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

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CHAPTER FIVE

A KAVIRONDO TOWN: MOMBASA URBAN LANDSCAPE IN THE CREATION OF A DIASPORA LUO COMMUNITY

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter elaborated on the matter of colonial racialism and how it functioned to develop class hierarchy and the attendant *wabara/wapwani* ethnic divide that was a hallmark feature of colonial Mombasa's social and identity politics. Missing from that analysis, however, was KURH migrant Luo labourers' response to this established system of class hierarchisation. How did they navigate the challenges presented by their *ubara* identity in Mombasa? What measures were taken to counteract *wapwanis'* rejection of their personhood? What were the counternarratives offered as representations of Luo ethnicity in Mombasa? In simple terms, what were their survival strategies in Mombasa, and how did these strategies contribute to the development of Mombasa's demographic and social landscape? The answer to these questions can be found by scrutinising KURH's migrant Luo labourers' efforts to build community. This chapter will hence analyse the processes by which a diaspora[371] Luo community developed amongst KURH labourers in Mombasa. The diaspora urban Luo community was the cumulative outcome of the responses of Luo labourers to counter the colonial order, and Mombasa's resistance of their integration into Swahili elitism. Among the responses adopted was the embracing of a pan-Luo identity, accomplished by consolidating fragmented and morphable features of various existing Luo identities into a single, concrete cultural entity. This process worked to create numerical strength, a most valuable currency that was later effectively used for political mobilisation and the negotiation of better terms of service at KURH. Other responses included the foundation of a *new Luoness*, a neo-Luo identity as it were, which redefined the material and cultural markers of Luo identity to align with modernity. A modern "Luoness" challenged Swahili stratification indexes in Mombasa, and, in the years after World War II, offered the Luo an opportunity to participate in the Africanisation[372] programme adopted by KURH in preparation for Kenya's independence. Ultimately, however, the emergence of a diaspora community was driven by the migration of Luo women into Mombasa town. These women were the intermediary force that solidified the community's presence and contributed to the emergence of permanent Luo households in Mombasa, a factor that

[371] The term diaspora is used within the framework of African reserves. Because ethnic groups were confined within specified native reserves, the Luo community in Mombasa was therefore a group dispersed from the Kavirondo reserve.

[372] Britain introduced the Africanisation policy after World War II as part of its decolonisation agenda. Africanisation included the integration of Africans into the bureaucratic apparatus of the state. For example, more Africans were allowed membership to the legislative assembly. Regarding the KURH, Africans were finally allowed seats on labour councils discussing railway workers' conditions. It was also in this period that the first Africans rose to management positions at KURH.

eventually produced the dramatic shift in the town's demographic and spatial map. Mombasa transitioned from its previous Arab/Swahili numerical dominance to cement its identity as an African town. These demographic changes gradually contested the town's positionality as part of a sovereign protectorate. The resulting tensions dramatically played out in the late 1950s as the struggle for Kenya's independence took shape.

5.2. Mombasa and the making of a Kavirondo Town

Walking into the infamous[373] Bangladesh informal settlement in Mombasa, I am greeted by the sounds of "*Bim en Bim*" a classic *benga** tune by the famous Luo musician D.O. Misiani. The song, heavily laden with political metaphor, electrifies the already charged political atmosphere as the 2017 general elections loom. Misiani, originally from Shirati, a region in Tanzania's Mara province, built his music career in Kenya, where the Kenya Luo constitute a majority of his fan base. A few paces ahead, fishmongers try to entice potential buyers with remarkable displays of *omena* (Lake Victoria sardine) and *budo* (smoked tilapia), sourced all the way from Lake Victoria in Western Kenya. Overheard snippets of conversation confirm that Dholuo is Bangladesh's de facto lingua franca. For any ethnic Luo venturing into this locale, there is an instant feeling of familiarity, an instant sense of belonging – dare I say, of home. Bangladesh has *seemingly*[374] translocated Western Kenya's Luo landscape – language, culture, community networks, and interactions, amongst other ethnic symbols – into the diaspora. This setting is mirrored in other settlements in Mombasa that have a majority ethnic Luo population, such as Magongo, Kongowea, huge parts of Port Rietz, Owino Uhuru, and *Kisumu Ndogo* "small Kisumu," all of which exhibiting similar cultural aesthetics.

Beyond the scene in Bangladesh, a discerning visitor to Mombasa cannot help but notice the conspicuously large number of ethnic Luo living in this coastal city. The Luo occupy spaces in trade and business – Kongowea market, for example, boasts a sizable number of its Luo traders. As the third largest voting block in Mombasa, the Luo are also key players in Mombasa's political scene. A number of current members of Mombasa's County Assembly (MCA's) are ethnic Luo, while since the introduction of multi-party politics, political affiliations have leaned towards support for Raila Odinga. Odinga is an ethnic Luo politician whose charisma and personality is larger than life, to the extent that he has been described as the "enigma in Kenyan politics."[375] Hezron Bollo Awiti, a Mombasa-based ethnic Luo politician and businessman who once served as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Nyali constituency, entered Mombasa's

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[373] Bangladesh was thrown into the national limelight in 2010 when community members of a local CBO adopted their own currency of exchange, known as Banglapesa.

*Benga is a popular genre of music amongst ethnic Luo.

[374] This chapter will reveal that "Luoness" does not owe its origins to the rural; it is rather a product of interactions and exchange between the urban and the rural.

[375] This title is directly lifted from Babafeni Badejo's *Raila Odinga: An Enigma in Kenyan Politics* (Lagos and Nairobi: African Books Collective, 2006). Raila Odinga has been a consistent figure in the history of the development of Kenya's democracy.

gubernatorial race in 2022 with ambitions to clinching the Governor's seat by merely capturing the Luo vote.[376] Unlike the Mijikenda (majority in Mombasa) and Kamba (second majority), who split their votes among the various political parties, the Luo typically vote as a block, and Awiti based his campaign on the expectation that this pattern would hold. The Luo are also visible in Mombasa's general social landscape. A regular feature of the coastal town's nightlife, for example, includes nightclubs hosting traditional Luo *ohangla* and *benga* bands. A curious observer might wonder how Mombasa's landscape came to be littered with pockets of Luoness, despite Luoland being situated hundreds of kilometres away, on the farthest edge of Kenya from Mombasa.

The features of the current Luo community in Mombasa, like all societies and cultures, are the result environmental adaptation.[377] The development of these features can be traced back to migrant Luo rail and port workers' attempts to adapt to Mombasa's hierarchical social space. The town's identity politics systems and networks had relegated Luo labourers to the bottom of its economic and social hierarchy, and until the late 1940s, they embodied Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. By hierarchising Luo labourers' personhood vis à vis that of the *wapwani*, Mombasa inadvertently incentivised the Luo to adapt in order to survive. In pre-colonial Luoland, community building had proven effective for navigating precarious conditions, and migrant Luo port and rail workers began reproducing similar community-building efforts when they encountered challenges to their *ubara* identity in Mombasa. Surviving in Mombasa therefore required Luo labourers to employ strategies that had been previously used to survive strenuous conditions in Luoland, while simultaneously incorporating newly introduced concepts of elitism to shape an identity fit for modern times. These undertakings not only helped the Luo endure, but they also elevated their position within Mombasa's colonial hierarchy. By the early 1950s, KURH migrant labourers' concerns had effectively moved to occupy Mombasa's highest political and administrative priorities.

The ecological landscape of Luoland has historically been inconsistent, marked by periodic cycles of abundance and scarcity. Early missionaries' journals and scholarly anthropological works reveal that, in the latter years of the 19th century, rainfall patterns varied significantly. Some months experienced abundant rainfall, facilitating extensive agriculture, while other months were characterised by dry spells and extreme heat.[378] The environment closer to Lake Victoria was particularly arid, and weather patterns there tended to be more erratic. In response, Luo social and economic systems evolved to create structures that could sustain communities

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[376] Onyango Ochieng, "Luos in Mombasa Divided over Shahbal, Nassir, Omar," in *The Star Newspaper*, Kenya, 24 January 2022. Accessed on 20 November 2022 at: https://www.the-star.co.ke/counties/coast/2022-01-23-luos-in-mombasa-divided-over-shahbal-nassir-omar/.

[377] Robin I.M. Dunbar, "Behavioural Adaptation," Howard Morphy and G.A. Harrison, *Human Adaptation*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

[378] Charles W. Hobley, "Kavirondo," *The Geographic Journal*, 12, No.4 (London: The Royal Geographic society, 1898), pp. 361–372; KEN.2.1. Life story and personal reflections of Father Arnold Witlox (1870, 1903–1938); NST.1.1-1.32 Collection of Bishop N. Stam's papers and personal letters to family while living in the mission of the Kisumu Vicariate, 1902–1939. Mill Hill missionaries archive in Oosterbeek.

and ensure continuity of life through the seasonal cycles of plenty and want. Family relations and communal living became highly regarded, and social networks developed to become the primary framework for social welfare and communal social protection.[379]

Southall argued that a community's social systems and economic structures determine its ability to adapt and respond to change.[380] Agreeing with this sentiment, Sheikh provided compelling arguments evincing the embeddedness of traditions in modernity. He posited that modern states are not solely shaped by external hegemonic powers, but rather that local cultures contain the seeds to spur development towards modern outlooks.[381] Moreover, Sheikh emphasised that local traditions exist within and shape modernity. Luo social structures and ethos of communal living – anchored in communal networks as the main social protection mechanisms – became important blueprints when it came to adapting to Mombasa's rejection of their *ubara* identity. The experiences and adaptive practices of migrant Luo port and rail workers certainly influenced the consolidation of previously differentiated populations of Luo language speakers into a single constituency, which came to identify as the ethnic Luo community. This consolidated ethnic constituency played a major role in driving changes within the KURH especially after World War II, and migrant labourers' welfare moved to dominate conversation and administrator's concerns as the colonial state gradually moved to become a welfare state in the decolonisation era of the 1950s.

5.3. Early attempts at Luo unity and formations of a homogenous Luo identity

Efforts to create a single homogenous ethnic Luo identity had been attempted by various Luo-speaking groups prior to contact with European colonists. These attempts met with varying degrees of success. For example, they were able to assimilate the Kagwa, an originally Bantu group living in Asembo and Uyoma but the Nyan'gori rebuffed their integration efforts and instead advanced further east as the Luo moved to settle in their previous homelands around Lake Victoria.[382] The search for Luo unity was significantly revived with the advent of British colonialism. Carotenuto convincingly argued that this cultural and linguistic group originated in the community networks moulded in Kenya's colonial urban areas, and that the group emerged in response to colonial labour and social policies.[383] The colonial urban environment, where a majority of Luo men had been compelled to seek fortune and better life, encouraged the amalgamation of the various heterogenous Luo-speaking groups into a single, consolidated unit. In Mombasa's particular case, the distance between Luoland and Mombasa, and the migrant labourer's marginalised position in Mombasa's colonial and Swahili social spaces, created the framework for the development of a previously elusive Luo unity. Because migrant

[379] Bethwell A. Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967); Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, "Luo Tribes and Clans," in *Rhodes Livingstone Journal*, 7, (1949).
[380] Aidan Southall, *Social Change in Modern Africa* (London: Routledge, 1961).
[381] Haroon Sheikh, *Embedding Technopolis: Turning Modernity into a Home* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2017).
[382] Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo*.
[383] Carotenuto, *Cultivating an African Community*.

Luo port and rail workers largely reproduced existing cultural methods for surviving strenuous circumstances, a proper study of the processes that shaped this urban Luo identity demands knowledge of earlier attempts at these endeavours. Therefore, this section will begin by providing a portrait of early pre-colonial attempts to consolidate Luo identity.

The Luo language is part of a cluster of languages belonging to the Western branch of the Nilotic family, collectively referred to as the Lwo language.[384] Lwo speakers are spread out across various parts of Eastern and Central Africa, ranging from the Upper Nile Valley in the Sudan to Central Uganda, North-eastern regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Western Kenya, and the Mara region of Northern Tanzania. Ethnic groups speaking the Lwo language include, among others, the Shilluk and Bor (Sudan), the Anywak (Sudan, Ethiopia), the Lang'o, Acholi, Padhola and Alur (Uganda), and the Luo of Kenya and Tanzania. While each Luo ethnicity shares linguistic roots, they have evolved distinct cultural tenets of identity over time. Since this study focuses on the Mombasa rail and port Luo labourers, whose origins can be traced back to Western Kenya, this chapter does not delve into the early history of the entire Lwo group, but rather it will centre specifically on the identity formation of the Luo of Kenya. Henceforth, the term Luo will denote the Luo of Kenya.

