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Migrant Luo rail and port workers and the cartographies of colonial Mombasa, 1902-1950s

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

*Mombasa, a melting pot of languages and cultures from all sides of the Indian Ocean, waits like a decadent dessert for travellers who make it to Kenya's coastline. Having more in common with Dakar or Dar es Salaam than Nairobi, Mombasa's blend of India, Arabia, and Africa is uniquely enchanting, and many visitors find themselves falling for East Africa's biggest and most cosmopolitan port.*¹

Lonely Planet's description of Mombasa captures the quintessential character of a town renowned for being a tourist hub. Mombasa's bustling business and social district, scenic landscape, infrastructural architecture, serene laidback ambiance, and cosmopolitan multilingual/racial demography indeed positively reflect the defining characteristics of a modern urban African space. The picturesque quaintness observed in the town's general landscape, however, belie its history of tumultuous struggles and quietened murmurs, particularly surrounding issues of citizenship, autonomy, and the autochthony rights of its diverse population. Occasionally, the town's underbelly is exposed through sporadic outbreaks of ethnic violence and acts of terrorism, directed at perceived "invader" visitors accused of "occupying and taking over the town's general landscape while relegating indigenes to the periphery."² Mombasa's contradictory nature – equanimity on one side and bleeding conflict on the other – is a complex phenomenon shaped by the interplay of numerous factors and influences, some rooted in centuries-old history while others have emerged more recently. It is nonetheless certain that European colonisation was a pivotal moment, triggering a chain of events that defined and moulded the town's colonial character, with both overt and covert effects spilling over into the contemporary era.

The letterheads on all government documents in colonial Kenya were inscribed with the title "Colony and Protectorate of Kenya." To a casual observer, this designation might appear to be a simple nominal attribution for a defined geographic space. However, there are deeper

¹ Lonely planet's description of Mombasa accessed from the company's website on 2 January 2024.

<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/kenya/the-coast/mombasa>

² Kenya's coastal belt, including Mombasa, has endured its fair share of ethnic violence, pitting groups who consider themselves indigenous autochthons against those from the inland regions and migrant Westerners who are perceived as invaders. The Likoni clashes of 1997, for example, was an attack by indigenous Digo targeting ethnic Luo, Luhya, and Kikuyu. The Mpeketoni terrorist attack of 2014 was another example of a local vs visitor struggle, where Al-Shabaab Islamists carried out anti-Christian and anti-Western attacks on the non-Muslim community living in Mpeketoni. Even as the Government of Kenya attempts to navigate these tensions by muffling the main antagonists, the Mombasa Republican Council and Al-Shabaab, the question of belonging and rights remains an emotional and emotive issue in Kenya's coastal belt. A more in-depth understanding of the tensions along the Kenyan coasts can be gleaned by reading, among others, John Oucho, *Undercurrents of Ethnic Violence in Kenya* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Binaifer Nowrojee and Bronwen Manby, *State Sponsored Ethnic Violence in Kenya* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993); Stephen Magu, *The Socio-Cultural, Ethnic And Historic Foundations of Kenya's Electoral Violence* (Abingdon: Routledge/ Taylor and Francis, 2018).

implications underlying this categorisation, revealing its significance for collective aspirations of national cohesion spread across East Africa. These implications extended not only through the era of British occupation but also well into the postcolonial period. From 1888, when East African soil was declared the Imperial British East Africa Company's (IBEAC) sphere of influence, until 1963, when Kenya negotiated for independence, the boundaries of the colony, and of the protectorate, and whomever had rights to these spaces, were defined and redefined, and the margins drawn radically transformed the topography of the spaces and the respective peoples occupying them. The migrant Luo rail and port workers in Mombasa played a crucial role in informing the decisions leading up to the drawing and redrawing of these boundaries.

Kisumu and Siaya, the representative³ homelands for ethnic Luo, lie in Luoland, some 830 and 900 kilometres, respectively, from Mombasa. Figure 1.1 shows the location of the two regions. The Luo stepped into Mombasa's social landscape as the official African labourer class, mobilised specifically to mitigate Mombasa's manpower shortages as the British colonial state rolled out its grandest imperial projects in East Africa: the Uganda Railway and the port of Mombasa. Their entry into Mombasa, a territory that, at that time, fell under the Zanzibar Sultanate, revolutionised the town's landscape and radically transformed the Swahili coastal landscape by way of effecting the shift from a predominantly Islamic Swahili structure towards a new cosmopolitanism. The convergence of the European colonial state, the Swahili socio-cultural landscape, and the migrant Luo labourers in Mombasa indeed produced modern-age histories for Mombasa, for ethnic Luo, and for what was to later become the Republic of Kenya. Colonial-era mobilities in Mombasa – of both ideas and people – transformed the town's topographical features. They altered its political structure, revolutionised systems and methods of subsistence, shifted established communal belief systems and public social conventions, and informed new ideas of perceived rights to spaces.

³ Though Luoland is spread over a wider area in Western Kenya, Luo ethnicity is typically attached to homelands in Kisumu and Siaya.

