

LAND ALIENATION AND FOREST CONSERVATION IN THE USAMBARA HIGHLANDS OF GERMAN EAST AFRICA IN THE PERIOD, 1885-1914

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THE FINAL PARTITION OF AFRICA among the colonial powers in 1885 was followed by a steadily increasing influx of Europeans with various goals in mind. While the activities of the Europeans affected all spheres of indigenous life, a major and lasting effect was imparted through the alienation of some of the best agricultural lands in a number of the colonies.

The Germans were remarkably late to get involved with tropical Africa, and held their colonial empire only for about 30 years. Nevertheless, their influence was strong, and the German colonial period is noteworthy—and occasionally notorious—for its accomplishments. German East Africa (present-day Tanzania) was the scene of one of the earliest colonizing attempts, in the course of which the Germans alienated large tracts of land for plantations and for forest reserves. This paper examines the major aspects of the German policy toward land alienation and forest reserves in the Usambara Highlands, located in the north-eastern corner of Tanzania.¹

THE USAMBARA LANDSCAPE

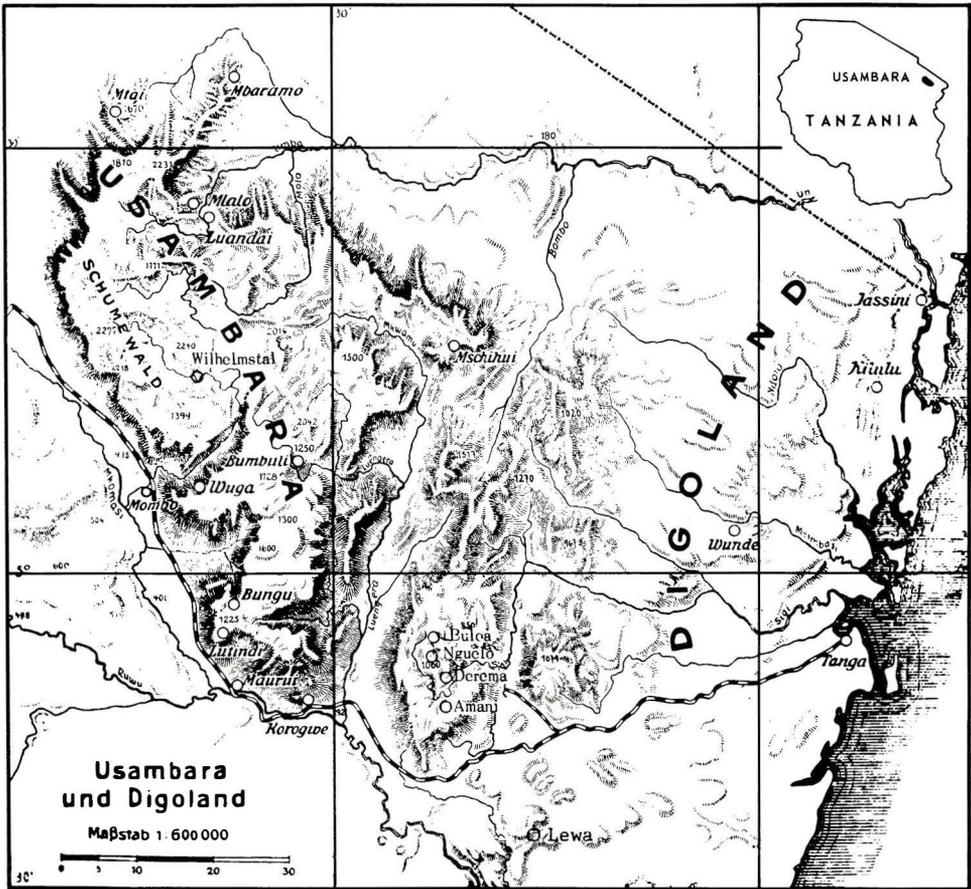
The Usambaras are a horst-and-graben formation approximately 70 miles long and 40 miles wide. Elevations range from 2,000 to 7,000 feet, increasing from east to west. The rainfall varies from 20 to 60 inches, decreasing westward; this trend is modified by orographic effect increasing in the westward direction. The dry season is severe in the lee side of the first ranges, and in the Luengera graben.

The natural vegetation follows the pattern of rainfall, varying from "Closed Evergreen Forest" to "Deciduous Parkland," and is heavily modified by centuries-old shifting cultivation and, since the colonial period, plantation development. The dominant tribe of the area was and is the Washamba, which numbered around 70,000 in 1914. The total population of the Usambara Highlands was estimated around 17,500 in 1888, and approximately 100,000 at the time of World War I.² In 1914, about 100 Europeans were residing in the Usambaras; nearly all of them Germans.

