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

Okelo, B.A.

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CHAPTER FOUR

A TOWN DIVIDED: ETHNICITY IN MOMBASA AND THE CHALLENGE OF URBAN LIVING

4.1. Introduction

No sooner had migrant Luo rail and port workers set foot in Mombasa than it became evident that its reputation as an Eldorado – a place of fast living, abundance, and endless opportunities for rapid wealth accumulation – was nothing more than an elaborate illusion created for the sole purpose of luring them into its rail- and harbour-driven wage labour economy. Instead, Mombasa metamorphosed into the very embodiment of the colonial world described by Frantz Fanon.²⁸¹ Colonial Mombasa proved to be one of the most exacting places for Luo migrant labourers to live in, both economically and socially. The harsh realities of urban living arose from the convergence of entrenched and emerging class politics, which motivated the reimagining and reorganisation of established identity hierarchies and essentially transformed the town's economic and social landscape into theatres where differences between “local” *wapwani*, and “visitor” *wabara* identities were performed. Luo rail and port workers arrived in Mombasa burdened not only with the contemptuous *wabara* tag, but also by their positionality as the “African proper” within the colonial order. This status demanded far more from them, particularly in terms of labour and tax, both of which were crucial in maintaining the colonial economy. Their attempts to integrate and immerse themselves into Mombasa's social fabric – a privilege hitherto extended to visitors to the Swahili social scene – were rebuffed and fiercely challenged by coastal indigenes anxious to uphold both traditional Swahili norms and, more importantly, new colonial hierarchies of stratification. This chapter will analyse the colonial origins of Mombasa's local/visitor *wabara/wapwani* ethnic divide. By examining how visitor *wabara* and indigenous *wapwani* identities were articulated during the age of British imperialism, the chapter reveals how race and ethnicity structured opportunity and community access to resources, to produce Mombasa's delineated ethnic and racial lines. The material conditions of each group became the outward manifestations of these identities. Contests over these identity boundaries, particularly in relation to material conditions, sharply impacted Mombasa's cost of living, making it one of the most expensive colonial towns for Luo migrant labourers. The chapter will also discuss the changing nature of social interactions between visitors and locals in the Swahili social scene. This will be elaborated through the analysis of two institutions, *kafaáh marriages* and *ngoma*. Both were reconstructed in colonial Mombasa to reinforce social hierarchies, ensuring that *wabara* Luo remained at the bottom of Swahili and colonial social strata.

²⁸¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin books, 1963). Fanon's *Concerning Violence* draws attention to the duality of the realities of life for colonised black and brown people of the world, and their white coloniser. He describes the colonised world as one of ill fame and depravity, and in sharp contrast to the coloniser's town, which is literally and figuratively well fed.

4.2. Colonial racialism in the development of Mombasa's *Wabara/ Wapwani* ethnic divide

20 June 2017. The electoral period is in full swing and campaigning in Mombasa has reached fever pitch. In Changamwe, community residents hold informal discussions to analyse the recently announced nominees for ward representatives. Conversation naturally shifts to ethnicity and ethnic balance among the Orange Democratic Movement's (ODM) nominees. ODM is the most popular political party in Mombasa, and its nominees are more or less certain of winning their respective seats in the coming August general elections. Of interest to a number of ethnic Luo in this conversation is whether ODM's nominee Fadhili Mwalimu Makarani, an ethnic Mijikenda, would represent the general interests of the Luo-dominated Port Rietz ward. Even as discussants stress the importance of negotiated democracy²⁸² in Mombasa's political scene, it is apparent to anyone familiar with Kenyan politics that this scepticism is not entirely misplaced, and that the fears of ethnic Luo living in Mombasa are valid. Memories of the Likoni clashes of 1997,²⁸³ more recent sporadic violence against *wabara*,²⁸⁴ and the secessionist Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) pronouncements of "*Pwani si Kenya*" (the Coast is not part of Kenya) and "*wabara kwao*" (Bara people should go back to their homes)²⁸⁵ induces distrust of coastal indigenes and produces feelings of apprehension. Adding to this sense of unease is the persistent use of pejorative terms such as *chura* (frog), *kafiri* (derogative for non-Muslim), *mshenzi* (uncivilised), *sokwe mtu* (ape man, in reference to the Luo's darker skin tone) by Arabs and indigenous coastal communities in Mombasa.²⁸⁶ Within this scenario, the fear that Fadhili might neglect the interests of the Luo community once in office, is far from an overreaction.

Tensions, old and new, between inland communities (*wabara*, s. *m'bara*) and coastal indigenes (*wapwani*, s. *m'pwani*. The term encompasses the African population indigene to the coast, together with the Arab and Swahili populations) in Mombasa and the broader Swahili coastal region, are embedded in practices of race, ethnicity, and class relations amongst its diverse population and throughout the town's history.²⁸⁷ The introduction of the European colonial

²⁸² The term is widely used in Kenya to refer to the practice of making agreements to distribute political positions and share power in advance of elections.

²⁸³ Human Rights Watch, *Playing with fire: Weapons Proliferation, Political Violence and Human Rights in Kenya*, (New York, 2002).

²⁸⁴ BBC Africa, "Kenya election: Hatred leaflets in Kisumu and Mombasa," 22 February 2013. Accessed 15 June 2021 at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-21544847>; VOA News, *Violence, discontent swell along Kenyan Coast*, 27 November 2012. Accessed 23 June 2021 at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/violence-discontent-swell-along-kenyan-coast/1553839.html>.

²⁸⁵ Justin Willis, and George Gona, "Pwani C Kenya? Memory, Documents and Secessionist Politics in Coastal Kenya," *African Affairs*, 112, No. 446 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, January 2013), pp. 48–71; The Daily Nation, "MRC maintains its stand of Pwani si Kenya," 27 July 2017. Accessed 18 June 2021 at: <https://nation.africa/kenya/videos/news/mrc-maintains-its-stand-of-pwani-si-kenya--1222018>.

²⁸⁶ Participant observation data collection method by researcher in Changamwe Mombasa, 20 June 2017.

²⁸⁷ A more in depth understanding of Swahili identity hierarchies can be found in De Vere, *Swahili Origins*; Chapurukha Kusimba, *The Rise and Fall of Swahili States* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999); Jeffrey Fleisher, "The Complexity Of Public Space at the Swahili Town of Songo Mnara, Tanzania," *Journal of*

state, a wage labour economy, and an unprecedented number of *wabara* migrant labourers into this social landscape in a short span of years at the beginning of the 20th century created what can be only be described as a cataclysmic upheaval. Mombasa was then thrown into disarray as previously established economic and social interactions amongst its inhabitants were disrupted, leaving participants struggling to locate their positions in a society undergoing profound transformation. This displacement was particularly acute for the Swahili elite. Having lost their position at the helm of the towns social strata, the Swahili recognised that it was necessary to realign boundaries of interactions with members of the newly forming society. Each exchange was deliberately shaped to reinforce their perceived superiority over those they regarded as belonging to lower social strata, whether *m'bara* or *m'pwani*. Ultimately, migrant groups, and especially the Luo, would bear the brunt of the negative consequences of these interactions.

From as early as the 1910s, Mombasa's district annual reports documented the gradual deterioration of race and ethnic relations between "local" and "visitor" residents of the town. For example, by 1913, Luo rail and port workers had begun complaining about paying higher rents than other Mombasa residents.²⁸⁸ The 1924 report, furthermore, revealed that coastal indigenes often refused to sell foodstuffs to Luo labourers during periods of "tribal" conflict.²⁸⁹ Of particular note is the Mombasa District Annual Report of 1937, which details one of the first large-scale outbreaks of ethnic violence between *wapwani* and *wabara*. The fighting was apparently triggered when an ethnic Luo was found dead in a house belonging to an Arab landlord. Rumours then began circulating that he had been killed in dispute over rent. The incident escalated into violent clashes involving some 2,000 Luo and their sympathisers (most probably the (Aba)Luhya), against 500 Washihiri.²⁹⁰ At the end of three days of fighting, twenty Arabs and one other Luo lay dead. The above examples confirm that altercations between migrant *wabara* ethnic groups and coastal indigenes in Mombasa were frequent and often resulted in mass fatalities, as was the case in the 1937.

The *wabara/wapwani* ethnic divide was a defining feature of colonial Mombasa's urban landscape. In a world where the majority of people in these two categories were phenotypically black and, at first glance, indistinguishable from each other, how were the differences between a *m'bara* and a *m'pwani* recognised? What did *wapwani* consider the key elements that separated their identity from that of *wabara*, and which particular attributes represented *u'bara*? Appiah argued that identities come with labels, and when one assigns an identity to another, their first action is usually to deliberate whether the person embodies the attributes associated

Anthropological Archaeology, 35 (2014), pp.1–22; Matthew Pawlowicz, "Beyond Commoner and Elite in Swahili Society: Re-Examination of Archaeological Materials from Gede, Kenya," *African Archaeological Review* 36, (2019), pp. 213–248. The consensus in this scholarship is that there is a connection between the Swahili coastlines' involvement in maritime trade and the development of identity hierarchies based on ethnicity and race.

²⁸⁸ KNA/PC/COAST/1/10/166 Township Matters, 1913.

²⁸⁹ KNA/CQ/1/19/23 Annual Reports 1921–1927.

²⁹⁰ KNA/CQ/1/19/25 Annual Reports 1931–1945.

with that label.²⁹¹ In Mombasa, these labels were often tied to material conditions. How one lived hence, became evidence of identity. Coastal indigenes therefore emphasised the duality of their identity in contrast to that of *wabara* by showcasing the refinement of their material conditions and way of life. This distinction was reinforced through the deliberate vilification of the imageries of the life of a migrant *m'bara*.