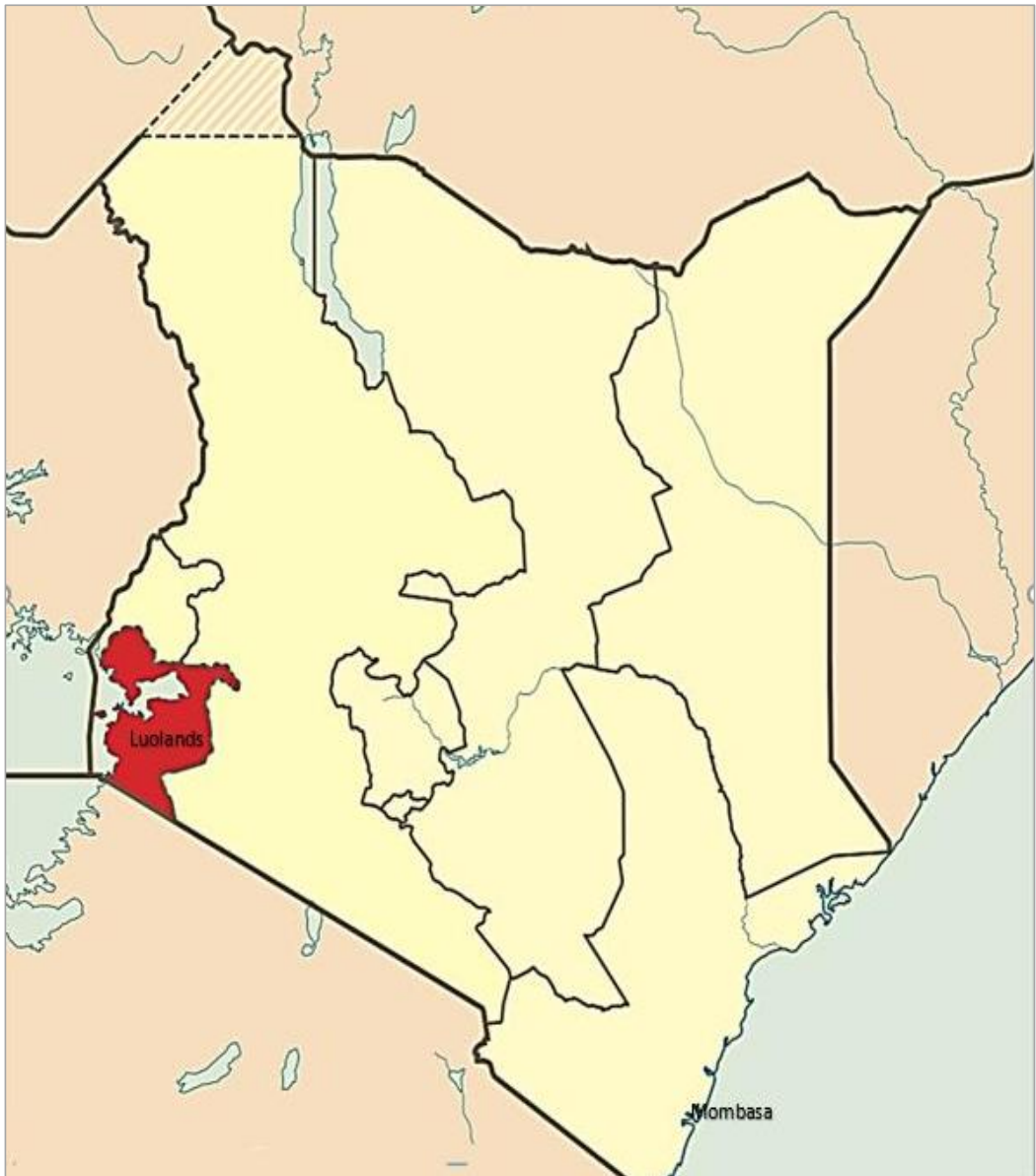


Figure 1.1 Map of Kenya showing Luoland and Mombasa. Map courtesy of Wikipedia commons https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nyanza_in_Kenya.svg

The British Empire's acquaintance with the East African coast and Mombasa in particular began in the late nineteenth century, when surrogates of capitalist investors began whispering of the potential Africa's previously unexplored interior offered to the metropole. Geographically, Mombasa was strategically positioned, and incorporating the town into the British sphere of influence was deemed a sensible and prudent imperial move. This would have not only secured vast, resource-rich lands for the British Empire, but also provided a vantage point to monitor Germany's aggressive expansion into territories north of Tanganyika, including regions closer to the Buganda Kingdom, where British interests lay.⁴ Mombasa town was already a notable player in the Indian Ocean maritime trade network and presented promising opportunities for profitability, provided proper occupation and control were established. Though the town's position and importance in the broad imperial scheme were clear, Mombasa nevertheless faced challenges that potentially jeopardised British chances of securing proper occupation, particularly in competition with another European power, in this case Germany. The town lacked modern infrastructure, and the thriving trade network, which Britain planned to take over, was deeply rooted in social contracts between Arab traders and African populations inhabiting the regions along trade routes extending to the Great Lakes of East and Central Africa. Britain was determined to overhaul the organisational structure of this trading system by cutting out all the middlemen facilitating the trade and, instead, engaging traders directly. This goal was to be realised by establishing a rail network and modernising Mombasa's port. Robinson noted that locomotives had already proved their remarkable capacity for integrating local and national economies in Europe and the United States, fostering growth. Once the trunk lines had been completed at home and become profitable, railway mania spread abroad.⁵ In East Africa, the metropolitan rail networks were replicated by way of the construction of the Uganda Railway line. The Uganda Railway, along with Mombasa's Kilindini Harbour, indeed, became pivotal to the success of East Africa's imperial campaign, particularly in facilitating access to the interior resources (including labour), for incorporation into the colonial capitalist economy.

The construction of the Uganda Railway commenced in Mombasa in 1896, and the line was extended to the Eastern borders of Lake Victoria (present day Kisumu). The line was completed in December 1901. Upon its completion, the colonial office took over control of its management from the Uganda Railway Committee, and in 1903 the Uganda Railway and Harbours Corporation (renamed the Kenya–Uganda Railway and Harbours Corporation after an amalgamation process that took place in 1912–1914) was established. The rail headquarters was transferred to Nairobi but the corporation's major operations remained in Mombasa.

On taking over the management of the rail and harbour, the colonial state was abruptly confronted with a severe shortage of manpower. Mombasa's political and cultural landscape in that period harboured deeply rooted prejudices regarding labour and work, forcing Britain to

⁴ R.M.A van Zwanenberg and Anne King, *An Economic History of Kenya and Uganda 1800–1970* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Books, 1975).

⁵ Ronald E. Robinson, "Introduction: Railway Imperialism" Clarence B. Davis, Kenneth E. Wilburn, and Ronald E. Robinson, eds., *Railway Imperialism* (Westport, CT: Bloomsbury Academic. 1991) p. 2.

reckon with the fact that the specific labour required for operations and further expansion of the rail and harbour was severely lacking. Hence, the colonial administration began migrating communities from the Lake Victoria region, collectively known as the Kavirondo, into Mombasa, in such large numbers that Kavirondo Luoland in Western Kenya become the primary labour pool for Mombasa's rail and harbour infrastructure projects. The arrival of these migrant labourers triggered transformational changes in Mombasa's political, economic, and social landscape. The town, for example, witnessed rapid economic development to the extent that, by 1910, it had overtaken Zanzibar to become East Africa's centre for Indian Ocean maritime trade. The introduction of Luo labourers into Mombasa's distinct cultural space, however, disrupted established norms of social interaction within the Swahili social fabric, generating tensions that would become the foundations for the development of colonial Mombasa's urban identity. Using migrant Luo rail and port workers as the unit of my analysis, this thesis illustrates how Luo labourers influenced the foundation of a new Mombasa, with visible changes in demography, spatial development, economic outlook, and systems of social interactions. The study seeks to stimulate debates on the effects of migration on the development of present outlooks of African urban spaces, and inspire a re-explorations of perspectives on migration and urban social change.

