Middlemen and Marginalization: Analyzing the Social Consequences of Economic Exploitation in the Kisii Soapstone Industry, Kenya

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Abstract

The objective of this paper was to investigate how middlemen's economic exploitation of soapstone carvers shaped the social fabric of their community. It examined the ripple effects of this economic injustice—poverty, resentment, and social division—among the carvers. Ultimately, the study aimed to reveal how unequal trade relations eroded both livelihoods and social harmony. The analysis was grounded in Marxian theory, which provided a framework for understanding the class struggles between the middlemen—who controlled and profited from the soapstone trade—and the working-class carvers, who remained underpaid and marginalized. Ultimately, the study established that such exploitative dynamics resulted in economic deprivation, thereby restricting access to quality education and healthcare among the affected communities. To investigate these concerns, the study utilized both primary and secondary sources. It involved interviews with a randomly selected group of 30 respondents drawn from soapstone carvers and miners. These sources provided firsthand insights into the social impact of economic exploitation. The findings revealed that most of these intermediaries were privately owned companies and wholesalers who purchased carvings from local carvers at ridiculously low prices, only to resell them at exorbitant rates in international markets. This systematic exploitation trapped the carvers in cycles of poverty, giving rise to a host of social problems. Equally, lack of fair compensation bred animosity between the haves and the have-nots, deepening social divisions among the carvers. Similarly, widespread poverty followed, driving many into desperate survival strategies. Consequently, crime, poor access to healthcare, and prostitution surged—intensifying the spread of HIV and AIDS within the soapstone carving communities. Moreover, the study found out that poverty curtailed access to education, as many parents could neither afford school fees nor meet basic medical needs.

Keywords: Soapstone, Carvers, Middlemen, Economic Exploitation, Social Consequences, Poverty, Export, Global Markets.

Introduction

This paper traces the historical development of the soapstone carvers, who are located in Kisii County, southwestern Kenya, since the country's independence in 1963. It specifically examines how middlemen exploited local carvers and the mechanisms through which such exploitation occurred. Local cartels, comprising wholesalers and privately owned soapstone companies, emerged as powerful intermediaries controlling both domestic and export markets. These middlemen purchased carvings from carvers at extremely low prices and resold them at significantly higher rates abroad, thereby monopolizing profits from the trade while excluding the producers from meaningful economic participation.

According to Moses Ong'esa, from as early as 1966, the market for Tabaka soapstone carvings expanded across multiple continents, including North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Australia, and parts of Africa. Yet, despite these global linkages, the local carvers of Tabaka continued to live in poverty. He said: "lack of formal regulation in the soapstone trade, coupled with widespread illiteracy and limited business awareness among carvers, enabled middlemen to exploit their labor and creativity with impunity." (Oral interview, 2022). Although the carvers formed the backbone of the industry—responsible for quarrying, carving, and finishing products that gained worldwide recognition—they remained economically marginalized. This systematic disenfranchisement not only perpetuated cycles of poverty but also contributed to broader social challenges such as poor access to education, inadequate healthcare, and social vulnerability. By examining the power relations between carvers and intermediaries, this paper seeks to illuminate how the exploitation within the Tabaka soapstone industry reflects enduring patterns of postcolonial economic inequality and class struggle in Kenya.

Historical Background

Soapstone carving in Tabaka predates colonial period. The soapstone carvers produced a wide array of items that held significant social-economic and cultural values. This art continued even during the colonial era when it was used as a commercial commodity to generate earnings for payment of colonial taxes.

During the post-colonial period, the export of soapstone carvings continued. The carvings they crafted included giraffes, stars, eggs, and human figurines among others. They also carved functional images such as buttons, candleholders, flower-holders, key-holders and many more. See fig 1- fig 4. The middlemen sold these carvings in national markets and exported others to foreign nations, where they were sold at high prices. The local carvers never benefitted from their vocation, thus became impoverished. This in turn led to social challenges among the soapstone artisans, which is the central focus of this paper.

Soapstone carving in Tabaka is a deeply rooted tradition that predates the colonial period, forming an integral part of the community's social, economic, and cultural life. Long before the arrival of colonial powers, local artisans skillfully transformed raw soapstone into a wide variety of objects—ranging from ritual and household items to decorative pieces that reflected the community's identity and artistic heritage. These carvings were not merely aesthetic creations but carried symbolic meanings and practical value within the Abagusii society, often used in ceremonies, exchanges, and domestic settings.