Before analysing the development of relations between *wabara* and *wapwani* in imperial Mombasa, it is important to provide some background on how relations between these two identities evolved over different historical periods. The term *wabara* was used by the coastal community proper to denote individuals who came from inland regions, i.e. the lands beyond the Nyika plateau, which, in the pre-colonial period, divided Kenya into two geographical zones. Though the origins of the word *wabara* remain unclear, the map of the 16th-century cartographer Jodocus Hondius I²⁹² showed *bara* to be a region somewhere in Central Africa, close to the Great lakes region, where Arab traders ventured in search of slaves. This points to usage of the term to refer to inland communities as far back as the 16th century. Prior to British occupation, *bara* populations were brought to the Swahili coast as servant workers, with many more shipped off to Arabia as slaves. With the advent of British occupation and the abolition of slavery, inland “*wabara*” arrived at the Swahili coast as wage labourers. This meant that interactions between *wabara* and the coastal proper populations were historically framed by master/slave or master/servant relations. Coastal indigenes’ perceptions of *wabara* in the initial years of colonial occupation were hence influenced by their previous interactions. These attitudes seem to have been further reinforced by the coastal communities’ own experiences within the colonial wage labour economy. As discussed in Chapter Two of this dissertation, coastal indigenes’ ability to resist labour recruitments was often viewed as evidence of an inherent capacity for autonomy – a trait that the incoming visitors seemingly lacked.²⁹³ To the coastal indigenes thus, *wabara* were a class of workers who arrived on the coast simply because they lacked autonomy and agency – characteristics strikingly similar to those associated with *watumwa* (slaves). This perception was further solidified by the colonial state’s neglect of *wabara*’s welfare in Mombasa, which not only degraded their status but also reinforced the view of them as subhuman.

The hierarchisation of *u'bara* and *u'pwani* identities in Mombasa can be traced back to East Africa’s precolonial interactions with the Arabic world. To assert their dominance and authority over conquered coastal city-states, Arab overlords established a system of social stratification based on particular reference categories. Affinity to Arabic biological, spatial, cultural, and

²⁹¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies that Bind: Rethinking Identity, Creed, Country, Color, Class, Culture* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2019).

²⁹² Jodocus Hondius, Kaart van Afrika, deposited at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. A digital copy can be found at: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/mijn/verzamelingen/151424--angelica/maps-of-africa/objecten#/RP-P-1905-6608,0>.

²⁹³ Osodo Dami, O.I. This idea has been carried over to the present. In Mombasa today, the Luo are viewed as intruder beggars, dependent on *wapwani* benevolence. Allowing them to stay in Mombasa is for example, seen as an act of kindness.

ideological motifs progressively became the defining markers of status. These markers were further reinforced by the possession of wealth and military power.²⁹⁴ On the East African Swahili coast, social hierarchy placed the Arab and Afro-Arab (Swahili) populations at the top, while African *wabara* slaves, far removed from these motifs of elitism, occupied the lowest rungs. In Mombasa, the upper class consisted of descendants of the Shirazi, Omani, and Mazrui Arabs, together with the Swahili, who were a mix of Arab and upper-echelon indigenous Africans. Arab and Swahili prestige and elitism were rooted in their prestigious international origins, literacy in the Arabic language, access to urban and international trading networks, and their social refinement, known as *u'ungwana*. This refinement encompassed inherent traits of gentility, generosity, and piety.²⁹⁵ Prior to British occupation, Arab/Swahili elitism was generally fluid, and primarily based on an individual's material conditions. It was therefore possible to ascend from the lower echelons to the higher ranks of society. Even slaves who acquired wealth (e.g. through marriage) could potentially integrate into Swahili upper society.²⁹⁶ Because class was primarily based on material conditions, the Arab/Swahili elite in Mombasa encompassed a wide range of racial and phenotypic variations. Some were seemingly "purely" Arabic, while others could not be differentiated, at first glance, from inland *wabara* Africans.

Colonial hierarchisation of racial identities significantly influenced the re-evaluation of the element of race within Swahili's configurations of elitism. As race became a main reference point for an individual's position within the colonial order, the Arab and Swahili populations experienced a heightened sense of racial identity. This shift fuelled a desire to reaffirm Arab/Swahili identity, leading to the reimagining and stricter delineation of its boundaries. The Swahili's racial ambiguity, in particular, inspired the development of practices aimed at asserting Arab identity and legitimising its perceived superiority in Mombasa.²⁹⁷ Binaries of *wabara* and *wapwani* subsequently came to define interactions with and the treatment of migrant *wabara*, who, up until the early 1950s, were largely represented by Luo rail and port workers. In colonial Mombasa, class hierarchies thus transformed from being primarily based on material conditions to include race as a primary factor of social status.

In their efforts to integrate into newly defined colonial/racial stratification hierarchies, Arabs/Swahili sought alliances with the African *wapwani* (also referred to as *wanyika*), a consolidated group of nine coastal ethnic groups collectively known as the Mijikenda (which

²⁹⁴ Francois Constantin, "Social Stratification on the Swahili Coast: From Race to Class?," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 59. No.2 (1989), pp.145–160.

²⁹⁵ Nathaniel Mathews, "Imagining Arab Communities: Colonialism, Islamic Reform, and Arab Identity in Mombasa, Kenya, 1897–1933," *Islamic Africa*, 4 No.2 (Brill, 2013), p.137, pp. 135–163.

²⁹⁶ Steven Fabian, *Making Identity on the Swahili Coast: Urban Life, Community and Belonging in Bagamoyo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

²⁹⁷ F. J. Berg, "The Swahili Community in Mombasa 1600–1900," *Journal of African History* 9 No.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 35–56.

translates to “nine tribes”).²⁹⁸ *Wanyika* occupied lands adjacent to the coastal Arab settlements, extending all the way to the Nyika plateau. For centuries, *wanyika* limited interactions with Arabs on the coast and with populations further inland, as they were quite determined to preserve their identity. They notably did not allow other groups, including the highly regarded Arabs, to settle amongst them.²⁹⁹ *Wanyika* who had embraced Islam were requested to leave communal spaces as it was feared they may introduce the Islamic law of individual freehold, which would have threatened the groups’ communal rights customs.³⁰⁰ *Wanyikas*’ indifference and laissez-faire attitude towards coastal elitism dramatically shifted as the impact of European racialism became more apparent in Mombasa’s colonialist capitalist economy. Paternalistic and racist constructs, which painted Africans as lazy and indolent³⁰¹ who needed work to become “civilised” were exacerbated in Kenya by the pressures and difficulties experienced in acquiring labour for the development of the colonial economy. When the colonial state resorted to more violent methods to mobilise African labour, *wanyika* began rethinking their stance. Associating with Arab/Swahili elitism appeared to offer a potential avenue for escaping the fate of the “African proper.”³⁰²

During much of the colonial period, the Mijikenda were largely confined to the Nyika Reserve, where they subsisted by engaging in peasant farming and rural food production. Few ventured into the coastal strip towns, including Mombasa, and when they did it was mainly as petty traders in, for example, food or *tembo* (alcohol), selling to the multitude of migrant labourers working for the KURH.³⁰³ The Mijikenda, however, quickly recognised the potential influence of migrant groups and the dangers they posed to their own attempts at accessing Swahili elitism.

²⁹⁸ Mijikenda ethnicities include the Chonyi, Duruma, Kambe, Kauma, Ribe, Rabai, Jibana, Giriama, and Digo peoples.

²⁹⁹ Robert W. Hamilton, “Land Tenure among the Bantu Wanyika of East Africa,” *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 20 No.7 (Oxford University Press on behalf of The Royal African Society, 1920), pp. 13–18.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (Abingdon and New York: Frank Cass and Company Ltd., 1977); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York and Toronto: Pantheon Books, 1978); Clayton and Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya*. In *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, Alatas argues that European views of Southeast Asians began shifting in the eighteenth century, when colonial capitalism required their labour for the establishment of plantation agriculture. Malay, Filipino, and Javanese aversion to working in the plantation economy was attributed to their inherent laziness, a view contradicting previous interactions where they had been praised for their contributions in developing Said’s “Oriental world.” The rhetoric of the lazy native thus only played to justify the oppressive practices required for the mobilisation of labour in the plantation economies of Southeast Asia. Similar attitudes of lazy natives were prevalent in colonial Kenya, and pioneer settlers, including Grogan, regarded African recruitment into the wage labour economy as civilising acts removing the native from docility. Clayton and Savage’s study in fact revealed that Grogan was adamant that “...a good sound system of compulsory labour would do more to raise the African than all the millions that had for years, been sunk in missionary efforts.”

³⁰² KNA/CQ/1/19/ 30 Report on Native Affairs Mombasa, 1930. The district commissioner for Mombasa agrees that owing to ambiguity of ethnic affiliations and variations of religions, it was extremely difficult to rigidly enforce “tribal” forms of administration on indigenous African populations in Mombasa. *Wanyika* positively worked to reproduce this ambiguity to escape the fate of the African in Mombasa’s colonial economy.

³⁰³ KNA/CQ/1/19/25 Annual Reports, Mombasa District 1932–1939.

This apprehension led to an emphasis on drawing clear lines of identity. The Mijikenda's class aspirations were conveyed through overt efforts to align themselves with the newly restructured Arabic/Swahili configurations of elitism. Material conditions and "purity of blood" therefore became critical points of distinction between them and the lower-ranked inland Africans. This distinction was reproduced in two ways. Firstly, the Mijikenda leveraged their advantageous position and community access to resources in Mombasa, and the coast region in general, to accumulate wealth while simultaneously dictating the material conditions of the migrant. Secondly, the Mijikenda drew strict boundaries with Luo migrant labourers, confining contacts to interactions within the established cash economy. The avoidance of all forms of social interactions with *wabara* was meant to block any chance of introducing *bara* lineage into their bloodlines. These firmly drawn *wabara/wapwani* distinctions prevented even the most elite of *m'bara* from receiving the social respect accorded to an average *m'pwani*.

The following section will give accounts of how ethnicity and race shaped the transactional interactions between Luo rail and port workers, on one hand, and Arabs, Swahili, and the Mijikenda *wapwani* on the other. The discussions will reveal how the tensions and highly charged contacts were specifically meant to convey the dichotomy between the perceived superiority of *u'pwani* identity, with its inherent *ustaarabu* (civilised nature), and the contrasting *ushenzi* (uncivilised nature) ascribed to the *wabara* Luo. The ethnic/race antagonism found expression in the duality of material conditions experienced by indigenes and visitor labourers in colonial Mombasa, and contributed to transforming the town into one of the most expensive urban areas for migrant labourers to sustain themselves.

4.3.1 Housing and the development of *wabara chura* ("inlanders are frogs") stereotype

As the influx of Luo labourers into Mombasa town steadily increased during the first two decades of the twentieth century, *wapwani* began to acknowledge the potential threat posed by their sheer numbers to the established social order and class politics of coastal Swahili society. As attested by comments of the town planning committee, even the colonial government had begun to recognise that the rising migrant population was driving Mombasa towards becoming an African town.