1.2. Objectives

This study explores the role played by migrant Luo rail and port workers in the development of the defining features of colonial Mombasa's urban landscape in the years 1902–1950s. The main objective, therefore, is to analyse how the introduction of the Luo labourer produced the revolution that informed the radical transformations that were witnessed in Mombasa's economy, demography, and society. This objective is guided by the following research questions:

- Why did the Luo migrate into Mombasa town at the onset of colonial occupation?
- How did Luo rail and port workers interact with the colonial state, the wage labour economy, and Mombasa's society?
- What tensions were produced by the introduction of Luo rail and port workers, and how were these manifest in Mombasa's urban environment?
- How did migrant Luo rail and port workers respond to colonial Mombasa's social hierarchies, and how did their reactions influence the development of the towns new urban outlook?

1.3. Area of study

Nestled between the districts of Kilifi and Kwale, Mombasa is the second largest city in Kenya and lies in what, until 2010, was Kenya's Coast province. The cosmopolitan district of Mombasa is composed of the island of Mombasa,⁶ from which it derives its name, and pockets of the mainland that officially border Kwale and Kilifi districts. With a population of over 1.2 million,⁷ Mombasa district is divided into six constituencies, namely, Changamwe, Jomvu, Kisauni, Likoni, Mvita, and Nyali. Figure 1.2. presents a contemporary map of Mombasa, showing the location of the constituencies, while Figure 1.3. is the 1917 colonial mapping of the town.

The study to analyse migrant Luo port and rail workers and the transformational cartographies of colonial Mombasa was mainly conducted in the constituencies of Changamwe, Mvita, and Nyali. The three constituencies were selected because their housing estates host a significant cluster of Luo households. Respondents included in this study were therefore drawn from residents living in Mombasa's Railways Estate in Changamwe and Luo households in Shimanzi, Kongowea, Kisumu Ndogo, Bangladesh, Makupa, Magongo, and Port Reitz. The contemporary conditions of the study area clearly reflect the positionality of the Luo community as Mombasa's unofficial labourer class, both in the colonial period and in the postcolonial era. Port Reitz, Magongo, Shimanzi, Makupa, and Changamwe are located near Mombasa's ports and its surrounding goods godowns. The clustering of Luo households in these estates indicates a deliberate choice by Luo port workers to live in close proximity to their workplaces. Kongowea in Nyali constituency is close to Mbaraki, where the first railway godowns were constructed. Kongowea and Kisauni, moreover, were among the first resettlement points for the Kenya Uganda Railway and Harbours (hereafter KURH) labourers when the boundaries of Mombasa town were extended to include areas outside the official island. Figures 1.4 and 1.5 are photos of houses in the Railways estate where the researcher sampled a number of respondents included in this study.

The Luoland districts of Kisumu and Siaya and Nairobi form two secondary study areas. Since the primary focus of this study is Mombasa, the secondary study areas were not conclusively defined due to the limited number of respondents, who were scattered throughout the respective regions. For example, two respondents, a retired KAR soldier formerly stationed in Mombasa, and the elderly widow of a former Railways employee were the only informants sampled in the village of Malanga in Siaya. A total of five respondents were interviewed in Siaya, three in Kisumu, and four in Nairobi. Respondents in these secondary study areas were purposefully selected because they were either repatriated individuals or relations of retired and returnee

⁶ The island officially falls under Mvita constituency, one of Mombasa's six constituencies.

⁷ Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, *The Kenya Population and Housing Census, 2019: Vol II, Distribution of Population by Administrative Units*, (Nairobi: KNBS, 2019).

Mombasa port and rail workers. Figure 1.6 shows the interviewing process with Christopher Okumu,⁸ a former goods loader for the Railways Corporation in Mombasa.



Figure 1.2. Map of Mombasa County. Map courtesy of Tourist Maps Kenya.

⁸ Okumu worked at Mombasa's railways godowns and was forcefully repatriated to Siaya for associating with an ethnic Kikuyu woman. His story is narrated in Chapter Four.