The pre-colonial boundaries of Luo identity have been established through interdisciplinary studies of the tradition of various Lwo groups. Historians and anthropologists, including Ogot,[385] Okello-Ayot,[386] Mboya,[387] Evans-Pritchard,[388] and Wilson,[389] have produced work that is generally accepted as authoritative, despite ongoing arguments challenging their methodological approaches. Notably, Okot P'Bitek posited that it was impossible to fully understand the exact origins of Lwo people (including the Luo) because traditions, in particular oral traditions that survived until the 19th century (at the time when professional study of the Luo began), were more concerned with legitimising institutions that existed within Luo society than on the fundamentals of the origins of the people.[390] Okot's assertions are supported by other scholars, including Campbell, whose analysis of the oral traditions of ethnic groups, including the Tutsi, exposed a similar trend. Campbell revealed that Tutsi traditions were skewed towards aligning with the European Hamitic theory, which granted them perceived racial superiority in relation to their counterparts in Central Africa.[391] Regardless of the gaps in

[384] C.C. Wrigley, "The Problem of the Lwo," *History in Africa,* 8 (1981) p. 219.
[385] Ogot, *History of Southern Luo,*
[386] Henry Okello-Ayot, *A History of the Luo Abasuba of Western Kenya: From AD 1760–1940* (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1979).
[387]Mboya, *Luo Kitgi gi timbegi.*
[388] Evans-Pritchard, "Luo Tribes and Clans," .
[389] Wilson, *Luo Customary Laws and Marriage Laws*.
[390] Okot p'Bitek, *Religion of the Central Luo* (Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau, 1971).
[391] John R. Campbell, "Who are the Luo? Oral Tradition and Disciplinary Practices in Anthropology and History," *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 18, No. 1 (Taylor and Francis, 2006), pp. 73–87.

scholarship on Luo identity, the aforementioned interdisciplinary works provide a window through which we can get a glimpse of the early attempts at forming a consolidated Luo identity.

The Luo's first dispersal point is believed to have been the Bahr-el-Ghazal region of Sudan. From the 15th century, the Luo began a southward movement through Uganda, with some groups settling at various points through their journey, while others continued pushing further south. This movement was primarily driven by conflict and diminishing resources, culminating in their arrival in Western Kenya at the beginning of the 16th century. Upon settling in Kenya, the Luo did not form a homogenous cultural or political unit. Each patrimonial group or *Oganda*, 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.[392] By the end of the 19th century, several *pinje* dotted the regions of Western Kenya surrounding Lake Victoria. Each *piny* was governed by a group of elders from the *gwenge* and this formed an assembly known as the *buch piny*. This assembly was the primary political institution, responsible for maintaining law and order and managing the affairs of the *piny*. For example, the *buch piny* had the power to declare war or to tweak existing customs to adapt to contemporary needs. *Pinje* in Kenya – examples include Asembo, Uyoma, Gem, Alego, Nyakach, Kano, Ugenya, Kisumo, Seme, Karachuonyo, Karungu – were responsible for teaching the youth about their community history, including their migration to Siaya, their first settlement point, and their dispersal throughout the Central and South Nyanza regions.

Initial attempts at forming a homogenous Luo polity in Kenya are closely linked to Luo encounters with Bantu groups during their migratory movements within Western Kenya. The Luo arrived in three waves: the first group was the Joka-Jok, followed by the Joka-Owiny, and, finally, the Joka-Omollo. Another Luo group, the Abasuba, (also referred to as Luo-Abasuba) formed when the Luo living on Rusinga and Mfangano Islands on Lake Victoria welcomed and gradually assimilated Abakantu refugees from the Buganda Kingdom on the eve of colonial expansion. Abasuba dispersal continued well into the early years of the colonial era, and they are testament to the unification processes that shaped the Luo community in the 20th century. These processes were largely mediated by the urban Luo. The first wave of Luo migrants, Joka-Jok, endeavoured to establish political hegemony in Western Kenya by creating distinct Luo societies, a move vehemently resisted by neighbouring Bantu and Nilotic societies. Multiple conflicts ensued and Western Kenya became a hub of great insecurity.[393] The arrival of the second wave of Luo from Uganda, Joka-Owiny, however, created favourable conditions for dominance and the formation of a unified polity as envisioned by the Joka-Jok. The Joka-Owiny's arrival increased the population of Western Kenya, sparking new struggles for the limited resources around the lake basin and making it more difficult for small groups and family

[392] Bethwell Ogot, "The Construction of Luo Identity and History," *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 33.

[393] Matthias Ogutu, "Forts and Fortification in Western Kenya (Marachi and Ugenya) in the 19th Century," *Transafrican Journal of History*, 20 (Nairobi: Gideon Were publications, 1991), pp. 77–96.

units to survive independently. This scarcity facilitated processes of amalgamation and identity redefinition, eventually leading to the development of larger and more viable polities.[394] As the different Luo groups began to appreciate the importance of patrimonial lineages, memories of unity were traced back to their dispersal points in Uganda.[395] This sense of unity enabled the Luo to conquer neighbouring Bantu groups, who were either pushed further away from the lake or integrated within the ranks of Luo social and political networks. The Luo ultimately dominated the areas surrounding Lake Victoria. Despite this dominance, the assembly of Luo *pinje* still regarded each other as distinct ethnic groups, even though each acknowledged that they shared a common history and patrimony. On the eve of European colonisation, the Luo were, as shown in the map in Figure 5.1, a segmentary lineage-based, multiethnic community.

[394] Ogot, *The Jii speakers.*

[395] Gilbert Ogutu, *Ker Jaramogi is dead, who shall lead my people*? (Nairobi: Palwa Research Services, 1995).

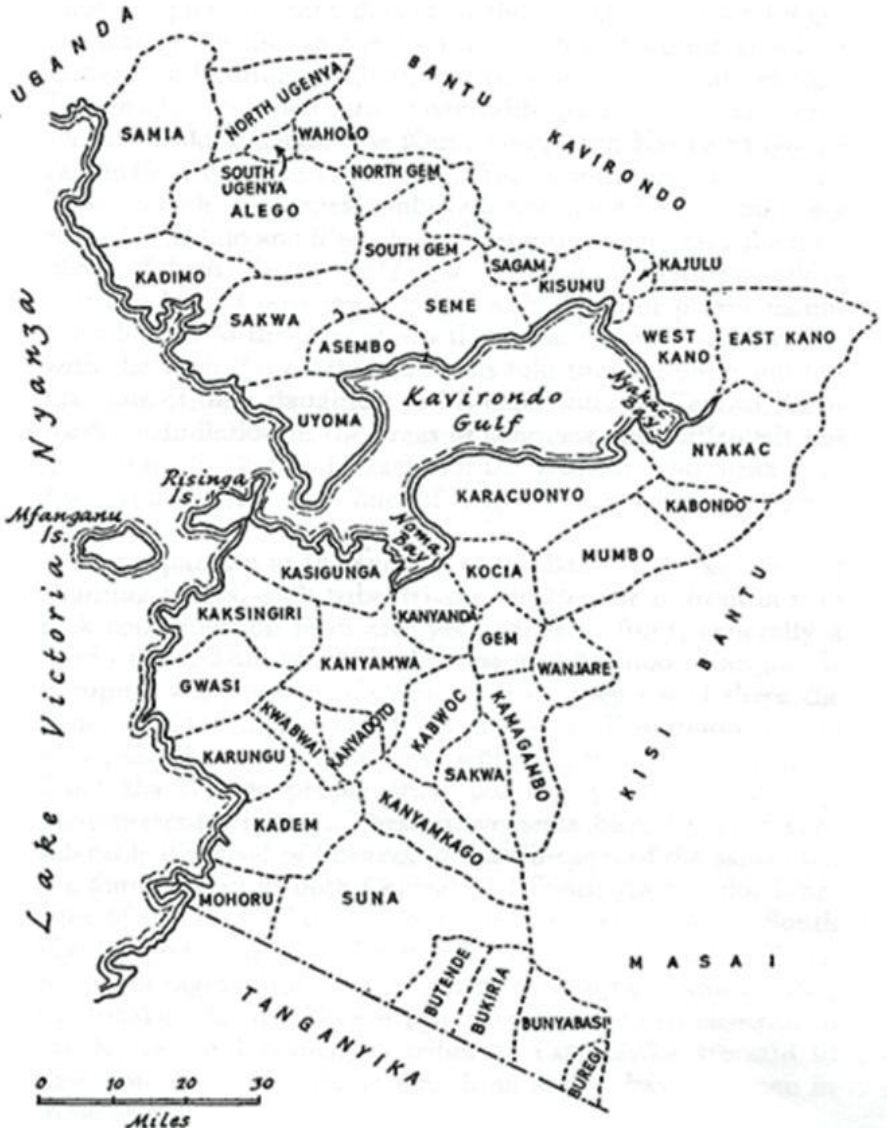

Figure 5.1. Evans Pritchard's mapping of Luo pinje*, and ethnic groups assimilated or partly assimilated by the Luo in the early 20th century. Differentiation continued during the colonial period. For example, by the end of the 1950s, the Samia had broken away to become part of the (Aba)Luhya. The Bunyabasi, Buregi, and Bukiria also incorporated to form the (Aba)Kuria ethnic group*. Map source: Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and Other Essays in Social Anthropology* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 207.

5.4. Mombasa's colonial landscape in the construction of KURH labourers pan-Luo identity.

Africa did not present its conquerors with the framework of an indigenous imperial state, nor a uniform system of centralised rituals of honour and rank.[396] How, then, was Britain to integrate its worldviews into African social, legal, and political systems? How were Africans to assimilate British ideologies of social hierarchy, which was the framework that was to be applied in determining positionality in the colonial economy? Ranger postulated that this end was achieved by formulating and inventing traditions of nativity for African peoples. He argued that Britain's conception of "nations" for the multiplicity of cultural and linguistic groups occupying certain regions was intended to create frameworks of control that could be easily incorporated into British imperial ideology. In Kenya, the nationalities/ethnicities thus created were a significant factor in determining positionality within the colonial enterprise's organisational framework.[397]

The British colonial administration ascribed the term "Kavirondo" to the multiplicity of cultural polities residing in Western Kenya. It is not clear when the usage of this term began, but missionary and trader journals from as early as the 1870s referred to the "Kavirondo people."[398] Because of the linguistic variations evident in the so-called Kavirondo group, the unit was further differentiated into the Bantu Kavirondo, a segment comprising more than twenty Bantu-speaking ethnic groups, and the Nilotic Kavirondo, who became the Luo. The fabrication and distinction of the two Kavirondos was an arbitrary classification in the sense that the Gusii, who also lived around the Kavirondo Gulf and shared cultural similarities with both groups, were excluded from the Kavirondo classification. The "Kavirondo nation" was thus a colonial fabrication, created to align African societies with British conceptions of the nation state for administrative purposes. Ranger argued that this distortion of history instilled Africans with a sense of modernity by presenting them with a constructed tradition and history similar to that of the "advanced" colonialists.[399] In the case of migrant Luo rail and port workers, essentialising ethnicity was a matter of co-opting and reproducing these British concepts of nationality, by appropriating the colonial experience of ethnic Luo in Mombasa and assembling these experiences into common memory to create a common identity.

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[396] Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa."

[397] Ethnic groups in Kenya were labelled and allocated specific inherent traits, which, in turn, dictated their perceived capabilities and hence assignment of duties. The Nandi, for example, were considered militant and therefore allowed entry into the military section of the army during WWI. In contrast, the Luo were labelled sturdy and industrious and so could only join the army as carrier corps. Meshack Owino, "The Impact of Kenya African Soldiers on the Creation and Evolution of the Pioneer Corps During the Second World War," *Journal of Third World Studies*, 32 No. 1 (location: University of Florida Press, 2015).

[398] NST.1.1.8 Mijn leven in Afrika. 1870, 1902, 1913. Personal journals of several early Mill Hill missionaries record their encounters with Kavirondo people.

[399] Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*.

