

## The Evolution and Resilience of the Gusii Soapstone Industry

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### ABSTRACT

The Gusii soapstone industry is one of the oldest traditional craft industry in Kenya. The history of the industry dates back to hundreds and perhaps thousands of years ago (Ongesa, 2011). Initially made as traditional handicraft products for local use, the soapstone products have been transformed into tourist items that are sold to both domestic and international tourists who visit Kenya and are sold in handcraft shops all over the world. The aim of this paper is twofold: first, to provide an historical analysis on the transformation of these soapstone products from items that had mainly 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 area of Kisii county. Data for this paper was acquired through in-depth conversational interview schedules with selected soapstone producers and sellers, structured conversation with key informants and field observations. The research also provides recommendations that can guide policy formation for the sustainable development of the soapstone industry in Kenya.

**Keywords:** *Soapstone, sculpture, traditional crafts, Gusii, tourism, livelihoods, sustainability.*

### Introduction

The Tabaka soapstone carvers belong to the Mugirango clan of the Abagusii people of Southwestern Kenya. The Gusii (also referred to as the Kisii or Abagusii) belong to the Western Kenya Bantu speakers and they are currently domiciled in the Southern Western Highland region of Kenya (see Figures 1 and 2). other communities in this group includes the Kuria, Suba and the Luhya (Ochieng, 1978; Akama and Maxon, 2006). Over the years, the Abagusii practiced subsistence level mixed faming including the growing of crops such as finger-millet, sorghum and a variety of indigenous vegetables. The Abagusii people also reared livestock. In addition, the people engaged in indigenous industrial initiatives mainly producing iron implements such as hoes, axes, spears, arrows and knives. The Abagusii also produced soapstone products which are the subject of this paper (Ochieng, 1978; Masai, 1988). Soapstone carving together with iron

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smelting and working, basketry, leather-works and several other types of weaving are among the oldest traditional industries that existed among the Abagusii people (Ochieng', 1978; Masai, 1988). 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 domestic containers.

At the advent of colonialism, the Europeans came into Kenya with mass produced finished goods that looked better and more convenient to use. Consequently, the traditional items lost their appeal. In this regard, most local industries such as iron working, basketry and pottery were lost.

The soapstone industry has, however, survived the colonial times and developed into an art form mainly for the tourism market. This paper thus, aims at finding out the reasons behind the resilience of this soapstone carving industry. Our main objectives are to provide an historical analysis of the transformation of the Gusii soapstone industry; 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 Abagusii people.

