Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

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

Okelo, B.A.

Citation
Okelo, B. A. (2025, September 9). *Migrant Luo rail and port workers and the cartographies of colonial Mombasa, 1902-1950s*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4260331

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4260331

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

CHAPTER THREE

A TOWN IN TURMOIL: LUO KURH LABOURERS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLONIAL MOMBASA'S LABOUR LANDSCAPE

3.1 Introduction

Barely twenty years after Britain took control of affairs on the coast of East Africa, remarkable events that, subsequently, would define Kenya's labour history began dominating Mombasa's labour scene. By then, the Kenya-Uganda Railway had become the key technological factor contributing to Mombasa's prominence as the chief commercial centre of East Africa.[155] As such, its workforce formed a major bloc of labourers influencing the development of the town's labour landscape. Three contentious issues – wages, working conditions, and housing – featured prominently in this labour scene, and transformed Mombasa into a theatre of great upheavals to rival other burgeoning and established colonial industrial towns, such as Lubumbashi and Kimberly.[156] This chapter discusses the development of Mombasa's labour landscape, which, at its core, was the product of contradictions between the needs of colonial capital and those of migrant rail and port workers. The arguments put forward will elaborate on how KURH's development and expansion played a key role in influencing the migration of huge numbers of Luo labourers into Mombasa and, subsequently, contributed to the proletarianisation of their labour. The chapter also discusses Mombasa's recurrent labour tensions and persistent contests over wages, working conditions, and housing, and it evaluates how these pressures stimulated migrant workers' labour and political organisation. Finally, the chapter scrutinises the strategies applied by colonial capital to control Luo labour, as well as workers' articulation of grievances regarding colonial labour policies in Mombasa.

3.2.1 Luo labour migrations: The contradictions of theory and practice

W.A. Lewis' model of economic development presumed the existence of surplus labour in the economy, the majority of whom, he argued, were in the disguised unemployment in the subsistence agricultural sector. His theory of development envisaged capital accumulation in the industrial sector by way of reallocating the excess and dormant labour found in the agricultural sector. He postulated that this labour mobility was to be influenced by economic forces as individuals would, presumably, readily leave the subsistence sector and seek employment in the capitalist sector if the wages rates in the latter were some 30–50 per cent

---

[155] Karim Janmohamed, "The Emergence of Mombasa as the Chief Commercial Centre of East Africa," in Gerhard Liesegang, Helma Pasch, and Adam Jones eds., *Figuring African Trade; Proceedings of the Symposium on the Quantification and Structure of the Import and Export and Long-Distance Trade in Africa 1800–1913* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1986).

[156] Mining towns were the epicentres of often violent worker struggles throughout colonial Africa.

higher.[157] Building upon Lewis's model, Barber[158] hypothesised a framework from where he assumed the African urban wage labour force was developed. His theory similarly supposed that indigenous labour moves organically to the cash economy when incomes in that sector become marginally higher than in agricultural production. This supposition was explained in a four-stage process. The first stage was the organisation of African indigenous production, which, he contends, was self-sufficient even if outputs were low and tastes modest. The second stage begins with the introduction of the cash economy, which, he agrees, is initially tepidly received, but becomes more accepted when interventions such as taxation nudge individuals into moving towards ventures that result in cash acquisition. The third stage manifests when indigenous people actively pursue cash earning endeavours – which, at that time, meant either the sale of agricultural produce or the sale of their labour. People only choose to sell their labour if it brings in more income than would be achieved through selling produce. Barber is particular, however, in relaying the fact that this shift in productive labour is specific to male labour. This, he argues, was because men's role in community production was periodic, while the routine tasks of subsistence production were performed by women.[159] Traditional forms of agricultural labour organisation thus, create a periodic "unemployment of men" – the surplus labour implied in Lewis's model. The episodic withdrawal of a portion of this productive unit (less than 50 per cent) would therefore not irreparably interfere with or destabilise indigenous agricultural production. The last stage of Barber's labour mobility hypothesis was said to be attained when demand for African labour rose to more than 50 per cent of the total male population. Labourers need better wages, however, to offset the loss of income that would otherwise have come from agricultural output, and this, in turn, induces even more labourers to break away from indigenous agricultural production. This, Barber posited, was the reason for the rise in wages witnessed in a majority African towns in the period after World War II.

Lewis's and Barber's labour mobility models have been critiqued by a number of scholars studying the development of the African working class. Specifically, they have been accused of ignoring the structures that were deeply ingrained in the economic processes that developed the African wage-labour class. Arrighi, notably, disavows their assumptions of labour mobilities with the argument that, to a large extent, labour migration was the result of a process of primary accumulation in which the political rather than market mechanisms predominated.[160] Using the example of the development of the Rhodesian peasantry, Arrighi shows that the political created and progressively widened the gap between labour productivities in the peasant and capitalist sectors, and was hence the main driver for the labour mobilities witnessed in

---

[157] W.A. Lewis, "Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour," *The Manchester School*, 22 No. 2 (Wiley, 1954), pp. 139–191.

[158] William J. Barber, *The Economy of British Central Africa: A Case Study of Economic Development in Dualistic Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1961).

[159] Ibid., p.46.

[160] G. Arrigghi, "Labour Supplies in Historical Perspective: A study of the Proletanization of the African Peasantry in Rhodesia," *Journal of Development Studies*, 6 No. 3 (1970), pp. 197–234.

Rhodesia's colonial urban towns. The political, in this case, drove the economy of labour mobilities.

The first section of this chapter endeavours to use the aforementioned scholars' insights to evaluate patterns of Luo labourers' migrations to Mombasa and, specifically, to the port and rail service. What factors, for example, informed the development of KURH's particular labour market, and what role did the colonial state play in the development of these labour trends? What were the interactions and contradictions of the needs of Mombasa's rail and port management, the colonial state, and migrant Luo labourers, and how did these relations develop KURH and, by extension, Mombasa's labour landscape from the 1910s to the late 1950s? In simple terms, how did the workings of the market economy, and the fact of state coercion, contribute to the development of KURH and, by extension, Mombasa's tumultuous wage labour economy?

3.2.2. KURH and the development of a migrant African working class in Mombasa

The success of the colonial project in Kenya in the nascent years of British occupation generally rested on the colonial state's ability to mobilise the manpower needed to run its most crucial imperial infrastructure projects: the railway and the port. A pronouncement by Lord Delamere, one of Kenya's pioneer settlers, demonstrates the important role that Kenya's railway and port were to play in the development of settler agriculture and in facilitating the development of the colonial extraction economy:

> *It is vital for this country to place the end of the Uganda railway upon the deep waters so that no hand […] stands between the produce of the vast regions that are tapped by the Uganda Railways and the ships.*[161]

Because the railway and the port were key instruments in the expansionist project, the colonial state did not leave the intricacies of labour demand and supply solely to market forces. Instead, the state took an active role in ensuring that labour in Mombasa was, firstly, available and, secondly, abundant and hence cheap. Thus, even though it can be correctly argued that Luo migrant labourers consciously chose to work in Mombasa's KURH because, as Barber postulates, the wages increased the overall family income, a majority of these labourers were nonetheless, inclined towards that choice because colonial structures had altered and progressively rendered traditional production as a means of subsistence, impractical.

In the years immediately proceeding its completion, the impact of the Uganda railway on the East African region it served could only be described as revolutionary. The rail line contributed to a reduction in haulage cost for goods from and into the interior regions, and thus facilitated the expansion of trade on a scale never witnessed before. While human porterage of one ton of goods from the coast to Uganda had previously cost about 180 pounds, the cost of rail transport

---

[161] KNA/AWS/24/1 Newspapers. Delamere's statement is quoted in a 1908 article in the newspaper *The Daily Leader of British East Africa*.

was significantly lower, at 17 pounds a ton.[162] A greater part of the German East African trade also began to flow towards Mombasa as freight charges on this line were considerably cheaper than on the German Tanganyika line. As import and export volumes increased, the ports in Mombasa gradually became the lifeline supporting the highly profitable exchange of goods between the metropole and East Africa. Mombasa's growth in the first twenty years of occupation was huge and it sounded the death knell for Zanzibar as the East African hub for the Indian Ocean trade.

While the challenge of transporting goods to and from the interior had been effectively solved by the rail line, the issue of handling those same goods at the point of entry and exit nevertheless remained largely unresolved. Regardless of the revolutionary developments in the transport sector in the first two decades of the 1900s, Mombasa nonetheless still appeared lethargic in adopting measures to develop modern facilities for handling the large amounts of goods that were coming in and moving out of the territory. Up until the 1920s, human labour was still the chief method applied in the entire cargo handling process, which began with unloading goods from docked ships and ended with the goods at the railway sheds in Mbaraki. (The sheds would be moved later to expanded and modernised units in Kilindini.) The reliance on human labour for this arduous work, and its initially sparse availability resulted in higher wages at the rail and port service, which steadily increased in the first ten years of colonial occupation.[163] Shipping companies were forced to outbid each other in terms of the wages offered in an effort to ensure their cargo was unloaded first and fastest. The struggle to acquire workers was ideally informed by KURH's method of standardising dock charges and penalties, and rates were calculated for the number of days ships remained docked. KURH's primary labour force thus comprised workers stationed at the port, and whose main duty was the lightering of goods from ships. Other labourers included carriers of goods in the locomotive sheds – their main duties involved loading goods into trains and offloading those that had came in from the interior. This group of employees, the loaders and carriers, were all African. The Luo were favoured for this heavy work and, by 1930, they dominated most of the departments connected to the dockyard.[164]

African, and particularly Luo workers, were not only doing lower-cadre manual labour at the KURH docks, though, they were also distributed across various departments of the organisation. Port records revealed that, in 1906, 7032 were in construction, 9865 were engaged in maintenance, and 749 worked for the marine service.[165] From 1910, the rail committee began requesting the integration of African labourers into mid-level management positions at KURH.[166] The system adopted by the colonial state and rail and port management, where trained and skilled staff were recruited from overseas, was becoming unsustainable because it

---

[162] Janmohamed, "The Emergence of Mombasa."

[163] Wages flattened during WWI and were further reduced during the subsequent depression years. However, they were still comparatively higher than in other colonial urban centres.

[164] KNA/CQ1/19/25 Report on Native Affairs Mombasa, 1930.

[165] KNA/K/33/1/11/87-803 Report of the Labour Commission, 1906. Numbers stated are for the total African workforce. It is also stated that the Kavirondo Luo constituted a majority of these labourers.

[166] KNA/PC/COAST/1/9/62 Employment of Literate Africans in Government Departments.

was extremely costly, but it was also difficult to administer and insecure.[167] On several occasions, train drivers who had been recruited from England failed to take up their positions, which resulted in a severe shortage of drivers for the rail locomotives. In 1922, for example, the driver shortage meant that of the 115 available locomotives, only 85 were in use.[168] Consequently, the rail committee began requesting that Africans be fully integrated and trained in running the rail proper, rather than being restricted to the lower cadre, rank-and-file positions. In this regard, a labour department report prepared by Colonel Hammond suggested that the rail service should establish a scheme for training African "artisans". KURH was encouraged to take in "boys" with a certain level of literacy for training for this specific role. Contradicting the colonial policy of migrant labourers' temporary residential status, the report suggested that KURH create a cadre of permanent employees in Mombasa. This special group, the report argued, was to be induced into taking permanent employment by being offered accommodation that was big enough for long-term occupation; meaning residential units that were not only suitable for them when they were single, but were also big enough for when they married and had families. Facilitating permanent residency was viewed as a crucial step in enhancing the smooth and continuous operations of KURH.[169] The rail and port service also needed higher cadre servicemen, such as clerks, and Hammond argued that it would be prudent if Africans were encouraged to apply for these positions.