Appiah views identities as imagined commonalities that create unity within an in-group while ostracising those considered to be of a differing out-group.[400] He further argues that identities are fluid, evolving through alterations and additions to a primary idea. Using the example of the English, Appiah posits that the drastic industrialisation of 18th-century Europe, and the harsh realities of life in that period, influenced new ways of thinking about people and led to a renewed romanticism of the past. In the face of the encroachment of industry, individuals in Britain experienced a renewed enthusiasm for emotions, a reappreciation of nature, and a resurgence in the celebration of folk traditions.[401] These performances of recognition created feelings of belonging and provided stability amidst the otherwise unstable life of the English working class. Similar romanticised feelings of a faultless past and an urgency for its preservation were widely felt among the African colonised. Much like the English, Africans sought to essentialise and celebrate perceived identities of old. In Kenya, this effort gave rise to African-led ethnographic traditions in the 1920s, exemplified by works such as Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mt. Kenya* and Paul Mboya's *Luo Kitgi gi Timbegi*, which aimed to essentially reaffirm "native" identities and record them for posterity. For the Luo, situated at the centre of Mombasa's colonial labour economy, nostalgia for an idealised past combined with the need to integrate into the modern world inspired the creation of a reformed neo-Luo identity. The contours of this new Luoness were (re-) defined and reified through new ritual performances, and Luo identities began stressing the importance of bonding networks – kindred, spatial, and cultural – with their supposed homelands in Western Kenya. These efforts were spearheaded by the rail and port workers' chosen community leaders, who Petersen has aptly described as "cultural entrepreneurs."[402]

5.5. Social cohesion and growth of an urban Luo diaspora

Amid the chaos of dilapidated housing, low wages, minimal social amenities, job scarcities, and urban ethnicity, systems of social organisations began to emerge in the rail and port workers' environments as early as the first decade of the 1900s. These structures later extended to their living quarters,[403] providing frameworks through which the forming Luo community could co-exist within the *wabara/wapwani* boundaries. These organisations also became platforms for members of the new ethnic constituency to negotiate with the KURH, which, in Mombasa, was an unofficial surrogate of the colonial state. Having arrived in Mombasa as second-class *wabara*, communal cohesion was crucial for surviving Mombasa's hierarchical social landscape. The many prejudices and stereotypes developed around *wabara* people served to reinforce ethnic solidarities, prompting the majority of Luo rail and port labourers to maintain interactions within patrimonial kin and social groupings whose origins could be traced back to

[400] Appiah, *The Lies that Bind.*
[401] Ibid., pp. 79–81.
[402] Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival.*
[403] KNA/PC/COAST/1/9/7 Housing of Upcountry Labourers, 1912–1913. The PC notes the existence of migrant labourer's social organisation frameworks when he suggests that KURH management liaise with the various ethnic associations while examining the question of urban housing.

the same rural localities. Social networks inevitably formed within these boundaries, creating fertile conditions for the consolidation of Luo ethnic identity. This process was significantly mediated by Luo welfare groups in conjunction with the colonial state. The Luo Union and Ramogi African Welfare Association played the most prominent roles to this end.

The conditions of Luo labourer's living quarters were a key catalyst in the development of a pan-Luo identity amongst KURH labourers in Mombasa. The high degrees of occupational mobility within KURH departments, particularly those affiliated to the port, created environments where urban poverty and its associated social decays thrived. Theft, drunkenness, prostitution, and violence became everyday realities in the rail and port workers' living quarters in Majengo, Changamwe, Magongo, and sections of Kisauni, prompting colonial authorities to encourage community members to devise mechanisms to control the behaviour of their associates. District commissioner reports from as early as 1908 frequently attributed much of the theft and insecurity in Mombasa to urban migrant labourers, among whom Luo KURH workers were the majority.[404] Majengo residences, which had been reserved for rail workers up until the 1920s (see map on p.8), were particularly notorious and were described as breeding grounds for many of the vices plaguing the town. In 1925, the Mombasa district commissioner, fed up with Majengo's infamy, toyed with the idea of demolishing the entire settlement and relocating its inhabitants.[405] The colonial state hence urgently needed to find workable mechanisms to control the urban migrant labourer.

Within this framework of urban decay, Luo rail and port workers began taking measures to foster community cohesion among their members in Mombasa. At the heart of these concerns was a desire to encourage members to present a particular picture of Luo ethnicity, one that was clearly aimed at pandering to the British colonists. Paul Mboya, a leading proponent of the formation of Luo unity emphasised this point, stating that the Luo urban labourer was supposed to "[…] act a particular way to get the attention of the government."[406] Similar sentiments were echoed by elders chosen to represent urban Luo people, who generally agreed that minority habits that, in their view, destroyed tribal ties, were not to be tolerated.[407] Ethnic Luo from various *pinje* thus began organising themselves to control group behaviour, and they applied rural mechanisms of social cohesion and incorporating elements of modernity into the framework. Educated men were especially valued because they possessed knowledge of the English language and could therefore parley with KURH management and negotiate better terms of service for Luo people. The committee of inquiry looking into Mombasa's labour conditions in 1939, for example, reported that Luo rail and port workers had insisted that a Luo representative be included in the committee formed by the labour office, as the majority of workers in these two government agencies were Luo.[408] Elders were picked from groups of

[404] KNA/CQ/1/1/22 Memorandum from the Native Affairs Office, 1908.
[405] KNA/AWS/11/7 Mombasa Island Revised Town Planning scheme, 1925.
[406]KNA/ PC/NZA/3/1/376 Administration (Ramogi African welfare), 1945.
[407] Ibid.
[408] Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Appointed to Examine the Labour Conditions in Mombasa,* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1939).

older labourers and assumed similar roles to those of traditional elders in Luoland. Their main function was the institution of communal controls in urban spaces, and their duties included resolving conflict in line with customary laws, guiding community members on Luo customs and nationalism, and acting in stead of family whenever required.

Susan Adhiambo is a community elder living in the Railways estate in Changamwe. Her authority partly stems from personal charisma, but it also comes from the fact that her deceased father, a former Kenya Railways employee, was a respectable elder for the now defunct Kamagambo Community Welfare Group. The welfare group members were drawn from the rail workers who could trace their origins from Kamagambo, in Western Kenya. I interviewed Adhiambo at her home in Changamwe on 17 July 2017. Her responses revealed the processes involved in forming community networks amongst KURH labourer's in Mombasa:

> *My father worked as a railway mechanic beginning the 40s and retired from service in 1984. He was a respected member of the Kamagambo Community Welfare Group. The group was very active up to the 1990s, actually. The younger people do not seem very interested in keeping the tradition of helping and looking out for members of the clan. These days, local communal network are better received as representative of the people's voice, probably because we see ourselves as Mombasa Luo first and members of our rural clan associations later.*

Susan's interview highlighted the significant role that elderly and retired members of community organisations have played – and continue to play –in maintaining cohesion within the wider Changamwe area. Reflecting on a moment her father regarded as a highlight of his career –even though this was before he became an elder – she revealed that her father participated in the grassroots mobilisation for the successful Mombasa general strike of 1947. Records of parliamentary proceedings in Britain reported that the strike was sudden – no demands were made by the registered unions and a strike notice was not given, workers just woke up on 13 January 1947 and refused to work.[409] Adhiambo says her father shared details of this monumental event with her:

> *The planning for the strike were conducted in welfare group meetings, where members were cajoled into participating and also sworn to secrecy. Participation in the strike was actually presented as service to the Luo community as they were the majority workers at the rail and port service and hence if their demands for better wages and housing were met, then the Luo would be the elite African in Mombasa, whose standards of living would be more or less similar to that of the European. Community members in the grassroot organisations were watchful of persons not participating in the strike, and these were, with the blessings of the*

[409] Kenya (General strike Mombasa), 22 January 1947. Hansard record of parliamentary proceedings. Accessed on 12 June 2022 at: https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1947-01-22/debates/9d4850b3-665f-4874-aaa4-58114a3d9ec3/Kenya(GeneralStrikeMombasa).

> *elders, confronted and beaten to submission. My father is proud of this moment because he reckons the strike was successful only because the KURH Luo community was able to hold each other accountable and presented their grievance as a singular unit.*[410]

The ranks of communal social authorities among KURH labourers soon expanded to include diviners, healers, and medicine men. These figures played a crucial role in building communal cohesion by providing guidance for navigating urban life while also maintaining connections with rural communities in Western Kenya.[411] Adhiambo's father, for example, was instrumental in mediating and settling conflicts among Luo rail and port workers, especially those arising over burial and inheritance rights in Mombasa. He also coordinated with medicine men to facilitate the performance of rituals for restorative justice whenever a community member violated social norms:

> *There was always a* jabilo [*loosely translates to medicineman/woman*] *ready to give* manyasi [*medicinal concoction*] *whenever one erred.*

This approach was particularly effective in reintegrating social outcasts back into the Luo community networks formed by the rail and port workers. The urban landscape thus gradually connected to the rural landscape and rural community networks were reproduced and translocated into the urban space.

The colonial state further facilitated the consolidation of Luo labourers by officially recognising chosen urban elders as "tribal" spokespersons. This recognition reflected the state's recognition of the critical role that these leaders could play in regulating the behaviour of what they considered the most important category of labourers in Mombasa. As the DC for Mombasa remarked in 1930:

> *The significant role they (tribal spokespersons) played is relayed in the affirmations that such collection of elders will tend to evolve as a council controlling the particular tribe, and it is thought that development of administrative control in these lines is to be recommended rather than the appointment of a number of headmen, none of whom would be wholly acceptable to the people*[412]

On taking up his position as governor of the Kenya colony in 1944, Sir Philip Mitchel wrote to the colonial secretary in London, reiterating that: "The Luo people deservedly enjoy a good repute in their home district and wherever they go to work in the colonies because of their general excellent conduct and industry, and the efforts they make to care for their young people."[413] This strategy of assembling a diverse group under a single authority and labelling it as a constituency marked the beginning of a diaspora Luo community. Urban Luo leaders

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[410] Susan Adhiambo, O.I.

[411] Ibid.

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

[413] KNA/OP/AA/1/43 African Affairs: Associations, Societies and Public bodies, Luo union.

became the chief mediators in the regulation of Luo group behaviour, especially in aligning labourers' responses with government policy. The elders played a pivotal role in extending the materiality of this pan-Luo identity to rural areas, facilitating exchanges between the urban and rural that gradually forged a unified ethnic identity.

5.6 Luo welfare organisations in the creation of Mombasa's rail and port workers neo-Luo identity: A special mention of the Luo Union

The wage labour economy in Mombasa offered what can be considered some of the worst work and living conditions for migrant labourers in the Kenya colony. KURH migrant labourers, most of whom were Luo, were regarded as sojourners in the town. Consequently, the colonial administration provided the bare minimum to ensure their basic survival, as strategy designed to discourage permanent relocation to urban areas. Housing in Mombasa was scarce, social amenities and services were virtually non-existent, and wages could barely sustain even a single migrant, let alone support families back in the reserves. Migrant labourers in urban centres and towns closer to Western Kenya, like Kisumu and Mumias, and those in colonial farms in the Rift Valley, often subsidised their incomes by having food transported to them from their families in the rural areas. Food was generally cheaper in inland urban centres, which were often situated near European agricultural zones. Labourers in Mombasa were not so lucky. Faced with these challenges, they began organising welfare organisations, initially aimed at look into the well-being of associate members within the town.

Welfare organisations began with individuals from the same *piny* coming together to ensure that members of the community "did not get lost" in urban areas. As they gradually gained legitimacy as the voice of the urban collective, the organisations transformed to become powerful mediums of social control. Luo welfare organisations in the urban exerted considerable pressure on migrant labourers to conform to behaviour patterns and philosophies considered beneficial to community, and compliance was achieved within a form of patron-client relationship that grew out of the need to survive in urban environments. Initially, most early migrant labourers to Mombasa's port and rail service had little to no education. The majority-the goods porters- were in fact, unskilled labourers who had no formal education at all. Localised in Mombasa and isolated from their kin in Western Kenya, these labourers struggled to maintain regular contact with their rural communities. Correspondence between urban and rural areas was only possible by via mail services or the press – avenues typically accessible only through interactions with members of welfare groups whose leaders had, in most cases, attained some form of education.[414] This situation is exemplified by Elijah Juma, a 70-year-old former goods porter who worked at Kilindini harbour until his retirement in 1990:

> *I was born in Gem just after the big war. I moved here (in Mombasa) when I was 16 and came to join my father who worked at the port. My children were born and have lived their entire lives in Mombasa. My (four) sons have visited my rural home*

[414] Elijah Juma, O.I., 5 December 2017, in Magongo, Mombasa.

in Akala, Gem twice; once to burry their mother, and one time to build the customary bachelor's pad, simba. My 30-year-old last-born daughter from my second marriage is however yet to visit my home. The farthest she has gone is actually Nairobi.

Juma's visits to Luoland since moving to Mombasa have been irregular, and he confesses that the pattern mirrors that of his sons. He insists that this is common and nothing out of the ordinary for most of the Luo people he knows in Mombasa. Juma conveyed the fact that his father had a similar story of irregular attachment to the rural area when he moved to work in Mombasa.

My father, came to Mombasa just before the beginning of WWII, and because of financial difficulties, was unable to bring my mother and us a long to live with him. He rarely came home afterwards, but he kept regular contact with us through letter correspondence. I remember on several occasions people who I knew to be my father's colleagues visiting our home with a letter from my father. The letters were always read by my cousin Ochieng who went to the mission school in Yala.

The letter-reading moments are forever etched in Juma's memory, because they were events:

The entire family sat under a mango tree, and the emissary guest was given one of my mother's prized cushioned seats to sit on. We were never allowed to sit on that chair! The guest first gave greetings from my father and followed with a few stories of workplace adventures and misadventures they had with him. The letter was then handed over to Ochieng, who proceeded to read it with a lot of theatrics. We were always eager to learn of how he was doing in Mombasa. After the readings, my mother was then given the letters for safe keeping.