*The African is destined, by virtue of his paramount portion of fitness and numbers in this country, to ultimately overwhelm all other races in competition with him as the labouring class. It will be wise to anticipate this march of events in Mombasa, for already, he no longer knocks at the gates from his long march from the hinterland – he has entered the citadel and will soon dominate it as universal labourer.*³⁰⁴

Under Britain, *wapwani* had encountered glimpses of outsider domination. In less than a generation, British colonialism had completely transformed the landscape of their homeland,

³⁰⁴ KNA/AWS/11/7 Mombasa Island Revised Town Planning scheme, 1925. Comments by the Chair, Mombasa Town planning committee.

by ending slave trading, introducing a new economic dispensation, and reorganising the political and social structure of Swahili society. While their ability to resist British dominance was severely limited at that moment, they could still do something about the perceived looming threat of *wabara* dominance. In efforts aimed at confirming their position as the coastal elite and rightful owners of Mombasa, *wapwani* therefore resorted to interacting with *wabara* within the newly restructured social and economic power frameworks. The balance of power in relations between the two greatly disfavoured *wabara*, and *wapwani* continuously used their position and power of access to resources to dictate the material conditions of migrants.

Fanon's renowned anti-imperial essay perfectly encapsulates the dual realities of material conditions for the coloniser and the colonised.

*The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity...they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible...The town belonging to the colonised people, or at least the native town, the negro village, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute...it is a world without spaciousness; men live on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other...the native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes of coal of light. It is a town of n****rs and dirty Arabs.*³⁰⁵

Fanon's concept of the colonial world as "a world cut in two," was a defining feature of colonial Mombasa's identity politics. These identity structures were the by-product of colonial policy on migrant labourers, combined with Mombasa's established practices of association amongst different groups within society. Together, these forces created contrasting living conditions for visitors and locals. In this context, one's identity gradually became not only the reason for their material condition, but also the outward manifestation of that particular identity. Where a person lived, who they interacted with, what they ate, how they dressed, and even the most mundane of everyday activity became markers of either *u'bara* or *u'pwani* identities.

As early as the 1910s, the material conditions of Luo KURH labourers in Mombasa generally mirrored the image of the native town described by Fanon. Located hundreds of kilometres from their ethnic reserve, Luo labourers were unable to access a critical resource for production and accumulation: land. The limitations of access to land made them entirely dependent on the *wapwani* for their livelihood, creating a power imbalance within the colonised population. This imbalance gave *wapwani* the means to dictate the material conditions of those they regarded as being on the bottom rungs of society. Housing, water, clothing, fuel, and food then became the commodities that determined one's social class in Mombasa.

Chura (frog), a common pejorative for Luo KURH labourers living in Mombasa, stemmed from disdain for their housing situation. From the 1910s to the late 1940s, many migrant labourers had been forced to seek accommodation in the undesirable swampy lands in and adjacent to

³⁰⁵ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Frere town (Kongowea, and parts of what is now Kisauni constituency), and in Changamwe.³⁰⁶ In Majengo, sanitation was lacking and open sewers ran through doorways where children played and domesticated animals roamed in search of food. The overcrowded and unsanitary conditions in these areas were, indeed, reminiscent of a frog's life. Chapter Three of this dissertation pointed out how Luo labourers' housing was a complex issue intrinsically connected to land, which, in colonial Mombasa, was almost exclusively Arab owned.³⁰⁷ In Mombasa, land ownership and user rights followed Islamic tenure systems of individual ownership, and Britain, upon occupying the region, had been allowed to purchase a few pockets of these lands as they too followed similar individual tenureship approach. The vast majority of lands, however, remained under Arab control and Britain was required to pay the sultan owner an annuity of £100,000 to operate and administer the terrain, which included Mombasa.³⁰⁸ The lands in Majengo, where a majority of Luo rail and port workers sought accommodation upon arrival in Mombasa, were owned by the Kilindini Sites Company, Sousa Junior and Dias, Musajee Jevanjee, Morrison, and the Wakf Commission.³⁰⁹ These landlords leased their plots to Arabs and *wapwani* Africans, who, because of the reserve policy, were the only ones granted tenancy rights. Figure 4.1. below shows the plans to expand the boundaries of Mombasa to enable access to non-Arab-owned lands, which would, in turn, provided a place for its exploding population to settle.

³⁰⁶KNA/MSS/115/19/33 Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Report of the Local Government Commission, Vol 1* (London: Waterlow and Sons Limited, 1927); KNA/AWS/11/7/ Mombasa Island Revised Town Planning Scheme.

³⁰⁷ KNA/CQ/1/9/11 District Commissioner Mombasa. In the files concerning Mombasa's land matters, names and races of the majority property owners reveal that they were of Arabic origin. File 11, for example, titled *Tudor/Tononoka: Names, Professions, Races and Nature of Development of Property Owners*, reveals that 80% of named property owners were Arabs.

³⁰⁸James R. Brennan, "Lowering the Sultan's Flag: Sovereignty and Decolonization in Coastal Kenya," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50 No. 4 (2008), pp. 831–861.

³⁰⁹ KNA/K/331/11 Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Examine the Labour Conditions in Mombasa*, (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1939).

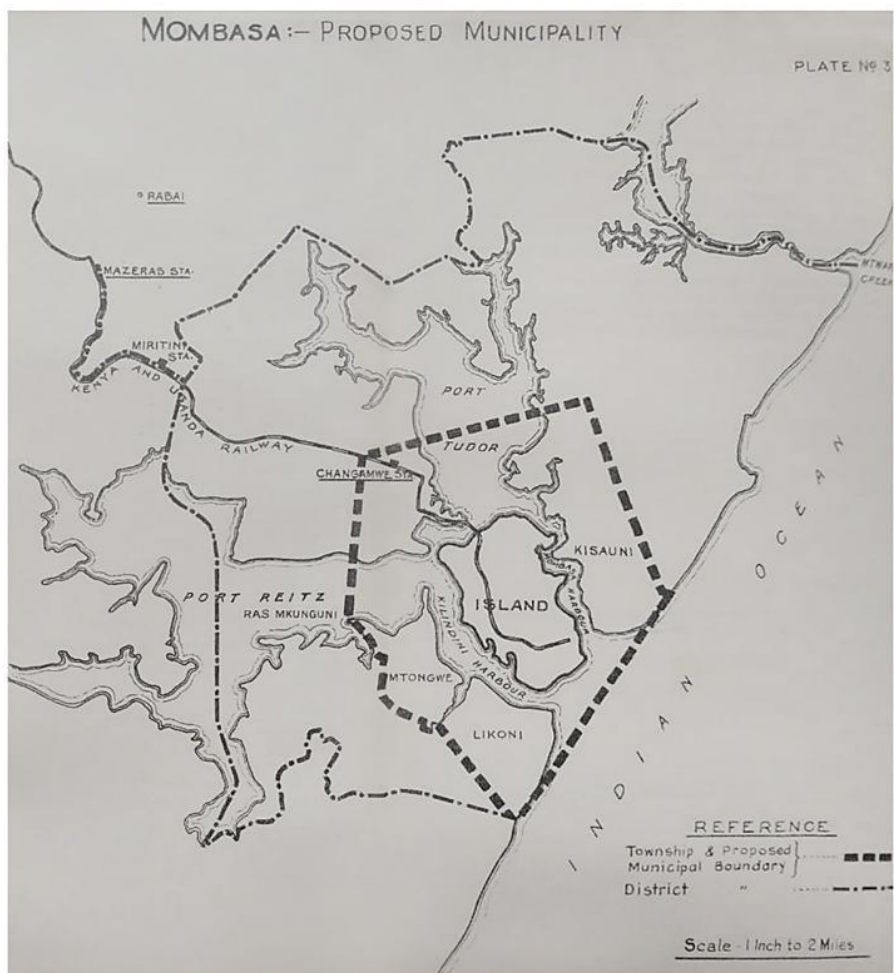


Figure 4.1. Image of a Mombasa Town planning committee proposal to expand Mombasa's boundaries to accommodate the growing numbers of migrant labourers. The committee suggested that these labourers be housed in the far north of Mombasa, near Makupa Bridge. The estates included in the expansion are now known as Changamwe, Tudor, Kongowea, and Bangladesh, and they remain predominantly Luo settlements. KNA/AWS/11/7 Mombasa Island Revised Town Planning Scheme, 1925.

To fully understand the contradictions of *wabara* and *wapwani* housing in Mombasa, it is important to first examine the colonial policy of African reserves. This policy was developed for the sole purpose of socially controlling African populations by limiting expansion to new lands and, thus, binding ethnic groups to specific regions. It promoted the entrenchment of group identities, particularly at the intersections of imperial domination. The reserve policy was part of a series of land legislation passed between 1897–1932, at a time when European settlement was becoming established in the colony. The official justification for the passing of these laws was that it was a scheme of trusteeship, meant to protect African people's land from encroachment by European settlers speculatively acquiring large tracts of land. This was certainly happening in Central Kenya around Kikuyu, Kamba, and Maasai lands.³¹⁰ The most significant laws were, of course, those that created African reserves. Reserves were defined lands with exclusive tenancy and user rights granted to specific ethnic groups. The first official reserve in Kenya was created for the Maasai in 1904 following the signing of the Anglo-Maasai Treaty.³¹¹ This agreement saw the Maasai cede possession of the greater Laikipia and Samburu regions in return for exclusive rights to reserve lands created in Kajiado and Northern Laikipia. The creation of other reserves followed soon after, bolstered by the resignation of the commissioner for the Protectorate Sir Charles Eliot, who had vehemently argued against their establishment.³¹² Convinced of the need to encourage European occupation, Eliot was of the opinion that they ought to be given the opportunity to acquire “empty” land for settlement in any region of the protectorate.³¹³ After the Native Land Trust Ordinance was passed in 1930, all ethnic groups in Kenya were given a homeland in form of a reserve. African tenure rights were only recognised within the boundaries of their designated ethnic reserve.

Reserves lands were allocated in areas deemed large enough to meet immediate grazing and cultivation requirements while allowing for future population growth and land-use expansion.³¹⁴ Nomadic and fallowing land-use systems were also accommodated within reserves.³¹⁵ Additionally, reserves were strategically positioned at a distance from European-held lands, creating a buffer zone between European and African territories. Britain justified the fixed and unalterable reserve boundaries by arguing that allowances had been made for present and future use and population growth. The claim that reserves were created to protect African lands against European encroachment was, however, a ruse, as subsequent events clearly revealed. In 1930, news of the discovery of gold deposits in the Ikolomani region of Kakamega triggered a rush of Europeans – reeling from the effects of the Great Depression –

³¹⁰ Edwin W. Smith “Land in Kenya,” *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 35 No. 140 (1936), pp. 246–250.