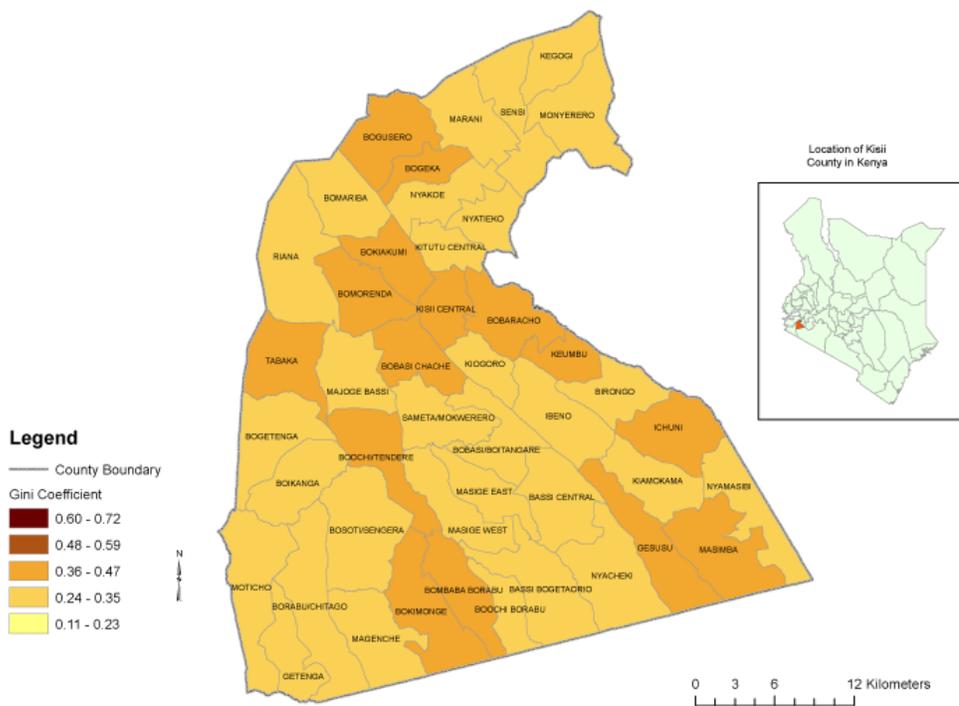


Fig. 1. Map of Kisii County (source softkenya.com)

## **Methodology and study area**

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

The field research was conducted between January and December 2014 in South Mugirango Constituency in the current Kisii County where most of the soapstone resources and soapstone carving activities are located and carried out. Seventy respondents were interviewed during the research. The researcher interviewed surviving respondents born before the 1940s because they understand the cultural context and overall growth of the soapstone industry being the custodians of the Gusii folk-history and culture. These very respondents also had recollections of information about the soapstone industry's origin passed on by their elders. They were expected to be more knowledgeable as they witnessed the changes in the sculpture industry over the years. There were only ten surviving respondents in this age group. Oral interviews were used at both individual and group level. Guided questions were used on issues such as acquisition of raw materials, carving skills, and distribution of industrial products. Purposive sampling was used to select artwork or handicrafts, individuals, groups and organizations that would provide the greatest insight into the phenomena under study, based on their involvement in and of the industries.

## **The Pre-Colonial period**

According to existing archaeological evidence and local folk-history the soapstone industry in Gusii land goes back to over three thousand years during the pre-colonial period, although the exact dates as to when soapstone sculpturing started cannot be ascertained (Ochieng, 1974;

Eisemon, 1988; Inyega, 2001). One of the earliest sites where pioneer soapstone carvings and other forms of art works have been found is in a place called Goti Chaki in the Tabaka area in the Southern parts of Gusii land. Some of the most ancient soapstone engravings that are still observable at Goti Chaki Hills includes scribbling of wild animal images on the soapstone rocks, rudimentary items such as small household utensils, *Ajua* (board game), concentric rings and ritualistic figurines. This rock art has been dated to between 700 and 1300 CE (Odak 1985). Other areas in Gusiiland where *ajua* board games have been found include Manga hill on the border of Nyamira and Kisii Counties, though this has not been dated. The *Ajua* game is common all over Sub-Sahara Africa, and this makes it ethnographically difficult in establishing who the original rock carvers suffice to say that its presence indicates that the occupiers of this areas had time set aside for leisure

According to Eisemon, (1988), proper 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 iron smelting, an indigenous activity that was shrouded with secretive knowledge and skills that also dates back to hundreds and perhaps thousands of years. A contemporary famous Gusii soapstone artist, Elkanah Ong'esa (2011), contends that the earliest forms of soapstone carvings were made before the Abagusii settled in their current homeland in the late 18<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 and these were the original initiators of the soapstone art from who the Abagusii people copied the art of soapstone sculpturing (Snarman, 1971). Apart from Goti Chaki area, other places in Gusii where soapstone rock art has also been found include, Bosinange, Nyabigena and Sameta regions. However, unfortunately, due to lack of conservation initiatives, these unique rock art carvings are rapidly being damaged and disappearing from the various historical sites in the Gusii region (Ong'esa, 2010).



Fig. 2. Ajua Game carved into the rock

However, Abagusii folk history claims that the sculptures pre-date the arrival of the Abagusii in their current homeland in South Western Kenya in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Ochieng,1974). Thus, it should be noted that the Gusii soapstone industry was closely intertwined with the people's cultural practices and religious beliefs and the industry was preceded by rock-art painting and iron smelting. Practically, some soapstone items were used in the performance of various cultural activities. These included soapstone containers that were used to store traditional medicines. Soapstone powder was used to decorate people who performed traditional rituals such as rain-making and initiation ceremonies. 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 suffered from (Ong'esa, 1971; Ochieng, 1974; Motondi, 2010). Furthermore, according to Gusii folk culture, the rock engravings 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 (Ochieng, 1974; Motondi, 2010).

the original and/or indigenous soapstone industry, therefore, has a significant spiritual orientation apart from utility value.