Despite KURH's labour demands, the colonial state was however adamant on pushing through a policy that dictated that the majority of its migrant wage-labour workforce could not become permanent residents of Mombasa. For reasons related to the social control of urban populations,[170] colonial officials instead leaned towards developing a temporary class of urban resident labourers who were firmly rooted in their respective rural reserves. These labourers were to only live in Mombasa for the period they were in service to the colonial capital and were expected to return to rural subsistence production when their labour was no longer needed. This policy contradicted Mombasa's rail and port labour demands as KURH's needed to maintain a continuous and constant flow of labour, not least to achieve its goal of maximising profits. This glaring contradiction was the foundation for the development of a key feature of the urban landscape of Mombasa and its adjacent districts[171] from as early as the 1920s, i.e. a

---

[167] KNA/AWS/24/1/Newspapers. Colonel Hammond's report is published in the *The East African Standard*, 1920.
[168] Ibid.; Editorial in the newspaper *The Daily Leader of British East Africa*, 1922.
[169] Ibid.
[170] A severe shortage of European personnel informed the colonial state's adoption of indirect rule, and the dependence on rural mechanisms of social control to manage response to colonial policies. The urban environment and, in the particular case of the Luo, the element of spatial distance threatened to disrupt this control structure. The colonial state hence favoured the maintenance of rural and urban linkages, ideally to enable the extension of rural frameworks of authority to the urban worker. How this linkage worked to control Luo rail and port workers will be discussed in detail in the final section of this chapter.
[171] Osodo Dami, O.I., 12 January 2018, in Changamwe. When the colonial state began taking measures to control the flow of labour into Mombasa through registration certificates and issuance of work permits, Luo labourers intent on heading to the town acquired permits to work on plantations in the neighbouring districts of Kwale, Voi, and Malindi, where demand for labour was also high. Plantation owners paid their transportation costs to these

large number of migrant Luo labourers resident in the town. The following section elaborates on how the labour practices of KURH and the stevedoring companies, the colonial state policies on African labour, and the work of recruiters, collaborated to create this key feature of colonial Mombasa. Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 below are testament to how the utilisation of huge numbers of migrant Luo labourers in Mombasa contributed to KURH'S tremendous growth.

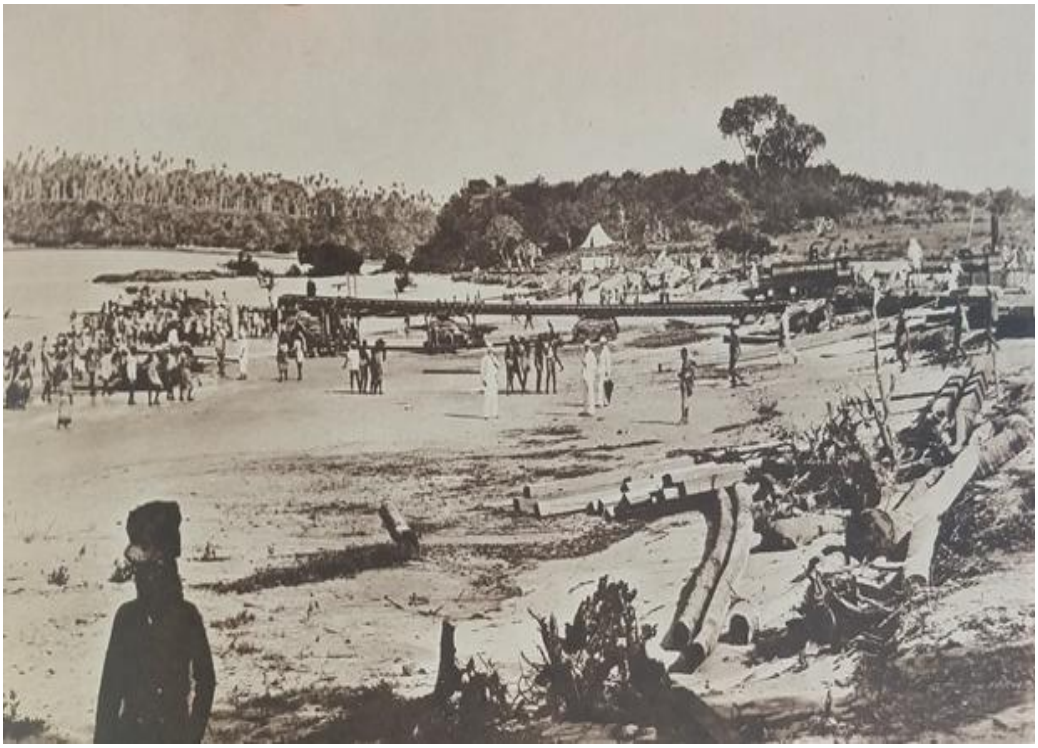

Figure 3.1. Kilindini, 1898

work stations. At the end of their contracts, a majority of these farm workers disappeared into Mombasa's urban maze instead of repatriating back to their respective reserves. The reserve labour for KURH thus included not only the population resident in Mombasa, but also the labourers working on plantations in adjacent districts. Osodo Dami, for example, testifies that a number of her extended family arrived in Mombasa via this route.

Figure 3.2. Kilindini, 1900

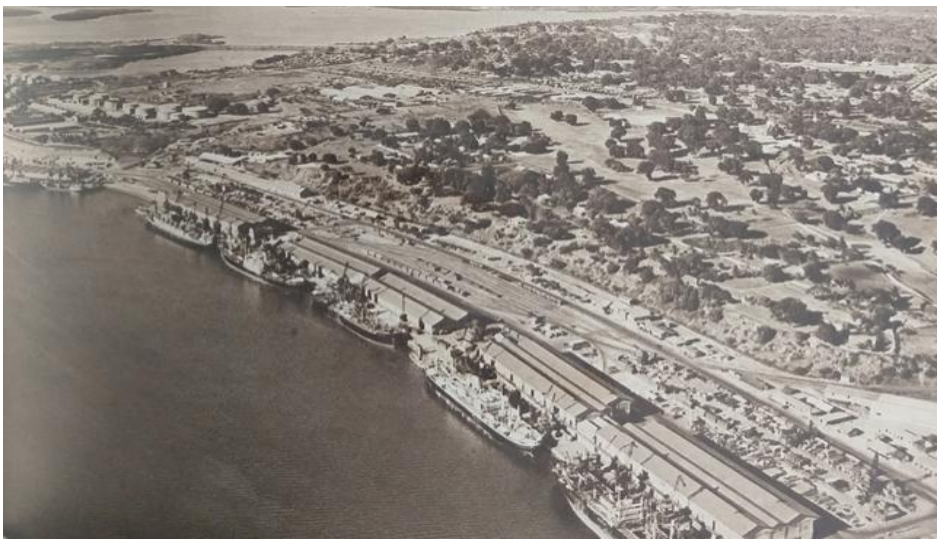

Figure 3.3. Kilindini, 1946

Photographs of Kilindini harbour in 1898, 1900, and 1946. A newspaper commentary describing the fast pace of the port's growth reported that, "if one has not been in Kilindini for a fortnight, then they return, they are surely to evidence unimaginable progress."[172] Photo source, M.F. Hill, *The story of the Kenya and Uganda Railway*.

[172] KNA/AWS/24/3 Port Control Kilindini, Newspaper Comments. *The East African Standard*, 7 September 1927.

3.3.1 The creation of surplus Luo labour in Mombasa

> *To a casual observer, the African city is made up of three basic population groups; a plebeian "urban mob," workers and artisans, and the elite. Rarely do the members of the mob move up into the latter categories but it is always possible for the urban African worker to sink to the mob.*[173]

Marxist social theory defines proletarianisation as the process of creation and expansion of the working class in a capitalist economy.[174] Marx and Engels argued that this process entails the dissolution of the intermediate class of small producers and self-employed artisans to create two distinct classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.[175] In Africa, the course of proletarianisation was triggered when colonial capitalist enterprise combined with state machinery to create structures that progressively destroyed traditional African modes of livelihoods and, in turn, pushed Africans into yielding to a cash-based economy. The result was the subsuming of different versions of African labour into the wage-labour economy. Though the characters and effects of proletarianisation were a feature throughout all African economies, scholars including Bundy[176] and Burawoy[177] nevertheless observe that colonial urban towns were the main sites where processes of labour proletarianisation occurred. This, they argue, was because colonial structures placed urban labourers in a position of dual dependence, i.e. relying on employment in one place and on an alternate economy in another. Burawoy, moreover, adds that, because capitalist economies function by maintaining their workforce by providing minimum daily subsistence, workers are inevitably forced to depend on a vicious system requiring them to continuously sell their labour in order to survive. Bundy's and Burawoys' arguments on proletarianisation are certainly applicable in the case of the migration of Luo labourers to Mombasa's rail and port service. As the committee looking into labour unrest in Mombasa noted:

> *[T]he organisation of wage labour proceeded on the assumption that […] the home of the native labourer will continue to be in the native areas. Thus, renumeration was pegged for a single man, which was assumed to be adequate for feeding and housing in their temporary place of employment. Wage rates were in addition,*

---

[173] Peter Claus Wolfgang Gutkind, *The Emergent African Urban Proletariat, Occasional Series Paper No.8* (Montreal: Centre for Developing-Area Studies, McGill University, 1974).

[174] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, Vols. 1 and 2 (Hertfordshire:Wordsworth Classics, 2013).

[175] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin classics, 2014).

[176] Colin Bundy, "The Emergence and Decline of a South African Peasantry," *African Affairs* 71 No. 285, (Oxford University Press on behalf of The Royal African Society, Oct 1972), pp. 369–388.

[177] Michael Burawoy, "The Functions and Reproduction of Migrant Labor: Comparative Material for Southern Africa and United States," *The American Journal of Sociology* 81 No. 5 (The University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 1050–1087.

commensurate with standards of living in the reserves. Family income was assumed to be derived from the reserve.[178]

That the initial batch of Luo migrant labourers to Mombasa were involuntary immigrants is unquestionable.[179] The first groups were introduced to the town as tax-indentured labourers, and this group apathetically participated in the wage-labour economy, hopeful that it was only for a long-enough period to allow them to pay off accumulated debts with their wages. A letter written by the then Commissioner of the colony Charles Eliot reiterated that a majority of workers looked forward to returning to Luoland to resume rural subsistence production. Disinterest in Mombasa shifted, however, when the effects of the economic depression began affecting livelihoods in the years following World War I. Though directly triggered by the economic changes that proceeded the war, the shift was actually the outcome of a build up of gradual transformations occurring in a number of Luo economic and social practices in the twenty years or so after the beginning of the colonial encounter. A striking feature of these transformations was the modification of Luo economic and social practices by either partly or fully incorporating cash into these processes. Take the example of bride price payment; cash had become an elementary requirement for the fulfilment of this obligation.[180] Because community was grounded in family, and familial connections were now formalised in part by way of cash exchanges, the African family structure became firmly embedded in a cash-dependent system.[181] Cash was also needed to pay school fees, tax, and it was the medium of exchange for payment of fines and compensation. Because cash had become an integral part of Luo social and economic life, young men in particular were more or less pushed into pursuing ventures whose returns were in cash.

The search for all-important cash in Mombasa, as opposed to nearby towns like Eldoret, Kisumu, or even Nairobi, was influenced by the wages that KURH offered in Mombasa. Generally, labouring in Mombasa attracted higher wages than in other parts of the colony.[182] Moreover, the colonial practice of ethnically categorising African labour had ranked Luo labours higher than other African ethnicities'. Evidence from monthly contracts in Mombasa show that they the Luo were amongst the best-paid Africans from the inland regions. In 1908, for example, the Kikuyu received monthly pay of between 2–4 rupees for a ten-hour shift at the railway godowns, while the Luo received a salary ranging between 4–8 rupees for similar work. This pay was raised to 10 rupees as they gained experience.[183] This second amount is

---

[178] KNA/K/331/892/2 *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Unrests in Mombasa* (Part two), (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1939).

[179] FO/2789/178, Letter from Sir Charles Eliot to C.W. Hobley dated 1 May 1902.

[180] Wilson, *Luo Customary Laws.*

[181] Bernard Magubane, "A Critical Look at Indices Used in the Study of Social Change in Colonial Africa," *Current Anthropology* 12 No.4/5, (University of Chicago Press Journals, Oct.–Dec., 1971).

[182] KNA/PC/COAST/1/10/166 Township Matters, *1913*. Letter from PC Mombasa to the Chief Natives Commissioner in Nairobi, 1913.

[183] The Foreign and Colonial Compiling and Publishing Company, *East Africa (British). Its History People, Commerce Industry and Resources*, (London: 1908–1909).

comparable to what the Swahili, a group categorised as non-African, received. These wages appeared lucrative for young Luo men, especially since the rural landscape of Western Kenya had been ravaged by drought in the period immediately following World War I. Young men thus moved in droves to work, in particular, at the port of Mombasa, which, by 1930, employed a majority of workers with roots in Luoland Nyanza.[184] The Luo willingness to migrate was further facilitated by labour recruiters and the organisational structure of the KURH. These factors were key reasons for the formation of a proletariat "urban mob" – a large pool of active and reserve African labourers – which was one of the key features of colonial Mombasa's urban space.