³¹¹ Lotte Hughes, *Moving the Maasai: A Colonial Misadventure* (New York: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2006).

³¹² J. D. Overton, “Social Control and Social Engineering: African Reserves in Kenya 1895–1920,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 8 No. 2 (1990), pp.163–174.

³¹³ L. Izuakor, “Colonial Challenges and Administrative Response: Sir Charles Eliot and ‘Native’ Trusteeship in Kenya, 1901–1904,” *Transafrican Journal of History*, 17 (Gideon Were Publications, 1988), pp. 34–49.

³¹⁴ Overton, “Social Control and Social Engineering,” p. 168.

³¹⁵ Morris Carter, *Report of the Kenya Land Commission* (London: Government Printer, 1933).

into the North Kavirondo³¹⁶ reserve. In response, the colonial government immediately amended the Native Land Trust Ordinance of 1930, which had established fixed reserves boundaries and excluded lands where minerals had been found from native reserves. The amendments, implemented by the infamous Carter Commission, allowed such lands to be annexed without compensating those affected with an equivalent area of land or even giving notice to the local native council.³¹⁷ Thus as Overton argued, spatial segregation by creation of reserves was nothing more than a colonial strategy of indirect rule, the main aim of which was to reduce the redirection of state resources towards the social control of African populations.³¹⁸

Reserves were one of the most ingenious structures of control devised by the British colonial state. They not only facilitated spatial segregation of ethnic groups, but also extended indigenous structures of authority over individuals living beyond specified territorial boundaries. Their utility in controlling urban diasporas was most apparent in colonies where European administrative personnel numbers were low. In a process that Ranger has described as the “invention of tradition,”³¹⁹ reserves offered Africans new opportunities to reconstruct and recreate identities around their designated “native” homelands. In the case of ethnic Luo, the creation of the Central and South Kavirondo Luo reserves played a significant role in unifying the urban diasporas of the various ethnicities that spoke a variant of the Luo language.³²⁰ This process of amalgamation contributed to the formation of a relatively homogenous polity that is now recognised as the ethnic Luo community. Previously, Luo identities were in a constant state of flux, and people moved in and out of an ingroup depending on circumstances.³²¹ Excommunicated men, for example, would normally seek refuge in other Luo groups as tenant *jodak* (s. *jadak*) far away from their original territorial units *pinje* (s. *piny*). *Jodak* were rarely denied lands for subsistence in new *pinje*, allowing opportunities for new beginnings and the chance to integrate into a new community. In fact, *jodak* children would

³¹⁶ Exclusive rights for occupation of the North Kavirondo reserve belonged to a collective of twenty ethnic groups known as the Abaluhya, (also Luhya). Initially referred to as the Kavirondo of the North (the Luo were the Kavirondo of the South and Central), the term Abaluhya officially appeared in the 1948 census.

³¹⁷ Carter, *Report of the Kenya Land Commission*; Hansard records of parliamentary proceedings conducted on 20 December 1932, discussing amendments to the Native Land Ordinance of 1930. Record accessed on 22 November 2022 at: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1932/dec/20/kenya-native-land-trust-ordinance>.

³¹⁸ Overton, “Social Control and Social Engineering.”

³¹⁹ Terence Ranger “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,” Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

³²⁰ Individuals originating from the South and Central Kavirondo reserves were classified as the Kavirondo Luo by the colonial state. Labour practices such as salary scales and housing arrangements, which, in urban areas, were based on ethnic identities, were similar for this heterogeneous group. The group was therefore presented with a shared sense of identity, which they worked to amalgamate into a singular ethnic identity.

³²¹ Upon settling in Kenya, the Luo did not form a homogenous cultural or political unit. Each Luo group lived within a settlement called a *gweng* (pl. *gwenge*) and several *gwenge* formed alliances to create autonomous territorial units called *piny* (pl. *pinje*). *Pinje* were therefore multi-clan and multi-ethnic political groupings. The homogeneity of the Luo language was a twentieth-century phenomenon, as *piny* variants fell into disuse as a result of formal education and urban migration. The influence of Mombasa’s urbanisation on the development of the constituency that became the Luo ethnic group is discussed in Chapter Five.

become fully assimilated into their new communities, becoming known by designations linked to their father's new *piny*. This system facilitated the disappearance of old identities and creation of new ones, complete with new lineages. In many cases, *jodak* moved to neighbouring Bantu groups, where they adopted Bantu identities while their Luo identities gradually dissipated. The creation of reserves, however, completely altered this fluid system of identity reconstruction. Reserves introduced rigid formations of identity tied to the soil of one's birth *piny*. Consequently, those who had left their ancestral homes in search of new beginnings in new locations were compelled to maintain communal connections. This system enforced a permanent connection with one's birth community. The reserve policy was thus a useful framework for ensuring that ethnic Luo remained Luo, even if they migrated to far off lands in Mombasa, or even Tanganyika where a sizeable number migrated to in the 1930s. Luoness was the main reason they were denied access to lands in Mombasa; they were forever tied to Luoland and could never integrate and become part of Mombasa society.

Returning to the question of housing, Arab landlords in Mombasa typically rented their land properties to *wapwani*. In the 1920s, the monthly rental rates for a plot ranged from Sh.5 to Sh.25.³²² The lessees then built houses on these plots, which cost approximately Sh.1200–2500. This money was usually borrowed from Asian moneylenders at very high interest rates. The houses built were no more than basic huts, made of mud with *makuti* (palm frond) roofing. Latrines adjoined kitchens and there was almost no light and ventilation. The huts were divided into several rooms and each room was rented out to a migrant labourer at rates ranging from Sh.2 to Sh.10. Given the low wages earned by most labourers, affording rent often required sharing rooms with others. This led to overcrowding, which became the most pressing problem facing migrant labourers in Mombasa during this period. On average, a single room accommodated approximately eight persons. It was not uncommon, however, to find as many as twelve. For example, during a fact-finding mission in 1925 to investigate the extent of the housing problem in Mombasa, the local government commission reported finding one house with six rooms, where four rooms were each occupied by a man, his wife and their four children, while the two remaining rooms were rented by sex workers.³²³ Open defecation was widespread, especially along the seafront, due to shortages of latrines for migrant labourers.³²⁴ The unsanitary living conditions among migrant Luo labourers were exacerbated by the colonial government's policy of not providing any municipal services to the African population in Mombasa, a policy that remained in effect until 1927.³²⁵

Such housing, where hygiene and privacy were disregarded, were particularly reserved for upcountry labourers, the majority of whom were Luo KURH employees. Arab housing in Mombasa's Old Town were in complete contrast and constructed following Islamic

³²² KNA/MSS/115/19/33 Report of the Local Government Commission.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ KNA/PC/COAST/1/10/166 Township Matters, 1913. Letter from the superintendent of police to Mombasa DC.

³²⁵ KNA/MSS/115/19/33 Report of the Local Government Commission, 1927

architectural styles that prioritised privacy. Arab family houses were multi-roomed, with private spaces and even separate entrances for women and men. Decent housing was not generally a problem among the African *wapwani* either as they rarely spent time in Mombasa and thus had little need for permanent accommodation of housing. Afro *wapwani* homesteads scattered on the mainland littoral were made of similar mud and *makuti*, but were cleaner and more sanitary because their ability to access land afforded them space for better ventilation and higher hygiene standards.³²⁶

Mombasa's housing problem exponentially increased at the beginning of World War II. Increases in transportation and shipping resulted in a rise in Luo migrations to Mombasa's KURH, which had become the logistical hub for British East Africa's war efforts. The subsequent rise in demand for housing caused rental prices to increase sharply and a labour officer recorded prices ranging from between Sh.8 and Sh.15 per room in 1939, with some rooms going for as high as Sh.20 a month.³²⁷ The deterioration of the housing situation was the primary reason for rail and port workers strike actions during and immediately after World War II. Figure 4.2. is a table showing the wages and other allowances received by railway workers in Mombasa in the years 1939–1947. The housing allowance was clearly insufficient given the high rental charges in Mombasa.

Minimum wage (KSh.) for African Railway workers in Mombasa

	Basic Wage	Ration allowance	Fuel allowance	Housing allowance	War Bonuses
Before 1939 strike	15.00	4.00	1.00	-	-
After 1939 strikes	15.00	4.00	1.00	3.00	-
After 1942 strikes	15.00	6.00	2.00	5.00	5.00
1943	15.00	6.00	2.00	5.00	7.00
Jan 1947	18.00	6.00	2.00	5.00	7.00

Figure 4.2. Minimum monthly wages (KSh.) for African Railway workers in Mombasa. Figures drawn from KNA/K/331/8/BOO, Report of the Economic and Social Background of Mombasa Labour Disputes.

³²⁶ KNA/AWS/11/7 Mombasa Island Revised Town Planning scheme, 1925.

³²⁷ KNA/K/331/892/ Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Unrests in Mombasa (Part One)*, (Nairobi: Government Printer 1945), p.88.

Until the onset of World War II, the colonial government remained largely indifferent to Mombasa's housing problem. Its inaction was however partly due to the unavailability of crown land, as most of Mombasa's lands were privately owned. Attempts to control rent by instituting a Rent Controls Board in 1939 did little to alleviate the problem because a majority of Luo migrant labourers did not use its services. This decision was influenced by the flawed power relations between labourers and their *wapwani* landlords. Any KURH labourer who complained to the board was certain of eviction.³²⁸ Many therefore quietly paid the unreasonably high rental charges, as finding housing was a much more immediate need. Furthermore, the labourers faced significant financial and legal barriers. They could not afford the mandatory advocate required to lodge a complaint, while their Arab landlords invariably had legal representation. The stipulation of depositing Sh.20 before making a complaint, moreover, dissuaded many from seeking help from the board. Even for those who managed to successfully file a complaint at the tribunal, it was almost impossible to get time off work to attend its proceedings. Contracted KURH labourers rarely got permission to attend to issues considered personal trivialities, while casual labourers were too involved in trying to find work for the day. Consequently, taking legal action against a landlord became a costly and lengthy endeavour, one that most labourers understandably chose not to engage in.