ACQUISITION OF GERMAN EAST AFRICA AND EARLY LAND POLICY

The German claim to East Africa was established by a series of expeditions financed largely by the German East Africa Company. The claim to the Usambaras was laid by the fifth, or Kilima-Ndjaru, expedition in 1884, led by Dr. Karl Peters. Dr. Peters marched along the Pangani river to Masinde, where King Sembodja of the Usambaras signed over the whole of his domain to the Germans. Oscar Baumann, writing in 1888, caustically remarks: "For a few more yards of cotton goods perhaps he would have handed over the whole of Africa."³ With the imperial Schutzbrief (letter of protection) issued in 1885, the German East Africa Company acquired and practiced sovereign rights over a large part of East Africa, including the whole of the Usambara Highlands.

The numerous expeditions launched in order to explore and claim East Africa, 18 of them altogether, proved to be very expensive, and it was hoped that some of the costs could be recovered by selling parcels of land in the area under the company's jurisdiction. But the high prices charged—one rupee (approximately 40¢) for a hectare of undeveloped land—discouraged potential smallholders with limited means. It was estimated that a capital investment of 50,000 to 100,000 marks (approximately \$15,000 to 35,000), was necessary to establish a reasonably profitable plantation.⁴



Usambara and Digoland. Map prepared by the Germans, ca. 1910. (Exact source unknown.)

Besides, there was a wait of several years before these brought any returns. Eventually, large parcels of land were transferred to various plantation companies, none of which had previous experience in tropical Africa. Most of the plantations were established in the areas covered by the "Closed Evergreen Forest" which, as a rule, had a sparse population.

The planters desired a long-term lease or, even better, an outright ownership of the land for their plantations. Such property rights could originate in the early days only by agreement with the chiefs who claimed the land. But the African views of ownership and property were quite different from those of the white man; there existed a communal ownership in a traditional form unknown to the Europeans. The Africans did not believe that purchase of the land was possible; the land was wanted only for its products—usufruct—and for that purpose the Africans were willing to sell at a very low price.

A report in 1894 records the details of a typical land transaction. For the lease of 10,000 acres of land for a period of 100 years the German East Africa Company agreed to pay to the local chief a total of 100 rupees; that is \$40, or 40¢ per year. The first half was paid when the contract was signed, the other half was due in 50 years.⁵ Overall, only a small fraction—generally less than 20 percent—of the land alienated came under eventual cultivation.

In 1890, the German imperial government took over the Protectorate. The German East Africa Company gave up its sovereign rights over the coastal strip (10 miles wide), and received in exchange exclusive rights to occupy all unclaimed lands.⁶

As a result of this treaty and an additional one secured through the founding of the Usambara Railroad Company, the German East Africa Company came to control around 400,000 acres of land in the Usambaras. But the rights to the Usambaras were lost in 1899 when the government bought up all the land rights and interests. The total area in company possession was reduced from 400,000 acres to 27,000 by 1900.⁷

GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS OF LAND OWNERSHIP

After 1890 the government issued several laws and regulations in regards to land ownership. In general, these were designed to protect the lands cultivated by the Africans from expropriation, and to secure adequate reserves for future needs. In 1894, von Scheele, the governor, specified: "The size of the holdings taken up by the companies for the purpose of cultivation will depend upon their abilities and means of disposal for this purpose. This rule is adopted to forestall speculation in land."⁸

Another ordinance, issued in 1896, stated: "Over and beyond the presently cultivated areas by any native, village or community, an additional area four times that size has to be maintained in native ownership to provide for their needs."⁹

Overall, except where special provisions applied, the land rights, property laws, and other regulations involving real estate were those adopted verbatim from the General Prussian Land Code.¹⁰ The mining rights to the more important minerals and fuels were reserved by the government. However, the Africans were guaranteed the rights to mine iron, copper, and graphite to satisfy their personal needs.¹¹

In order to forestall expected malpractices by the various officials, Chancellor Caprivi issued an ordinance in 1893 which forbade administration personnel from acquiring real estate without his special permission, which was practically never given.¹²

By the terms of the Crownlands Ordinance of 1895, all the unclaimed (*herrenloses*) lands became crownlands; much of the Usambara Highlands was included in this category. Special rules applied to the sale and lease of crownlands as follows: (1) uncultivated land could not be sold, only leased; (2) duration of the lease was for 25 years; (3) cultivation had to start immediately; yearly one-tenth of the area leased had to be brought under cultivation; (4) the lessee had the right to buy four times the area under cultivation; and (5) the lessee had to arrange and pay for the survey of his property; all properties had to be entered in the land register (*Grundbuch*).¹³

The laws and regulations relating to land sales and ownership were circumvented by many settlers. In other instances, several excessive and conflicting claims were

advanced. The control and enforcement of land legislation was seriously handicapped by the perennial shortage of administrative personnel and the inadequate means at their disposal. By 1913 the amount of land alienated became a major concern of the government. In order to assure adequate areas for indigenous cultivation, Governor Schnee ordered the Tanga and Wilhelmstal districts, where the Usambaras were located, closed to further land alienation.¹⁴

There are no accurate records available of the amounts of crownlands sold and leased in the Usambaras during the German period. Measurements, carried out by planimeter on a map indicating the alienated lands in 1911, give a total of around one-quarter million acres, exclusive of forest reserves, or approximately one-third of the total area of the Usambaras.¹⁵ (The forest reserves amounted to about 75,000 acres in 1914). As noted before, much of this area was but sparsely populated; population increase became rapid only after the turn of the century, following the medical measures carried out by the administration and missionaries, such as vaccination against smallpox.