3.3.2. The role of Recruiters

The labour uncertainties that plagued Mombasa's biggest colonial infrastructure project in the first ten years of occupation were the product of the colonial state lacking European manpower to facilitate recruitment processes. This gap was to be hastily filled in the years running up to the close of 1910, when the Department of Manpower authorised agency recruitment. The first tranche of Luo worker gangs transported to Mombasa were therefore, mainly recruited through private labour agents. Agency recruitment was a fairly common practice throughout colonial Africa, but it was especially used in regions where there was a need for specific labour that was not easily available. In the Gold Coast mines of Tarkwa, for example, local labourers were unwilling to work in the unpleasant underground mines, and this decision informed the development of a thriving recruitment sector, with agents enlisting labourers from the Northern territories, French colonies, and from Nigeria. The demands of the Tarkwa mining sector significantly influenced the development of its distinct labour conventions, which included long-term contracts, harsh penal sanctions for desertion, and separate delegated administrative laws for mining labour camps.[185] In Kenya, recruitment agencies grew from understaffing and the unavailability of European personnel to manage sectors related to African labour at the Department of Manpower. The department therefore outsourced recruitment to agencies. Possessing little knowledge of the interior terrain and generally oblivious of the way of life of the communities from whom they were to mobilise labour, European agents gradually turned to Asian and African sub-recruiters, who were more willing to venture deep into the interior in search of working men.[186] Indeed, African sub-recruiters became a vital link in the shift towards embracing the wage-labour economy as they were cognisant of their societies' economic and social networks, positionality, and individual and collective aspirations, particularly with regard to the cash economy. They were thus considered the perfect intermediaries to entice their fellow

[184] KNA/RW/33/1 Labour Unrests and Commissions of Enquiry Since 1937.
[185] Roger G. Thomas, "Forced Labour in British West Africa: The Case of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast 1906–1927," *The Journal of African History*, 14, No.1, (Cambridge University Press, 1973). pp. 79–103.
[186] KNA/PC/NZA/3/20/2/1 Labour Agents.

kinsmen to enlist.[187] Among the labour agencies operating in Luoland were: Gulam Kadir Khan Labour Agents; R.E. Mclaland; Kisumu Trading Company Sasa Hivi Recruiting Company; J. Maxwell and Co. Labour Agents and Recruiting Company; M.F. De Souza Company; Ramji Dass; and Juma Remu and Company.[188]

As Mombasa's demands for Luo labourers continued to grow from the 1910s onwards, recruiting in Luoland became lucrative business and, inevitably, stiff competition ensued. Agencies adopted nefarious methods and began cutting corners and employing unorthodox means to get large numbers of men to sign up as wage labourers through their companies. Guidelines put out by the government to ensure that only qualified workers were recruited were invariably ignored as each company competed to enlist as many labourers as possible. A concerned senior commissioner for Nyanza noted that there were even agencies operating without fulfilling the minimum requirements of the official recruiter's licence.[189] The commissioner's report on the labour situation in Central Kavirondo revealed innumerable corrupt practices within his jurisdiction. Recruiters, for example, always ensured that labourers passed the requisite medical tests, even when they were clearly unfit for work. It was not unusual to recruit those who were openly sick or those who had infectious diseases. If a recruiter did not agree with the outcome of tests or the assessment of a particular medical officer, they simply arranged for a certificate of compliance from a more complacent one. Other unethical practices included bribing chiefs and headmen to limit recruitment within their jurisdictions to particular companies. Though strongly discouraged, juveniles and important figures in the community were also recruited.[190] Efforts made to reign in recruiters' behaviour by, for example, making the government medical officers stationed at the district offices the sole official authority on a labourer's condition and suitability for work, did little to deter underhand practices as recruiters were well aware of the severe personnel shortages, and how this presented challenges to implementation of outlined directives. Recruitment in Luoland was indeed a dog-eat-dog affair.

A significant number of the recruited Luo labourers arriving in Mombasa were juveniles. A key reason for this phenomenon was the normalisation of racialised assumptions that adultified[191]

---

[187] Ibid. Letter to chief native commissioner in Nairobi from the Kisumu Senior commissioner outlining the practices of labour recruiters. Seemingly free from obligations placed on local populations (Luo sub-recruiters were, for example, excluded from provision of forced communal labour), a number of Luo migrants to Mombasa had been led to believe that labouring was a prerequisite to becoming a recruiter.

[188] KNA/PC/Coast/1/9/55 Labour Recruitment, Recruitment Permit for Labour Agents, 1915–26.

[189] KNA/PC/NZA/3/20/2/1 Labour Agents, Letter written to the Sasa Hivi recruiting company's owner John Riddock by the Senior Commissioner in Nyanza. Letter spells out conditions for renewal of their recruiter's licences.

[190] The British policy of indirect rule appropriated pre-existing indigenous power structures to control resistance and rebellion. They were thus more inclined to let authority figures remain within their respective communities.

[191] Though the term "adultification" is of recent coinage and its usage is mainly applied in analysis of the African American population (see Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake, and Thalia González, *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood* (Georgetown law, 2017); Alison N. Cooke and Amy G. Halberstadt "Adultification, Anger Bias, and Adults' Different Perceptions of Black and White Children," *Cognition and*

African children and youth by viewing them as grown up. The adultification of African children was generally influenced by the necessity to subsume the various forms of African labour into the wage-labour economy and including youth/child workers, greatly increased the available labour pool. The use of juvenile labour thus became widespread not only in Kenya, but in many parts of colonial Africa. In South Africa, the 1841 Masters and Servants Act permitted parents to jointly sell the labour of children younger than sixteen along with their own, or to independently sell the labour of their children between ten and sixteen years of age for a period until they turned twenty-one.[192] The practice was also widespread in Central and West Africa, and here juveniles became essential in the transportation of exports in the expanded agricultural produce sector.[193] Juvenile labour was easily incorporated into the colonial wage-labour economy, as it aligned with the pre-existing concept of work as an epistemology of education and training in pre-colonial African societies. In the pre-colonial context, however, children and youth participated in subsistence production in secondary roles, with their involvement in farming, mining, trading, manufacturing, and caregiving serving primarily as learning processes in preparation for adult roles. With the introduction and expansion of the colonial capitalist economy, higher demands were placed on African labour, further intensifying the differentiation of lineage- and family-based division of labour by age and gender.[194] Children's participation in labour then shifted from its secondary, educational role to primary participation in family subsistence. Agitated Luo teenagers, of whom there were plenty, were regularly lured into wage labour, enticed by the promises of freedom and prospects of accumulation in a society ravaged by hunger and poverty. By the 1920s, the practice of recruiting juveniles had become so extensive that it began to raise concerns among provincial administrators. However, these concerns were mainly focused on the fact that juveniles contributed significantly to the growing numbers of destitute and vagrant individuals in Mombasa's urban areas.[195] In response, the state attempted to develop a system to determine the age and health status of all prospective labourers, stipulating that juveniles could only be employed if they were fifteen or older. When accused of underage recruitment, agencies often argued that they were unable to accurately determine the age of labourers and hence juveniles continued streaming into Mombasa hopeful of finding employment at the rail and port service. When efforts to halt the practice proved futile, the Master and Servant Ordinance of 1926 allowed the minimum age for juvenile employment to be cut off at twelve, i.e. boys who appeared to be of adolescent age.

Emotion, 35 No.7 (2021), pp. 1416–1422; Elizabeth Jean, *Young and Unprotected: The Psychological and Behavioral Consequences of Adultification Bias in Emerging Adulthood*, (Doctoral dissertation, Kent State University, 2022), the concept and similar assumptions were certainly present in racist views of black children and youth in colonial Africa.

[192] Lance van Sittert, "Working Children: Rural Child Labor Markets in the Post Emancipation Great Karoo, South Africa, 1856–1913," *Journal of Family History*, 4 No.1 (Dec 2015), pp. 39–64.

[193] Hugh D. Hindman ed., *The World of Child Labor: An Historical and Regional Survey* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

[194] Ibid.

[195] KNA/PC/COAST/1/10/166 Township Matters, 1913. DC for Mombasa notes that destitution victims are mainly women, youth, and children.

3.3.3 Labour organisation of stevedoring companies at the port

The rapid development of the rail and port network in Mombasa in the first three decades of occupation was undoubtably a key factor in facilitating the movement of great numbers of Luo migrant labourers to Mombasa. The swift expansion undertaken by the rail committee in the period 1902–1930, which included not only the extension of feeder rail networks, but also the building of godowns and warehouses where import and export goods were stored – required vast amounts of labour that recruitment companies in Luoland obligingly mobilised. Just two years after the completion of the railway, the total tonnage of import goods handled at Mombasa's ports stood at 426,380, while exports totalled just over 200,000 tons. In 1904, KURH also began constructing a new deepwater pier in Kilindini with the intension of increasing its maritime traffic flow towards this harbour.[196] This venture, too, required the mobilisation of substantial amounts of labour. Labour demands, moreover, increased in the 1920s when plans were made to make the port a 24-hour operation area rather than one that only operated during daylight. Indeed, the commentary "[…] if one has not been in Kilindini for a fortnight, then they return, they are surely to evidence unimaginable progress […]"[197] indicated that KURH had become heavily reliant on migrant labourers for the development and expansion of its core infrastructure. Migrant Luo numbers, hence, continued swelling in Mombasa as more took up the abundance of rank-and-file construction and porter positions at the KURH, while a few of the educated elite were absorbed into driver, conductor, and ticket collector positions.

KURH's growth notwithstanding, the organisational structure of the stevedoring companies operating in Mombasa's two ports was actually the main stimulus invigorating the movement of Luo labourers to Mombasa in the years leading up to the early 1930s. These companies were:

- The East Africa Lighterage company, which worked ships belonging to the Clan Ellerman line and handled cargo from Japanese and German ships.
- The African Wharfage Company, which handled cargo from the British-Indian line, the Union Castle lines, and the French and Italian lines. This company was also responsible for cooling steamers at Mbaraki.
- The Tanganyika Boating Company belonging to Holland-Africa, which handled cargo for all Dutch ships.

The operational systems of these companies largely informed the development of Mombasa's migrant urban proletariat. To begin with, each company worked independently and separately, meaning that each had to acquire its own pool of labourers to load and offload goods from their respective ships. This practice was risky, especially if the precarious labour situation initially experienced in Mombasa was anything to go by. The companies, moreover, were unwilling to commit to a cadre of regular employees. They instead relied on Arab labour agents *hamals* (s. *hamal*, also *hamali*, *amal*), who were the official licensed agents supplying casual labourers at the port. By the eve of World War I, *hamals* had established themselves as an important aspect

[196] KNA/AWS 24/3, Port Control Kilindini, Newspaper Comments. *East African Standard*, 16 August 1927.
[197] Ibid. *The East African Standard*, 7 September 1927.

of the ports' labour network.[198] Generally, this was because they had played a pivotal role in ensuring that the port had a constant supply of labourers, regardless of the labour scarcities experienced in the war period. The policy requiring ships to pay docking charges for each day a vessel remained berthed at the port worked to develop stiff competition amongst the shipping companies, and each rushed to mobilise gangs of casual labourers to enable quick movement of goods, which would essentially reduce accrued docking charges. Consequently, *hamals* were given the green light by stevedoring companies to quote high wages to attract potential labourers.[199] Mombasa's PC remarked that the high wages presented to labourers in Mombasa and the casual nature of employment at the port were the reasons for the influx of huge numbers of migrant labourers into the district in the 1920s.[200] Mombasa's casual labourers were such a notable feature of the town's labour landscape that, as World War I began, they constituted 28 per cent of the entire colony's and protectorate's casual labour force.[201]

The casualisation of labour in Mombasa's port operations thus created the framework for the development of a large pool of reserve Luo labourers in the town's general labour landscape. Casual employment numbers at the port leapt in the years following the end of World War I and, by the mid 1920s, their numbers jumped to highs of up to 2,900 workers in a day.[202] Casual labouring as a general operational practice continued well until 1927, when a new arrival, the Kenya Landing and Shipping Company, entered Mombasa's port business after obtaining a twenty-year contract to handle all government-related KURH goods. The entry of this company shook the port labour dynamic as, for the first time, a small group of African labourers became permanent employees in Mombasa. This move introduced new competition to Mombasa's colonial space, not least because it blurred the boundaries and positionalities of the African "indigene native" and the "migrant native." As permanent migrant workers took permanent residency, they began demanding political and economic rights in Mombasa's social space, with radical results. Though the company employed about 300 permanent workers, the largest share of its workforce nonetheless remained casual labourers. The Kenya Landing and Shipping Company offered monthly workers a 40-shilling wage for working 5 ½ days a week, while casual labourers received Sh. 1.50 per day for an eight-hour shift. In 1931, the casual employee rate was raised to Sh 2, but this was later slashed back to Sh. 1.50 as the recession of the 1930s brought a slump in trade and money circulation. No housing allowance was paid to either cadre of employees.