4.3.2. Access to water and the creation of the *wabara wachafu* (inlanders are dirty) trope
 Commenting on the state of upcountry labourers living in Mombasa in 1945, the chair of the commission of inquiry looking into the cause of Mombasa's labour unrest pointed out that:

*The upcountry labourer arrived in Mombasa in a semi-starved condition. They were liable to attacks of smallpox and other diseases. Until 1914, they were forced to consume polluted water from wells, which resulted in the high number of disease in the town. In 1910, the town had the unenviable reputation of having the highest cases of malaria in the whole country. Conditions did not improve for the next 30 years*³²⁹

The availability of water, has for centuries, been a key factor influencing patterns of mobility and settlement along the Eastern African coast.³³⁰ Surrounded by salty waters, Gedi, Mombasa, Zanzibar, to name but a few, depended on freshwater wells dug at various points on the mainland or in the islands to facilitate the settlement of first African, then later Arab populations. Freshwater was so crucial for the survival of East Africa's coastal communities that thriving settlements were sometimes suddenly abandoned when supplies became

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ KNA/RW/3/1 Labour Unrests and Commission's Enquiry Since 1937, Vol 5.

³³⁰ Thomas H. Wilson, "Spatial Analysis and Settlement Patterns on the East African Coast," *Paideuma*, 28 (1982), pp. 201–219.

depleted.³³¹ The declaration by the manpower department in the initial years of occupation, stating that “[...] procuring labour for the development of a water-work network to bring freshwaters into Mombasa was of prime importance to the colony and second only to the rail,”³³² shows that Britain was also greatly concerned with the water question and especially the availability of freshwater on the island of Mombasa. Water was particularly vital for supporting the projected population growth expected with the planned expansions of the port. Thus, the colonial state’s first order of business upon establishing control in Mombasa was to set up a public works department to begin construction of a coastal waterway to connect the inland freshwaters of Taita Taveta, Kwale, and Kilifi, to Mombasa. The impeccable works done by migrant Luo labourers in constructing these waterways was the reason they later became the preferred workforce for the colony’s rail and port departments.³³³

The public works department prioritised Mombasa’s piped water network for European households, government offices, and other administrative areas. The migrant population in Mombasa together with the remaining segment of *wapwani* were left to fend for themselves. This second group hence sourced water from dug wells and from the few public works department’s water kiosks at various points in the town. Unsurprisingly, this led to widespread water shortages for the majority of Mombasa’s population. Access to water then became a critical marker of *wabara* and *upwani* identities, with water assuming both literal and symbolic roles. Purity and cleanliness hence came to signify the divide between these two identities. Because the *wabara* bore the brunt of water scarcity in Mombasa, they came to be perceived as a people who were physically and culturally “dirty.”

Clearly, the *wabara*’s uncleanness (physical) was a natural consequence of the challenges placed on their personhood by the colonial state in collaboration with *wapwani*. The flawed organisation of the water department’s operations set the stage for the *wabara/wapwani* class politics and the assumed difference between the two identities to play out. Public works water kiosks, designated for the non-European population, operated between the hours of 7.00 am–5.00 pm. Here, water was sold at 1 cent per *debi* (10-litre) container. The operating hours of the water kiosks, however, ran parallel to KURH working hours. In addition, until the beginning of the 1940s, the majority of migrant Luo labourers at KURH were either bachelors or they had left families in Luoland.³³⁴ Thus, unlike *wapwani*, who lived with family and hence could easily

³³¹ David Hatcher Childress, *Lost Cities and Ancient Mysteries of Africa and Arabia* (Stelle: Adventures Unlimited Press, 1989). Archaeologists working on Gede ruins have, for example, hypothesised that Gedi settlement in Kilifi was abandoned because of water scarcity.

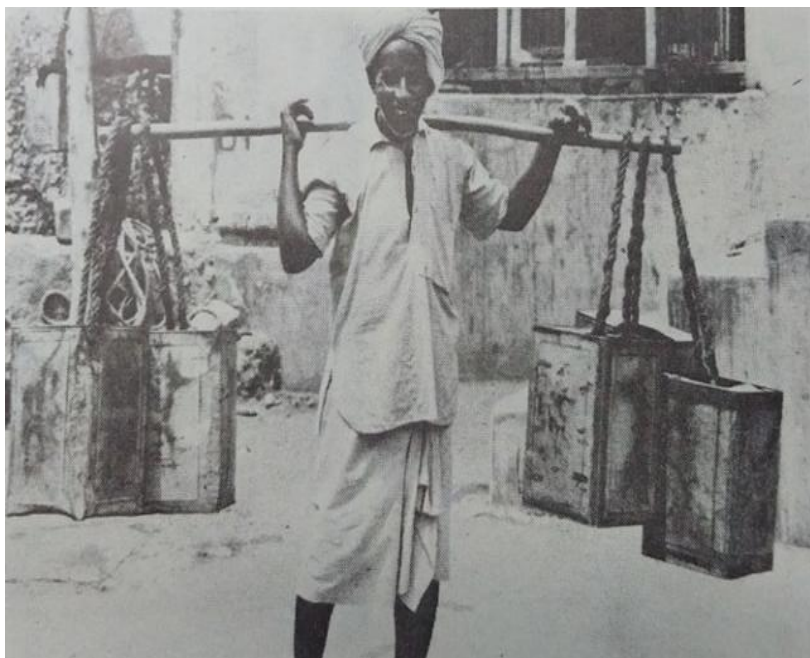
³³² KNA/PC/COAST/1/14/11. Report on Labour Camp: Shimba Water Works, 1913.

³³³ Ibid. In 1902, camp chiefs began to specifically request Luo labourers for the construction of the Mombasa water network.

³³⁴ KNA/AWS/1/366 Labour Unrests Mombasa, 1945. Excerpt from an editorial in the *East African Standard*, written by member of the committee set up to look into the affairs of unskilled workers in Mombasa. Dated 16 April 1945; Rose Muyuka, O.I., 4 February 2018, Changamwe. Muyuka says his grandfather came to Mombasa and left his grandmother in Uyoma. Leaving families in Luoland was common practice for migrating Luo men.

source water from water kiosks during operating hours, the migrant labourers were forced to rely on the growing black-market trade in water, an activity run mainly by Washihiri Arabs.³³⁵

Washihiri traders bought water from the kiosks in bulk, storing it in huge drums at their water vending premises, some of which were right next to the official public department kiosks. This water was then resold through water carriers, who carried the commodity to people's households. Because of prevailing notions of purity, this work was strictly reserved for *wapwani* men. Moreover, having water brought into one's house was perceived as a sign of high social standing. Thus, for reasons of prestige, migrant Luo labourers detested water-carrying duties, agreeing to the task only if the kiosk was located in a secluded location.³³⁶ The price of water sold on the doorstep was however increased to 5 cents per *debi*. From 5.00 pm, when most Luo labourers were returning from their work stations, these prices shot up to between 12–20 cents per *debi*.³³⁷ On average, households used two *debis* per day, even if they needed more; thus, water in Mombasa became a costly commodity that strained migrant Luo labourers' incomes.



A m'Shihiri water carrier in Mombasa, circa 1945

³³⁵ Ibid, KNA/AWS/1/366 Labour Unrests Mombasa, 1945

³³⁶ KNA/K/331/8/BOO Report of the Economic and Social Background of Mombasa Labour Disputes, p.65.

³³⁷ Ibid.; KNA/AWS/1/366 Labour Unrests Mombasa, 1945.

Through the commodity water, perceptions of prestige, embodied in cleanliness, were constructed and worked to reinforce *wapwani*'s sense of superiority within Mombasa's social hierarchy. Water scarcity not only evinced *wapwani*'s position as gatekeepers of essential resources for survival in Mombasa, but also directly influenced the health and well-being of migrant Luo labourers. Luo labourers could hardly afford to bathe, leave alone clean their environment, hence diseases including scabies, cholera and many others associated with hygiene were everyday norms in predominant Luo settlements. This situation further fuelled perceptions of them as "dirty" people. Curiously, despite the financial burden, Luo insistence on employing water carriers revealed their desires to associate themselves with Swahili motifs of prestige. For instance, labourers forbade their womenfolk from going to the kiosks to carry water for household use,³³⁸ a task that could have greatly alleviated family expenses.

4.3.3 Food and other household consumer goods in the typecasting of *wabara* as *watumwa* (slaves)

Migrant labourers also fully depended on *wapwani* for the provision of their food and other important household consumer goods. Here, too, ethnicity played a pivotal role in guiding the organisation and dynamics of food access, offering yet another avenue for expressions of ethnic and racial differences between *wabara* and *wapwani*. Similar to the case of water, *wapwani* leveraged their advantaged position over Luo labourers to not only supply food and other consumer goods at very high prices, but to also undercut them through unfair weights and measurement. The food question in Mombasa –who produced it, its availability to migrant labourers, and at what price – was the cause of widespread poverty and malnutrition among migrant Luo rail and port workers, and this certainly contributed to the construction of their image as that of a people unable to take care of themselves and, in contrast to *wapwani*, wholly dependent on others for their survival – *just like watumwa slaves*.

Similar to housing, the food question in Mombasa was intrinsically tied to land. As previously mentioned, the reserve policy restricted access to Mombasa lands for migrant Luo labourers, as their tenure rights were solely recognised in Luoland. This effectively eliminated any possibility for them to engage in food production. Additionally, rail and port workers were unable to participate in small-scale, often-illegal farming on plots of absent landlords because they spent most of their days at their work stations. Consequently, these labourers thus had to rely on *wapwani* for the fulfilment of their entire dietary needs.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the wage labour policy in Mombasa assumed that a labourer's primary home was in their native reserve. Consequently, the colonial administration considered its responsibilities fulfilled if they were paid at rates sufficient to sustain a single man in their "temporary" place of employment. KURH hence assumed that its food responsibilities to migrant Luo labourers were discharged by providing monthly rations of food, which included staple starch (mostly maize but at times millet), tea leaves, and sugar. These rations were issued one day a month at the Mombasa railway locomotive sheds. The policy of provision of rations

³³⁸ KNA/K/331/8/BOO Report of the Economic and Social Background of Mombasa Labour Disputes,

to wage labourers introduced a new dimension to the food question, particularly in its relation to class and the evolution of tastes and preferences of the labourers. Luo KURH labourers resented these rations, partly because they had begun to develop a preference for Mombasa's culinary repertoire, which was considered superior. But this was not the only contention. Because rations were disbursed one day a month and only at the locomotive sheds, only workers at the sheds were able to easily draw the rations. Despite this, the cost of the rations was deducted from all labourers' salaries at standard rates, even though the rations were of very low quality.³³⁹