With the advent of colonial rule, the art of soapstone carving took on new economic significance. The colonial government introduced taxation systems that compelled many locals to commercialize their craft

as a means of raising cash for tax payments. Consequently, soapstone carving evolved from a purely cultural practice into a source of monetary income. (Araka D. 2025:72-79). The post-colonial era witnessed further transformation, as the trade expanded beyond local markets to national and international levels. Artisans produced an array of carvings—including giraffes, eggs, stars, human figurines, and practical household items such as buttons, candle holders, flower vases, and key holders (see Fig. 5–8).

However, as the industry grew, a new socio-economic imbalance emerged. Middlemen—often wealthier and better-connected individuals—began dominating the trade, purchasing carvings cheaply from local artisans and selling them at high prices in urban centers and international markets. While these intermediaries accumulated significant wealth, the carvers themselves remained trapped in poverty, unable to reap the fruits of their labor. This economic disparity bred frustration, dependency, and social discontent within the community. The resulting inequalities and their social implications form the central focus of this study.

Table 1: Images of Aesthetic Carvings

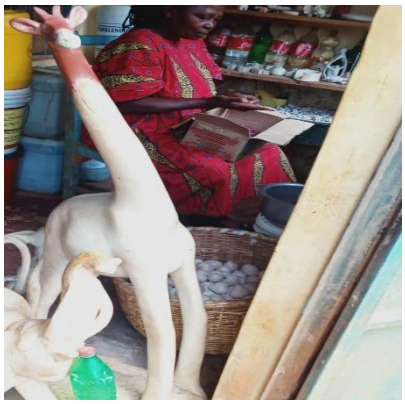

Figure 1: Image of giraffe

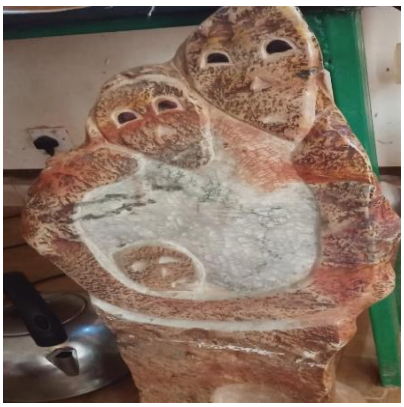

Figure 2: Human figurine

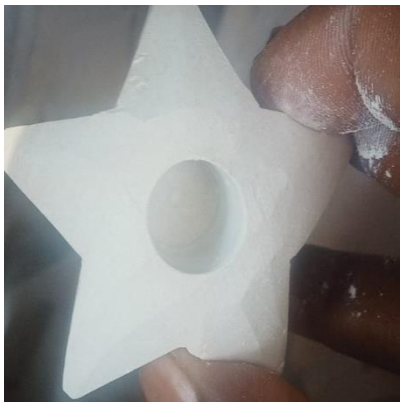

Figure 3: Image of star

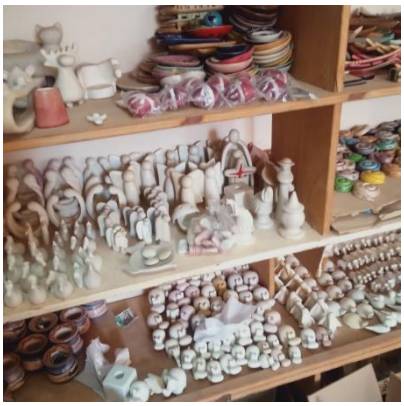

Figure 4: Collection of carvings

Table 2: Functional Carvings

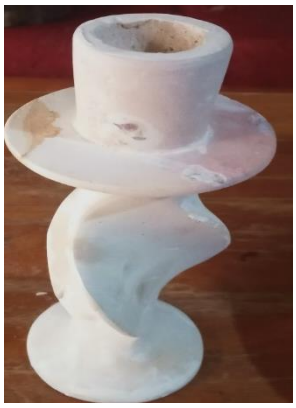

Figure 5: Candle holder

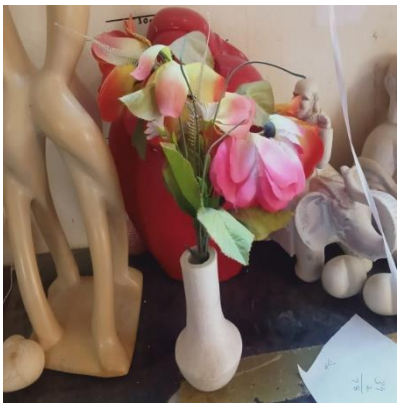

Figure 6: Flower holder

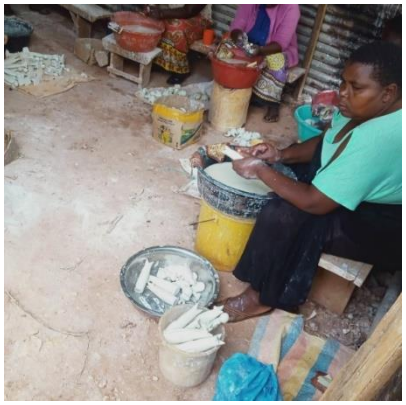

Figure 7: A carver at work

Figure 8: Images of eggs

Literature Review

Iliffe argues that the Germans in Tanganyika subjected the local population to economic exploitation on plantations producing rubber, cloves, coffee, sugarcane, and tobacco, which were then exported to Europe and the United States. While Iliffe provides a detailed account of how German colonial authorities structured and profited from plantation economies, he does not adequately explore the lived experiences, and exploitative forms of the African laborers who toiled under these exploitative conditions. This leaves a gap in understanding the social dimension of colonial labor exploitation—how the oppressive plantation systems affected African workers in their communities. (Iliffe J. 1975:13-65).

In the South African context, the scholar demonstrates how gold mining for export subjected African laborers to intense exploitation, leaving them impoverished and highly susceptible to tuberculosis due to harsh working and living conditions. Although Packard's work effectively exposes the health consequences of economic exploitation, he does not sufficiently interrogate the institutional complicity of mining companies, colonial administrators, and medical authorities in reinforcing and sustaining these exploitative labor regimes. Thus, the interconnected roles of power, policy, and institutional neglect in perpetuating

exploitation remain underexplored. Furthermore, the mechanisms and internal dynamics of exploitation within the mining sector—such as wage systems, labor recruitment, and control—are only superficially addressed, pointing to a broader gap in understanding the structural foundations of colonial economic domination. (Randal Packard 1990:47-170).