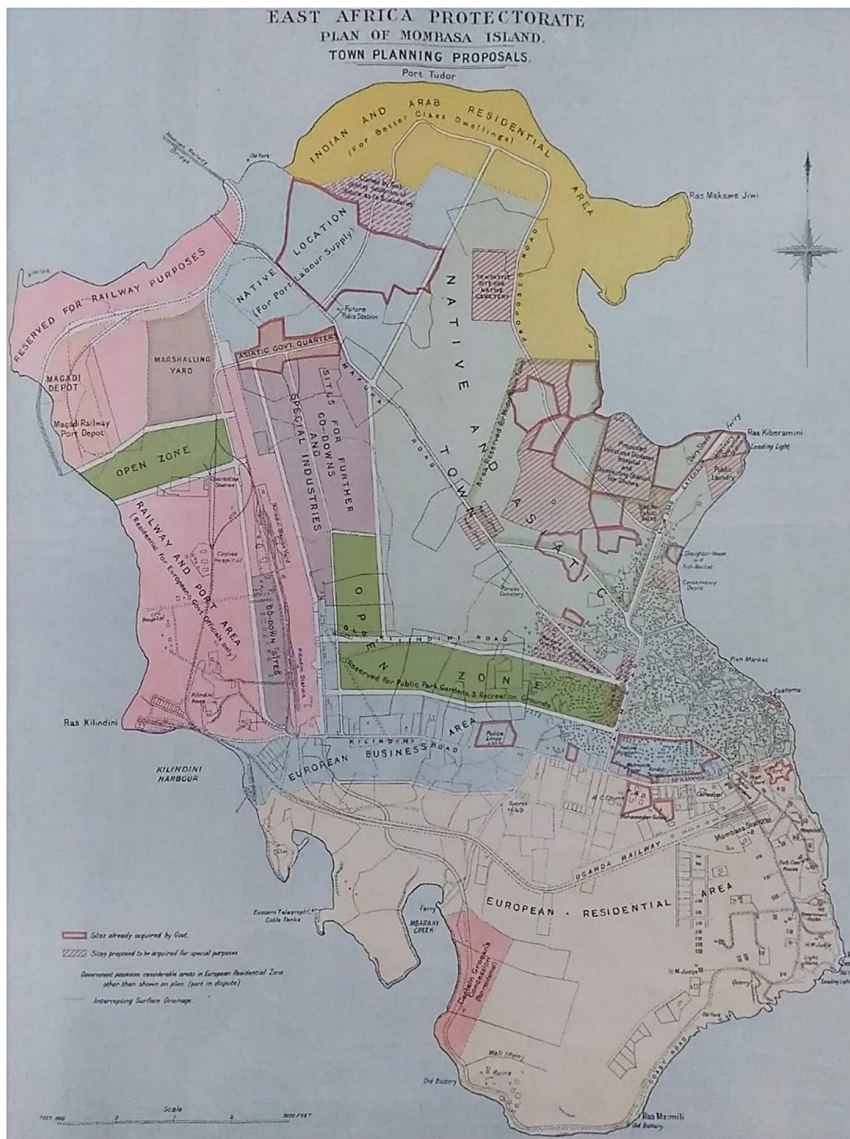


Figure 1.3. Proposed plans for the mapping of Mombasa Island, 1917. Source: C0/533/190 Colonial Office Kenya: Official Correspondence.



Figure 1.4.



Figure 1.5.

Figure1.4. and 1.5. Photographs of Mombasa Railways Housing Estate in Changamwe.



Figure 1.6. Photograph of interview with Christopher Okumu, on 27 February 2018 in Banana Siaya.

1.4. Methodology and data collection procedure

The research base upon which I draw my conclusions brings together a range of diverse sources. The principal source materials used were the official government correspondences and reports deposited at the Kenya National Archives. In particular, the files of the Chief Native Commissioner and the Departments of African Affairs and Labour provided vital information. The annual reports for Mombasa districts, the Central Kavirondo districts of Kisumu and Siaya, and reports of Local Native Councils (LNCs) offered a wealth of information regarding migrant Luo labourers working for the rail and port service in Mombasa. In Britain, the main archival source was the CO533 series dedicated to Kenya, which is deposited at the Public Records office in Kew. The archival data referencing colonial Mombasa's landscape in Nairobi and Kew were indeed illuminating, in that they were almost exclusively related to the KURH. Labour needs and tensions in the town are discussed, for example, in relation to the rail and port service, while the housing crisis in Mombasa is analysed and recorded pertaining to the KURH. The town's demographic and spatial planning, security concerns, and ethnic tensions are also examined while referencing the rail and port workers. Scrutiny of this data clearly revealed that KURH was the colonial state's primary concern in Mombasa.

The archival data used to describe the Luo rural landscape at the cusps of colonial domination was sourced from the personal archives of travellers to East Africa that are available online, and from the Mill Hill Mission Archives in Oosterbeek, the Netherlands. The data included photographs, missionaries' official correspondence, and collections of various private letters and dairies. These sources were essential in providing the broad picture of Luo positionality in the period immediately preceding European occupation, and how this position influenced the transition to embracing the wage labour economy.

Setting its veracity aside, the voices contained in this diversity of documentary archival material are almost exclusively European. Colonial documents in Africa are notorious for silencing African voices and disregarding African personal experience in their portrayal of colonial spaces. The archival data documenting Mombasa's colonial space, for example, is almost exclusively related to the KURH, and there are gaps in the data documenting the manifestation of other facets of Mombasa's topography that did not directly influence the management of the port and rail. Data documenting the changes witnessed in Mombasa's demography, for example, emphasise KURH's migrant labour problem, but overlook the contribution of Luo women to this development. Scholars of subaltern Africa have endeavoured to correct this anomaly by adopting methodologies that engage with their subjects' life histories as a way to overcome their silencing. White's study, for example, utilised the life histories of women sex workers in colonial Nairobi to reveal how women's gendered labour contributed to the economic development of the African labourer class in Nairobi.⁹ Pesa's study on family history is another example of how life histories and biographies fit into and sometimes challenge dominant narratives of social history. Their study of family histories of migrant labourers in Mwinilunga district in northwestern Zambia juxtaposes individual stories with the grand theories of social change in colonial Mwinilunga, and from this basis they were able to map how the individual was connected to the grand social changes witnessed in the town.¹⁰ To overcome the silencing of the Luo labourer's voice in the creation of Mombasa's colonial urban landscape, additional data was therefore sourced from interviews with principals and descendants of migrant Luo rail and port workers who were stationed in Mombasa in the years 1902-1950s. A total of 52 one-on-one interviews and four focus group interviews were conducted. The focus group interviews comprised groups of 10–15 individuals.

Though Mombasa was the main study area, interviews were also conducted in Siaya, Kisumu, and in Nairobi. Respondents in the three latter areas were selected using the snowballing sampling technique, and they were either repatriated or retired migrant labourers or their descendants. Mombasa nonetheless was the main study area, and the majority of respondents were sampled in this district. Mombasa's respondents came from clusters of "Luo settlements"¹¹ in Kisumu Ndogo, Bangladesh, Kongowea, Magongo, Shimanzi and Port Rietz, and from different parts of estates in the wider Changamwe constituency. Two focus group interviews were conducted in Bangladesh, one in Magongo and one in Changamwe. Unfortunately, a significant number of colonial era port and rail workers are deceased, hence the interviewees were mainly with second-, third- and fourth- generation relatives of former KURH labourers. These familial respondents were able to provide personal biographical

⁹ Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Iva Pesa "From Life Histories to Social History: Narrating Social Change Through Multiple Biographies" Klaas van Walraven, ed., *The Individual in African History* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2020).

¹¹ The colonial practice of segregating African urban settlements ethnically has spilled over to the spatial mapping of contemporary Mombasa. Areas that housed particular ethnic groups during the colonial era more or less have the same ethnic composition today. Chaani, for example, has a disproportionate number of Kamba households just as Port Rietz is predominantly Luo.

material, which was used to position the individual migrant experience within the larger picture of the development of colonial Mombasa. Local administrative networks of chiefs and community leaders who were not necessarily kin to former KURH workers were also interviewed, and they provided useful information on how the Luo rail and port community has profoundly influenced the development of local spaces. They also pointed out community members who were connected to the KURH, thus allowing the researcher to roll out a list of relevant informants who were later interviewed for this study. Members of the Legio Maria Church, and *Sauti ya Wanawake* and SHOFCO CBOs working in the predominantly Luo settlements were immensely helpful in identifying older and retired rail and port workers, while also illuminating the long-standing tensions between migrants Luo labourers and coastal indigenes.