One of the factors that influenced the development of soapstone industry at Tabaka and the adjacent areas is the occurrence of rich soapstone quarries such as Nyabigena, Nyabigege and Moma that are also shallow and therefore easier to mine. Furthermore, the soapstone products were traded during pre-colonial times, between the Abagusii and the neighbouring communities. Items such as smoking pipes and storage containers were sold to the Luo, Abasuba and the Kuria in local markets like Riosiri and Nyakoe (Ochieng, 1974). However, the idea of earning a living from soapstone carving alone did not exist until very recently when tourism became an important Kenyan industry. 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 finger millet and for milking livestock. The Abagusii people also made stools from soapstone used in many homes.

It should also be stated that 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. Land was inherited from father to son and women could only get access to land belonging to their husbands, fathers or brothers, Ancestral land was thus available to members of the same clan who could access it and utilize it. The people of Tabaka could freely access the quarries within their ancestral lands such as Riamosioma, Bwonsase, Riontita, Nyabitono, Itumbe and Nyatike in the South Mugirango region in Kisii County. The only limit was finding labour to dig the stone out and this was solved by the '*risaga*' a communal call for help where members of the community came together to assist someone in need. (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. The men first removed the overlying soil to expose the needed stone. and then pried from the hillside using iron tools. The stone was cut out according to the required size and shape and in a way that allowed for easier transport. 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 and heavy stones were however carried by older men.

### **The Colonial Period**

The introduction of the mass-manufactured goods in Kenya during the colonial period, led to stiff competition to the locally produced items such as indigenous iron implants including hoes, axes, knives, razors and the various soapstone products. In this regard, the arrival of European goods 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 Abagusii people at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century observed with bemusement the uniqueness and the overall aesthetics of Gusii sculpture (Eisemon, 1988; Motondi, 2010). Later pioneer colonial administrators and European travelers to Gusii land made it a point of purchasing pieces of soapstone sculptures which was then regarded as aesthetically pleasing. With time these sculptures became valued by visitors to Gusii leading to middlemen coming to buy the products for sale on the more lucrative East African coast and national parks. The growth of the economies of Western Europe and the Americas, and the advancement in transportation made it increasingly possible for large numbers of international travelers comfortably travel to long overhaul destinations such as Kenya and other parts of the World. One

of the major developments that accompanied international travel is of course the collection of souvenirs from the destinations. In Kenya, one of the most popular souvenirs that is collected is Gusii sculptures. From the late 1960s, tourism became a major foreign exchange earner for Kenya and many other African countries, as large numbers of international tourists travel to Africa, especially to wildlife parks with animals that are rare in Europe, Japan and the Americas. In recent years, Kenya has become a leading tourist destination in Africa, attracting over 1.3 million visitors per annum (Kenya Government, 2017). Kenya has also continued to attract visitors from emerging economies like China, South Korea and other Southeast Asia countries.

In this regard, both international and local visitors to the Lake Victoria region of Kenya, include visits to areas with unique indigenous pieces of art such as the Gusii soapstone. While visiting these places to admire the aesthetic beauty of these indigenous soapstone products, these visitors also end up purchasing pieces of art which they take to their home countries. In recent years, most of these unique pieces of art are conspicuously displayed in living rooms, government and private business front offices and exhibited in art museums (Atieno, 1988; Motondi, 2010). 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. These soapstone products are being sold to buyers who are eager to pay relatively higher prices for the Gusii soapstone pieces of art. Unfortunately, however, the prices that tourists pay to the artisans is much lower than what these same buyers are willing to pay in the international market or on online markets created in China and Europe. It is not uncommon for one to find a soapstone carving (like wildlife sculptures) that were bought for less than US\$ 2 at the point of origin in Gusii land, being sold as high as US \$50 by in the Western countries (Motondi, 2010).

In recent years, a special group of expert Gusii sculptors such as Elkanah Ong'esa and Gerald Motondi has emerged. These elite Gusii soapstone artists produce art pieces for niche markets like galleries and art collectors from different parts of the world. They have also made art pieces for tertiary educational institutions, government agencies and business organizations, and international NGOs (Maranga, 1985; Ongesa, 2011). Many of these elite artists have become famous and their pieces are part of top art collections in museums and galleries all over the world.