At face value, casual employment appeared lucrative, especially since one could take on extra shifts and additionally work overtime. In the initial years, when there were fewer migrant

---

[198] KNA/PC/COAST/1/9/42 Hamals, Labour Bureaus, and Registration of Port Labourers 1916–18. In the war years, Luo labourers had been redirected to serve in the WWI carrier corps.

[199] Ibid. Letter from Mombasa DC to PC Coast province, dated 12 December 1917, details reservations with the general acceptance of *hamali* labour practices.

[200] KNA/PC/COAST/1/10/110 Registration of Natives , 1927.

[201] KNA/K/331/8/BOO, H.S. Booker and N.M. Deverell *Report on the Economic and Social Background Of Mombasa Labour Dispute* (Nairobi: Government printer, 1947).

[202] Ibid.

labourers, casual workers were indeed able to accumulate a tidy sum. The high returns received encouraged them to convince more of their kin to make the move to Mombasa. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, as more labourers moved into the district, a large pool of reserve labour was created. Luo labour at the port was now definitively proletarianised. Trained blacksmiths, for example, who just a few years before could easily find specialised trade positions at the KURH were forced to become goods carriers at the port.[203] The labour situation progressively deteriorated into the 1930s, and it was notably difficult to find work at the KURH despite renewed vigour in maritime exchanges as the world braced for World War II. Most casual labourers could only obtain work one out of five days a week, or six days a month.[204] This translated to incomes of about 12–18 shillings a month, barely enough for a single man to survive let alone one with a family. Luo labourers hence struggled to survive in Mombasa's labour landscape while, on the other hand, its famed wages continued pulling in more and more fortune hunters.

William Oduor owns his family's informal gate-making enterprise (referred to as a *jua kali* business) in Changamwe. Oduor learned his blacksmithing skills from his father, who arrived in Mombasa in the early 1940s. I interviewed him at his home in Changamwe and he informed me of how the KURH had crushed the aspirations and ambitions of large numbers of its migrant Luo workforce in the colonial period, by offering no more than goods-carrying positions at the port:

> *My father came to Mombasa just after the beginning of the big war [WW11]. He was initially a goods carrier at the Kilindini port but was lucky enough to later find employment as a steam engine fireman. He ran a small workshop at the back of our house in Railway estate where he recreated household items like cups, plates, cooking pots, and wash basins from scrap metals he collected. Blacksmithing runs through my lineage, actually. My grandfather was a well-known spear maker in Seme, and I passed on blacksmithing skills to my son, James Ochieng, who is the star artist in my workshop. He brings in the most business to the workshop! My father opened this* jua kali *shed in 1970 and ran it until 2000 when he handed over the day-to-day running of the business to me. He arrived in Mombasa hopeful that he would secure employment as a rail blacksmith, but quickly realised that such specialised positions were few. Because he had to survive in Mombasa, he took up casual employment as a goods carrier at the Kilindini port. He was able to preserve his blacksmithing skills only because work at the port was inconsistent and paid poorly, and he hence began collecting scrap metal and recreating household products, which he sold to those who could not afford factory-made utensils. I consider myself lucky because my father was only partially subsumed into the rail and port economy, and I was hence able to inherit a vital skill that later enabled*

[203] William Oduor, O.I., 20 January 2019, in Changamwe.

[204] KNA/K/331/4 Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Examine The Labour Conditions in Mombasa* (Nairobi: Government printer, 1939).

me and my son to eke out a decent living. Other people were not so lucky. My cousin Onyango was a trained and skilled mechanic, and he thought he would find a mechanic position at the KURH. He ended up being a goods carrier and died before he could fulfil his dreams. Others wanted to be painters, weavers, carpenters, and even entertainers for KURH workers, which wasn't possible in the 1940s and 1950s. The KURH drowned the ambitions of numerous skilled Luo workers.[205]

3.3.4 Labour increases during World War II

Though World War I had necessitated the mobilisation of manpower on a scale previously unknown in Africa (with the exception perhaps of recruitment for the South African mines),[206] World War II nevertheless opened the gates for unprecedented levels of Luo migration to Mombasa's rail and port service. These WWII-era movements were primarily influenced by Britain's decision to make East Africa the centre of the Allied powers' sisal production, after the loss of Malaya and the American colony of the Philippines.[207] The loss of these two territories to Japan had dealt a major blow to the Allied forces' war strategy, as it cut off the supply of jute and Manila hemp – materials used in the making of ropes, camouflage netting, sacking cloth, gunny bags for harvesting, and for other binding works. Britain hastily discovered that sisal was a good alternative to jute, and Kenya and Tanzania became the main centres of its production. East Africa's sisal was transported to various Allied processing destinations and military posts via the port of Mombasa. Figures 3.4. and 3.5 show workers in sisal factories getting the fibre ready for transportation to the port of Mombasa.

[205] William Oduor, O.I.

[206] Donald C. Savage and J. Forbes Munro, "Carrier Corps Recruitment in the British East Africa Protectorate 1914–1918," *Journal of African History*, 7 No. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 313–342.

[207] INF/10/156 Cotton Growing: An Important East African War Industry, 1942.

Figure 3.4

Figure 3.5.

Figures 3.4. and 3.5. Labourers working through fibres in a sisal factory in Kwale, 1942. The sisal was then transported to the port of Mombasa for redistribution to various destinations. Source: INF/10/156 Cotton Growing: An Important East African War Industry 1942, British National Archives in Kew.

The port had expanded its facilities tremendously by the time the war broke out, and this facilitated increases in cargo handling in aid of the war. Sisal was one of the most voluminous and most important cargos moving through the port. Because large volumes had to be quickly moved to various destinations, the port expanded opportunities for employment and took on more dock- and rail workers. A majority of these labourers were ethnic Luo.[208] The additional increase in money circulation, as a result of the presence of British soldiers and military personnel, stimulated local trade, both licit and illicit, and initiated local manufacturing. Sex work, for example, was widespread in this period, and this was the result of an influx of women, including Luo women, into Mombasa's urban space.[209] The growth of Mombasa's overall population, and the general expansion of economic life resulted in improvements to the social services offered to the African populace. KURH and the municipality of Mombasa increased and diversified their number of workers to include those providing social services. Street cleaning and garbage collection, for example, was extended to the rail service's living quarters, and the Luo took up these jobs. The influx of migrant labourers during the war was significant and by the end of World War II, the African population in Mombasa had jumped to 65,000.[210] Of these, 24,307 were employed on monthly terms in KURH departments, and a majority of these permanent employees were attached to the port.

More migration to Mombasa's urban space came in the years following the ending of World War II. Increased freedom of movement occasioned by the banning of the *kipande* registration system in 1946,[211] together with the lifting of the ban requiring inland Africans to vacate urban areas unless in active employment, extended leeway to young men seeking to escape the widespread poverty in rural Luoland. In the pre-war and war years, the rural landscape of Luo Nyanza had progressively deteriorated and young men were therefore ready to move out as soon as the war restrictions ended. Pre-war cotton planting had resulted in extensive damage to the area's soils, rendering farming an unfeasible subsistence option. The nationwide droughts of the 1940s, moreover, had ravaged Luoland and significantly interfered with local subsistence production. The then DC for Central Nyanza certainly agreed that Luoland was a potential danger zone requiring urgent attention.[212] Mombasa's port and rail service then offered

---

[208] KNA/PC/NZA/1/34 Nyanza Province Annual Report 1939. The PC indicated that a majority of the men leaving the reserve were en route to work at the port of Mombasa. In 1939, for example, 2966 labourers left for Mombasa with recruiters to work in port railway construction.

[209] KNA/ABK/12/44 Labour Control-Urban, 1946–55. PC Mombasa remarks that the origins of the rampant vice of prostitution can be traced back to WWII, when the numbers of foreign soldiers in Mombasa increased.

[210] KNA/K/331/89 *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Unrests in Mombasa*, Part Two. Census data was rarely taken for African populations living in Mombasa; hence it is difficult to make a comprehensive numerical analysis of the increases from 1902 to the 1950s. The report of the committee looking into labour unrest in Mombasa, however, gives a glimpse of the patterns of increases in migrant labourers, and their report agrees that WWII was a defining moment in terms of the migration of inland ethnic groups to Mombasa.

[211] WWII labour recruits were required to report to their homeland District Commissioners before leaving for their workstations. Here, information on their registration certificates (*kipande*) was noted to enable surveillance of movement and to track labourers in case of desertion.

[212] KNA/PC/NZA/1/35/2 Notes on Land Utilisation, February 1951 (Nyanza province).

possibilities for generation of income, and there was the additional allure of the town's famed urban cultural space. Furthermore, the radical shift in the colonial governing framework witnessed after World War II, where the colonial state swiftly metamorphosised to become a welfare state, meant that there was an expansion of economic space and workplace positions for the urban African in the skilled departments and administrative structures of the KURH. Many young men therefore left Luoland to seek their fortunes in Mombasa, and in numerical terms the Luo continued to dominate Mombasa's rail and port service.

3.4. Mombasa's labour landscape and the growth of worker consciousness

Low wages, long working hours, dangerous working conditions, job insecurity were among the daily problems facing migrant Luo labourers toiling to make a living in various KURH departments in Mombasa. Much has been written on the development of this labour landscape and the worker conditions that culminated in the strike movement that began just before World War II and intensified in the post-war period. The works of Singh,[213] Stichter,[214] Clayton and Savage,[215] and Zeleza[216] are among the many outstanding narratives illustrating workers conditions and the growth of worker consciousness in Mombasa. Given the abundance of written texts in this field, this dissertation will discuss the issue of wages and work conditions in passing, and only focus on the subject of housing. The choice of housing is because the subject is directly related to the processes of creating a home, materially and symbolically, the outcome of which, in this analysis, was the development of a Luo diaspora in Mombasa. This topic will be discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation.

The aforementioned literature agrees that tensions between the colonial state and migrant Luo labourers in Mombasa were mainly rooted in the twin issues of wages and housing. They contend that these struggles were basically outcomes of the colonial state's policy on migrant labourers, where migrants were regarded as no more than sojourners temporarily living in urban areas while readying to return to their respective permanent abodes in the reserves. This assumption undoubtedly informed the colonial state's calculation of "fair compensation" for African labour that corresponded with standards of living in the reserve rather than, to quote Lord Hailey, "[…] that of civilised men fully depended on their wages for survival."[217] Wages were calculated on the basis that, for Africans, work was not as means of subsistence, but a way of obtaining tax money and acquiring a few extras for enjoyment. Family income was intended to be derived from the reserve, hence familial commitments were disregarded in calculations fixing reasonable wages. The principles guiding this wage policy glaringly contradicted the

---

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

[214] Stichter, *Migrant Labour in Kenya*.

[215] Clayton and Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya.*

[216] Tiyambe Zeleza, "The Strike Movement in Colonial Kenya: The Era of the General Strikes," *Transafrican Journal of History*, 22 (Nairobi: Gideon Were Publications, 1993), pp. 1–23.

[217] William Malcolm Hailey, *An African Survey: A Study of Problems Arising in Africa South of the Sahara* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938).

realities of a majority of migrant Luo labourers working at Mombasa's rail and port service. As previous discussions have revealed, migrations were primarily triggered by the decimation of rural economies as a result of a combination of natural disasters and the introduction of the colonial capitalist economy. Consequently, wage labouring was regarded as neither a temporary means of survival nor a secondary supplementary subsistence method. Working at the KURH was in fact viewed as a primary adaption measure meant to allow survival in prevailing economic and social environments. The low wages (vis-à-vis standards of living) provided by the colonial state in Mombasa meant that migrant wage labourers in the town experienced some of the worst living conditions in the colony. These conditions were epitomised by the state of their housing. Dairy workers, for example, lived as outlined below:

> *The housing accommodation supplied to the employees by the dairy owners must be seen to be believed. It is not housing accommodation in any sense of the term, because the employees sleep on mats or pieces of corrugated iron, either above or amongst the cattle, and they have no protection from the weather.*[218]

Having moved hundreds of kilometres from their reserves, the question of housing was, naturally, the most aggravating of issues affecting the majority of migrant Luo labourers working in Mombasa's rail and port service. Murmurs of dissatisfaction with their housing situation began in the 1910s but grew louder from the 1930s when the number of migrant labourers exponentially shot up. Through chosen community leaders, Luo KURH labourers began officially demanding for better housing and living conditions, even as KURH management and the colonial state continued to disregard the rising numbers of people arriving and the obvious manifestations of a class of permanent workers fully dependent on their wages living in the town.[219] The 1939 general strike in Mombasa – the first large-scale industrial action taken by workers in the colony – was chiefly caused by the housing problem and KURH employees were only pacified when a salary increase of sh 3.00 was paid out in lieu of a monthly housing allowance.[220]

Whereas it can be correctly argued that Mombasa's housing problem was primarily caused by the colonial state's apathy towards its African workers, in reality the situation was an outcome borne of a set of complex interactions. Hence, even though the colonial state rightly bears culpability for the failure to plan for a more permanent workforce in Mombasa, its protectorate status nevertheless contributed immensely to the development of the town's housing crisis as it granted limited occupation on its lands. Legally, Mombasa's lands belonged to Arab and Swahili elites, thus migrant labourers and, to some extent, the colonial state, were allowed limited access, of which if allowed liberal leeway, could potentially have facilitated the

---

[218] KNA/K/331/4, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Examine The Labour Conditions in Mombasa*.