The oral interviews in Mombasa were conducted in the framework of participant observation. As an ethnic Luo, I requested and was allowed to immerse myself in the daily lives of the descendants of colonial-era KURH labourers. For example, I was a welcome visitor at the Legio Maria Church in Magongo, whose membership includes a sizeable number of current KURH labourers who have gained employment through communal networks stretching back to the colonial era. Legio Maria is an African independent religious movement whose core theology is centred around Luo ethnicity. I participated in the church's social activities and outreach programmes during the five-month period I was conducting interviews in Mombasa. Moreover, I was invited to participate in the community programmes and meetings held by *Sauti ya Wanawake* and SHOFCO CBOs. Participant observation allowed me to become familiar with my respondents, and it illuminated how the Luo community in the Mombasa diaspora have a sense of kinship with members of the ethnic community dispersed in other regions. It also allowed me to compare my observations against archival documentation of communal networks, and their role as survival mechanisms in navigating KURH's volatile labour market in the colonial era. Today, these communal networks continue to play a crucial role in helping residents of low-income areas, where many previous and present rail and port workers live and endure everyday hardships. Figure 1.7 below is a photograph of a local currency that was once used by a (predominantly ethnic Luo) CBO in Bangladesh for bartering goods and services amongst members whenever there was low circulation of cash.

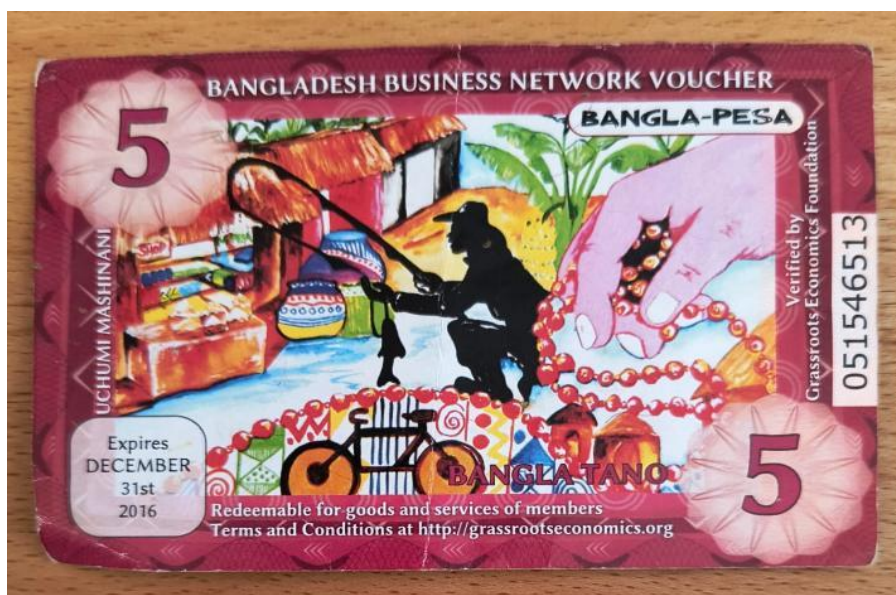


Figure 1.7. A photograph of the Bangla-pesa currency

The primary data collected was analysed, edited, and contrasted with an array of secondary sources. A review of a selection of books, journal articles, newspapers, and opinion pieces on the internet helped situate my findings within the broader context of imperial expansionism and the impact of colonialism on African communities and communal spaces. Priority was given to books and articles focused on African labour, including, among others, Berman's *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya*; Gutking et al. *African Labour History*; and Stichter's *Migrant Labour in Kenya*. A major theme analysed in this dissertation is how communities make adaptations to cope with social change. The arguments supporting this theme in the analysis of the cartographies of colonial Mombasa were informed by the work of scholars such as Dekker, whose body of work is mainly dedicated to analysing the coping mechanisms that communities adopt when confronted with stress.¹² One study, for example, examined how familial bonds and group networks were used as support systems by newly resettled households in Zimbabwe's land resettlement schemes, and my study of the Luo found parallel support systems used by migrant Luo workers to navigate the shocks of Mombasa urban living. Similarly, Carotenuto's

¹² Marleen Dekker, *Risk, Resettlement and Relations: Social Security in Rural Zimbabwe* (Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers, 2004); Marleen Dekker, "Sustainability and Resourcefulness: Support Networks during Periods of Stress," *World Development*, 32, No. 10, (Elsevier, 2004), pp. 1735–1751; Abigail Barr, Marleen Dekker, and Marcel Fafchamps, "Who Shares Risk with Whom under Different Enforcement Mechanisms?" *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 60 No. 4 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012) pp. 677–706.

dissertation *Cultivating an African Community: The Luo Union in 20th-Century East Africa*,¹³ was especially informative in laying the foundation for understanding how the urban Luo diaspora community was a reproduction of the colonial experience in Nairobi and, hence, it was the basis of my analysis of a similar situation in colonial Mombasa. My study diverges from Carotenuto's in the fact that it reveals how the development of a unitary ethnic Luo constituency contributed to the official shift of Mombasa's demographic and political status from an Arab/Swahili town to an African town.

1.5. Problematisation of the Luo

This study originally proposed to explore how Luo rail and port workers contributed to the development of the defining features of colonial Mombasa. The question of "who are the Luo?" lingered, however, as I continued analysing data and realised that the boundaries defining this category of individuals were constantly shifting in the colonial period. This situation created a conditional framework, which I have described as the "problematisation of the Luo."

An ethnic group is generally defined as a community or population made up of people who share a common cultural background or descent.¹⁴ Scholars often categorise ethnic groups on the basis of language, territory, shared history, or common culture.¹⁵ The categorisation of people within specified ethnic boundaries is, however, contentious, and is oftentimes challenged by scholars of the subject who argue that the boundaries of backgrounds and descents that make up ethnicities are subjective and tend to be constructivist.¹⁶ Moreover, scholarly categorisations of ethnicities sometimes differs from the peoples' own definition of the given designations.¹⁷ Thus, how an individual categorises themselves ethnically may not fall within the textbook definitions of that particular ethnicity.