For instance, Elkanah Ongesa was commissioned to create art pieces “Bird of Peace” and “Dancing Birds” for UNESCO Head Office in Paris (see Figure 3) and USA Embassy in Nairobi, respectively.

However, for this lucrative business of imported soapstone products in the West and other parts of the world, the Abagusii soapstone claim that apart from awards that they receive as a sign of recognition to their craft, they have not receive any monetary benefits. (Ongesa, 2011). Recent auctions of Kisii sculptures have shown that the prices for such pieces are increasing by more than 100% per piece. Because they would have been bought cheaply from Gusii sculptors much of this money never trickles down to the majority of the artists. This is one of the major issues that need to be solved if the livelihoods of artists and their families are to be improved.



Figure 3: Sculpture of a *Enyamunchera* (Magpie shrike) bird by renowned Gusii soapstone artist, Elkana Ongesa, displayed outside UNESCO Headquarters in Paris (© Photo:UNESCO/M. Claude)

## **Contemporary Challenges Confronting the Soapstone Industry and way forward**

The post-independence soapstone industry has been profoundly influenced by the impacts of tourism. The tourism industry has had an adverse effect on the traditional soapstone handicraft. Commercialization of traditional skills has stifled creativity, innovation and originality in favour of product themes that are preferred by the tourism market (Courts, 1987). 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. Ole Sena (1986) has shown that churches and missionary groups are at the forefront of setting up soapstone craft workshops in Gusii land. Although these workshops are set up with the express purpose of generating income to fund education, health and other welfare programs, their impact on both creativity and on the social structure of soapstone sculpture production may be detrimental in the long run. In most cases these workshops encourage production of items that can be produced quickly and in large quantities in order to meet customer deadlines and therefore, don't allow for individual creative thinking.

The mass production of soapstone in commercial enterprises requires a certain sacrifice of traditional creativity and introduces other forms of 'quality'. Curio shop owners often provide samples of pieces which are popular with tourists and this results in reduced art forms as some are discontinued. This results in a formulaic style of commercial art which mimics mass production and eliminates cultural production processes and structures that are more suitable for local conditions. The local mythology which had informed the sculpture tradition ceases to be the inspiration of the art pieces. For example, household utensils and ritualistic clubs that are used in the rainmaking ceremony/dance have now become rare and each loss is also marked by a loss of a related cultural narrative and activity. It also reduces inventiveness and innovation as the artists hardly produce new forms of art. Since 1990, 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 which has resulted in the demise of producer co-operatives as the main structures of the industry (Motondi, 2010). Instead, they have been replaced by private companies. Some of these private

companies are owned by non-locals, and the Gusii artists have been complaining about outsiders benefiting from their knowledge economy. The proliferation of companies that mass produce these sculptures has also significantly reduced the prices.

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 communal resources for personal benefit. Companies have also exploited the artisans by forcing prices down and purchasing the art pieces as well as quarried rock cheaply. The companies have out-competed the cooperatives owned by local communities and hence, many have gone bankrupt. These cooperatives had distributed the profits more evenly within the community and sustained communities rather than individuals. For those artists who have remained independent, there are the middlemen who purchase the art pieces at ridiculous prices and sell them at huge profits to galleries and other art markets.

It has become a common practice for middlemen to buy soapstone products cheaply from Gusii carvers, and then to sell them exorbitantly 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 allows a few middlemen to benefit, as they can easily manipulate the various soapstone producers, who do not have a unified strategy on pricing and marketing (Maranga; 1985, Motondi, 2010). Many sculptors confirm that the disintegration of the co-operatives and the creation of numerous private companies have had a negative impact on the overall development for soapstone art.