Turning to the Kenyan context, Mallion Onyambu and John Akama (2018), in their work *Development and Evolution of the Gusii Soapstone Industry*, trace the historical continuity of soapstone carving from the pre-colonial to the contemporary period. They observe that the transformation of soapstone sculptures into tourist and export commodities attracted middlemen who exploited the carvers. (Mallion Onyambu and John Akama 2018). While their analysis highlights the persistence and commercialization of the craft, it falls short of explaining how specific economic forces shaped unequal benefit-sharing within the industry and the consequent social effects. The authors also overlook the social consequences of such exploitation, including poverty, marginalization, and tension within the artisan community. Therefore, the link between economic exploitation and its broader social implications remains insufficiently examined.

Similarly, the study on the 'Challenges hindering opportunities in the soapstone industry among carvers in Tabaka', argue that middlemen exploit carvers by purchasing carvings at low prices and reselling them at high margins in foreign markets. Although their work recognizes the exploitative relationship between carvers and intermediaries, it provides limited insight into the structural and historical roots of this exploitation. The authors also fail to interrogate the power relations, policy environments, and market mechanisms that sustain the carvers' vulnerability. (Buyeke and Njoroge, 2015: 4-13). Consequently, there remains a significant gap in understanding how economic exploitation translates into social disintegration, inequality, and cultural transformation within the soapstone carving community.

Discussion and Findings

Middlemen and How They Exploited the Soapstone Working Community

Middlemen in Tabaka emerged as entrepreneurs who established wholesale outlets and privately owned companies to dominate the soapstone trade. These intermediaries systematically exploited local carvers by purchasing carvings at extremely low prices and in large quantities, before reselling them at exorbitant rates in international markets. According to Mallion Onyambu (2013), soapstone carvers were unable to conduct direct global transactions due to widespread poverty and limited awareness of international market prices. Consequently, carvers became dependent on middlemen who dictated the terms of trade and controlled the flow of goods to foreign markets. One of the carvers interviewed in 2022 explained how this exploitative system operated within the community: "From around 1980, wholesalers and private companies such as Afrikiko Soapstone hired agents who went around collecting carvings directly from carvers' homes. They bought the carvings at ridiculously low prices, taking advantage of our lack of market knowledge." Another carver corroborated this account, emphasizing the influence and privilege enjoyed by the middlemen: "Most of the middlemen who owned these enterprises were influential individuals—many of whom had traveled abroad and were fully aware of the high value that soapstone sculptures fetched in international markets." These testimonies reveal how economic asymmetry, limited access to market information, and lack of capital entrenched exploitation within the Tabaka soapstone industry. The middlemen's control over production, marketing, and pricing mechanisms marginalized the carvers, confining them to chronic poverty despite their central role in sustaining the trade.