Juma acknowledges that his father was illiterate and confirms that the letters were written by members of his welfare group in Mombasa.

Welfare organisations, moreover, helped incoming migrants find lodgings and work in Mombasa. As documented in other parts of Africa, potential migrants often rely on information provided by peers before deciding on embarking on a migratory journey.[415] Similarly, Luo labourer's intending to move to Mombasa were influenced by family and community connections. These linkages were a key factor in boosting the chances of better economic outcomes in Mombasa's saturated labour market. By maintaining systems to enumerating members, for example, Luo welfare organisations knew locations of a majority of ethnic Luo in urban areas. This information was invaluable in helping incoming members find kin who they could stay with while looking for employment.[416] For example, Elijah's move to Mombasa was facilitated by another member of the Kanyakuta port workers welfare group, who brought

[415] Goolam Vahedi, "Family, Gender and Mobility among Passenger Migrants into Colonial Natal: The Story of Moosa Hajee Cassim," *Journal of South African Studies*, 42 No. 3. (2016), pp. 505–522.
[416] Elijah Juma, O.I.

him to the town and deposited him right on his father's doorstep. The same welfare group helped him secure employment using their networks at the port. Additionally, welfare organisations functioned as social protection mechanisms for urban Luo populations. They helped out members who had fallen on hard times, for example, by providing food and sharing lodgings. Young men, who often arrived unaccompanied in Mombasa, were normally given lodging in the houses of members of the welfare group, who then helped them to settle in until they could find work at the port. Elijah, for example, shared that he has housed numerous young men from the rural areas who were looking for work in Mombasa, and that his father did the same. The Mombasa town planning committee stated that helping new labourer's settle in was already common practice amongst migrant Luo rail and port workers in the 1920s.[417]

By the 1930s, migrant Luo rail and port workers had become fully aware of the importance of group unity, even as welfare organisations continued to play a prominent role in helping them survive Mombasa's urban landscape. To gain more traction as the collective voice of the urban Luo community, small localised welfare groups began amalgamating into larger organisations. Local clan-based welfare groups, for example, joined to form district-level welfare groups, and by the beginning of the 1940s all Luo-affiliated welfare groups had united under the umbrella of the all-encompassing Luo Union. Like all grassroot organisations, the Luo Union aimed to provide safety nets and spaces for Luo-speaking people away from their homeland in Western Kenya. Indeed, the Union registered its objective as being "to promote the welfare of the Luo individually or collectively in their places of residence."[418] In the specific case of Mombasa, the Union's organisation of dances, football matches and other sporting activities, and community meetings, enabled the communion of KURH labourers in Mombasa and provided a platform where linkages could be maintained with kin back in Luoland. Parkin has argued that while members were often aware of what (welfare) association's manifest functions were, they were less conscious of the unintended social consequences arising from an association's mere existence as well as its activities.[419] For the Luo Union and KURH labourers, these interactions eventually evolved into a patron-client relationship, and the Union increasingly fortified its position as the spokesperson of the urban labourer collective. Soon, the Union began influencing the personal lives of migrant workers, shaping their behaviour and limiting their freedoms. For example, Luo rail and port workers were discouraged from marrying non-Luo women in urban areas because boundaries of Luoness had to be adhered to. This discouraging of cross-cultural interactions was an extrapolation of colonial calls for the maintenance of ethnic and racial boundaries. By adhering to these rules, the Luo could remain in the colonialists' favour. The rules of ethnic purity were ruthlessly applied to women, and many were forcefully returned to their rural homes on mere suspicion of entertaining interest in non-Luo men.[420] Men who lived and even had children with non-Luo women were considered unmarried, and their

[417] KNA/AWS/11/7 Mombasa Island Revised Town Planning Scheme, 1925.
[418] KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/12 Administration, Riwruok Luo, 1945–51.
[419] Parkin, *Neighbours and Nationals.*
[420] Elijah Juma, O.I.

kin constantly berated and urged them to spare the family shame by marrying within the community.[421] Sixty-four years after the fact, Christopher Okumu struggles to narrate how he was forced out of his job at the railway's godowns, and forced by his family to return to Siaya based on the Luo Union's say-so. He recounts falling out with his brother, who he was staying with at the time he began courting Njeri, a Kikuyu woman, and how the Luo Union influenced the ending of this relationship. The Mau Mau rebellion, which began in the early 1950s, had placed considerable strain on ethnic Kikuyus' reputation among the settler and administrator colonists. Pandering to the colonists, the Luo union reproduced similar biases against the Kikuyu, discouraging ethnic Luo, and especially young Luo men, from associating with them.

> *When I began courting Njeri, my elder brother first attempted to reason with me, advising me that it was in my best interest to stop the relationship as the police were suspicious of every Kikuyu. He was afraid that I could be suspected of partaking in Mau Mau's underground activities. I couldn't stop seeing her though. I loved her. My brother escalated the situation when I continued courting Njeri. We quarrelled a lot. One day, he took me to the home of an elder of the Luo Union, I do not remember his exact names. I was shocked to learn that a baraza meeting had been convened to specifically indict me and the relationship I was pursuing. They threatened me with repatriation if I continued courting Njeri. Two days after the baraza and before I could make a decision, I was forcefully put on a train together with two other members of the association and sent back to Siaya with explanation that I was acting as a vagrant in Mombasa. In Siaya, I found a woman chosen for me as a wife, a woman I had never met before. She was already living in my simba. I was doing so well in Mombasa and the repatriation resigned me to my present life of poverty.*

Okumu managed to maintain his arranged marriage until 1994 when his wife died, but he was still visibly bitter about this episode.

The Luo Union activities greatly impacted urban Luo labourers, playing a pivotal role in the formation of the neo-Luo identity witnessed in urban areas. In the specific case of KURH, the union's unifying call, *Riwruok e teko* ("unity is strength"), was rigorously employed to consolidate Luo ethnicity in Mombasa and to pressure individuals to present a particular picture of modernity amongst the Luo. The union was instrumental in reshaping Luo ethos and ideologies to align with those of the Europeans, and in the reconstitution of materiality of Luo ethnicity in Mombasa. These activities resulted in the relative homogenisation of Luo cultural practices and social interactions and, soon enough, migrant labourers from several *pinje* began regarding themselves – and acting – as part of a wider Luo ethnic group. Gradually, the Luo labourer became the model African in Mombasa's urban space. Whenever Luo rail and port workers had grievances, for example, union leaders often counselled them against acting out their disapproval to KURH management. For instance, when they threatened to go on strike in 1942, Luo Union's Nairobi and Mombasa leadership managed to convince workers to go back

[421] Christopher Okumu, O.I., 27 February 2018, Banana, Siaya.

to their duties, arguing that the war took precedence over labourers' personal grievances. Luo women were also admonished by the union, and accused of being the villains fuelling rail and port workers disaffection with the colonial state, by "[…] exerting pressure on Luo men to provide luxurious lifestyles for them."[422] It was imperative that Luoness in Mombasa be presented as characterised by civil order, discipline, and etiquette,[423] and those Luo women who they felt jeopardised these efforts were to be sent packing from the colonial urban space. Though the Luo Union began as a medium to navigate Mombasa's urban landscape, it gradually transformed into the voice of Luo sanction and ideology, preserving and representing what its leadership regarded as common corporate interests amongst migrant rail and port workers in Mombasa.

5.7.1 Materiality and imageries of a neo-Luo identity amongst KURH labourers in colonial Mombasa

Material objects have always been vehicles for human cultural meanings.[424] As Hirsch and Smith posited, objects make us, giving us a material basis for social relations.[425] The choice of objects as points of reference for historical analysis has been embraced by various scholars. Nkwi, for example, argued that social and spatial mobilities witnessed in Bamenda Cameroon were, in fact, the products of materials – including roads, motor vehicles, and bicycles – that were introduced by the colonialists.[426] Objects such as the contraceptive pill and the sanitary towel have also featured as powerful focal points in the history of women's struggles and the feminist movement.[427] With regard to Luo identity amongst rail and port workers in Mombasa, what mattered? What were the material perceptions of this identity? Rejecting the *wapwani* visualisation of Luoness, how did they otherwise define it? The following section tackle these questions and presents some of the elements that played significant roles in materialising Luo ethnicity amongst rail and port workers in Mombasa. The possession of such material elements eventually came to define Luo identity, even in the rural areas.

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[422] KNA/ AWS/1/366 Labour Unrests Mombasa, 1945.

[423] Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival.*

[424] Francois G Richard and Kevin MacDonald, *Ethnic Ambiguity and the African Past: Materiality, History and the Shaping of Cultural Identities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

[425] Shirin Hirsch and Andrew Smith, "A View Through a Window: Social Relations, Material Objects and Locality," *The Sociological Review*, 66 No.1 (2018), pp. 224–240.

[426] Walter Nkwi, *Kfaang and it's Technologies* (Doctoral Dissertation, Leiden University, 2011).

[427] Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas, *A History of Women in 100 Objects* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2018).

5.7.2 Language

Barth considers ethnic groups to be organisational, with actors within groups using specific identity markers to categorise themselves and others for purposes of interaction.[428] The markers highlighting differences between in-members and setting them apart from an out-group are usually not objective, but chosen and regarded as significant only by the actors. Language is commonly acknowledged to be an important marker and outward symbol of group identity.[429] Simpson asserts that a natural sense of solidarity is stimulated amongst members sharing a single variety of speech, and this can be manipulated to create feelings of belonging to populations larger than the local.[430]

In its current form, the Luo language is relatively homogenous, with diction, symbols, and meanings of words communicating a similar message across speakers from several *pinje*. This is in contrast to early Luo history where each *piny* used a local dialect and words borrowed from neighbouring Bantu groups featured prominently in the diction of specific *pinjes.* In the early 1900s, a Luo from Alego spoke a language that was slightly different from an individual from Suna.[431] Early Luo migrants to Mombasa's rail and port service were, therefore, no more than a multiplicity of individuals coming from the Kavirondo region of Western Kenya who spoke a variant of the Luo language. Their experiences, challenges, and uncertainties about Mombasa's economic and social landscape informed their creation of a common language, a vehicle that was used to push for a common corporate interest – education.[432]

Mobilities that create diaspora groups threaten mother tongue languages, as they are spoken less often in new localities and are less likely to be passed on to the next generation.[433] This threat to language was real for migrant Luo labourers in Mombasa where Kiswahili was the de facto language of communication. A mastery of Kiswahili was particularly essential for *wabara* migrants migrating to work at the rail and port, for two main reasons. Firstly, it was necessary to learn the common language of communication amongst the different ethnicities living in Mombasa town; and secondly, knowledge of Kiswahili was considered prestigious. *Wapwani*

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[428] Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (Illinois: Waveland Press Inc, 1998), p.11.

[429] Andrew Simpson, *Language and Ethnic Identity in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[430] Ibid., p. 2.

[431] Minimal variations exist to date. Maize, for example, is *oduma* amongst Alego Luo and *baando* amongst the Suna Luo.

[432] Education was one way for Luo rail and port workers to rise through the employment ranks at the KURH. This was only possible if resources meant to advance education, i.e. books, were available in Luoland. The Luo Union, whose primary objective was to "promote mutual understanding and unity among the Luo as a tribe for practical purposes," spearheaded efforts to consolidate Luo language, which enabled the production of educational related texts. These efforts included establishing a Luo language committee, whose members standardised the Luo language. The quotation above is from the introduction of the Unions prospectus, KNA/ PC/NZA/3/1/12 Administation, Riwruok Luo, 1945–51.

[433] Abid Chaudhry, Aftab Ahmed, and Shaheer Khan, "Migration and its Impacts on Demolishing Lingual Heritage: An In-Depth Case Study of Mohajir Kashmiri Families in Pakistan," paper presented at the International Conference on Migration, Education and Development in South Asia, Islamabad, Pakistan (2014).

regarded everything *bara* – mannerisms, forms of dressing, communal interactions, language, among other signifiers – to be inferior. Adopting Kiswahili, which, at the time, was an elite coastal language, was thus regarded as a step up on the perceived scale of "civilisation."