Efforts aimed at shedding overt indicators of *ubara* identity among migrant Luo labourers led to an uptake of coastal culinary habits.³⁴⁰ Such foods signified exclusivity and access to rare delicacies, which was one identifiable marker of *u'pwani* elitism. Instead of drinking maize/millet porridge in the morning (considered *ubara*), they began consuming milk tea accompanied with local *mandazi* and *mahamri* pastries. The wheat flour and ghee needed for preparation of *mandazi* were not, however, part of KURH rations. Many labourers therefore began eating at the various eateries that had sprung up along Kilindini Road, where a wide array of coastal dishes were offered.³⁴¹ Makupa, Mwembe Tayari, and Mwembe kuku, which had been prominent small-scale trading spots from as early as 1915, became popular stops for Luo workers looking to indulge in Mombasa's culinary experience on their way to and from work.³⁴²

As demands for Swahili-associated foods became high, hoarding and a thriving food and consumer goods black market emerged in Mombasa. In fact, this had begun during the depression years, when consumer goods were in low circulation, but the practice persisted into the 1940s, when it became apparent that *wabara* were anxious to associate with "elite" Swahili food. The commission of inquiry looking into KURH's labour unrest in Mombasa in 1939 reported that access to *wapwani* food was one of the major reasons for the widespread dissatisfaction among Luo labourers in Mombasa. The contents of this commission's report astonishingly elaborated the extent to which the *wabara* /*wapwani* divide played a key role in questions regarding food access in Mombasa, and how this caused Mombasa's unusual high cost of food. In the 1930s, the price of sugar and rice, two commodities the Luo particularly favoured as symbols of integration into Mombasa's culinary culture, sharply increased. Adulterated milk, which was hawked in the predominantly Luo settlements in Mombasa, was bought for as high as 10 cents for a quarter pint (40 cents a pint). On the mainland, where migrant Luo labourers were fewer, the same milk, unadulterated, went for 25 cents a pint. Sugar, too, was mainly found on the black market, where it was sold for 15 cents a cup. Meat was

³³⁹ KNA/K/331/11 Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Examine Labour Conditions in Mombasa.

³⁴⁰ Juma Hamisi, O.I., 4 February 2018, Changamwe. The perceptions of *bara* and *pwani* food and its associations with class and prestige is a continuing theme in Mombasa's contemporary society. For example, Kenya's staple maize starch, *ugali/sima*, widely popular inland, is viewed as low-class *bara* food. Ethnic Luo in Mombasa with class ambitions strive to not consume it.

³⁴¹ KNA/K/331/892 Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Unrests at Mombasa; KNA/PC/COAST/1/10 Temporary Occupation Licences. File no.14 has licences given for occupation of plots for shops and stores.

³⁴² Ibid, KNA/PC/COAST/1/10 Temporary Occupation Licences.

bought in bulk from abattoirs on the island and from small-scale traders on the mainland and resold at extremely high rates in butcheries close to KURH labourers' quarters. Labourers who could not afford it, however, could instead purchase grilled meat on a stick, *mshikaki*, sold for 10 cents by traders along Kilindini Road. Alcohol bought at canteens run by *wapwani* went for 20 cents during the day, but prices shot up to 70 cents in the evening when Luo labourers began trickling in from their work stations. The price of vegetables, widely available among the Mijikenda, was unusually high in Luo settlements in Mombasa. Because of the high prices, food deficiencies were so common in Mombasa that a health survey in 1939 revealed that 90% of urban migrant labourers' children were malnourished.³⁴³ The 10% of children who were getting enough food belonged to parents who were in the class of clerks and artisans at KURH, and thus received relatively higher wages. The table in Figure 4.3. shows consumption patterns and the monthly food budget for various African groups living in Mombasa in 1945. It reveals that the Luo labourer expended higher amounts on food items.

The prevalence of food poverty among migrant labourers was exacerbated by the practice of lending from shopkeepers, which had become rampant in Mombasa. Arab and Asian traders, who dominated the food trade, used a credit system to keep Luo labourers tied to their shops. Money lending by way of giving food kept many migrant labourers in debt as they were unable to find better solutions by dealing elsewhere for fear of prosecution. Labourers were hence kept in a cycle of debt taking and repayment, and were essentially restricted from breaking it even when unscrupulous dealers continued increasing prices of food at their expense.

³⁴³ KNA/K/361/CHA Native Welfare in Kenya, 1944; KNA/DC/KFI/3/2 Administration.

<i>Mdigo</i> <i>Man, wife, and four children</i> Bread 15.00 Rice 20.00 Meat 15.00 Coconut 2.40 Vegetables 7.50 Fruits 2.40 Tea 1.80 Total 70.10	<i>Mkamba</i> <i>Man, wife, and one child</i> Rice 6.00 Meat 6.00 Beans 1.80 Vegetables 2.40 Ghee 1.80 Coconut 2.40 Total 22.10
<i>Mganda</i> <i>Man</i> Bananas 1.50 Potatoes 1.00 Rice 6.00 Meat 7.25 Total 15.75	<i>Jaluo</i> <i>Man and wife</i> Posho 5.00 Rice 10.00 Meat 12.00 Fish 4.00 Beans 2.00 Vegetables 2.00 Tea 1.50 Milk 1.80 Total 38.30
<i>Kikuyu</i> <i>Man</i> Posho 6.50 Rice 5.00 Meat 2.00 Sugar 1.00 Milk 1.20 Tea 1.00 Bananas 1.00 Total 17.70	<i>Luhya</i> <i>Man and wife</i> Posho 5.00 Rice 5.00 Meat 6.00 Sugar 1.00 Milk 1.00 Beans 1.00 Total 19.00

Figure 4.3. Consumption patterns of food items and their cost for a number of ethnicities resident in Mombasa, 1945. The table reveals that food prices were significantly higher for ethnic Luo than for other wabara groups. The Digo, whose amounts were highest are wapwani and their consumption patterns play within aspirations of association with those of the Swahili. Data derived from KNA/K/331/892 Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Unrests at Mombasa, 1945.

4.3.4 Energy/Fuel

Energy is essentially the driver of human civilisation. Its availability and application is a primary factor determining civilisations' industrial capacity and thus, a society's material standard of living.³⁴⁴ Since humanity's early mastery of fire, societies have progressively discovered new methods of harnessing and appropriating energy, in turn, effecting revolutionary changes to economies and environments. In colonial Mombasa, the availability of energy and fuel was a key concern for all segments of the population and each segment was focused on their particular needs being met. While European industrialists and administrators prioritised coal imports, the expansion of electricity networks and the development of the oil pipeline, Luo rail and port workers were primarily concerned with the availability of firewood. As migrant labourers made up the largest portion of Mombasa's population, firewood hence became the most sought-after source of energy in colonial Mombasa. The commodity was essential for cooking and lighting.

Firewood came into Mombasa by way of Arab merchants, who brought dhow-loads of the product to the Old Mombasa port. In the 1920s, the wood was sold to traders at a rate of Sh. 3.75 per score pieces measuring 4 feet by 3 inches. The product was then transported to the nearby market in Ndia Kuu, which was the biggest wood-trading market in Mombasa. At Ndia Kuu, the wood was split, bundled, and then sold to Arab traders who transported it to shops close to rail and port workers' quarters in Majengo and in other settlement areas. At Ndia Kuu, a three-piece bundle of split firewood cost 6 cents.

Due to work commitments, most Luo KURH labourers were unable to source their firewood directly from Ndia Kuu. Buying firewood from that particular location also required carrying the load to their living quarters, a long and tedious process for a labourer who lived, for example, in Changamwe, or even the much closer Majengo. Labourers with co-habiting partners could not even enlist their partner's help, as Mombasa society regarded carrying of firewood as lowly work. Indeed, Luo women refused to be seen carrying firewood.³⁴⁵ At Majengo, the price of firewood trebled and this left labourers spending a disproportionate amount of their total income on firewood. The Willan Report revealed that, in 1937, workers who grossed Sh. 35 a month were forced to pay monthly costs ranging from Sh.7 to Sh. 8 on firewood. This was at a time when KURH employees were paid a fuel allowance of Sh. 2 per month.³⁴⁶

Fuel prices were part of the reason rail and port workers agitated for higher wages in the early 1930s. To manage this situation, the colonial government introduced control prices, and traders were liable for prosecution if they overcharged labourers for split wood. For instance, in 1939, two traders were prosecuted for price gouging, but this resulted in difficulties in obtaining

³⁴⁴ Vaclav Smil, *Energy and Civilization: A History*, (London: Cambridge and The MIT press, 2017)

³⁴⁵ KNA/K/331/8/BOO Report of the Economic and Social Background of Mombasa Labour Disputes

³⁴⁶ C0/535/137/7 Extract from the report by the colonial office chief legal advisor, Mr. H. C. Willan.

wood, as traders refused to sell to workers connected to KURH.³⁴⁷ The sale of fuel then went underground to the black market, where prices went up to 15 cents for a three-piece bundle.

4.4. Redrawing boundaries of social interactions

A common feature of development for many of East Africa's coastal settlements included the regular integration of groups of newcomers into the established social order.³⁴⁸ For instance, Afro *wapwani* were often incorporated into Swahili elite society through marriage alliances. Similarly, former slaves, having adopted the distinctive characteristics of the slave culture of Islamic civilisations of the Middle East, could move from the ranks of *watumwa* slaves to *wangwana* (freeborn).³⁴⁹ Mobility from one social category to another was thus a fairly ordinary process, albeit one that was strictly curated. Institutions facilitating integration were carefully monitored, controlled, and moderated. The higher echelons of society particularly emphasised integration through established structures, as it ensured a systemic balance of power amongst the different political and social hierarchies within Swahili society.

The introduction of British colonialism and the ensuing influx of large numbers of ethnic Luo into Mombasa's social sphere destabilised the established social order and power dynamics upon which Swahili society rested. Outnumbered by the incoming migrant workers and simultaneously constrained by British control, Mombasa elites became acutely aware of their waning ability to control the features of the new society developing around them. The colonial system's constant reliance on Luo labour certainly illuminated the crucial role this migrant group was playing in the development of a new modern Mombasa. Fearing loss of power to a group they had for centuries considered inferior, Mombasa elites responded to this situation by redefining the boundaries of social interactions with migrant groups, particularly those coming from the inland *bara*. A key feature of this reaction was the deliberate restriction of integration into Swahili society to *wapwani* alone. Two institutions –the *kafa'ah* system of marriage and the *ngoma* traditions – were the most impacted by these changes, as they had historically served as accessible vehicles for social mobility for commoners in Swahili society. Both institutions were indeed restructured to function as formidable barricades, safeguarding Swahili society against integration by inland migrants. In doing so, they hoped to preserve the distinctions of race, ethnicity, and social class central to Swahili and colonial hierarchies. The following discussions will reveal how the *kafa'ah* system of marriage and the *ngoma* traditions functioned

³⁴⁷ KNA/K/331/8/BOO Report of the Economic and Social Background of Mombasa Labour Disputes.