FOREST RESERVES

The Germans transferred to East Africa many of the concepts about land and forest conservation developed in Europe. The Crownlands Ordinance of 1895 specified that "forests must be preserved for the public interest and have to be excluded from alienation." Subsequently, large tracts in the West Usambaras were declared to be forest reserves.

The administration issued a number of specific laws and regulations to safeguard the forests. The ordinance of 1895, issued by Governor Wissman, incorporated a number of advanced concepts of forest protection. It forbade lumbering on either side of a mountain crest to a distance of 150 meters, and prohibited cutting on slopes over 45 degrees. On the valley slopes facing streams, parallel strips—each 50 meters wide and spaced 600 meters apart—had to be maintained. Along the streams a strip of forest, 50 meters wide on each side, had to be preserved.¹⁶

Another forest ordinance, issued in 1899, made it mandatory for every owner possessing more than 500 acres of forest to file a detailed utilization plan in the district office, indicating the areas designated for lumbering. This had to be done every year. The government had the rights to set aside one-fourth of the total forested area for reservation. Heavy penalties were set for noncompliance.¹⁷

The forest ordinance of 1908 further extended the measures involving private tracts. It stated that the government could forbid lumbering if this was thought to be necessary for forest conservation and protection. It could also limit cutting to trees over 25 cm. in diameter at breast height. Of the trees over this size, at least one-fourth had to be left standing. In case the continuous forest area was more than 250 acres, at least one-fourth of this was excluded from lumbering.¹⁸

The ordinance of 1909 expanded the conservation measures. It forbade cultivation and the grazing of animals in the forest reserves. The damaging of trees in any way was forbidden, including the slashing of trunks for boundary markings. Caravans passing through the forest reservations had to camp in designated areas. The forest reservations were at the same time declared to be game reservations where a large number of species were protected. However, the Africans received permits to secure poles, grass, and other necessary materials for building their huts.¹⁹

The Germans spent considerable effort and expense on reforestation projects. *Juniperus procera* and *Acacia decurrens* (black wattle), and several varieties of eucalyptus were the most widely planted species. By 1914, the total reforested area in the West Usambaras reached approximately 440 acres.

In 1914 the Wilhelmstal district, including the West Usambaras, had two German foresters assisted by ten uniformed African forest wardens and a headman.²⁰ Large sections of the lowland forests were surrounded by a 30-meter-wide firebreak. Along the railroad at the foothills of the Usambaras on both sides of the track a wide strip was planted to the latex-bearing tree, *Manihot glazovii*. The closed canopy of these trees effectively reduced fire hazard from locomotive sparks.

During the period of British mandate the reforestation project was enlarged and many of the conservation measures advanced by the Germans were carried on. As a result, at the present time the landscape of the Usambaras, and especially the forested regions, presents a scene rather uncommonly found in tropical Africa.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Map No. 1. The Usambaras are the mountainous area located north of the railroad, and west of Digoland.
- ² Statistical data of the colonial period are to be treated with caution. They are all approximations, and might be up to 20 percent off.
- ³ Baumann, O., 173.
- ⁴ Samessa, P., 24-30.
- ⁵ *Deutsche-Kolonial-Zeitung*, 1894, No. 1, 6. The land was "sold" in 1897.
- ⁶ Kurtze, B., 193-194.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.
- ⁸ *Deutsche-Kolonial-Zeitung*, 1894, No. 9, 122.
- ⁹ *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*, VIII, 1897, 125.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, V, 1894, 389.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, IX, 1898, 725.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, V, 1894, 1.
- ¹³ *Usambara Post*, 1903, No. 41.
- ¹⁴ *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*, XXII, 1913, 23.
- ¹⁵ Many of the records of the German administration were destroyed or lost. Surveying of the Usambaras was completed around 1910, but its accuracy was never verified.
- ¹⁶ *Deutsches Kolonialblatt*, VII, 1896, 4. By 1914 the total area of forest reserves amounted to approximately 75,000 acres in the Usambaras.
- ¹⁷ *Der Tropenpflanzer*, III, 1899, 450.
- ¹⁸ *Amtliche Anzeiger für Deutsch-Ostafrika*, 1908, No. 18.
- ¹⁹ Siebenlist, Th., 60.
- ²⁰ *Berichte über Land. . .*, III, 1909, 296.

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