This study encountered a similar problem regarding the ethnic classification of the "Luo." While trying to define the ethnic boundaries of colonial-period Luo rail and port workers in Mombasa, an inevitable overlap with other ethnicities emerged. This occurred because Luo ethnicity, as a homogenous cultural entity, had not fully solidified even years into the twentieth century. Several Luo-speaking cultural groups inhabited regions of Western Kenya in the nineteenth century, in the nascent years of European occupation, but they did not form a

¹³ Matthew Paul Carotenuto, *Cultivating an African Community: The Luo Union in 20th-Century East Africa* (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 2006).

¹⁴ Definition derived from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁵ Elliott D. Green, "What is An Ethnic Group? Political Economy, Constructivism, and the Common Language Approach to Ethnicity," *London School of Economics Working Papers* (London: 2005). Accessed on 22 April 2023 from <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/137723/WP57.pdf>.

¹⁶ Kanchan Chandra, "Cumulative Findings in the Study of Ethnic Politics" *APSA-CP*, 12 No.1 (2001) pp. 7–11.

¹⁷ Katarzyna Hamer, Sam McFarland, Barbara Czarnecka, Agnieszka Golińska, Liliana Manrique Cadena, Magdalena Łuźniak-Piecha, and Tomasz Jułkowski, "What is an 'Ethnic Group' in Ordinary People's Eyes? Different Ways of Understanding it Among American, British, Mexican, and Polish Respondents," *Cross-Cultural Research*, 54 No. 1 (2020) pp. 28–72.

homogenous cultural polity. Luo speakers in Western Kenya certainly mixed with Bantu groups in regions including Alego, Samia, Bunyala, and Yimbo. Additionally, the Lake Victoria islands of Sesse, Bugaya, Magenta, Mfangano, and Rusinga were also inhabited by several hybrid communities who did not necessarily consider themselves Luo.¹⁸ It was the members of these hybrid groups who migrated into Mombasa to work for the KURH, and who later came to identify as the Luo. Thus, up until the 1930s and, in some cases, the 1940s, “Luo” migrants were not Luo as we know them today. The amalgamation of Luo ethnicity was in fact a process that occurred in the twentieth century, and it included the incorporation of groups some of whom may not have previously considered themselves Luo.¹⁹ The Suba, for example, were part of Bantu refugee groups arriving in Luoland from Uganda in the first decade of the twentieth century, and they gradually adopted “Luoness” to the point that, in the 1950s, a majority of the Suba considered themselves Luo. The trade unionist Tom Mboya is an example of a Luo with Suba origins who is considered “Luo proper” in the annals of Luo and Kenyan history.

The problem of Luo categorisation was compounded by colonial classification of the group. In colonial documents, they are categorised as the Kavirondo. Kavirondo, however, is a collective term for a group of individuals who were said to have originated from the Kavirondo Gulf. Today, this means that the Kavirondo ethnicities encompass Luo, Gusii/Kisii, (Aba)Kuria, and (Aba)Luhya. The boundaries of the four groups were, however, fluid during the colonial period, and they shared similarities in terms of patrimonial relationships, cultural practices, and spatial and temporal boundaries. Thus, it is possible that documents discussing the Kavirondo, even those that specifically name the Kavirondo Luo, may have captured groups that, in later periods, came to regard themselves as the Luhya or Gusii/Kisii. This study reveals, however, that it was the experiences of the urban collective that formed the constituency that came to be regarded as the Luo. The Luo Union, the organisation that played a crucial role in the construction of a pan-Luo identity in the twentieth century, extended membership to all individuals as long as they were willing to abide by the organisation’s regulations and statutes.²⁰ My reference for ethnic Luo in this study is thus drawn from the urban Luo’s own definitions (those who claimed Luo ethnicity) and also from the history of the formation of the ethnic Luo constituency and cultural polity in colonial urban areas. For example, the Manyala, who consider themselves a hybrid Luo/Luhya ethnic group and fully claim both ethnicities were included in this study and categorised as Luo because they are considered Luo by the “Luo proper”; they speak the Luo language, have similar cultural traditions (for example, with respect to naming), and are found in “Luo settlements” in both Mombasa and Luoland.

¹⁸ Bethwell A. Ogot, *Economic Adaptation and Change among the Jii-Speaking Peoples of Eastern Africa*, (Kisumu: Anyange Press, 1996). Inhabitants of these islands currently consider themselves Luo.

¹⁹ This point will be elaborated in the final chapter of this dissertation, where I will discuss how Mombasa became a “Kavirondo town.” A glimpse of this phenomenon was revealed by Parkin when he observed that the Luo Union welcomed everyone into the association “as long as they agreed with Luo customs and traditions, and the constitution.” Up to the late 1950s, several Union committee members were indeed non-ethnic Luo. David Parkin, *Neighbours and Nationals in an African City Ward*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

²⁰ Parkin, *Neighbours and Nationals*; KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/12 Administration, Riwuok Luo, 1945–51.

1.6. The Luo in Kenya's historiographical tradition

From the earliest anthropological writings as African history, where scholars like Evans Pritchard, Southall, and Wilson elaborated on the evolution of Luo cultural practices,²¹ political organisation,²² and tenure systems,²³ to the modern era in which the Luo feature prominently in analyses of Kenya's ethnic based politics, the Luo have undoubtedly secured space in Kenya's historiographical tradition. Initial Luo historiography was the preserve of European writers, and missionaries, amateur historians, and professional anthropologists were at the forefront of providing writings that later became valuable reference points for information regarding the social practices and structures of the communal organisation of Luo society. As soon as the Luo adopted European record-keeping practices, however, they too began chronicling their cultural history. The impetus for the Luo to produce their own anthropo-historical works arose from the perceived threat of erosion of their cultural identity, and the formation of a detribalised urban group in the colonial diaspora as migration to urban areas progressively increased in the first half of the 20th century. Amateur historians such as Malo²⁴ and Mboya²⁵ then began recording and archiving records of Luo cultural life for posterity, and their writings often served as invocations of heritage and nationalism presented as authentic expressions of the national collective.

The professionalisation of African history in the 1960s informed the production of a new body of scientific work covering Luo history proper. Stimulated by Bethwell A. Ogot's *History of the Southern Luo*,²⁶ other historians ventured into recording the world of the Luo in the past and the near present. Scholarly works continued previous themes elucidating Luo cultural, economic,²⁷ political,²⁸ and social life,²⁹ but new frontiers were also made by works revealing the interconnectedness of colonialism to Luo history in modernity. These included Glickman's³⁰ analysis of the evolution of Luo patriliney, which, he argued, was influenced by

²¹ Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, "Marriage Customs of the Luo of Kenya" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 20 No. 2 (1950), pp. 132–142.

²² Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, "Luo Tribes and Clans," *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and other Essays in Social Anthropology* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), pp. 205–227; Aidan Southall, *Lineage Formation amongst the Luo* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1952).

²³ Gordon Wilson, *Luo Customary Laws and Marriage Laws Customs*, (Nairobi: Government printer, 1961).

²⁴ Shadrack Malo, *Dhudi mag Central Nyanza* [Clans of Central Nyanza], (Kampala: Eagle Press, 1953).

²⁵ Paul Mboya, *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi* [Customs, beliefs and practices of the Luo], (Kisumu: Anyange Press, 1938).

²⁶ Bethwell A. Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo: 1500–1900*, (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).

²⁷ William R. Ochieng, ed. *Historical Studies and Social Change in Western Kenya: Essays in Memory of Prof. G. S. Were* (Nairobi: East Africa Education Publishers, 2002); Ogot, *Economic Adaptation and Change among the Jii-speaking Peoples*

²⁸ William R. Ochieng, *A History of the Kadimo Chiefdom of Yimbo in Western Kenya*, (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1975).

²⁹ A.B.C. Ocholla-Oyayo, *Traditional Ideology and Ethics among the Southern Luo*, (Upsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1976).

³⁰ Maurice Glickman, "Patriliney among the Gusii and the Luo of Kenya," *American Anthropologist*, 76. No.2 (1974), pp. 312–318.

creation of ethnic reserves. Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo³¹ explored how colonialism informed the changes witnessed in Siaya's rural landscape, and Ochieng's³² work on the development of modern Kenya included the contribution of Luo labourers in settler farms and other urban areas.

The Luo are also mentioned in studies on Kenya's labour history and on the development of Kenya's urban spaces, and they feature in works such as those of Stichter,³³ Zwannenberg,³⁴ and Janmohammed.³⁵ In addition, they have been invariably analysed in scholarship on urban protest movements, in works such as those by Clayton,³⁶ Singh,³⁷ and Cooper.³⁸ Scholarly outputs such as those of Ogiwang and Mugambi,³⁹ and Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo,⁴⁰ which, in analysing the saga of the death and burial of S.M Otieno, espoused linkages between urban Luo and their rural counterparts, reveal how communal links and ethnic identities have been integral parts of the identity of urban Luo through history.

Moreover, the Luo feature prominently in discourses on the development of Kenya's postcolonial political landscape. Scholarship on this theme is immense, due partly to constant flare-ups of ethnic violence targeting the Luo, especially during electoral cycles, but also because of the dominance of Oginga Odinga and Raila Odinga (both ethnic Luos) throughout Kenya's postcolonial national politics. Notable works here include those of Throupe,⁴¹ Shilaho,⁴² Ndubai,⁴³ and Oucho,⁴⁴ all of which analyse the development of Kenya's ethnic-based political landscape.

³¹ David William Cohen and E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, *Siaya: The Historical Anthropology of an African Landscape*, (London and Nairobi: Heinemann and James Currey, 1989).

³² William R. Ochieng, ed., *A Modern History of Kenya, 1895–1980* (Nairobi: Evans Press, 1989).

³³ Sharon Stichter, *Migrant Labourers* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Sharon Stichter, *Migrant Labour in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response 1895–1975* (Nairobi: Longman, 1982).

³⁴ R.M.A Zwanenberg, *Colonial Capitalism and Labour in Kenya, 1919–1939* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1975).

³⁵ Karim Janmohamed, *A History of Mombasa, c. 1895–1939: Some Aspects of Economic and Social Life in an East African Port Town During Colonial Rule*, (Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 1978).

³⁶ Anthony Clayton and Donald Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya*, (London: Frank Cass, 1975).

³⁷ Makhan Singh, *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement to 1952*, (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1969).

³⁸ Fredrick Cooper, *Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University press, 1987).

³⁹ J. B. Ogiwang and J.N. Kanyua Mugambi, *The S.M Otieno Case: Death and Burial in Modern Kenya*, (Nairobi: Nairobi University Press, 1989).

⁴⁰ David William Cohen and E.S Atieno-Odhiambo, *Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992).

⁴¹ David Throup and Charles Hornsby, *Multi-Party Politics in Kenya*, (Nairobi and London: James Currey and East African Education Publishers, 1998).

⁴² Westen K. Shilaho, *Political Power and Tribalism in Kenya*, (Johannesburg: Macmillan and Palgrave, 2018).

⁴³ Benjamin Ndubai, *Cleavage in Kenya Politics: A Critical Post Mortem of General Elections and of Current Trends in Kenya's Multi-Party Politics*, (Nairobi: Kensing International Limited, 1993).

⁴⁴ Oucho, *Undercurrents of Ethnic Conflict in Kenya*

Luo women have also been given some, albeit minimal space in Kenya's historiographical tradition. Work here has centred on their contribution to the development of local politics⁴⁵ and the transformations of their gender roles as a consequence of male wage labour migrations.⁴⁶ Scholars like Jean-Hay⁴⁷ have illuminated how Luo women's consumption patterns contributed to the development of a wage labour economy, while Strobel⁴⁸ has, albeit in a small section of her work, revealed migrant Luo women's experience of ethnicity in Mombasa. Ndeda has also produced informative work on gender and its intersection with politics, culture, and religion.⁴⁹

The Luo have also featured, albeit on a shallow level, in discourses illuminating the Kenya coasts' territorial boundary contests and security issues. Kanyinga's⁵⁰ work, for example, revealed their involvement in the development of the incessant land question on the Kenyan coast, while Aseka⁵¹ and Willis and Gona⁵² have discussed their contribution in the structuring of Kenya's coastal politics, which became the foundation for past and current secessionist politics.

A comprehensive historical analysis of the Luo diaspora community in Mombasa, with a focus on mobilities and the consequent changes in the political, economic, and social map of Kenya's protectorate space, has yet to be produced, however. This work hopes to make a contribution in this regard and to provide some insights into the question of the place of the diaspora Luo community living along the Kenyan coastline and particularly in Mombasa, where persistent struggles exist with those who consider themselves indigenes and particularly over questions of historical and autochthony rights. The findings in this study may help involved parties to mediate these issues from a point of knowledge, and find a feasible middle ground that, may lead to peaceful co-existence.

⁴⁵ Dorothy A. Nyakwaka, *Gender and Political Transformation in Kenya: A Case Study of Women in Luoland, 1895–2002*, (Doctoral dissertation, Egerton University, 2013).