Furthermore, after the collapse of the co-operatives, many soapstone sculptors began moving to urban areas to sell their carvings individually. Unfortunately, they had no marketing experience as previously, all marketing was done by the co-operatives. Middlemen capitalized on this situation, going to Tabaka in large numbers to buy soapstone at bargain prices. Because 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 he is a member. Tabaka Classic Carvers had a business partner 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 (Motondi, 2010; Ongesa, 2011; Dillon, 2013). 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 most of the revenue from sales was going to Wahome, instead of the sculptors. 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 the 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 which ensure that the original producers of goods are not exploited and that their 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 (Motondi, 2010).

These galleries in the UK pay them and then transport the carvings to the United Kingdom. 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 inflation and royalties. This is because the agreement was drafted by the company and Tabaka Classic Carvers merely signed it. The partnership is still on, though revised to reflect 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.

With these various issues and challenges confronting the Gusii soapstone industry, one of the critical questions to ask is: what specific strategic measures and policy related initiatives can be taken to make sure that local artists get the economic benefits from the potentially lucrative international soapstone business?

There are various 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. However even with these problems this research contends that the future of the soapstone industry would be relatively bright if a number of measures and strategies are initiated to sustain the industry.

Firstly, the County and National governments should spearhead the establishment of entrepreneurial centers to train and develop people in the soapstone industry. These centers can train and develop the artisans on design, production and marketing soapstone products. The centers should also teach basic skills on book-keeping as well as financial management. Secondly, the dissemination of marketing skills to the local carvers will enable them to identify existing market niches as well as identify 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 external market. Furthermore, they should also be trained to be able to use basic computer design skills to produce products for specific markets.

Thirdly soapstone sculpture can substantially contribute to the growth of both the local and national economy. There is need therefore, for improved transport and communication network in the area to enable its accessibility to both local and international traders and tourists. 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.

There is also need for the government to 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, use of advanced technology helps artists to come up with big valuable sculptures” (*Nation Newspaper* 29 August 2011: 19)

Soapstone producers in Kisii should organize themselves into a strong co-operative. 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.

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, advertising and creation of a website. 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 will 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 Kenya, the market will expand, and demand increase. Since Kenya has recently been experiencing political problems that resulted in negative advise against visiting it, direct marketing of soapstone abroad will circumvent political development at home and abroad.

It is also important for the relevant government bodies, like Ministries of Trade and Industry, as well as organisations in cultural and social services, and tourism, to promote awareness of the variety of soapstone sculpture being produced in Kisii. 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.

There is need for the enactment of a draft policy and clear legal framework to protect the soapstone carver from blatant exploitation by unscrupulous middlemen and women, businessmen and investors. This legal frame should be drafted with the main aim of protecting the social and economic interests, innovativeness and creativity of the soapstone carvers. Specifically, there should be a clear legal channel to protect the copyrights and patents of the unique carvings from blatant infringement.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that apart from agricultural production, the people of Tabaka have, over the years, earned their living through soapstone quarrying and carving. In particular, the study provides a systematic analysis of the development and historical evolution of the soapstone industry in the Tabaka area. The research established 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 livelihoods. 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 goods because of the introduction of European goods that were mass-produced and served various purposes. These mass-produced goods included steel products and plastic goods that replaced the soapstone products.

The change in the Abagusii livelihood brought major transformations in the production of indigenous soapstone products. Products changed from utilitarian to tourism junkets and this change robbed the Abagusii of their traditions, skills as well as the sense of aesthetics as they rush to produce for a different market. Many tourists to Africa focus on wildlife tours and prefer to buy sculptures of animals they see in these tours.

In the post-colonial period, change of government policies have had some direct impact on the soapstone industry. For instance, some of the restrictions that were imposed by the colonial government like those on quarrying were removed. This provided individual freedom and encouraged the production and marketing of soapstone production. The sculpture industry expanded in the 1970s as Kenyan tourism industry grew. Furthermore, the government encouraged the exportation of soapstone carvings to the outside world especially to Europe and North America. The recent slump caused by external market forces and processes of globalization have had major influence on the Tabaka soapstone industry, but with the right government policies, the tradition can be protected from this global world market.

The study has 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 produced in Gusii. Unlike other traditional industries that have disappeared soapstone sculpture has survived harsh competition from products from elsewhere. The craftsmen have adapted to changing socio-economic and cultural conditions. The soapstone sculpture industry still flourishes and has great potential to make a significant contribution to the livelihoods of the local Abagusii people.

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