³⁴⁸ Randall L. Pouwels, "Oral Historiography and the Shirazi of the East African Coast," *History in Africa* 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 237–267; James de Vere Allen, "Swahili Culture and the Nature of East Coast Settlement," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14 No.2 (Boston, MA: Boston University African Studies Center, 1981); Sarah Sadian, *Decoding Swahili Culture: An Introduction* (Joya Cultural Enterprise, 2014).

³⁴⁹ Miura Toru and John Edward Philips, *Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa: A Comparative Study* (London: UNESCO, 2000). Unlike the Western world, where slave status was passed down through generations, slavery in Islamic society ideally lasted for a specified limited period.

to ensure that inland visitors were unable to integrate into Mombasa's elite society. This exclusion guaranteed that, regardless of their numerical dominance, migrant Luo remained at the bottom of Mombasa's social strata.

Kafa'ah marriages

In the early 1920s, one of the most striking features of Mombasa's demography was its abnormally high number of men. Of the 18,000 Africans enumerated in the 1921 census, for example, over 12,000 were men.³⁵⁰ The majority of the women captured in this census were classified under the racial categories of Arab, Indian, and European, while African women populations on the island remained low. This image would be the official demographic face of Mombasa town throughout the 1920s, the feature being in glaring contrast to the numbers recorded on the mainland among the Mijikenda.³⁵¹ Despite extremely low recorded birth rates, Mombasa's population continued to grow through the 1930s.³⁵² These increases were entirely driven by immigration, particularly by Luo labourers coming to work at Mombasa's rapidly expanding rail and port projects. Up until the 1920s, a majority of these labourers lived as single bachelors throughout their service, while married men typically left their families behind in Luoland.³⁵³ Singlehood was, however, not a lifestyle choice willingly embraced by these labourers. This was indicated by the prevalence of prostitution and sex work. As a Ramogi Welfare Association newsletter noted:

*[A]s soon as these young men get employed in towns, they find they cannot do without women and begin keeping prostitutes [...] all the money they earn is spent on them and perpetual drinking, where as their wives and children are suffering in the reserves without any help or information through correspondence.*³⁵⁴

Bachelorhood and prostitution were therefore only widespread because Luo labourers were denied access to *wapwani* women. This restriction was well articulated by Paul Ochieng.

One evening when I was about six years old, I was hurriedly shipped off to Nairobi to live with an uncle. In Nairobi, conversations regarding my mother were forbidden. It was quite strange. On coming of age, my curiosity regarding my birth mother's whereabouts were put to rest when it was revealed that she was a Giriama woman, and that she was forcefully removed from my father's house at the Mombasa Railway housing scheme where we lived. Her parents were displeased

³⁵⁰ KNA/AWS/11/7 Mombasa Island Revised Town Planning Scheme, 1925.

³⁵¹ KNA/K/361/CHA. A.M. Champion, *Native Welfare in Kenya* (London: The Colonial Office Press, 1944). Among the *wanyika*/ Mijikenda ethnicities, the numbers of women were higher than those for men throughout the 1920s. This was considered a normal average.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Atieno Mwamba, O.I., 14 February 2018, Bangladesh, Mombasa. Though her father migrated to Mombasa sometime in the 1950s, Atieno's mother was able to join him in 1960. It was impossible to move earlier because the process of moving with family was expensive.

³⁵⁴ KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/376 Institutions and Association, Riuruok Luo, 1945.

with the fact that she married a Luo man. My sister Akinyi, was carted off to Siaya where she lived with my paternal grandmother. My father worked as a clerk for the Kenya Railways until he retired in 1966. I remember when I was young, he was popular and well respected among his peers and fellow Luo; probably because he was one of the first young men from Anduro (Siaya) to be educated. His clerk job was also highly regarded. He was moreover witty and well dressed, and hence the envy of many a men as he was doing better than the average Luo labourer at the KURH. My father struck a friendship with my mother Kadzo, when he began frequenting her mandazi (local pastry popularly consumed as a tea accompaniment) stall. My uncle says that a relationship blossomed from their encounters, and he wished to marry her. My mother's family however forbade this union, insisting that she would not marry an uncivilised m'bara. After weeks of back and forth trying to negotiate with her family, she eloped and went to live with my father.

After cohabiting for more than seven years and two children later, my mother's family laid trap and forcefully removed her from our home, carting her off to some undisclosed location. Up to date, we have no idea where she is. I even tried making contact with the family in the 1980s because I wanted to reconnect with her, but my efforts were rebuffed. I have heard rumours that their initial plan was to take my mother and us in a common practise where the Giriama through rituals incorporate offspring of Giriama women into Giriama society while erasing identities erstwhile possessed.³⁵⁵ I and my sister escaped the kidnap only because we had gone off to play at a friend's house. That's why we were hurriedly shipped off to Nairobi and Siaya. My uncle told me that my father tried to lodge a complaint through the local Native Tribunal, but it was agreed that since he had not paid bride price (which my mother's family refused to negotiate) then she was legally, not his wife. They in any case, feigned ignorance of her whereabouts and insisted that she must have come to her senses and decided to abandon the "unholy" union with our father. My father refused to discuss this issue. He insisted he moved on with life, and he later married my stepmother who is a Luo.

Social systems rooted in purity, hierarchy, and inflexibility tied to birth exist in numerous societies across the world. Most prominently, India's caste system, which is grounded in occupational hierarchy, assigns qualities to individuals, which directly influence their occupations and social roles.³⁵⁶ The Indian caste system emphasises purity and avoids pollution of caste lines by limiting interactions within social and occupational groups.³⁵⁷ A form of caste

³⁵⁵ This practice of integration into Giriama society continues to date. Several interviewees revealed that Giriama women were the bane of inter-ethnic unions involving Luo men in Mombasa. Upon separation, which occurred quite often, Giriama women normally take the children of the union to their birthplace, where they are renamed and undergo rites to integrate them into Giriama society, thus losing their erstwhile Luo identities.

³⁵⁶ R. K. Pruthi (ed), *Indian Caste System* (New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 2004).

³⁵⁷ Suraj Yengde, "Global Castes," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45, No.2 (2022), pp. 340–360.

system existed on the East African Swahili coast long before British occupation of the region. This system was passed down through generations and relied on the practice of endogamous family marriages. Endogamy was encouraged not only because it played an important role in binding family relations, but also because it ensured that kin and family wealth remained within extended family structures. Though endogamous marriages were the norm, it was not uncommon for marriages to occur between individuals from different families and social categories. Indeed, the Swahili emerged as a result of marriage alliances with Arab elites who wanted greater access to and firmer control over the East African coast's trade networks. Marriage, thus, was essentially a social institution with underlying economic motivations. However, when *bara* immigrants began arriving in Mombasa, the practice of endogamy changed focus. It became less about economic strategy and more about a pathological need to keep racial and ethnic lines pure. This new turn, was of course, the outcome of colonial racialism. Purity was institutionalised through *kafa'ah*, a social system aimed at minimising intermarriage between the so-called superior coastal bloodlines and the supposedly inferior *bara* bloodlines.

Kafa'ah was basically a gendered mechanism for regulating marriage, ensuring that women could only marry a social equal, while men – especially Arab men – could incorporate less prestigious groups using the mechanism of patrilineality.³⁵⁸ *Wapwani* groups along the Kenyan coast would, however, begin reimagining *kafa'ah* and attributing new meanings to the practice in the wake of imperial domination. During this period, identities became core features for individual and group positionality in the colonial economy. Colonial classification of racial groups, and the subsequent duties and responsibilities assigned to each category –such as taxation, wages, labour provision– were the main drivers of these reimaginings of *kafa'ah*, and the attendant efforts by Arab and *wapwani* to keep racial and ethnic lines pure. In Mombasa, *wabara* Africans bore the brunt of colonial extraction and, moreover, lived in the most deplorable conditions. It thus became vital for *wapwani* in general, but *wanyika* in particular, to disassociate from this African identity.³⁵⁹ Cousin and in-group marriages thus became reinforced and acquired new symbolism as the structure upholding not only social status, but also keeping racial/ethnic lines pure along the Swahili coast.

Ngoma traditions

From the *Rhaza* dance of Arab warriors readying for a raid, to the mocking *Taarab* songs used by women to challenge authority, to the celebratory *Ngoma ya fimbo* danced at Swahili weddings, music and dances have long been utilised on the East African coast not only as forms

³⁵⁸ Nathaniel Mathews, “Imagining Arab Communities” p.139.

³⁵⁹ KNA/CQ/1/19/25 Annual Reports Mombasa 1925-32. Several petitions made by Swahili and Afro Arab groups were requests for recognition of their Arab status and the renegeing of their categorisation as African. The report of 1925 confirms the colonial governments’ dilemmas of categorising *wangwana* as “..mostly, they (petitioners) are unable to trace unbroken pedigrees of descent through males from Arabs..” The presence of “*Bara*” blood in *wanyika*’s lineage thus significantly diminished their chances of accessing Swahili elitism.

of entertainment, but also as frameworks for conveying particular political and social messages. In Swahili society, dances were meticulously and elaborately organised, with every aspect – from participants, to the costumes, performances, and even the audience – carrying within them some overt or subtle meaning. The right to participate in dance performances was in particular directly linked to Swahili ascriptions of privileges to an individual's position and social status.³⁶⁰

A new form of dance tradition, *ngoma* (pl. *ngomas*), emerged on the East African Swahili coast from the early 1910s, when British occupation began taking root. Its development was directly linked to *wapwani* efforts to navigate the newly forming urban society emerging from British colonialism and the influx of a significant stream of migrant labourers into their cultural space. The *wapwani* were particularly concerned about the potential blurring of stratified social lines caused by the growing presence of *bara* visitors, whose numbers increased annually as the colonial state scrambled to fulfil its insatiable appetite for cheap labour. *Ngoma* then became a framework through which distinctions between coastal *wapwani* and *wabara* identities could be asserted, and the demarcation of social lines performed. Among the many *ngoma* traditions to emerge in colonial Mombasa, the *Beni* and *Lelemama ngomas* were particularly relevant to the question of *u'bara* and *u'pwani* identities. *Beni* and *Lelemama* became avenues for social mobility for *wapwani* as they provided a pathway for marginalised members of this group to integrate into the higher ranks of Swahili society. *Ngoma* indeed, provided an avenue for the most vulnerable of the non-Swahili *wapwani* -the Afro *wanyika*- the opportunity to become Swahili.³⁶¹

As previously mentioned, there were various avenues through which ordinary *wapwani* could access Swahili elitism. While marriage was the most common entry point, other methods included an individual making what was considered significant contributions to the development of Swahili tradition and refinement. For example, individuals could access Swahili elitism by showing exceptional bravery during battle, or even by being a great poet. Through *ngoma*, artistic talent and ritual expertise became vehicles for non-Swahilis to gain recognition and rescue their descendants from life at the bottom of the Swahili social order. Participation in coastal *ngoma* traditions was forbidden to migrant inland communities, including the Luo.³⁶² This was certainly aimed at hindering their chances of social mobility in Mombasa, while reinforcing the perception that *u'bara* status was immutable.