In the first decade of the 20th century, when the initial migrations to Mombasa began, the Luo language exhibited a wide range of variations between dialects. Because Luo language developed through local interactions, one might expect that a variant of the Luo language – perhaps one integrated with Kiswahili – would emerge in Mombasa's social sphere. This was not the case. As migration to Mombasa's port and rail service steadily increased, Luo labourers instead began rigorous efforts (which are generally considered successful) to develop a homogenous Luo language. As one missionary put it:

> *As many "Luo,"* especially the younger generation, go down the line for work, the demand for a grammar and vocabulary has greatly increased of late.* [434]

Such attempts to essentialise the language and bind it to identity were a common phenomenon amongst several African communities becoming aware of the concept of nationalism during the colonial period. The Kikuyu, for example, initially derived their identities from regional interactions and although variations of Kikuyu language were spoken by people from different regions, these regions were not unified by language.[435] Some Kikuyu groups in fact, identified more with the Nilotic Dorobo than with ethnicities that would later merge to form the Kikuyu nation.[436] In Uganda, the Langó communicated in the Acholi language and missionaries used Acholi books in education in schools in Langó. However, as nationalism gained ground in the 1950s, the Langó unexpectedly began demanding their own books, arguing that they did not understand Acholi phrases.[437] Recognising similar threats to their own language in Mombasa, Luo ethnic entrepreneurs then began efforts to organise and preserve it. Rail and port workers in Mombasa were particularly vulnerable to language loss, as they were unable to maintain regular spatial connections with relations in Luoland. Luo welfare organisations therefore began efforts to revive the language, and the first step was to request for its official structuring and organisation.[438]

Entrepreneurs' reasons aside, the move to structure and organise Luo language was primarily stimulated by the urban worker's desire to integrate into the modern world through Western education. Their demand for the standardisation of Luo orthography was aimed at enabling the

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[434] Fathers of St. Joseph Society, *A Handbook of the Kavirondo Language* (Nairobi: Caxton Printing and Publishing works, 1921).
*Quotation marks on the word "Luo" reflects the missionaries' recognition of the ambiguity of Luo language and identity.
[435] Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism*.
[436] Godfrey Muriuki, *A History of the Kikuyu 1500–1900* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).
[437] Mildred Brown, "The Lwo Bible," in *The Bible Translator*, 11 No.1 (1960), p. 32, pp. 31–42.
[438] KNA/PC/NZA/3/6/129 Vernacular Literature, 1944–1949. The Luo Union formed the Luo Language committee to organise Luo language.

production of literature to expand education in Luoland.[439] To allow access to education, a range of organisations in the southern and central Nyanza areas even began inviting locals to regard themselves as Luo during the 1940s.[440] Education, a direct by product of the unification of the Luo language, became a defining boundary separating the Luo from other Africans and even the Arab population in Mombasa, as it bestowed on them the prestige associated with European "civilisation." By virtue of their educated status, a cadre of Luo labourers joining the rail and port service from the early 1930s through to the 1950s were skilled labourers, who worked as clerks, train drivers, and conductors.

Lucas Migosi vividly traces his lineage five generations back to the Abasekwe clan of the Bunyore Bantu. He divulges that his lineage shifted to Luo ethnicity when his great-grandfather, Awange Kogina, went to St. Mary's Mission school in Yala, where basic education was initially offered in the Luo language. Kogina went on to become a locomotive driver in Mombasa, a role that gradually facilitated his assimilation into Luo identity. He fully identified as a Luo during the 1939 strikes and was even part of the negotiating teams that were chosen to meet Chief Amoth of Central Nyanza, who had been called in to pacify striking rail and port workers in 1945. Educated Luo workers in Mombasa were part of an elite African minority whose presence contested Swahili stratification indexes. A member of the committee looking into labour unrest in Mombasa even commented that: "There are two types of African workers in Mombasa […] one has reached a standard of civilisation and is truly striving for civilised life […] This is the Luo."[441] By the beginning of the 1950s, Luo labourers in Mombasa certainly viewed themselves as the elite African in the colonial hierarchy. This perception was reinforced by the fact that, unlike a majority of *wapwani*, they were not only able to interact fluently with Europeans, but they also held positions that had previously been reserved for Europeans.[442]

A unified Luo language, moreover, helped Luo labourers better navigate Mombasa's saturated labour market. As Chapter Two revealed, work at the docks and on the railway was scarce from the 1920s, and mainly contracted through communal linkages. Employers often discriminatively gave specific work to certain ethnicities. Individuals identifying as Luo were more likely to get work at KURH than any other ethnicity, making Luo identity a critical factor

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[439] KNA/DC/Kisumu 1/10/60 Luo Language Committee, 1930–1954. Shadrack Malo, chair of the Luo Language Committee, reiterates the necessity of teaching in only one language in schools. Having a single language of instruction was cheaper for the missionary; KNA/ PC/NZA/3/6/129 Vernacular Literature, 1944–1949. Letters from the Luo language committee asking for the completion of books written in standardised Dholuo. Books include "*Sigendini ma gaso ji* [stories to keep you busy], and "*Dongo kwom riwruok*" [growth in unity].

[440] KNA/DC/KSM/1/10/60 Luo Language Committee, 1930–1954. Committee insists that there should be efforts towards consolidating the Southern Luo orthographies into a single language to avoid unnecessary divergences; Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*.

[441] Comments by Committee member in, KNA/ K/331/892/2 *The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Labour Unrests in Mombasa* (Part Two) (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1945).

[442] Western education was largely rejected in Zanzibar territory (including Mombasa) as the Sultan's sovereignty called for the continuation of madrassa and Islamic schooling. Such training was insufficient for entry into the skilled worker categories at the KURH. Hence, when the decolonisation process began, the Luo took most of the positions offered to Africans in the KURH.

in surviving Mombasa's labour landscape. Additionally, fostering a common language creates a sense of community and migrants are likely to move and settle in areas where their community is established. This fact has been documented with migrant groups in various parts of the world. Wanting to immediately settle down, migrant Hadrajaye in Salamat, Chad, for example, move into areas where their language is established. For the Hadrajaye, language is important and integral to their identity, a link to their cultural and religious origin, and acts as a bond to their parents and other members of their society.[443] In Mombasa, language too played a central role in stabilising the otherwise unstable life of migrant Luo labourers. Beyond the severe working conditions in Mombasa, contacts with a culturally dominant group who considered *wabara* Luo beneath them produced feelings of inadequacy and, consequently, the Luo sought refuge and acceptance amongst fellow Luo. This was the main reason for Kogina's assimilation into Luo identity. Luo language was indeed reinforced as an identity marker in ethnicised living quarters in Mombasa, which were the first stops for migrant labourers arriving from Luoland.

5.7.3 Connecting the urban with the rural

The Luo naming structure includes a designation that fundamentally connects a person to their patrimonial *piny*. Thus, every Luo is either a *nyar* (f) or *ja* (m) of a particular *piny*. Atieno, for example, a woman whose father's clan hails from Alego will be referred to as *Atieno nyar-Alego*, while a man, Omondi, whose father's clan hails from Asembo becomes *Omondi ja-Asembo*. These communal connections to land were previously fluid and easily altered depending on circumstances. A *jadak* (migrant or settler), for example, gave up his patrimonial designation and adopted that of his benefactor. It was therefore not unusual for even blood brothers to have different patrimonial lineages. As migrations to urban areas increased and ethnic entrepreneurs worried about the creation of a detribalised group, this naming method shifted, becoming much more rigidly applied. Over time, it became a central tenet of Luo tradition. The new naming systems linked the urban Luo to their rural roots and making them natives of their *piny* of origin.

In the pre-colonial and early colonial years, migration into new lands and integration into new communities was so common that Luo identity was in a constant state of flux. Apart from subsistence reasons, there was little sense of nativity and connections to the soil, as shown by Kogina's shift from Bunyore to Luo identity. Feelings of nativity were also absent among the first batch of Luo migrants to newly developing urban spaces, as they viewed their migration as continuations of pre-colonial mobilities in search of new means of subsistence. Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo revealed that ethnic Luo who had left the rural locale before the 1920s, for whatever reason, were regarded as gone. If they died in their new locales, they were buried wherever they passed away.[444] As colonialism became much more entrenched, however, Western ideals of nativity became attractive. In an effort to emulate the European order, the

[443] Alio, "Conflict Mobility and Language."
[444] Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, *Siaya*, p. 57.

Luo began not only to identify with their respective *piny*, but they also pegged this identity on unity with the soil. This unity was defined and reinforced by developing new agnatic relations, i.e. relations that bound individuals and families religiously and spiritually to land.[445] This mystical bond to the land found its most perceptible expression in a naming system that incorporated one's *piny* within one's identity.

Connections with the soil were reinforced by the British creation of ethnic reserves. Reserves worked to limit expansion to new lands, which was common practice whenever occupied land was exhausted. The South and Central Kavirondo Luo reserves thus confined the Luo within these restricted locations. Reserves were a remarkable strategy in social control, in that they not only allowed the segregation of ethnic groups, but they also made it possible to extend indigenous structures of authority beyond the local. This was a particularly important framework for enabling social control of populations in the diaspora and, in this case, in Mombasa.

Reserves presented new opportunities for reconstruction and recreation of identities centred around "native" homelands. As has been pointed out, Luo identities were previously in a constant state of flux and people moved in and out of *piny* ingroup identities for various reasons. An excommunicated man, for example, sought refuge in another piny as a *jadak* far away from his original homeland.[446] *Jodak* were almost always given lands to begin subsisting, which was essentially a clean slate from which to restart life as a member of a new community. *Jodak* children would be fully integrated into the new community, becoming known by the designation of their father's adoptive *piny*. Through this system, old identities disappeared and new identities and accompanying lineages emerged. Often, *jodak* moved to neighbouring Bantu groups, internalising and adopting Bantu identities while their Luo identities dissipated. The creation of reserves, however, completely shifted this system of identity reconstruction and gave way to rigid formations of identities connected to the soil of one's *piny*. Consequently, those who had left their ancestral homes because of non-reconcilable differences and were looking forward to a fresh start in a new location, were still forced to maintain communal connections. It became a case of permanent connection with community and one's past, and no chance of new beginnings.

One guarantee of maintaining this connection was to ensure that all Luo bodies were ritually linked to the soil. Every Luo gained association to their homeland at birth through a ceremony where the umbilical cord was buried at one's paternal homestead.[447] This linkage to the soil became a powerful means of social control, as one's behaviour, fate, and even fortune were forever tied to their origins. The body's connection to the community was attributed to

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[445] Glickman, "Patriliny among the Gusii and Luo of Kenya."

[446] Wilson, *Luo Customary Laws*. For example, a person could be excommunicated by the *buch piny* if they were the cause of constant quarrels between family or clan members. If a person was responsible for another's death, they were also a candidate for either cleansing or excommunication.

[447] Osodo Dami, O.I., 10 January 2018; Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo, *Burying SM;* Mboya, Luo *Kitgi gi Timbegi*.

communal spirits called *juogi* who resided in communal lands, and linkages created through acts such as burying the umbilical cord. It was believed that if a deceased person was unable to finally rest in the soil of their ancestors, then their spirit would forever wander, lost in strange lands and never finding peace. Migrant Luo labourers in Mombasa were generally unable to make frequent visits back to their reserve homeland, unlike migrants in Nairobi or other nearer urban towns, but *juogi* ensured that they were still an integral part of the Luo community.[448] Reconnection was mandatory and if the colonial situation obstructed this in life, then it had to be realised in death.

One famous example of this unwavering linkage with the soil played out in the battle to bury prominent criminal lawyer Silvanus Melea (SM) Otieno.[449] Though this saga occurred in 1986–1987, which is later than the official timeline of this study, SM's case is a remarkable illustration of the resolute linkages existing between an urban Luo and his rural homeland, whose origins can be traced back to the colonial period. SM's case drew attention to the burdens that urban-rural connections place on individual identities and highlighted the tensions and contradictions these connections produced. Contests over SM's body were revealed in Kenya's highest court, the Court of Appeal, when SM's brother, Joash Otieno, and the Luo Umira Kager clan, on one hand, contested his wife's right to bury him at their home in Matasia. SM's wife, Wambui Otieno, was an ethnic Kikuyu. SM's case drew wide public attention and reconfirmed the spatial recognition of home and its place in the identity of urban Luo, including those who had willingly severed ties with the rural. In interviews given after the saga, Wambui maintained that SM considered Matasia his new home and actually detested Nyalgunga, his place of origin.[450] SM thus, had essentially adopted the status of a *jadak*. Upon his death, in 1986, Wambui insisted on burying SM in his home in Matasia, a decision vehemently contested by Joash and the Umira Kager clan. They insisted that SM's body must reconnect with the soil of his people by being interred in his homeland. Joash's/ Umira Kager's won the case and the final burial of SM in Nyalgunga drew attention to the hierarchy of patrimonial relations (*anyuola)*, which are reinforced by connections to the soil, and how these connections rank higher than those created through marriage (*wat*).[451] Cases such as SM's also occurred in Mombasa in the colonial period in the rare instances of inter-ethnic unions. They were, however, much more common when a Luo labourer adopted the Islamic faith.[452]

Habiba Waswa is a shop owner in Bangladesh. Her husband Ali died in 2014, and she complains that, since then, her daughters have not been living according to the tenets prescribed by the Islamic faith. One daughter, Khadija, has even begun patronising an Evangelical church in

[448] Osodo Dami, O.I.