[219] KNA/AWS/11/7/ Mombasa Island Revised Town Planning Scheme, 1925. The report of the town planning committee warned that the underestimation of Mombasa's housing situation may lead to disaster. The committee suggests that the colonial state finds land where they can settle their worker population.

[220] KNA/K/331/7/1, Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *The Housing of Africans in the Urban Areas of Kenya* (Nairobi: The Kenya information office, 1946); Clayton and Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya*.

construction of proper housing.[221] As it was, migrant Luo labourers could only access housing in the overcrowded areas of Majengo where they paid very high rents to Arab landlords. When they could not find housing in Majengo, they erected illegal temporary housing in the fringes of the African reserved areas in Mombasa. This resulted in the development of satellite living quarters, which quickly turned to slums. A local newspaper the *Mombasa Times*, described the conditions of these areas as "[…] bearing disgusting proximity to animal conditions."[222]

A health pamphlet produced in 1946,[223] after an official investigation looking into the high number of plague deaths in Mombasa, associated much of the migrant labourers' deplorable health status to their living conditions. Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in the labourers' housing lines (including the official lines where rail workers lived) resulted in rat infestations, causing the ever prevalent plague pandemic in Mombasa. In addition to the plague, poor housing was the root cause of Mombasa's rampant respiratory infections, and the reason for the abnormally high mortality rates witnessed among the town's migrant population. Due to widespread theft, doors and windows of houses were rarely opened, limiting air circulation, which worsened sanitation. Conditions were further aggravated by the absence of proper waste disposal systems for human excreta and rubbish, as well as the use of shallowly buried water supply pipes. Waste was often heaped beside huts or scattered all over living quarters, creating fertile grounds for disease-carrying rodents.

Overcrowding was another key feature of the African housing crisis in Mombasa. A 1953 survey conducted in an area less than one square mile revealed over 6,000 people living in 475 houses, with an average four-roomed house being occupied by fifteen people.[224] Two houses captured in the survey encapsulate the extent of the housing shortage: in one house there were nineteen men, ten women, and six children; in another, 26 men, five women, and six children.[225] Homelessness also became a main feature of Mombasa's urban housing as many workers were forced to sleep on the pavement under the verandas on Kilindini roads at night,[226] while others whiled away on the beaches.

As one of the first groups of Mombasa residents to encounter the pressures of urban living, Luo rail and port workers were also among the first Africans to develop elementary forms of trade unionism. The Kavirondo Taxpayers Welfare Association (KTWA), which was borne out of the political Young Kavirondo Association (YKA), had a sizeable membership in Mombasa

---

[221] KNA/AWS/11/7 Mombasa Island Revised Town Planning scheme, The DC urges the government to buy more land from Arabs to enable the settlement of the rising numbers of migrant labourers in Mombasa. The Crown lands Ordinance of 1902 declared all "vacant" land on the colony side crown land, but lands on the protectorate side remained under the ownership of the Sultan and Arab elites.

[222] KNA/AWS/ 24/3 Port Control Kilindini, Newspaper Comments. *Mombasa Times* editorial, 9 September 1939.

[223] K/331/7/2, Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *The Housing of African Natives n Farms and Estates: Health Pamphlet No.3*, (Nairobi: East African Standard, 1946).

[224] C0/53/560/490 Press Office, Department of Information, 4 May 1954.

[225] Ibid.

[226] C0/533/493/25. Extract form the Nairobi chamber of commerce discussing Mombasa's housing problem, 1953.

by 1926. The association was the official mouthpiece of Luo labourers and spoke about conditions in Mombasa and, on several occasions, petitioned the colonial state to increase wages and provide better housing for Luo workers. Later, organisations such as the Luo Union were able to achieve a more structured sense of solidarity among Luo workers in Mombasa. Their activities were directly responsible for consolidating and unifying Luo identity into a single ethnic polity. This transformation enabled the Luo to leverage their most critical asset – ethnic numbers –in negotiations with KURH for better working and living conditions. Luo rail and port workers were also among the first to adopt organised methods of worker resistance. In 1934, they were the main participants in the first-ever strike in Mombasa, protesting stevedoring companies' proposal to reduce their wages from Sh. 2 to Sh. 1.50 a day.[227]

After the strikes of 1934, and following recommendations by various committees, the colonial government began to acknowledge what was happening in Mombasa's labour landscape, and admitted that the situation could only worsen and become more volatile if the African housing situation remained unaddressed. In 1937, amendments were added to the Employment of Servants Ordinance, the new stipulations obliging employers to either provide adequate housing or offer housing allowance to employees. KURH was specifically required to house their workers and the stevedoring companies were ordered to amalgamate into a single entity and, henceforth, engage a permanent labour force. The municipal council was advised to establish a municipal housing scheme to accommodate the labourers of smaller employers engaged with the KURH. These stipulations and recommendations never really materialised, however, as KURH and other private agencies working with them blatantly contravened them. The Sh. 3 housing allowance, for example, was only given to labourers whose salaries fell below Sh. 30. The Railway Department was actually willing to pay a housing allowance of Sh. 4 to its entire labour force but had to rescind this decision and go back to Sh. 3 after complaints from the municipality who wanted the rate to remain at Sh. 3.[228] This was the main reason for the subsequent strikes in 1939.

After the strikes of 1939, the labour situation in Mombasa was seemingly resolved, mainly because the colonial state had engaged rural authority figures to pacify agitated urban workers. In 1942, however, a further series of strikes began. These strikes were largely triggered by food shortages and the apparent apathy that employers exhibited towards their workers' grievances regarding the increased cost of living. Employees taking part in the 1942 strikes included workers from KURH, public works, and from the municipality. A year later, in October 1943, workers participated in yet another strike, this one related to the payout of KURH's war bonuses. African bonuses were given from the year 1942 while payments for other races were backdated to 1939. In 1944, there was yet further restlessness among KURH labourers, but the colonial state was able to contain the situation by, again, engaging the assistance of colonial chiefs. The peace was short-lived, however, and, in January 1945, signs of trouble were imminent. On 2 February, the first official demand for a wage increase was made at the general

---

[227] Singh, *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement.*

[228] KNA/K/331/11, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Examine The Labour Condition in Mombasa.*

meeting for KURH's African staff. Other issues, such as quality of rations and food prices, came up, and the meeting was particularly stormy. The colonial state again tried to engage African chiefs and Chief Amoth (Central Kavirondo) and Agoi (North Kavirondo) were called in to pacify workers. Though the chiefs tried to mollify Luo labourers, they were nevertheless in agreement that current wages were insufficient to sustain migrant workers in Mombasa. They further agreed that if no improvement were made, then a workers' strike was almost guaranteed. A committee was therefore set up in April 1945, and its recommendations included raising the minimum wage to Sh. 40 for a single man.

On 13 February 1947, and with a suddenness that shocked employers in Mombasa, African labourers commenced a General Strike. All African employees, including those of the railway and the docks, workers in hotels and the hospitality industry, and even domestic servants, participated in this famous strike. As the *Mombasa Times* noted, rather admiringly, the secrecy with which this operation was executed was remarkable.[229] Employees had worked until knocking off time the previous day without giving an inkling of their intentions. The following day, no African port and rail workers showed up for work. Oil companies were without staff and factories fell silent. Hotels and houses were without servants. The report detailing the unrest contended that, on that day, Mombasa had suffered a *coup de grace*.[230]

The 1947 strike was undoubtedly the event that radically shifted opinions on the viability of continuing the established economic and social order in colonial Mombasa. It was now clear that labourers were conscious of the dynamics of the colonial economy and their positionality within the framework. Consequently, the colonial state was forced to recognise the controversies within Mombasa's labour economy. Of particular interest was the question of the place of migrant labourers in the town's economic lifeline, and the apparent need to shift methods and strategies for engaging them. At the same time, the newest entrant on the world stage, the USA, shone a spotlight on the empire and Britain found itself on the defensive, constantly justifying the continuation of colonial occupation. To counter these growing challenges, Britain settled on restructuring its hegemonic focus and moved from the politics of production to the politics of welfare.[231] In Mombasa, the colonial state moved to establish itself as an overseer and the progressive force that initiated the changes that were to inevitably come to Mombasa. The post-1947 strike era was therefore characterised by a reorganisation of relations with African labourers as spaces for participation in the political and economic spheres widened. The most transformative of these developments was reflected in the reforms instituted in land and housing policies. These changes significantly altered Mombasa's political and social dynamics, marking the decline of Arab supremacy and the rise of a political landscape dominated by migrant labourers.

---

[229] KNA/AWS/24/1/ Newspapers, *Mombasa Times* editorial, 18 February 1947.

[230] KNA/RWW/33/1 *Labour Unrests and Commission's Enquiry Since 1937.*

[231] Fredrick Cooper, *Decolonisation and African Society: The Labour Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1996) p. 173.

3.5.1 Strategies of labour control

As Mombasa's rail and port workers' modes of resistance became more belligerent in the latter years of the 1930s and continuing into the 1940s, colonial authorities in Mombasa were forced to reckon with the pertinent issues dominating Mombasa's labour landscape. Previously employed methods of ignoring and diminishing the severity of grievances,[232] or promising to look into workers welfare but never acting, were becoming increasingly difficult to sustain as labourers adopted new measures and embraced new mobilising strategies while pushing for better working and living conditions. As the antagonism of labour and capital played out in tense relations, the colonial state went on to adopt new approaches to assert its authority over migrant rail and port workers. Labour control strategies used in Mombasa's KURH were essentially deployed to regulate the supply, productivity, and political activity of particularly Luo labour, and each method achieved some degree of success. These strategies are outlined in the following section.

3.5.2 Co-option of ethnic ideologies and indigenous structures of authority

Berman postulated that there are definite limits on the degree to which a state can act as the direct agent of capitalist accumulation before its authority and the wider social order are threatened by the struggle of the dominated classes. To successfully and continuously manage resistance, states therefore rely on regularly expanding their scope of interventions by incorporating new elements into their systems of control. Referencing this point was his study on colonial chiefs in Kenya, where he observed that Britain recognised the essential role indigenous structures of authority would play in the transformation of pre-colonial labour and production systems to align with imperial needs without provoking social collapse and bitter resistance.[233] The study revealed that great pressure was put on indigenous authorities to reform society and incorporate them into the political economy of the colonial state. This process progressively eroded the authority and autonomy of chiefs and local leaders, turning them into agents of control for the colonial state. In Luoland, colonial chiefs and headmen were the primary agents in mobilising African labour and production for the colonial economy. They acted as mediators tasked with maintaining disciplinary control over their communities, ensuring compliance with colonial demands for labour and production. Chiefs organised communal tribute labour that was used to expand rural road networks,[234] collected taxes for the colonial government, and facilitated labour agents within their spheres of influence to recruit migrant labourers. Tieleman and Uitermark correctly hypothesise that while the formation of

---

[232] KNA/AWS/1/366 Labour Unrests Mombasa, 1945. Port managers often termed migrant labourer grievances as petty and their demands as having no basis. Indeed, many attributed the strike actions of the 1930s and 1940s to the "reserve labour" in Mombasa, which was not always needed and only called upon when necessary.