³⁶⁰ R. Skene, "Arab and Swahili Dances and Ceremonies" *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 47, (1917), pp.413–434. While dances were normally performed by certain identity categories, some dances could be performed by a wide array of individuals. The sites where shared dances occurred however, were the main codes revealing identities of the performers. The *Mwaribe* dance was for example performed indoors by freeborn women, but outdoors by slave women.

³⁶¹ Rebecca Gearhart, "Ngoma Memories: How Ritual Music and Dance Shaped the Northern Kenya Coast," *African Studies Review*, 48 No.3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 21–47.

³⁶² Strobel, "From Lelemama to Lobbying."

Beni is the Swahili derivative of the word “band.” This *ngoma* was a competitive team dance involving men and women singers, dancers, and musicians. The performance featured men dancing in line formations while the women danced together in circular formations. *Ngoma* performances were generally displays of ethnic and racial supremacy, expressed outwardly by integrating symbols of power contemporary to that period. For instance, *Beni* bands incorporated European military motifs into performances, with participants wearing naval-style uniforms and playing brass instruments. In Mombasa, *Beni* street performances often included models of battleships.³⁶³ Band leaders wore dignified attire, complete with caps of rank, epaulettes, and rows of fountain pens in their breast pockets. The *Lelemama* dance, on the other hand, was a women-only indoor performance that originated in Zanzibar and gained prominence between 1920–1945.³⁶⁴ *Lelemama* dance festivities spanned several days, beginning with the preparation of lavish feasts and culminating in the performance of the dance. During the performance, women had the opportunity to purchase prestigious titles by contributing money to the dance group.

This dissertation does not aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the system and organisation of *ngoma* dances, as this has been thoroughly addressed in previous works. Notably, Ranger³⁶⁵ studied the emergence and history of *Beni* dances in Mombasa and Zanzibar; Strobel³⁶⁶ examined practices of *Lelemama* dance in Mombasa; and Franken³⁶⁷ surveyed the general features of an array of Swahili dances, including *ngomas*. The focus here is limited to *Lelemama* and *Beni ngomas* in so far as the dance relates to *wabara* Luo labourers. Specifically, this discussion analyses how *ngoma* performances restricted their attempts to integrate into Swahili society and hindered their efforts at social mobility in Mombasa’s stratified society.

As Luo KURH labourers began to dominate Mombasa’s demography and economic landscape, *wapwani* adopted *ngoma* traditions, using them as protective frameworks to guard against the unregulated social change instigated by those they considered outsider strangers. Through *ngoma*, the definitions of *u’Swahili* (the state of being Swahili) were reassessed and Afro *wapwani* of low status – some of whom had previously been ranked amongst slaves – were given an opportunity to become part of an elite in-group.³⁶⁸ This prospect was not extended to migrant Luo, who were strictly excluded from participation. *Ngomas* also became platforms for members of the coastal elite to showcase their wealth and social status, which as previous discussions have revealed, was something migrant *wabara* did not possess. For instance,

³⁶³ KNA/CQ1/19/25 Annual Reports 1931–1945. The 1939 report talks of the notoriety of street *ngomas* in Mombasa.

³⁶⁴ Strobel, “From Lelemama to Lobbying”

³⁶⁵ Terence O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890–1970: The Beni Ngoma* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975).

³⁶⁶ Strobel, “From Lelemama to Lobbying”

³⁶⁷ Marjorie Ann Franken, *Anyone Can Dance: A Survey and Analysis of Swahili Ngoma Past and Present (Africa, Kenya)* (Doctoral dissertation, University of California, 1986).

³⁶⁸ Gearhart, “Ngoma Memories”

funding a *Lelemama ngoma* was considered to be a significant contribution to the advancement of Swahili culture, an act that conferred immense respect (*heshima*) and elevated the sponsor to the respectable ranks of Mombasa society. As a result, Afro indigene *wapwani* competed to fund *ngoma* dances, which were exorbitantly expensive affairs, in order to buy *heshima* in Mombasa's social sphere.

Ngomas were a notorious feature of Mombasa's social landscape from the early 1920s, growing steadily in popularity through the 1950s. The performance styles accompanying these dances were deemed scandalous by local administration, prompting repeated discussions about banning them.³⁶⁹ Their proliferation in the exact same period as the surge of *wabara* immigration revealed *wapwani* efforts to reassert established boundaries of social interaction by reinvigorating notions of class and cultural purity. Ranger has argued that the incorporation of European military themes into *Beni* dances was indicative of desires for new modes of life aligned with the powerful European.³⁷⁰ These military motifs simultaneously served as allegories for the Swahili community's readiness to embrace militancy to defend coastal elitism against *bara* infiltration. The blocking of migrant Luo from participation in *ngoma* traditions became a potent metaphor for their inability to integrate or alter their social status within Mombasa's social ranks. In probable reference to their losing of the battle for ethnic and racial superiority, *ngoma* traditions of the *Beni* and *Lelemama* variants suddenly disappeared from Mombasa's social scene after the gaining of independence, which saw the incorporation of the Mombasa section of the Zanzibar protectorate into the Republic of Kenya. Today, remnants of these *ngomas* can only be seen at festivals, where their performances are stripped of the original references and symbolism of class.

Conclusion

The interaction between colonial racialism and Swahili identity hierarchies worked to produce the defining character of Fanon's "Manichean colonised world" within Mombasa's social landscape. Colonial Mombasa indeed manifested a duality of social privilege and material conditions, with migrant Luo rail and port workers occupying a marginalised position contrasted against their *wapwani* counterparts. The motifs representing Luo *u'bara* identity were informed by marginalisation, symbolising exclusion and deprivation. In contrast, the markers of *u'pwani* identity were grounded on elite exclusivity.

Mombasa society actively participated in upholding the structural systems that functioned to ensure that their *wabara* counterparts' material conditions appropriately reflected their assumed social standing. Migrant Luo labourers, for example, were offered limited housing options and, consequently, lived in conditions so deplorable that the *Mombasa Times* likened them to animal

³⁶⁹KNA/CQ/1/19/25 Annual Reports, Mombasa District 1932–1939. Mombasa Annual Report of 1933. The DC is of the opinion that *ngoma* should be banned as it was the reason for the rise in poverty levels amongst the poorer sections of coastal indigenes. Afro *wapwani* in particular allotted considerable resources towards funding *ngoma* activities in pursuit of acceptance into the upper echelons of Swahili society.

³⁷⁰ Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa*.

habitats. These were some of the worst living conditions ever recorded for urban wage labourers in the entire colony and protectorate of Kenya. The housing options offered to Luo labourers included accommodation in overcrowded Majengo, and lodgings in the swampy lands adjacent to Frere Town and in the fringes of Mombasa town where social amenities were non-existent. Sanitation was generally lacking in these areas and, consequently, diseases including tuberculosis, cholera, and plague caused by rat infestations were rampant. *Wapwani* additionally maintained systems that made it difficult for migrant KURH labourers to purchase reasonably priced water. Water was sold cheaply in the hours when Luo workers – a majority of whom were bachelors – were engaged at their workstations, but prices dramatically shot up in the evening when these labourers clocked out. The stigmatising of water carrying, furthermore, left the Luo indirectly obligated to use the services of water carriers, and a significant portion of their meagre income was thus spent on acquiring this vital commodity. The disparity in access to resources like housing and water created a stark visual representation of the duality between the “dirty *m’bara*” and the “clean *m’pwani*.”

Luo labourer’s *ubara* identity was further evident in their poverty and hunger. This was because ethnicity played a central role in shaping the organisation and nature of interactions relating to food access, presenting yet another avenue for expressing ethnic and racial differences between *wabara* and *wapwani*. Food was categorised as either unassumingly local or elite, with variations coded in elitism being sold at very high prices. Mombasa operated a lucrative black market for goods associated with prestige, such as sugar, which was intentionally priced to restrict access for the urban proletariat. Luo labourers were often driven into debt and kept in a constant debt-for-food cycle, which made it nearly impossible to engage other traders for fear of prosecution. Beyond food, other essential consumer goods were also sold at exaggerated prices in colonial Mombasa. Firewood, for example, which was the main source of fuel for Luo labourers, was sold at very high prices in areas closer to their quarters and was cheaper where *wapwani* lived. The price disparities between goods available to Luo labourers and those accessible to *wapwani* were so pronounced that even the elite cadre of Luo KURH labourers, i.e. those who earned what was considered higher wages, were reported to have malnourished children.

Swahili elite society nevertheless recognised the need to expand its base to protect itself against the rising numbers of Luo migrant labourers coming into the town’s social landscape. Invitations to Swahili exclusivity were therefore extended to the African *wanyika* population, granting them access to *kafa’ah* marriages and *ngoma* traditions. The exclusion of Luo labourers from these symbols of inclusion served as a marker of their perpetual marginalisation and reinforced the notion that *ubara* identity and social position were immutable. By the early 1930s, however, marginalised Luo rail and port workers began to mobilise and adopt strategies to challenge their positionality in Mombasa’s social landscape. The following chapter will analyse these responses and survival strategies, exploring how they enabled the Luo to survive Mombasa’s social hierarchies. These efforts played a significant role in the transformative demographic and political changes that reshaped Mombasa in the years running up to Kenya’s independence.