⁴⁶ Mildred J. Ndeda, "Women and Development since Colonial Times," William R Ochieng ed., *Historical Studies and Social Change in Western Kenya* (Nairobi: East Africa Educational Publishers, 2002), pp. 232–260.

⁴⁷ Margaret Jean Hay, *Material Culture and the Shaping of Consumer Society in Colonial Western Kenya* (Boston, MA: African Studies Center, Boston University, 1994).

⁴⁸ Margaret Strobel, "From Lelemama to Lobbying: Women's Association in Mombasa Kenya," Bethwell A. Ogot ed., *Hadith 6: History and Social Change in East Africa* (Nairobi: East Africa Education Publishers, 1976).

⁴⁹ Mildred J. Ndeda, "Luo Women Voters/Aspirants and the New Constitutional Dispensation in the March 2013 Kenya Elections: The Case of Siaya and Kisumu Counties," *Kenya's Past as Prologue: Voters, Violence and the 2013 General Election* (Nairobi: IFRA, 2016); Mildred J. Ndeda, "Nomiya Luo Church: A Gender Analysis of the Dynamics of an African Independent Church among the Luo of Siaya District in the Twentieth Century and Beyond," *Gender, Literature and Religion in Africa* (Nairobi: Kenyatta University, 2011).

⁵⁰ Karuti Kanyinga, "Re-distribution from Above: The Politics of Land Rights and Squatting in Coastal Kenya," *Report No. 115 of the Nordic African Institute*, (Uppsala, 2000) accessed on 2 March 2020 from <https://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:271584/FULLTEXT01>.

⁵¹ Eric Masinde Aseka, *Political Activities among the Mijikenda of Kilifi and Mombasa*, (Master's thesis, University of Nairobi, 1984).

⁵² Justin Willis and George Gona, "Pwani C Kenya? Memory, Documents and Secessionist Politics in Coastal Kenya," *African Affairs*, 112 No. 446 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 48–71.

1.7. Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is structurally divided into five chapters plus a conclusion. The introduction chapter gives an overview of the research, including background information, objectives, research methods, and the outline of the various components of the thesis. The discussions in the conclusion are a review of the entire dissertation, and include an analysis of how the cartographies of colonial Mombasa informed the development of the space that came to be the Republic of Kenya, and how Luo rail and port workers were the main protagonists in the contests that produced this particular outcome. The main body of arguments for migrant Luo rail and port workers and the cartographies of colonial Mombasa are presented in Chapters Two to Five, each chapter offering thematic arguments about the interactions of the colonial state, the Swahili social landscape, and the Luo migrant labourer in the production of the features of Mombasa's colonial urban space.

Chapter Two, aptly named "The setting," explores the intersection of Mombasa's positionality, British imperialism, and the Luo labourer in Mombasa. The chapter analyses how, at the onset of British occupation, Mombasa's organisational structure and urban features placed considerable limits on access to local labour and, in particular, the typology of manual labour needed for British rail and harbour projects. The chapter will elaborate on how British imperial interests engaged with Mombasa's semi-autonomy, social stratification, and demography, to produce a labour economy that was, ultimately, contradictory to British imperial interests. This contradiction was resolved by the introduction of the Luo labourer. The chapter goes on to chronicle the movement of Luo rail and port workers into Mombasa's urban space amidst a backdrop of worsening living conditions in Western Kenya's Luoland.

Chapter Three, "A town in turmoil," deliberates on the interaction of the colonial state and Luo rail and port workers, and the controversies these interactions produced in colonial Mombasa's urban space. The chapter discusses the development of Mombasa's volatile labour landscape, which, at its core, was the product of contradictions in official labour policy and the evident labour practices of colonial capital. The arguments put forward elaborate on how policies for the development and expansion of the rail and harbour network influenced the migration of huge numbers of Luo labourers into Mombasa and, subsequently, contributed to the proletarianisation of labour. The chapter additionally discusses Mombasa's recurrent labour tensions and persistent contests over wages, working conditions, and housing, and evaluates how these pressures stimulated migrant labourers' labour and political organisation. Finally, the chapter scrutinises strategies applied by colonial capital to control Luo labour, and to define workers articulation of grievances to colonial policies in Mombasa.

Chapter Four, "A town divided," discusses the evolution of conceptions of ethnicity in colonial Mombasa, and the subsequent development of Mombasa's infamous *wabara/wapwani* ethnic divide. The chapter examines how the racial structure of the colonial economy disrupted established hierarchies of social interactions amongst the Swahili, and produced new tensions over identity. By examining articulations of visitor *wabara* and indigenous *wapwani* identities in the age of British imperialism, the chapter reveals how race and ethnicity structured opportunity and access to individual and communal resources thus producing Mombasa's delineated ethnic and racial lines. The chapter further illuminates how contests over drawn

identity lines impacted Mombasa's cost of living, making it one of the most expensive colonial towns for Luo migrant labourers to subsist in. The chapter ends with an analysis of the Swahili coast's embracing of social practices aimed at invigorating Swahili cultural purity. This will be elaborated through analysis of two institutions, *kafaáh* marriages and *ngoma*, whose roles and boundaries were reconstituted in colonial Mombasa in order to ensure that *wabara* Luo remained at the bottom of Swahili and colonial social and racial hierarchies.

Chapter Five, "A Kavirondo town," elaborates on the processes of the development of a diaspora Luo community in colonial Mombasa. The diaspora community was the cumulative outcome of the actions of migrant Luo labourers attempting to survive Mombasa's volatile labour economy, and to counter Mombasa's vehement resistance to their integration into Swahili elitism. The responses adopted included the embracing of a pan-Luo identity, which worked to create numerical strength, a valuable asset when it came to negotiating for better terms of service with KURH management. Other responses included the foundation of a neo-Luo identity, which entailed the reformation of materiality and cultural identifiers of Luo identity to align with Western interpretations of modernity. A modern "Luoness" worked to challenge Swahili stratification indexes in Mombasa and offered the Luo an opportunity to engage in the Africanisation process in the post-World War II decolonisation era. The diaspora community was, however, ultimately produced by the migration of Luo women into Mombasa town, which is also discussed in this chapter. Indeed, Luo women contributed to the emergence of permanent Luo households in Mombasa, a situation that eventually produced the dramatic shift in the town's demographic map as Mombasa cemented its outlook as an African town.