[233] Berman, *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya.*

[234] CO/533/490/2, Archbishop Owens letter to the Manchester Guardian on 23 May 1929 titled "Forced Labour: A Kenyan Episode.

modern colonial states restricted the discretionary power of chiefs as sovereign leaders, it afforded them greater authority as managers of land and gatekeepers of state bureaucracy.[235]

Individuals moving away from established native reserves were distancing themselves from indigenous structures of authority and means of social control. Concerns over these individuals becoming a differentiated group in the urban centres with weaker or, worse, severed links with rural areas, influenced the colonial state's subtle and sometimes overt plans to establish urban frameworks of communal authorities. This was achieved by creating a cadre of urban leaders and representatives. Membership to these positions and roles was selective, achieved through a process that combined indigenous elements of authority with components associated with urban prestige, such as education. Epstein's study of the Copperbelt town of Luanshya in Zambia epitomises this formation of urban leadership as a means to socially control urban workers. High levels of residential and occupational mobility in Luanshya had created environments conducive to urban decay, making vices such as prostitution, thieving, and excessive alcohol consumption commonplace in the town's urban landscape. To manage the rapid pace of these transformations, colonial authorities began encouraging the development of urban leadership structures to establish communal social control. A royal connection was regarded as an important attribute for participation in this urban leadership framework.[236] These efforts culminated in the creation of ethnic-based urban location elders and urban advisory councils. By analysing how the colonial control frameworks aimed to shape the social organisation of African urban populations, Epstein effectively highlights the origins of communal and ethnically inclined systems of administration, which became a general feature of Zambia's urban landscape. Similarly, Mombasa experienced progressive social decay, which was the reflection the material conditions of its dominant demographic – the migrant labourer. By the early 1930s, prostitution, trafficking of liquor, *ngoma* dances,[237] and thieving, among other social vices, had become prominent features of Mombasa town in so far that the most pressing legislations made in that period were connected to controlling these "vices" by way of limiting the immigration of Africans from the inland regions.[238] As it was in Luanshya, the colonial state in Mombasa also actively encouraged the creation of a group of urban-based ethnic representatives, their intended role being to control the behaviour of its members. This process was begun by propositioning and, later, approving the positions of community spokespersons.

> *Upcountry people have some form of organisation amongst themselves, but the existing system divided the tribe into several sections. It was decided that the government endeavours to appoint a spokesperson for each tribe as a whole. From here then, tribunals for hearing petty crimes can be established. Tribal*

---

[235] Joris Tieleman and Justus Uitermark, "Chiefs in the City: Traditional Authority in the Modern State," *Sociology*, 53 No.4 (Dec 2018), pp. 707–723.

[236] A.L. Epstein, *Politics in an Urban African Community*, (Oxford: Rhodes Livingstone institute and Manchester University Press,1958), p. 50.

[237] The positionality of *ngoma* dances in the Swahili social sphere is elaborated in Chapter Four.

[238] KNA/ABK/12/44 Labour Control-Urban, 1946–55.

spokespeople should be recognised by the government...The collection of elders is assumed to evolve as a council controlling the particular tribe. This development is preferred to the appointment of headmen who may not be acceptable to every person.[239]

Institution and formalised social structures have profound ways in which they influence individual and group behaviour and stimulate social change. This is because they not only provide sanctions and enforce mechanisms which mould behaviour, but also in their provision of frameworks from where behavioural patterns can be adopted.[240] Luo welfare groups – including the Luo Union and the Ramogi African Welfare Association – served as the primary structures for producing a cadre of urban leadership, which were co-opted by the colonial state to control how migrant Luo labourers reacted to KURH labour policies, their general conduct, and their modes of resistance.

The Luo Union leadership's dalliance with the colonial state was conspicuous. In one public KURH *baraza* meeting in Mombasa, the presiding European labour official openly thanked the chair of the Union for being "[…] a loyal and devoted person who seems to take a lot of his time to keep his people within government policies."[241] Leaders, including Paul Mboya and Jonathan Okwiri, whose legitimacies were rooted in rural traditions, were regularly called upon to address discontent and pacify labourers demanding better terms of service and housing in Mombasa. For instance, when the rail and port workers threatened to go on strike in 1942, Luo Union's Nairobi and Mombasa leadership convinced them to return to their duties, arguing that the war trumped any personal grievances.

The urban leadership worked hand in hand with rural community figures to control the articulation of labourers' grievances in Mombasa. As Eggen suggests, when urban leadership faltered, the chiefs stepped in, invoking the language of custom, culture, and community.[242] Chief Amoth from Central Kavirondo emerged as the most prominent figure in this regard, and his authority was regularly enlisted by the colonial state, particularly whenever the invocation of custom was deemed necessary to control KURH labourers in Mombasa. Amoth's authority was particularly valuable in the years during and after World War II, when the labour landscape in Mombasa was particularly volatile as workers no longer accepted promises of improvements in the future and demanded immediate changes. He was twice summoned to Mombasa – accompanied by a retinue befitting his stature – to pacify the general Luo population in the town and convince them to continue serving in the Carrier Corps, despite the deplorable working conditions. He was also called in to mollify striking rail and port workers in 1945 after the urban

---

[239] KNACQ/1/19/25 Report on Native Affairs Mombasa, 1930.

[240] Surjit Singh and Varsha Joshi (ed) *Institutions and Social Change* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2003).

[241] KNA/OP/AA/1/43 African Affairs: Associations, Societies and Public Bodies Luo Union, 1942–1956. Comments by Mr Coventry, labour official in charge of the safari planned in Mombasa by the Nairobi labour office.

[242] Øyvind Eggen, "Chiefs and Everyday Governance: Parallel State Organisations in Malawi," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 37, No. 2 (June 2011), pp. 313–331.

leadership had failed to pacify them. In a meeting held on 5 August, Amoth appealed to workers by invoking renowned Luo values of diligence and good workmanship. He warned that "[…] the strike in Mombasa was being fermented [sic] by workers from Nyanza tribes who are in danger of blackening their names.]"[243] He insisted that the troubles in Mombasa were in no way caused by disaffection with wages or work conditions because, even as a chief, he did not get enough from the colonial state and he was fine.[244] Rather, he argued that the dissatisfaction witnessed in Mombasa was provoked by the large number of prostitutes, women, and girls who were coming down to Mombasa from their native homes in Luoland, and were exerting pressure on Luo men to provide luxurious lifestyles for them.

Urban and rural community leaders co-opted the principles of ethnicity and ethnic ideologies to manipulate Luo rail and port workers into conforming. Thus, ethnic patriotism became a powerful structure for controlling labourers behaviour in Mombasa. A letter from Governor Mitchell to the Colonial Secretary in London illustrated the popularly cultivated imagery of Luo ethnicity, which urban workers were expected to embody and adhere to: "The Luo people deservedly enjoy a good repute in their home district and wherever they go to work in the colonies because of their general excellent conduct and industry and the efforts they make to care for their young people."[245] This image of "Luoness" was the product of deliberate efforts by urban and rural ethnic leadership networks to cultivate and project a particular portrayal of Luo identity, especially in diasporic spaces. The version of Luoness encouraged clearly pandered to British paternalism and notions of good citizenry. Peterson's[246] study on revivalism in East Africa highlights a similar role that ethnicity played in maintaining conformity among ethnic Luo, particularly at a time when Christian revivalism as a form of colonial resistance began taking root in Western Kenya. Revivalists in Luoland, especially members of the Nomiya Church, positioned themselves as a distinct and righteous group within the Luo social order. However, seen through the eyes of conservative members of the community, the revivalist message was dangerous for its glorification of detachment and non-commitment to the natal community. Revivalists' ideas and behaviours were regarded as unpatriotic to the core values of Luo ethnicity, which emphasised unity, etiquette, discipline, and civil order. Ethnic patriotism was therefore deployed to supress the revivalists, whose actions were perceived as anti-social and divisive and setting people at odds by spreading disruptive and inflammatory testimonies. Luo patriots, positioning themselves as defenders of their fatherland's reputation and advocates for decency and civility, thus worked actively to defeat the revival movement in Luoland.[247] Patriotism to Luo ethnicity became a vital tool appropriated by the colonial state to manage and suppress resistance from urban workers to colonial labour policies. Amoth's

---

[243] KNA/AWS/1/366 Labour Unrests Mombasa.

[244] Ibid. Verbal report of speech made by Chief Amoth to Mombasa's rail and port workers, 5 April 1945.

[245] KNA/OP/AA1/43 African Affairs: Associations, Societies and Public Bodies, Luo Union. Governor Mitchell's letter to the Colonial Secretary in London.

[246] Derrick Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent 1935–1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[247] Ibid., p. 129.

characterisation of the Luo rail and port workers' strike action as "blackening the Luo name" was meant to stress the importance of engaging the colonial state within the approved boundaries of Luoness, which emphasised civility, etiquette, discipline, and hard work. The Luo Union in particular took extreme measures to promote this idealised image of Luoness. For example, young men were prohibited from drinking alcohol, going to dances, and engaging in cross-cultural communication.[248] Luo women, including the wives of KURH workers, were forbidden from buying tripe and bones from butcheries, as this was seen as a reflection of their husband's inability to provide.[249] These prohibitions worked to limit spaces for mutual interaction between workers that might have facilitated better organisation and resistance strategies. Patriotism to the perceived tenets of Luoness, including civility and the prioritising communal advancement over personal fulfilment, thus became a key framework co-opted by the colonial state to manage and suppress resistance by Luo rail and port workers against unfair labour policies.

3.5.3 Legislative controls and the use of coercive policing

Berman and Lonsdale note that the most striking feature of the colonial state in Kenya was its development from a simple administrative apparatus to a complex and sophisticated institution of social control and economic management.[250] This progression, they argue, was the function of the socio-economic forces operating on the periphery of the capitalist world system, which encouraged the development of practices and structural forms that shaped relations of production and processes of class formation. The colonial social order therefore developed to become a multifaceted system of control encompassing the use of both soft and hard coercive practices and structures of control. In Kenya, as in other colonies, legislation and public policing were the most common forms of coercive means of social control. Indeed, the police became the vanguard ensuring the success of the colonial economy by serving as the main agents of the state in civil and judicial matters. In doing so, they played a pivotal role in shaping the contours of the colonial social order.[251] Anderson contends that it was in urban areas where colonial police most directly enforced the moral and political imperatives of colonial capitalism. Urban social ills such as vice, vagrancy, and liquor were deemed as the enemy of the ruling class and the root cause of the instability that sporadically disrupted the accumulation of capital. These issues were largely attributed to the influx of unemployed Africans who had thronged cities and industrial towns, rather than being recognised as the direct result of capital's neglect of its

---

[248] KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/316 Riwruok Luo (Luo Union) East Africa. Young men were specifically prohibited from interacting with the Kikuyu. This was driven by fears of rebellion, as the Mau Mau insurgency was gaining ground in Central Kenya.

[249] Samwel Okuro, "Misfit Mothers, Wayward Wives and Disobedient Daughters: The Construction of Gender Identity and the Reinforcement of Traditional Authority in Post War Seme Location," IFRA ed., *Kenya: Culture, Gender and Society* (Nairobi: French Institute for Research, 2006).

[250] Bruce Berman, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa, Book One: State and Class* (London: James Currey, 1992).

[251] David M. Anderson and David Killingray, *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority, and Control, 1830–1940* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1991).

workers' material conditions. The colonial state thus turned to laws and the police force as instruments of regulation and social control to shape the emerging structures in African urban spaces.

One of the most effective laws used to control labour in Kenya generally and specifically in Mombasa was the Registration of Natives Ordinance; the ordinance that effectively introduced the pass system. Passed in 1915, the ordinance required the registration of all African males from the age of fifteen, and the provision of a metal case *kipande* in which the certificate was to be placed and carried at all times. In addition to bearing information about a pass holder's family and ethnic particulars, the certificate also detailed employment records, including place and dates of employment, wages received, employer name, and commencement and discharge dates. Initially, the Registration of Natives Ordinance was only required for contractual labourers in urban areas but, in 1927, its scope was widened to include casual labourers. Generally applied to labourers in urban areas, the registration certificate restricted both a man's freedom to leave his work and his freedom to bargain with an employer for a wage not related to that of his previous employer. Consequently, employers held considerable power over employees, many of whom were afraid of openly disagreeing with them for fear of receiving bad references. Employers controlled labourers they deemed troublesome by giving them long leaves of absence without signing off their *kipande*. This was a way of securing their return as they would be unable to find employment anywhere else. The *kipande* therefore played the dual role of ensuring that any articulation of grievances remained minimal while, at the same time, limiting options for seeking better terms of service with a different employer. Figures 3.6 and 3.7 are photographs of pages of the registration certificate that were placed inside a *kipande.*

While the *kipande* system was generally applied to managing Luo port and rail workers in Mombasa, additional legislations were also enacted, which specifically targeted the in- and outflow of casual labourers in the town. When more casual workers were needed, laws were quickly formulated to favour their movement into the town, sometimes at the expense of other urban areas. During World War II, for example, restrictions were placed on employment in Nairobi for the sole purpose of encouraging movement of labour into Mombasa during a period when men were needed to work cargo ships as part of the war effort.[252] By contrast, when less labour was required, specific laws were made to limit the influx of casual labourers into the town. Generally, the colonial state was adamant that casual labourers were the reason for the turmoil witnessed in Mombasa. Frequent proposals were hence made to manage labourers in Mombasa, often focusing on repatriating them to their ethnic reserves and controlling their re-entry into the town's labour landscape by introducing separate pass laws.[253] Other suggestions included the recruitment of seasonal labour during periods of high demand at the piers, followed by their repatriation when demand for work was low.[254] For instance, it was recommended that workers be brought in between June and October and sent back upcountry once the busy season

---

[252] KNA/K/341/763 Colony and Protectorate of Kenya *A Handbook of the Labour Laws of The Colony and Protectorate of Kenya,* (Nairobi: Government printer,1945).
[253] KNA/CQ1/19/24 Report on Natives Affairs Mombasa.
[254] KNA/K/331/11 *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Examine the Labour Condition in Mombasa*.

ended, only to return for the next cycle of high labour demand. To facilitate this, several pieces of legislation were enacted, which the colonial state felt would go a long way to regulate labour and occupational mobility within Mombasa.

