Soils of the Laikipia District, Kenya

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In 1982 and 1983, a team of agriculturists sponsored by U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) made a study of the Laikipia District located in the north central part of Kenya, East Africa. The purpose of this study was to determine how these semiarid lands can be used for crop and livestock production. New crops and systems of farming these lands are needed because Kenya’s population is presently undergoing a very rapid increase, one of the fastest in the world. Their best croplands, those of the humid highlands, have already been taken up and farmers are being forced into the lower, drier areas where crop failures occur often because of drought and mismanagement.

The study team consisted of an engineer, range ecologist, livestock specialist, economist, forester, sociologist, and two soil scientists. Dr. Peter Ahn and I were assigned to map the soils and to provide a report to the district (Fig. 1). Dr. Ahn, a professor of soils at Nairobi University, has had experience in Ghana and other West African countries I have had previous experience in Liberia, West Africa.

This was a nice area in which to work. The climate was pleasant, almost ideal. The district is located about 100 miles north of Nairobi and consists of about 2.5 million acres (970,000 ha). Most of the area is a vast expanse of grassland with the characteristic, flat-topped acacia trees (Acacia spp.); the rest is smaller areas of low, forested mountains and

Fig. 1. Checking soils near the foothills of the Aberdare Mountains. Small extinct volcano peaks in the background. From left to right are Kinyanjui, Dr. Peter Ahn, Mugo, and Luther Geiger. Kinyanjui and Mugo were the assistants who supplied the muscle power.

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