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

[450] Blaine Harden, "Kenyan buried in village he hated," *The Washington Post*, 24 May 1987.

[451] Cohen and ES Atieno-Odhiambo, *Burying SM*.

[452] Habiba Waswa. O.I, 10 January 2018, in Bangladesh, Mombasa.

Magongo, a fact that clearly irks Habiba. Habiba tells the story of how her father's adopted identity conflicted with their "native" identity:

> *My father came to Mombasa in the 1940s. He was a porter at the Kilindini harbour. He converted to Islam a few years after his arrival in Mombasa. He died in 1956. When he died, a feud ensued when my mother requested that my father's wishes of burying him according to Islamic burial rites be followed. Islamic burial rites largely contradict those of the Luo and my Luo kin were adamant that he was first a Luo before he became a Muslim. Even the requirement that the dead be buried within 24 hours could not be fulfilled as due to financial reasons, processes of transporting bodies back to Luoland took weeks, if not months. My mother lost the battle to bury my father, and he was transported back to Gem a month after his death.*

The tensions surrounding Habiba's father's "native" and adopted identities put severe strain on the family and estranged Habiba's mother (and, by extension, Habiba) from her father's family. She retaliated by cutting links with her husband's family and became an urban Mombasa Muslim resident. Habiba, however, still identifies as a Luo even if she continues to harbour resentment towards her paternal relations.

As in SM's and Habiba's father's case, heritage drawn from one's homeland became one of the most enduring symbols of identity for the urban-based Luo labourers. This was especially important for the Luo port and rail workers in Mombasa, who had been completely rejected by the Swahili social landscape. Even though they lived, and many died, in Mombasa, the Swahili and the colonial state ensured that Mombasa was never home for ethnic Luo. The emotions and longing for home certainly influenced the creation of linkages between the urban labourer and the rural regions, and labourers' rural homes embodied their origins and hence identity. Communal linkages between the rural and Mombasa labourers' commenced with organising Luo labourers around patrimonial welfare organisations, efforts that began from as early as the 1920s. As Southall argued, these organisations were part of the corporate, segmentary structure of the Luo in the rural and were reflected and represented in the new organisations of those abroad.[453] Clan and lineage organisations expanded to include more lineages and sub-tribes, eventually culminating in the all-inclusive Luo Union.

The Kavirondo Welfare Organisation (founded in 1922, later changed its name to Kavirondo Taxpayer's Welfare Association), Ramogi African Welfare Association (officially registered in 1945 even though activities began earlier), and the Luo Union assumed the role of the *buch piny* elders in the urban setting, and were instrumental as official mediums through which Luo

[453] Aidan Southall, "From Segmentary Lineage to Ethnic Association-Luo, Luhya, Ibo, and Other," M. Owusu (Ed.), *Colonialism and Change: Essays Presented to Lucy Mair* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 1979), p. 211, pp. 203–230.

rail and port workers were policed to conform to Luo group identity.[454] A key feature of this identity was the maintenance of urban and rural connections, which, if spatially and temporally impossible throughout ones life, were to be achieved in death by way of interment in Luoland. This requirement, however, created new contradictions as Mombasa's wage labour economy barely enabled labourers to make ends meet, let alone pay for repatriation if one died. Practices such as burying banana stumps together with the belongings of the dead (for example, a piece of their clothing) in mock funerals back in Luoland emerged and were widely adopted from the 1930s. The practice continues to date. From the late 1940s, and throughout the 1950s, at a time when rail and port workers earned better salaries, the Luo Union's and other welfare organisations' core responsibilities included ensuring that, in death, the expenses for transporting bodies back to Luoland were taken care of by a member's contributions.[455]

Connections between the urban Luo and the rural homeland were further strengthened through public engagement facilitated by the popular press. The press became the interface that virtually eliminated the temporal distance between the urban Luo in Mombasa and their rural counterparts, as news and ideas regularly flowed between the two groups despite their irregular meetings. The tradition of press propaganda was initiated by the colonial state, in conjunction with missionaries, through the medium of district news sheets. These began circulating somewhere in the mid-1910s. District news sheets carried information on developments in particular districts, and were disseminated to schools, but also to LNC's, whose membership included individuals who had acquired formal education. The sheets' main aim was to propagate the European modernisation agenda and, thus, subtly encourage their consumers to adopt European tastes, which, in turn, would arouse interest in integration into the wage labour economy. The press propaganda tradition was reproduced by urban Luo living in Mombasa, however their interests lay in wanting to be informed of going-ons in their homeland districts and, more importantly, in wanting to influence rural articulations of lifestyles adopted by the urban Luo labourer. The Central Kavirondo District commissioner's comments that, "[…]Luo LNCs would be interested in subsidising publicity material because they are very interested in the political and social development of the masses […]."[456] demonstrated that the urban Luo fully recognised the crucial role the press could play in encouraging the rural landscape's acceptance of and assimilation into urban lifestyles. From the 1920s, newspapers such as *Habari ya Leo*, *Baraza*, *Pamoja*, *Coast African Express*, *Hodi*, and *Kenya ni Yetu* (all written in Kiswahili) emerged, and were soon followed by those written in vernacular Luo.

Coast African Express, *Hodi*, and *Kenya ni Yetu* were produced in Mombasa and their content included images of the life of migrant Luo labourers living in the town. Rail and port labourers

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[454] KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/376 Administration (Ramogi African welfare). While addressing members of Ramogi welfare, Paul Mboya, a member of the Luo Union, was categorical that, through the union, Luo elders should strive to direct the multitude of Luo people to behave in a "particular manner."

[455] KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/316 Luo Union, 1951–1955.

[456] KNA/PC/NZA/3/6/129 Vernacular Literature, 1944–1949. Reply to request made by the Luo Union to recommence printing of *Pamoja* newspaper in 1946.

endeavours were thus a prominent feature in the newspaper, and the Luo often received special commendations for their contributions to the expansions at the rail and harbours.[457] Though produced in Nairobi, *Habari ya Leo* was also distributed in Mombasa, and included in its features were personal stories of ethnic Luo who had done exceptionally well in urban areas, including Mombasa. The newspaper began circulating in the 1920s and ran through to 1931, when the depression rendered its continuance impossible.

The press tradition went into a lull in the 1930s, but a revival was witnessed at the beginning of the 1940s and continued through to the 1950s. Aside from the re-emergence of Kiswahili language propaganda newspapers of old, this new era witnessed the introduction of the vernacular press. Newspapers including *Ramogi*, *Fwenyo Adieri*, and *Dongo Jo Central Nyanza* emerged when the Luo language was at the zenith of its consolidation, and tensions over ethnic nationalism and positionality in the Swahili social sphere were aggressively playing out in colonial Mombasa. The vernacular press became a powerful medium for articulating Luo ethnic citizenship in the diaspora,[458] and it was a great tool in expressing ideals of elitism and modernity, features they believed the Luo labourer certainly possessed.

[457] Ibid.

[458] James Ogude, "The vernacular press and the articulation of Luo ethnic citizenship: The case of Achieng' Oneko's Ramogi," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 13, No.2 (2001), pp. 42–55.

5.8. Enter the Luo woman

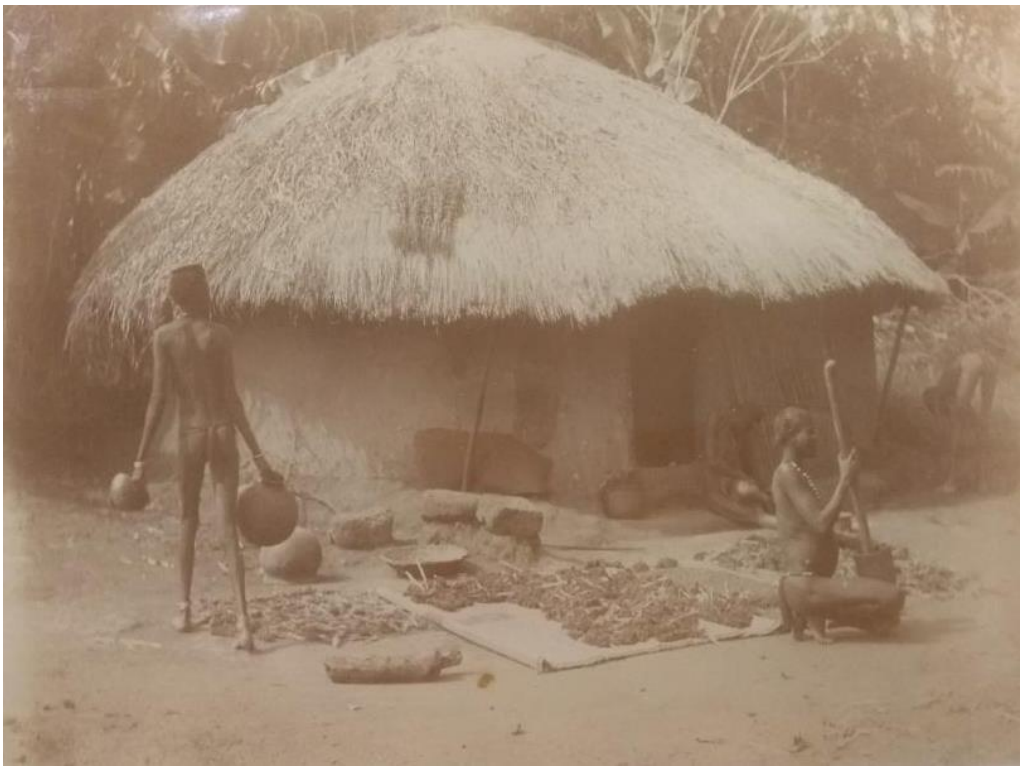

Figure 5.2. A photograph of Luo women performing domestic duties, circa 1910. The cieno *tail worn around the waist denotes their marital status. The place and roles of the Luo woman dramatically shifted with the introduction of the colonial economy and a number chose to migrate to Mombasa as wives and partners to Luo rail and port workers.* Source, Mill Hill missionaries Archives in Oosterbeek, the Netherlands

African women's entry into mainstream feminist scholarship is a fairly recent phenomenon.[459] While compiling her seminal work *Queens, Prostitutes and Peasants,*[460] Hay lamented that they only came across four books that properly analysed African women in their discourses. Hay's work is crucial in summarising the main historiographical themes in discourses on African

[459] Barbara Smith, Akasha Gloria Hull, and Patrice Bell Scott, *All the Women are White, all the Blacks are Men but some of us are Brave* (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1982). This classic text on black feminism was among the first critiques of the feminist movement's presentation of white women's worldviews as the collective experience of the female world.

[460] Margaret Jean Hay, "Queens, Prostitutes and Peasants: Historical Perspectives on African Women, 1971–1986," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol 22, No.3 (location: Taylor and Francis, 1988), pp. 431–447.

women up to 1985. The work additionally demonstrates the linkages between these themes and the dominant narratives of particular historical periods. Hay argued that initial discourses on African women depicted them as queens, and historiography focused on the positions and roles played by elite African women. Scholarship focused on women in leadership, on traders, and on market women. The "prostitutes" narratives followed the "queens" era, and these discourses heavily borrowed perspectives from the feminist movement. Analyses thus centred on women re-evaluating their positionality in society, and challenging the values ascribed to their personhood as women, mothers, and daughters. The re-appraisal of female gendered roles in family production introduced a new era of property accumulation by women and, in turn, disrupted and radically transformed structures of communal power relations. Discourses in the "peasants" era, Hay posits, began as critiques of liberalism. Accounts therefore painted women as the unfortunate victims of capitalist economies, severely devaluing their labour at the behest of profits. Since Hays analysis, an abundance of historical scholarship focusing on gender in general and African women in particular have been produced and the themes discussed by Hays continue to occupy space in these new discourses.[461] New theoretical approaches have also been introduced with Africology,[462] Black feminism, and intersectionality[463] becoming popular trends in analysing African women in Africa and the diaspora. Strides are also being made in connecting issues of gender with imperialism and race.[464] Moreover, sexualities and femininities, in their varied social performances, are also becoming popular perspectives in African women and gender studies.

Kenneth Little was among the first Africanists to pay attention to African women migrating into towns. He demonstrated that women migrated to colonial urban centres for reasons centred around escaping the constraints of family, kinship, and lineages. Women, he argued, migrated to cities to enjoy the material and non-material elements of culture, behaviour patterns and ideas that originate or are distinctive to the city.[465] Analogous to Little's study is Jean Baptiste's *Conjugal Rights*,[466]a study that chronicled the journey of Gabonese women in their quest to acquire space in the growing colonial urban centres of Libreville. Baptiste's work presented the

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[461] Scholars who have engaged with Hay's work include Kathleen Sheldon, *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014) and Iyelli Ichile Hanks, *Black Magic Woman: Towards a Theory of Africana Women's Resistance* (Doctoral dissertation, Howard University, 2011). Available at: https://search.proquest.com/docview/878545824?accountid=12045.