Among such laws was the Defence Limitations of Labour Ordinance, which stipulated that employers could not employ more than five casual labourers in a day. This ordinance was specific to and only applicable in Mombasa.[255] Another law, the Defence Casual Labourer Mombasa Regulations 1944, stipulated that all inland native casuals had to be registered before they could get employment.[256] The work permit issued afterwards, was to be renewed on an annual basis. Details of one's registration certificate, together with the permit, were then placed in their *kipande* disk container, which was to be produced on request by government authorities. Registration and granting of permits were left to the discretion of labour registrars, who had the authority to refuse permits if they believed someone was unlikely to get work. Additionally, the *kipande* disk could be confiscated for up to a year to verify the information provided. "Troublemakers" were therefore in constant danger of having their work permits denied or, even worse, having their disks confiscated, which would render them unable to find work anywhere in the colony.

[255] KNA/K/341/763 *A Handbook of the Labour Laws of the Colony and Protectorate*.
[256] Ibid.

82

SCHEDULE I

COLONY AND PROTECTORATE OF KENYA

CERTIFICATE ISSUED UNDER THE NATIVE REGISTRATION ORDINANCE A

Name.....Father.....

District.....Tribe.....

Location.....Sub-Loc.....

Group.....Clan.....

Circumcision Age.....Date.....19.....

Signature of R.O.....

No.

Left Thumb Impression

Name of Employer	Nature of Work	Date of Engagement	Rate of Wages		If Posho given	Date of Discharge	Employer's Signature on Discharge
			On Engagement	On Discharge			
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							

SCHEDULE II

COLONY AND PROTECTORATE OF KENYA

CERTIFICATE ISSUED UNDER THE NATIVE REGISTRATION ORDINANCE B

Name.....Father.....

District.....Tribe.....

Location.....Sub-Loc.....

Group.....Clan.....

Circumcision Age.....Date.....19.....

Signature of R.O.....

No.

Left Thumb Impression

Classification.....

Figure 3.6.

83

SCHEDULE IV

L.D. 3

No. of Certificate of Identity.....F.P. Class.....

ROLLED IMPRESSIONS—RIGHT HAND

1.—Right Thumb	2.—R. Fore Finger	3.—R. Middle Finger	4.—R. Ring Finger	5.—R. Little Finger

FOLD

ROLLED IMPRESSIONS—LEFT HAND

6.—Left Thumb	7.—L. Fore Finger	8.—L. Middle Finger	9.—L. Ring Finger	10.—L. Little Finger

FOLD

LEFT HAND Plain Impressions Taken Simultaneously RIGHT HAND

L.—Thumb	R.—Thumb

Note.—Impressions to be so taken that the flexture of the last joint shall be immediately above the black line marked FOLD. If the impression of any digit is defective a second print may be taken in the vacant space at foot of this form.

When a finger is amputated, deformed, or so injured that the impression thereof cannot be obtained, the fact should be noted in the space provided for that impression.

Signature of
Registration Officer..... Date.....
Classified by..... Date.....
Tested by..... Date.....

Left thumb impression of person taking prints

SPACE FOR DEFECTIVE PRINTS

IDENTIFICATIONS

No.	From	For	Date	Reference	Initials	Remarks

REMARKS :—

Figure 3.7

Figures 3.6 and 3.7 Copies of pages of the registration certificate that was placed inside a kipande. KNA/K/341/763 Colony and Protectorate of Kenya *A Handbook of the Labour Laws of the Colony And Protectorate of Kenya* (Nairobi: Government printer, 1945).

Anomaki vagrans!! (You will be arrested for vagrancy), a cautionary statement occasionally used by the current elderly in rural Luoland to persuade restless youth to conform, even if the underpinnings of the statement continues being lost to almost all recipients of the caution. Burton and Ocobock suppose that notions of vagrancy have long been embedded in British colonial imaginations of Africans.[257] They argue that the definition of vagrancy – and the subsequent implementation of rules to manage so-called vagrants – provided intersectional solutions to the socioeconomic and political challenges that arose as colonial capital mediated issues of urbanisation, workers, and criminality. Initially conjured to increase numbers of urban labourers by compelling anyone found unemployed in towns to work, vagrancy laws soon evolved into instruments used to control migrant populations. These laws targeted individuals deemed to be abandoning the African social order in favour of urban life and capitalism. The shift in the ordinance's purpose – from its original function of supplying extra labour to an instrument of social control – was particularly useful in Mombasa following the success of the 1939 strike, when rail and port workers intensified demands for improved material conditions, and mounted even more pressure on the colonial state.

Vagrancy legislation famously sought to exclude African 'undesirables'– hooligans, spivs, and loafers – from urban areas by repatriating them to their rural reserves.[258] KURH produced its fair share of vagrants – essentially, labourers who dared question the colonial social order or demanded better work conditions. These labourers were either sacked or given bad references if they agreed to quit.[259] Challenging the colonial social order thus almost certainly relegated individuals to the ranks of the unemployed urban mob; the very group that the vagrancy laws were made for. The requirements for permits for every labourer living in Mombasa and the additional provision of special badges for casual labourers, made it that it was virtually impossible for sacked employees to find other employment in the town. The intent was to make life in Mombasa unbearable, thereby forcing the "offending" person to return to Luoland. Contrary to expectations, however, vagrancy laws proved extremely challenging to implement in Mombasa. When Luo labourers were sacked from KURH departments, or if they were unable to find employment, most did not return to their respective ethnic reserves. Instead, they disappeared into the growing maze of African slums where they subsisted on petty trading, illegal trade in alcohol, and sex work. This was especially so if the migrant was also an undesirable element back in Luoland.

> *Men who were cohabiting with women they had eloped with, or those they had helped run away from marital homes in Luoland could definitely not return to the reserves. Kimirwa and Nyithi simba (children borne before their mothers officially*

---

[257] Andrew Burton, and Paul Ocobock, "The 'Travelling Native': Vagrancy and Colonial Control in British East Africa," Paul Ocobock and A. L. Beier, eds., *Cast Out: Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global and Historical Perspective* (Ohio University Press, 2008), pp. 270–301.

[258] KNA/PC/COAST/1/10/114 Vagrancy Regulations 1920–1928. In a letter to the resident commissioner to Mombasa, it was agreed that anyone declared a vagrant should be deported back to their reserve.

[259] Osodo Dami, O.I., 10 January 2018, Bangladesh, Mombasa.

married) and excommunicated men could never go back. Others chose not to return because of the shame associated with the inability to provide for their households.[260]

The colonial state, moreover, lacked the resources and proper strategies to enable repatriation of the huge numbers of undesirable elements residing in Mombasa. This was especially because Luoland, where the majority of Mombasa's vagrants came from, was located in distant regions at the opposite end of the colony, and conducting repatriation exercises would have been extremely expensive. The Mombasa DC attempted to outsource this responsibility to Luoland Local Native Councils (LNC), urging them to allocate funds for repatriation of the unemployed back to the reserve.[261] His efforts were however unsuccessful. Consequently, Mombasa became a safe haven for vagrants, including those who had run away from other towns. Suleiman Magero recalls that his uncle, Hayange, was one such "vagrant":

He (Hayange) worked for the railway in Kisumu. He was sacked sometime in the 1950s for picketing in request for higher wages. He was actually supposed to be arrested, but quickly ran away to Mombasa where it was less likely for the police to find him.[262]

By the early 1940s, the vagrant problem had become a key feature in colonial intelligence reports. The DC ultimately resigned himself to their existence and began advocating for the formulation of laws specific to Mombasa to restrict their movement within African areas in the town.[263]

Having implemented various legislation aimed at controlling labour with differing degrees of success, the colonial state also attempted to regulate the development of trade unions. After the first organised strike in 1934, KURH's management did not take steps to ameliorate workers' conditions. Instead, they intensified efforts and formulated strict policies to curtail the development of trade unions and their involvement in workers' organisation. The Trade Union's Ordinance of 1937, which was enacted as a direct response to the 1934 strike, stipulated that unions had to be registered and officially recognised by the state before they could act on behalf of workers. Unregistered unions were hereafter unrecognised and declared illegal. The movement of union leaders was also restricted. They could travel within and or outside the boundaries of their resident district only with the DC's permission.[264] It became illegal to hold meetings unless permission was given by the police, and collection of funds from members was also limited. To further limit union power, it was mandated that before any industrial action could take place, trade unions had to first present their grievances at a Dispute Arbitration

---

[260] Osodo Dami, O.I.

[261] KNA/CQ1/19/25 Report on Native Affairs Mombasa, 1930.

[262] Suleiman Magero, O.I., 3 January 2019, Bangladesh, Mombasa.

[263] KNA/ABK/18/16 Reports and Returns: Intelligence Report by Labour Officers, 1941.

[264] C0/533/493/5 Memorandum on Trade Disputes Arbitration and Inquiry Ordinance 1939, submitted to the Governor of the Kenya colony by the chair of the Labour trade union of East Africa, Makhan Singh.

Tribunal. If the tribunal ruled that there was no cause for a strike, then any subsequent industrial action would be declared illegal. Union leaders were frequently harassed, imprisoned, and deported. Some, like Fred Kubai, were declared *persona non grata* in urban areas with large concentrations of labourers. Furthermore, a heavy propaganda campaign was launched to question the authenticity and intentions of trade unions, painting their leadership in a negative light. Between 1945 and 1947, several newspaper editorials accused striking rail and port workers of being unwilling to compromise and it was reported that their primary aim was to prolong the struggle to harm public interests.[265] The radical union leader Makhan Singh was particularly targeted. His citizenship was thoroughly interrogated as the state toyed with the idea of declaring him an Indian national with no right to intervene in Kenyan affairs. The genuineness of his intentions to create a multiracial and multicultural union were also questioned, and presented as a self-serving attempt to secure power for himself and the Indian/Asian population by exploiting the grievances of African labourers.

Once it was apparent that workers and union leaders were not giving in to the colonial state's demands to conform and return to the colonial social order, the state's next step was to co-opt the union movement by infiltrating its top leadership. Secret correspondence deposited at the National Archives in Kew reveals that the efforts of union leaders, like Makhan Singh and Fred Kubai, with genuine interest in improving worker conditions and building a vibrate union culture in Kenya, were frustrated, and that the state tactically introduced a rival leader, Tom Mboya, who was more aligned with its interests.[266] As an ethnic Luo, the colonial state was sure that Mboya would be able to persuade the majority of its wage labourers in Mombasa's rail and port service; the Luo, to abandon the more radical Singh and Kubai and close ranks when labour issues were tied to identity politics. Mboya's entry and meteoric rise in the trade union movement indeed suffocated the development of a vibrant trade union culture in Kenya.[267] His actions directly contributed to the emergence of ethnic mobilisation –a defining feature of Kenya's political landscape.

3.5.4 Monitoring of worker's social life

"An idle mind is the devil's workshop," is a well-known proverb that warns of the perils of not being constantly engaged in productive activity. The proverb suggests that idleness leads to overthinking, questioning things better left alone, and eventually, getting into trouble. The principles of this proverb were applied in response to grievances expressed by migrant Luo

---

[265] KNA/AWS/24/3 Port Control Kilindini: Newspaper Comments. Mombasa Times editorial titled "Mombasa African General Strike: Attorney General reviews events and steps taken for improvement," 30 January 1947; Letter to the editor *East African Standard*, 16 April 1945.

[266] C0/533/493/5 Trade Unions in Kenya. A series of confidential correspondences in this file reveal the colonial state's plan to introduce a more pliable Mboya into the Kenya Federation of Trade Unions with the aim of neutralising Makhan Singh.