Another carver vividly described the extent of economic exploitation by comparing local and international prices: "The image of a giraffe measuring two inches was bought from us at Kshs. 200, yet sold abroad at about USD 20, equivalent to roughly Kshs. 2,000. They benefited from our sweat since they had enough capital to export the carvings, unlike us who lived from hand to mouth. Similarly, unfinished pieces are bought for as little as Kshs. 50, since they still undergo finishing processes such as sanding, coloring, and polishing, for which a carver is paid just Kshs. 10 per piece." *(Oral interview, 2022)*

Exploitation was not limited to pricing alone. Some middlemen also manipulated tourism flows to their advantage. As one of the female carvers explained: "When tourists visited to see how we crafted images, the middlemen diverted them to their own workshops and showrooms, where they had hired carvers to produce sculptures for sale. They did not even allow us to greet or interact with the visitors. The middlemen always accompanied the tourists and directed them on where to buy whatever they needed." *(Oral interview, 2022)*

Such accounts illustrate the deep structural inequalities that defined the Tabaka soapstone trade. Middlemen, backed by capital and international connections, monopolized profits while carvers—lacking bargaining power and market access—remained trapped in economic marginalization. This unequal relationship epitomizes the broader patterns of postcolonial class exploitation in Kenya's carving industries.

Images of soapstone carvings

Figure 9: Images of Eggs

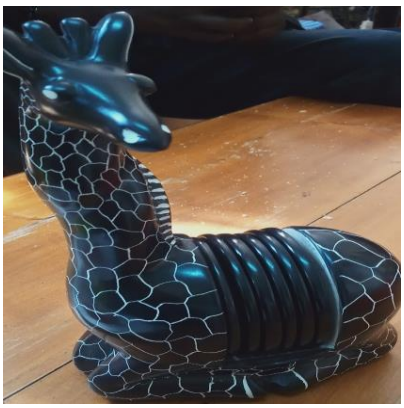

Figure 10: Image of giraffe

The Social Consequences of Economic Exploitation in the Tabaka Soapstone Industry

Economic exploitation in the Tabaka soapstone industry had far-reaching social consequences, particularly for miners and carvers who bore the brunt of poverty, unsafe working conditions, and social dislocation. Due to the carvers' limited income and lack of protective mechanisms, many workers were forced to endure hazardous environments in pursuit of their livelihood. The miners, in particular, faced grave risks associated with quarry collapses and unsafe extraction methods, which often resulted in severe injuries and fatalities.

Scholars such as Bell and Donnelly (2006) have observed that poorly reinforced and unregulated open-pit mines pose significant dangers, as collapsing quarry walls can trap workers beneath debris, leading to death or permanent injury. These dangers were evident in Tabaka, where quarries—often operated without

adequate safety measures—became sites of recurring tragedy. The risk was heightened during the rainy seasons, when the loose soapstone soil absorbed water and caved in, creating deadly sinkholes.

A tragic example was reported by Mbula (2022) in a national newspaper, where the Nyabigena quarry in Tabaka Division collapsed, killing two miners and injuring several others. Survivors were pulled from the rubble by local residents, many sustaining life-altering injuries and disabilities. One survivor recounted: "I was one of the lucky miners when the quarry collapsed, and I thank God for that." *(Oral interview with Omwoyo, 2022; see fig.4.1.1)*. These frequent accidents underscored the vulnerability of soapstone workers, who lacked both financial security and institutional protection. The absence of government oversight, combined with middlemen' profit-driven motives, left miners to bear all the physical risks of extraction with little to no compensation.

Health challenges were another serious outcome of the exploitative working environment. Soapstone workers were constantly exposed to fine dust particles generated during mining, cutting, and carving, which caused respiratory diseases such as bronchitis, asthma, and persistent flu. The inhalation of dust over prolonged periods severely affected the carvers' health, often leading to chronic illness. One of the carvers described a tragic case: "Through our occupation, we lost one of us to asthma. He developed the disease because he was allergic to dust from mining and carving." *(Oral interview with Omambia, 2022)*

Beyond health risks, illiteracy and school dropout rates were alarmingly high among the soapstone working community. The irregular and low income from carving made it nearly impossible for many parents to afford school fees. One carver shared his personal experience: "Due to poverty, I dropped out of school in Standard Six in 2005 to help my father carve so that we could get meals. That's how I learned the carving skills that I now use to earn a living."*(Oral interview with Gerald Motondi, 2022)* This testimony illustrates how intergenerational poverty and the absence of educational opportunities perpetuated the carvers' dependence on the exploitative soapstone trade, effectively trapping entire families in cycles of economic vulnerability.