[462] Yaba Amgborale Blay, "All the 'Africans' are Men, all the "Sistas" are "American," but some of us Resist: Realizing African Feminism(S) as an Africological Research Methodology," *The Journal of Pan African studies* 2, No.2 (2008).

[463] Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls*, 18, No.1 (2016), pp 166–173; Sabine Broeck, *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness* (New York: SUNY Press, 2018).

[464] Jean Allman, Susan Geiger, and Nakanyike Musisi (ed), *Women in African Colonial Histories* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

[465] Kenneth Little, *African Women in Towns: An Aspect of Africa's Social Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 18.

[466] Rachel Jean-Baptiste, *Conjugal Rights: Marriage, Sexuality, and Urban Life in Colonial Libreville, Gabon* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014).

operations and challenges of migrant women navigating structures of colonial feminisation, and the roles they played overall in changing established racial, colonial ,and social power structures in Gabon. Luise White's *The Comforts of Home*[467] is another seminal work analysing women's migration. This study chronicles the development of female sex work in colonial Nairobi. This section will engage Hay's, Little's, Baptiste's, and White's work, to examine Luo women's movement and subsequent interaction with Luo rail and port workers in Mombasa. It aims to reveal the central role they played in effecting the economic and social transformations that were witnessed in colonial Mombasa's urban space. Migrant Luo women, indeed, co-opted Mombasa's urban landscape, and particularly the spatial distance between Mombasa and Luoland, to escape new representations of Luo femininities that were developing in the rural areas. Their engagement with urban Mombasa produced a social revolution and enabled the radical transformations that were witnessed in the population dynamics of the town. At the same time, they contributed to the social and economic mobility of Luo port and rail workers. The movement of Luo women to Mombasa constituted some of the first registers of feminist resistance to colonial and African patriarchal structures, and ushered in what Aderinto described as new ideals of female socialisation.[468]

5.9.1 British colonialism and the deterioration of the rural landscape for Luo women.

The migration of Luo women to Mombasa, initially facilitated by the direct agency of KURH men but later as individual migrants, was a response to the colonial experience that had fundamentally altered their traditional gender roles, particularly in family production. Colonialism had indeed influenced the cultural revolution that was occurring in the rural areas and ushered in an era where Luo cultural femininities were redefined, communal property relations were reorganised, and gendered labour values were redistributed and re-evaluated. These changes severely limited women's ability to survive the rural landscape and to navigate family/communal social relations. It was under these circumstances that a number of Luo women made the conscious choice to migrate and seek better opportunities elsewhere, and Mombasa became a popular destination. Mombasa had a particular pull for individual migrant Luo women who, in line with this study, later partnered with Luo port and rail workers. Firstly, its unique urban characteristics, and especially its status as an international port city, provided opportunities for them to engage with the cash economy within colonial spaces where femininities demanded women operate within boundaries of the private. In addition, Mombasa presented options for conversion to Islam and women converts were – in contrast to recently revaluated Luo customary laws – granted full rights of property accumulation. Most importantly, though, the distance between Luoland and Mombasa provided safety as it significantly reduced possibilities of repatriation, a commonly applied punitive measure for Luo women considered "difficult" or disloyal to men and their community. Figure 5.3 shows Luo women participating in hunting, and reveals that gender essentialism was not a defining feature

[467] White, *The Comforts of Home.*

[468] Saheed Aderinto, "Journey to Work: Transnational Prostitution in Colonial British West Africa," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 24, No.1 (location: University of Texas press, 2015), p. 101, pp. 99–124.

of Luo femininities in the precolonial era, while the letter extract in Figure 5.4. reveals the extent to which Luo men worked to control and curtail the movement and independence of Luo women in nearby Kisumu town through community associations, which made moving to Mombasa a much more attractive option.

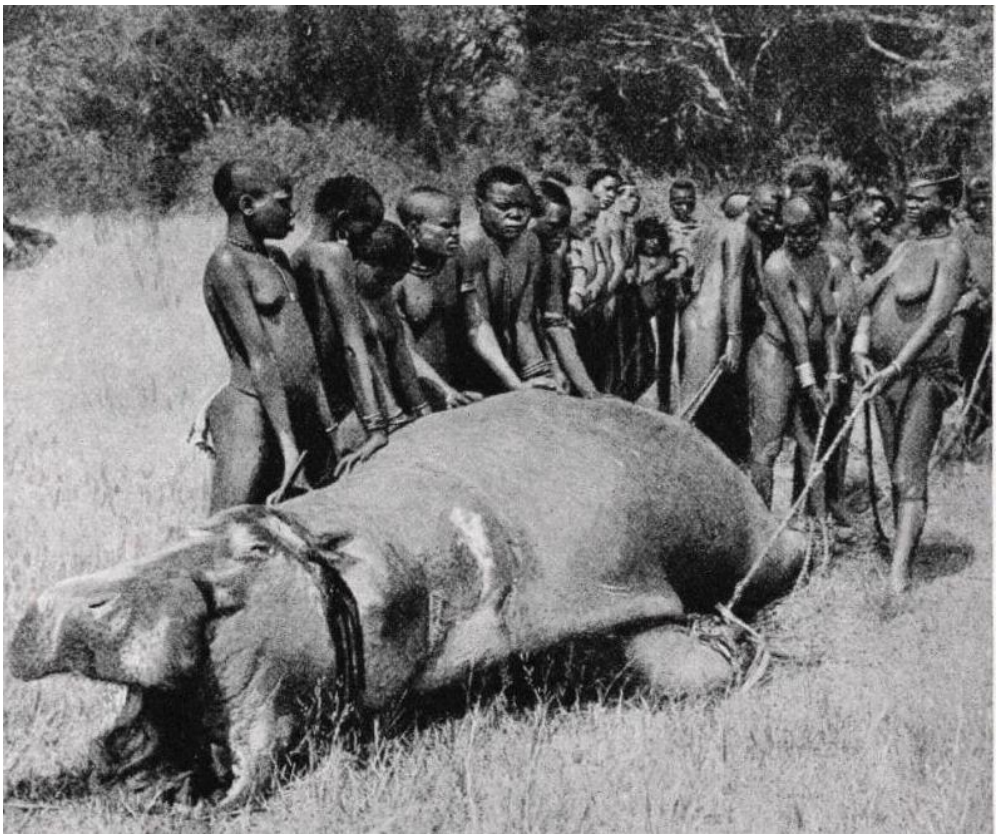
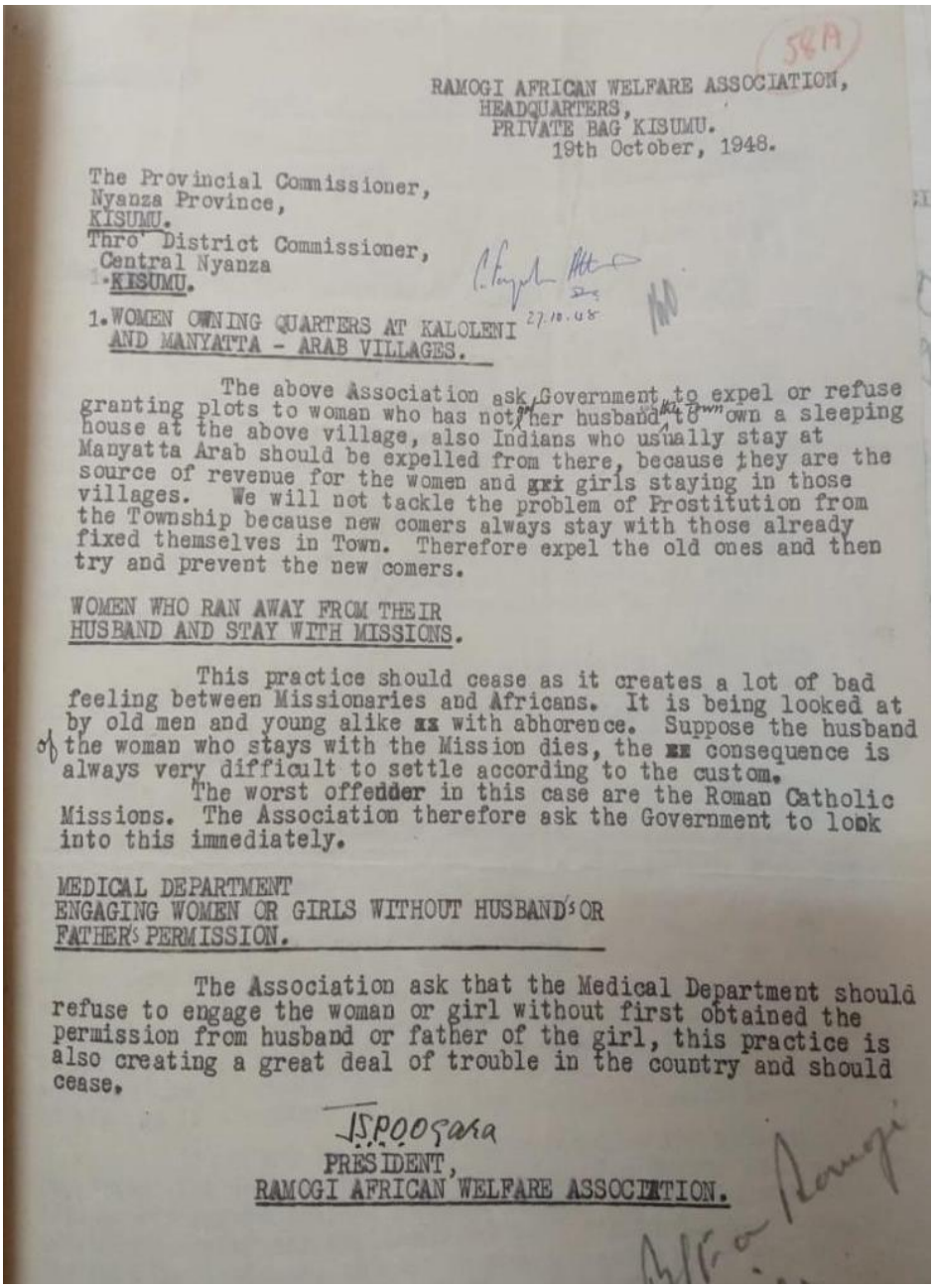


Figure 5.3. Luo women participating in a hippo hunt. The caption in the photo reads: Women of the Kavirondo tribe […] are most enterprising. They pursue agriculture, herding, hunting, and fishing with their menfolk, and are their tribe's only "medicine-men." […]plucky and dextrous hunters, the fiercest hippopotamus and largest elephant invariably succumb to their traps and spears. Photograph accessed on 15 February 2024 at: https://ian.macky.net/secretmuseum/kavirondo_women_hauling_hippo.jpg.



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RAMOGI AFRICAN WELFARE ASSOCIATION,
HEADQUARTERS,
PRIVATE BAG KISUMU.
19th October, 1948.

The Provincial Commissioner,
Nyanza Province,
KISUMU.
Thro' District Commissioner,
Central Nyanza
KISUMU.

27.10.48

1. WOMEN OWNING QUARTERS AT KALOLENI AND MANYATTA - ARAB VILLAGES.

The above Association ask Government to expel or refuse granting plots to woman who has not her husband, to own a sleeping house at the above village, also Indians who usually stay at Manyatta Arab should be expelled from there, because they are the source of revenue for the women and girls staying in those villages. We will not tackle the problem of Prostitution from the Township because new comers always stay with those already fixed themselves in Town. Therefore expel the old ones and then try and prevent the new comers.

WOMEN WHO RAN AWAY FROM THEIR HUSBAND AND STAY WITH MISSIONS.

This practice should cease as it creates a lot of bad feeling between Missionaries and Africans. It is being looked at by old men and young alike with abhorence. Suppose the husband of the woman who stays with the Mission dies, the consequence is always very difficult to settle according to the custom.
The worst offedder in this case are the Roman Catholic Missions. The Association therefore ask the Government to look into this immediately.

MEDICAL DEPARTMENT
ENGAGING WOMEN OR GIRLS WITHOUT HUSBAND'S OR FATHER'S PERMISSION.

The Association ask that the Medical Department should refuse to engage the woman or girl without first obtained the permission from husband or father of the girl, this practice is also creating a great deal of trouble in the country and should cease.

J.S.Ooyaka
PRESIDENT,
RAMOGI AFRICAN WELFARE ASSOCIATION.

Figure 5.4. A copy of a letter by Ramogi welfare association members requesting the colonial state's help to curtail the activities of independent Luo women in Kisumu. Photograph source: The Kenya National Archives, PC/NZA/ Association and Institutions, Riwruok Luo.