[267] Gerard McCann, "Possibility and Peril: Trade Unionism, African Cold War, and the Global Strands of Kenyan Decolonization," *Journal of Social History*, 53 No. 2, (Oxford University Press, November 2019), pp. 348–377.

labourers in Mombasa. Their objections were typically ignored, deemed irrational and nonsensical, and attributed to their "idle minds" as they "[…] had nothing productive to engage in in the hours proceeding their official working hours."[268] Rather than addressing workers' concerns about their material conditions, colonial authorities believed that keeping workers constantly occupied would prevent them from organising and causing trouble. Thus, colonial capital began proposing the adoption of various after-work activities designed to ensure that labourers were constantly engaged. For Luo labourers at the KURH, this labour control strategy involved encouraging the development of spaces for the invigoration of Luo popular culture, and creating opportunities to participate in sporting activities.

Proposals to engage workers during their after-work hours began as early as the 1920s when the shocks of industrialisation that are usually felt in capitalist economies began to be experienced in colonial Mombasa. Measures to control Africans during their free time then became a key discussion point in the DC's office as officials began viewing unengaged Africans as a threat to security.[269] Security reports indicated that a majority of African workers loafed around in the streets playing cards, or they idled at dances and cafés where they mostly got into trouble. To address their restlessness, the development of a recreation building was proposed, where workers could be properly supervised in their free time.[270] The KURH management also sought to counter workers' resistance by promoting sports as a method of keeping them busy after working hours. The establishment of the Makadara Football grounds in the 1920s was part of this strategy, providing a space where African labourers could compete in inter-tribal games.[271] The teams playing at Makadara were mainly comprised of labourers from the railway and harbours.

Football in Mombasa transformed from a simple activity meant to engage Luo rail and port workers in their off-hours into a powerful platform for reinforcing and celebrating Luo ethnic identity among the diaspora. This ethnicization of the sport was apparent in its progression from small workers' football clubs to its pivotal role in the development of the Luo Union Football Club (later Re-union, currently Gor Mahia). Luo Union players were mainly drawn from Luo labourers in the diaspora (KURH included), and their support base extended across ethnic Luo communities in urban areas throughout East Africa.[272] Njororai's analysis of the origins of Kenya's ethnic football teams and their support bases highlights key factors that drove the progression from awareness to attraction, attachment, and, finally, team allegiance. The factors that shaped club loyalty include demography, community, and individual motivations.[273] For

---

[268] KNA/CQ1/19/24 Report on Natives Affairs Mombasa

[269] KNA/ABK/18/16 Reports and Returns, Intelligence Report by Labour officers, 1941

[270] KNA/CQ1/19/24 Report on Natives Affairs Mombasa

[271] KNA/AWS/24/3 History of the Railway: Paper Cuttings 1920–1927.

[272] Francis Nandi, "Reunion FC. This was the home of Kenyan football," in *Kenyan Star Online News*, 4 May 2012, accessed at https://web.archive.org/web/20140109162029/http://www.kenyanstar.co.ke/retracing-our-roots/reunion-fc-this-was-the-home-of-kenyan-football.

[273] Wycliffe Simiyu Njororai, "Colonial Legacy, Minorities and Association Football in Kenya," Kausik Bandyopadhyay ed., *Why Minorities Play or Don't Play Soccer: A Global Exploration* (London: Routledge, 2010).

the Luo in the Mombasa diaspora, football matches created spaces for ethnic interaction. Playing football also provided an avenue for free expression in the highly controlled colonial environment. Indeed, football served as an alternative outlet for workers to vent frustrations stemming from their challenging material conditions. Although Luo workers were generally viewed as compliant, their behaviour during football matches transformed, and they were notorious for their hooliganism. Ironically, this conduct was tolerated by the colonial state. At one point, the Arab *hamali* team threatened to stop playing against the Luo rail and port workers team because of their quarrelsome behaviour, but their complaints fell on deaf ears.[274] Football also offered opportunities for excellence, fostering admiration and support as young men found heroes to look up to. Through peer and family socialisation, football acquired ethnic loyalty and became symbolic of nativity. For instance, the Luo Union FC and its later iterations were seen as extensions of Luo ethnic identity. This association was so strong that when Re-Union signed Edward Wamalwa, an ethnic Luhya player, in 1976, it sent shockwaves through Luo community circles and the broader Kenya football scene.[275]

The challenge of maintaining spatial connections to family and kin in rural areas often leads to the formation of slightly differentiated groups within urban diasporas. Anderson described such diaspora groups as amorphous, and for them, the concept of "homeland" is not necessarily tied to the spatial configurations of the state.[276] In these contexts, popular culture becomes an important medium for reaffirming connections to the original group in rural areas. For Luo rail and port workers living in Mombasa, social halls served as vital intermediary spaces for invigorating and maintaining Luo ethnicity across local and diaspora spaces. Luo labourers came to heavily rely on social halls as venues where ethnic Luo could freely meet and interact, especially in the post-1939 era when the strike movement became much more militant and the colonial state began viewing all gatherings with suspicion.[277] Consequently, labourers were forced to seek alternative sites for interaction away from their own homes and *barazas*. Figure 3.8 is a photograph of the African social centre in Tononoka Mombasa, where Luo rail and port workers regularly convened.

---

[274] KNA/ CQ1/19/24 Report on Natives Affairs Mombasa, 1930.

[275] Bethuel Oduo, "Grappling with Inter-Tribal Football Transfers," in *The Standard Newspaper* (2013), accessed at: https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/the-nairobian/article/2000091690/grappling-with-inter-tribal-football-transfers?pageNo=1.

[276] James Odhiambo Ogone, "Intra-National Ethnic Diasporas: Popular Culture and Mediated Trans Local Spaces in Kenya," *Vienna Journal of African Studies*, 15 (Vienna: Wiener Studien, 2015), pp. 69–89.

[277] KNA/ABK/18/16 Reports and Returns, Intelligence Report by Labour officers, 1941.

Figure 3.8. The African social centre in Tononoka Mombasa, circa 1956. Photograph courtesy of a Facebook post by Odhiambo Levin Opiyo. Accessed on 14 December 2023 at: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/QEQGmnE2DykUbdDE/.

Initially promoted as spaces where labourers could participate in recreational activity while invigorating popular cultures, social halls in Mombasa gradually grew into sites where the diaspora community leadership worked to structure the behaviour of its membership. Kingsdale's analysis of the function of the saloon in American society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries mirrored similar roles these venues played in burgeoning American cities. Touted as "poor men's 'clubs," saloons significantly influenced the values and behaviours of the urban working class by shaping the nature of their leisure activities.[278] In much the same way, social halls in Mombasa provided a much-needed escape from Luo labourers' dirty, overcrowded, and poorly ventilated living quarters. They embodied a semblance of urban goodness amidst the overall deprivation that defined workers' daily lives. These halls became the main source of recreation and entertainment for migrant labourers, fostering an atmosphere encouraging "positive group activity." After toiling in deplorable conditions during the workweek, young men looked forward to weekend gatherings at the halls, where they talked and engaged with kin, watched films, or participated in dances. However, the colonial state exerted significant control over the operation of social halls through budgetary allocations and itinerary reviews. Welfare organisations such as the Luo Union were often allowed to organise ethnic *ohangla*, *orutu*, *nyatiti*, and *benga* music events in social halls. Yet, permits for these events were sometimes denied, particularly during times of labour unrest.[279] In these instances,

[278] Jon M. Kingsdale, "The 'Poor Man's Club': Social Functions of the Urban Working-Class Saloon," *American Quarterly*, 25 No.4 (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 472–489.
[279] David Parkin, *Neighbours and Nationals in an African City Ward* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

community leaders would often use the promise of a dance or a movie to pacify dissatisfied Luo workers and deter rebellion.[280] By mediating access to spaces where labourers gained some reprieve from their daily drudgery, Mombasa's social halls hence became vital instruments enlisted by colonial authority to control the behaviour of rail and port workers.

Conclusion

The features evincing Mombasa's revolutionary growth as the town developed to become East Africa's chief commercial centre in the first decade of the 20th century were demonstrated in a duality. One part revealed a picture of turmoil and great upheavals, while the other was represented by unprecedented prosperity. The expansion of KURH which was facilitated by the labours of the migrant Luo was a key factor in the production of these twin features, even as the complexities of urban development contradicted official government policies to produce Mombasa's ever lingering chaos.

KURH labour dynamics were foundational to the development of Mombasa's tumultuous labour landscape, whose key feature was its significant population of a migrant urban proletariat. A substantial portion of this workforce comprised ethnic Luo labourers working for the rail and port service. This chapter revealed that this labour landscape was shaped by the interplay of various factors. Firstly, the wages offered by KURH, particularly to Luo labourers, was a key pull factor, encouraging a steady stream of this specific demographic of migrant wage labourers into the town. This migration was further facilitated by recruiters who actively scoured Luoland once it became apparent that Luo labourers were highly valued in Mombasa for their resilience to the harsh climate and severe labour conditions. Moreover, the labour landscape was shaped by the operational practices of stevedoring companies working at Mombasa's ports. Each company operated separately and independently and procured its own gangs of labourers for the day. This system depended on the availability of a large pool of labourers. Companies were furthermore reluctant to commit to a permanent workforce and instead depended on Arab *hamali* to procure casual labourers to load and unload cargo from their ships. Mombasa's share of casual labourers grew exponentially, reaching significant proportions in the 1930s that the town's DC even acknowledged that the casual nature of employment at KURH, was the main factor driving the influx of migrant labourers into the town. This fact contributed to making Mombasa the town with the largest proportion of casual employees in the entire colony and protectorate of Kenya.

The onset of World War II saw more Luo labourers move into Mombasa town, as the Allied forces moved to make East Africa a key centre for sisal production after the loss of Malaya and the Philippines. By this time, the port had significantly expanded its infrastructure, enabling increased cargo handing to support the war effort. Luo rail and port workers played an integral role in the maintenance of the transport network that delivered this vital product to various Allied destinations. Further migration occurred in the years following the war, as famine

[280] Osodo Dami, O.I.

continued to ravage Luoland, making rural subsistence increasingly untenable for the Luo. KURH then offered a lifeline, providing opportunities for the Luo to escape rural poverty. The prospect of Mombasa's famously high wages pulled in more labourers looking for alternative means of survival.

While the initial group of labourers managed to accumulate a modest sum in exchange for their labour, the situation shifted as KURH embarked on aggressive expansion in the years following World War I. The organisation then required a growing number of workers for lower rank-and-file positions, particularly for dockyard duties. Consequently, Luo labours gradually became proletarianised, with skilled craftsmen, including carpenters, painters, ironworkers, and masons increasingly subsumed into the rail and port economy as goods loaders. Mombasa's saturated labour market and KURH's reliance on casual employment further complicated the prospects for the multitude of workers seeking work at the docks. Most casual labourers could only secure work for a few days a month. As a result, Mombasa then became volatile as workers struggled to find work, better wages, and suitable housing. In response, Luo labourers began organising elementary forms of trade unionism. These early systems gradually developed into more structured organisations, becoming a formidable force by the late 1940s, as Mombasa entered the nascent years of the decolonial era. The strike movement in Kenya was notably refined in Mombasa, and KURH labourers, the majority of whom were ethnic Luo, were frontrunners in the development of this emergent form of workers resistance.

As Mombasa's rail and port workers expanded their modes of resistance and became increasingly belligerent during the late 1930s and into the 1940s, colonial authorities were compelled to confront the pressing issues dominating Mombasa's labour landscape. However, contrary to expectations that they would engage workers in dialogue, colonial capital responded with strategies aimed at reasserting its authority over migrant rail and port workers. Strategies employed included the use of coercive force, and this included legislative control of workers movement via the *kipande* system and the deployment of vagrancy laws. Other approaches included enlisting rural symbols of authority to control urban workers, and Chief Amoth from Central Kavirondo played a central role in this regard. He was often called upon to pacify Mombasa's rail and port workers whenever they threatened to go on strike, even though he acknowledged the need for improvements in their working and living conditions. The colonial state also attempted to influence workers' lives beyond the workplace. Sporting activities, particularly football, were integrated as important tools for controlling Luo workers during their leisure hours. These strategies were not entirely successful, and Luo labourers continued to demand better wages and housing and the strike movement gained momentum in the 1950s.

The underbelly of Mombasa's rapid development was difficult to conceal, despite colonial capital's attempts to dismiss or downplay it. Mombasa's tumultuous labour landscape revealed the dilemmas confronting colonial capital in their efforts to control African urban spaces and dictate the position of African labourers within the colonial social order. Luo labourers were brought into Mombasa without adequate consideration of how their mobility would shape the material conditions of the workforce, or how their presence would influence the town's economic and social landscape. The following chapter will analyse how Luo labourers' material conditions contributed to the development of a class divide in colonial

Mombasa, and how the divide was the central factor driving the development of resistance strategies that aided in the gaining of the monumental changes in the 1950s. Luo rail and port workers then moved from the periphery of Mombasa's political and social agendas to occupy the central position in the town's decolonial agenda.