The deteriorating social fabric in Tabaka was further reflected in rising crime rates. Poverty and unemployment pushed some individuals into theft and violent behavior. One respondent described the insecurity in the area: "It is very dangerous here when it gets dark. My friend was robbed of the few coins he earned from selling carvings. Even shopkeepers close early because of fear." *(Oral interview with Mouti, 2022)*

In addition, sexual immorality emerged as a growing concern within the Tabaka soapstone community. Economic hardship compelled some women to engage in transactional sex as a means of sustaining their families, a practice that exacerbated the spread of HIV and AIDS. These social challenges—encompassing crime, disease, and moral vulnerability—were direct consequences of the economic deprivation imposed by exploitative practices within the soapstone industry. As one respondent observed:"So most carvers here are victims of the disease, and some of them have died." *(Oral interview with anonymous carver, 2022)*. This testimony highlights how structural exploitation not only limited economic opportunities but also undermined the social and health well-being of the carvers, creating a cycle of poverty, illness, and social vulnerability that continues to affect successive generations.

Similarly, the exploitative tendencies within the soapstone industry widened the social divide between the wealthy few and the struggling majority. Middlemen—many of whom lived among the carvers—accumulated immense wealth by purchasing carvings at minimal prices and reselling them at huge profits in both national and international markets. Meanwhile, the artisans who skillfully craft these unique products continued to languish in poverty and were often unable to provide even the basic necessities for their families. This unequal system bred deep animosity, envy, and bitterness among the carvers toward the well-off middlemen who profited from their labor. As one carver, Erick Tamaro, lamented during an interview, "My cousin buys large quantities of carvings and exports them. He drives an expensive car and lives a magnificent life, while here we are, working under the scorching sun to earn peanuts from middlemen like him" (Oral interview, 2022). His words reveal not only the economic injustice in the soapstone trade but also the social tensions it has generated within the community, turning what was once a symbol of artistic pride into a source of resentment and division.

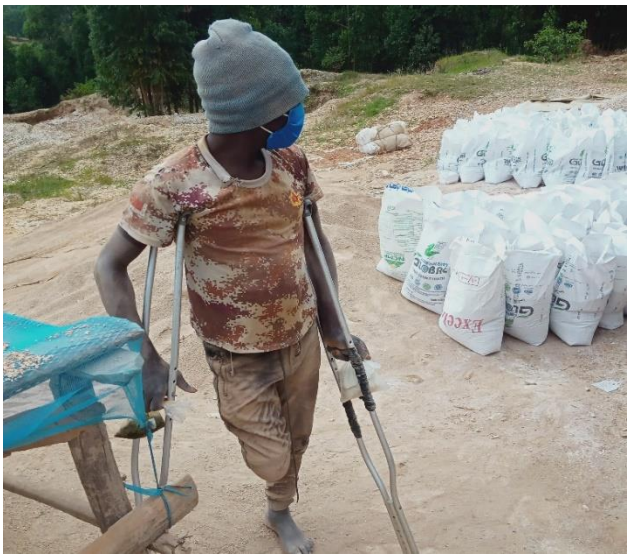

Figure 11: The survivor of collapsed soapstone quarry with crutches

Conclusion

The study revealed that the Tabaka soapstone industry has long been characterized by profound economic exploitation, with middlemen and middlemen monopolizing profits while local carvers remained marginalized. By controlling production, pricing, and access to international markets, middlemen systematically underpaid carvers, perpetuating cycles of poverty and economic dependency. This exploitation extended beyond economic deprivation, influencing every aspect of the carvers' lives. Miners faced constant physical hazards, including fatal quarry collapses, while prolonged exposure to soapstone dust led to chronic respiratory illnesses. Low and irregular incomes forced children out of school, limiting educational attainment and perpetuating intergenerational poverty. The lack of access to capital, market knowledge, and regulatory protection left the soapstone workers vulnerable not only to economic oppression but also to a host of social consequences, including crime, unsafe labor conditions, poor health, and moral vulnerabilities such as transactional sex and the spread of HIV and AIDS.

From a Marxian perspective, these conditions exemplify the structural exploitation of labor under capitalist relations. The middlemen' control over the means of production allowed them to appropriate the surplus value generated by carvers the carvers, leaving the working class alienated from both their labor and its rewards. The resulting economic and social inequalities were not incidental but systemic, reflecting the broader patterns of postcolonial class stratification in Kenya. The Tabaka case demonstrates how carving industries, despite being culturally and economically significant, can become sites of deep structural inequities when local producers are denied fair compensation, agency, and protection. Ultimately, addressing the challenges facing Tabaka soapstone workers requires not only economic interventions but also regulatory frameworks, education, and social support mechanisms to redress long-standing exploitation and improve the welfare of this historically marginalized community.

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