5.9.2 The reorganisation of communal property relations

The changes induced by colonialism in the matter of communal property ownership were a major factor catalysing Luo women's choice of Mombasa as a migration destination. The reserve policy in particular limited options for expansion and occupation of new lands and, consequently, put considerable strain on the prevailing cultural practices of tenureship among the Luo. Because of land scarcities, Luo agnatic relations swiftly transformed to displace some persons from accessing land ownership and inheritance rights.[469] Women and *jodak* tenants were amongst the first groups to lose land rights in this regard.

Wilson's[470] study comprehensively captured Luo tenure practices at the time of colonial occupation. He was categorical, however, that respondents whose material was used to finalise this work were explicit about recent changes in tenure practices, and that these changes were in response to the colonial experience. Wilson's work revealed that precolonial tenure amongst the Luo recognised that land was the property of the community. The land was acquired through conquest, and lineage warriors moved to conquer new areas whenever currently occupied lands became exhausted. Every member of an *Oganda* (lineage), had inalienable rights to cultivate a garden within the territory *(piny)* of their *oganda*. Within the *oganda*, women acquired usufruct rights to lands belonging to either their fathers (through their mothers) or through their husbands. These cultivation rights were inalienable and could only be removed if a woman changed their lineage by way of marriage, divorce, or remarriage. A man gave land to his wife upon marriage and each wife cultivated the land together with her children. Wives' portions thus belonged to them and all unmarried children, irrespective of gender. When a woman married, they lost ownership rights over their mother's portion but. at the same time, gained rights to portions given by the husband. These lands would then belong to her and her children. In the event of divorce, a woman returned to her father's home and was given a portion of her mother's land to cultivate. Her brothers or other male kin (in cases where the mother did not produce male children) could not take away these lands in inheritance when their father died. If a husband died without a male issue, their land reverted back to their father or nearest agnatic relations, except the portions that were allocated to the wife/wives. These lands could only be taken away if the woman refused to be taken in levirate and, instead, opted to be remarried in a different lineage. If the woman was taken in levirate, the levirate man did not gain rights to such lands, which remained property of the woman and her children. Occupation and usufruct rights extended to protect all children produced by a woman. For instance, if a woman came to her marriage with a *kimirwa/nyathi simba* (child born before cattle were paid to her father as bride price, and hence considered illegitimate), the *kimirwa* had rights to inherit portions given to the mother.

The social practices of tenure rights given to women began changing when reserves were created. As Ogot observed, the freezing of boundaries created a major economic problem for the Luo who, accustomed to moving to find new homes whenever there were contests over land,

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[469] Glickman, "Patriliny among the Gusii and Luo of Kenya."

[470] Wilson, *Luo Customary Laws.*

were now confined within specific land units.[471]As the value of land increased, clan and lineage territories were sealed and land inheritance rights were strictly tied to patrilineal lines.[472] Widows then lost land rights as agnatic kin of husbands now had the rights to land in levirate arrangements. Divorced women, too, were disinherited as patrimonial ties began conferring more rights on agnatic male relations. *Kimirwa* children became strangers and were accorded similar status to *jodak*, whose rights of inheritance were directly linked to their immediate benefactors. As the story of Halima Achieng below reveals, migration then provided opportunities where women could opt out of the growing tensions over lands in rural Luoland. Mombasa became the perfect destination, where these women could participate in the cash economy and eke out a living, far from communal restrictions.

> *I got married to Joshua in the year 1950. I did not particularly like him, but had no choice in the marriage as I had begot a kimirwa and the man responsible had run away to Nairobi. Soon after marriage negotiations had been completed, Joshua left me at his parent's home and went back to Thika where he worked in a sisal plantation. He had not yet made me my own hut and I was living in his old simba*.[473] He went for a very long time and did not communicate with us. We lived badly. Often, we would go without food and his family did not accept my child. They insisted that they would not accept a stranger taking away part of their land in inheritance. I began selling groundnuts at the market in Akala to make some money. It was in this market that I was told that Kisumu provided better conditions for working as ayah (child minder) especially if one had received some formal education. Since I had gone to the mission school for two years, I thought I would try my luck and find work at the European or Arab houses in Kisumu. I left Akala in the pretext of visiting my uncle in Kisumu, and there, I secured employment as a cleaner for Ali who worked as a cloth trader. I began having relations with Ali, and soon moved to his house where I began performing wifely duties even though our relationship was not legally recognised. Ali stopped paying for my services as soon as I began living with him. He was also violent. I then decided to move farther, to Mombasa where I had heard that men paid more money for women. On reaching Mombasa, I was shocked at the size of the town! I was given accommodation by a man who worked as a goods carrier at the rail godowns, and we began living as husband and wife. He earned very little and life was difficult. I looked for work in the beer bars, where I learned how to brew the popular "changáa" gin. It was here that my profession as a sex worker became established. When my family heard of my endeavours in Mombasa, I became a pariah. I know I cannot go back to Luoland and have made my peace with it. I however often think of my child, whom I left with my uncle in Kisumu.*

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[471] Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo*.

[472] Glickman, "Patriliny among the Gusii and Luo of Kenya."

[473] Simba is the housing built for unmarried bachelors in their father's compounds.

Joseph Ouma shares a similar story of contested patrimonial land rights. The 71-year-old is a second-generation migrant whose "ancestral" home is in Migori. Ouma lives in Bangladesh with his two wives; Amondi an ethnic Luo and Rose an ethnic Manyala. His first wife, Achieng, was a local beer brewer who unfortunately died; she is buried in Makaburini public cemetery. Joseph's father, Saulo, came to Mombasa in search of his mother, who migrated into the town in the 1930s.

> *My father was a kimirwa. Because of his status, my grandmother's choice in marriage partners became limited and she ended up being the third wife of a much older man. The man accepted him as his legal father but died when my father was still a young boy.*

Kimirwas' status as legal sons of the household is recognised with finality when the adoptive father pays a bride price for the son, which, in this case, had not happened.

> *When my adoptive grandparent died, his extended family began constant quarrels with my grandmother. She could not bear it anymore and hence left her marital home, and sought refuge at her maternal home. Efforts to reconcile the family did not bear fruit, which greatly annoyed my grandmother's maternal household and particularly the uncles. The contests were mainly related to land and inheritance rights. One day, my grandmother disappeared with a labourer from Mombasa, leaving my father behind. When my father grew up, he decided to go with one of his neighbours to Mombasa in the hopes of finding my grandmother. He was also tired of everyday quarrels at home, and he hoped to start a new life in Mombasa. Mombasa however turned out to be a sisal plantation in Voi. He worked several contracts in Voi and later moved on to work at the port in Mombasa. Here, he met and married my mother. She was a beer brewer.*

Joseph confirms that his father's stigmatising *kimirwa* status influenced his decision to marry Achieng, another social outcast. It was also the reason for her interment at the public cemetery in Mombasa, just like his father; both had "no rights" to land in Migori. Asked whether he feels incomplete because of the broken relationship with his "motherland," Joseph replies that he is actually happy because he finally found a home amongst the diaspora Luo population living in Bangladesh. Here, his status as "a child of no one" is diminished as Bangladesh provides a home and community for ethnic Luo rejected in Luoland.

The translocation of the site of family and communal production from the home to the wage labour economy considerably changed the values of Luo women's productive labour. The monetary compensation for labour provided *outside* the home, and mainly performed by men, and non-compensation of those provided *inside* the home, and performed mainly by women, shifted the values of traditional forms of gendered labour and invalidated the contribution of women in family and communal property acquisition. Before European occupation, labour was uniformly valued as a resource for keeping family and society running, and hence gendered division of labour was no more than a product of adapting to existing environments and lived

realities, rather than having any form of essentialism attached.[474] European capitalist reinterpretations of gendered labour served to devalue African women's labour, especially since household duties, though accepted as nurturing, were considered invisible and unproductive and hence not given any monetary value.[475]

In a majority of pre-colonial African societies, labour for personal accumulation was organised within the family and through the agency of women. Women did the bulk of subsistence work and were the chief producers of life and labour, making them, alongside land, one of the most valuable resource in communities.[476] When a woman left her maternal homestead for marriage, cattle were sent to her father to compensate for the loss of her labour, and those of her future children. The father usually used these cattle to acquire more wives (and children) or he would exchange them for political and social standing. Women and cattle therefore generated each other in a cycle of male accumulation and family formation.[477] The wealthiest men were those who owned many cattle and many wives. In this way, women's manifest and latent labours metamorphosised into male economic and political power. It is for this reason that whenever divorce occurred amongst the Luo, deductions were made from the bride price to be returned (a number of cows for every child borne, and some more for every year spent with the husband) to the extent that, in most cases, no returns were actually made.[478] If the woman produced many children or had stayed for a considerable period of time with a man, the husband was, in fact, the one with a debt of cattle to pay.[479]

Because land and property ownership were closely tied to a family's subsistence capabilities, a man was only able to accumulate large parcels of land if he had a large family of many wives and children who could work the land. In the case of the Luo, overall family wealth was measured by how many and how full one's granaries were, together with how much cattle and other domestic animals one possessed.[480] Men were obliged to build granaries for wives as soon as a home was established for them, and the granaries became property semi-owned by both man and wife. This was because each wife and her children were responsible for filling their particular granary. Upon getting married, a woman was sent to her new homestead with gifts of animals, which, in time, reproduced and increased the family's herd. Because women produced and co-owned family property, men were therefore required to seek permission from their wives to redistribute them. For example, a man could not use cattle belonging to his wife to pay bride price and he could not redistribute grain from their granary without her consent.

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[474] Xavier Vigna and Michelle Zancharini-Fournel, "Gender History and Labour History: Intersections," *Clio* 38. (2013). Online since 15 September 2014 at: http://journals.openedition.org/cliowgh/306.

[475] Ibid, p.177.

[476] White, *The Comforts of Home*.

[477]Anne McClintock, "The Scandal of the Whorearchy: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi," *Transition*, No.52 (Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 95.

[478] Paul Onyango, O.I., 20 April 2018, Bangladesh, Mombasa.

[479] Wilson, *Luo Customary Laws and Marriage Laws Customs*.

[480] Peter Odongo, O.I., 26 April 2018, Nyali Mombasa.

Property co-ownership would, however, be contested with the official embracing of a monetary economy and the adoption of cash as the main contributor to family property. Thus, as cash became much more important in the family economy, women whose labour values contributed less cash became marginalised. Having lost land rights and their position in property accumulation, women became much more dependent on men, and this situation increased their vulnerability. A number of Luo women therefore opted to break away from this growing cycle of male dominance and rural poverty, and moving far away from the community was the first step towards attaining personal freedom.

5.9.3 Conjugality and migration to Mombasa

Jean Baptiste[481] tells a compelling story of a community of former slaves who had been rescued and settled in Libreville. After settling into their new homes, the community, made up of mainly men, mutinied against their missionary benefactors and began kidnapping women from surrounding communities with the intent of making them their wives. The rescued slaves were the cause of much terror as they threatened to inflict further harm upon neighbouring residents unless they were given access to more women. Baptiste's story is an observed example of conflict that often arises in situations where the gender ratio is imbalanced. Studies have proven that living in environments that provide little companionship and opportunities for social and biological reproduction produces feelings of isolation, which can lead to the breakdown of not only the individual, but the society as a whole.[482] Colonial Mombasa's gender ratio was heavily skewed. Of the 18,000 Africans enumerated in the 1921 census, for example, over 12,000 were men. The Mombasa Housing and Population Survey, moreover, showed that, in 1948, the African proper male population stood at 29,244 against 13,609 women.[483] The majority of the women captured in Mombasa censuses[484] up to the 1950s were, indeed, classified under the racial categories of Arab, Indian, and European, i.e. women who migrant Luo labourers could not access.

From the outset of European occupation, the population of African women on Mombasa Island was very low, and this image was the official demographic face of the town through to the 1950s. This was in glaring contrast to the numbers recorded on the mainland among the

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[481] Jean-Baptiste, *Conjugal Rights.*

[482] Lea-Maria Löbel, Hannes Kröger, Ana Nanette Tibubos, "Social Isolation and Loneliness in the Context of Migration: A Cross-Sectional Study of Refugees, Migrants, and the Native Population in Germany," *SOEP Papers on Multidisciplinary Panel Data Research*, (Berlin, 2021); F. A. S. Jensen, "Psychological Aspects of the Social Isolation of Refugees," *The International Migration Digest*, 3 No.1 (Sage Publications, 1966), pp. 40–60.

[483] KNA/CQ/1/1/20 Housing and Population Survey, Mombasa District, 1948–1961.

[484] Ibid. The survey admitted that the government put little consideration into the matter of Mombasa's population. Censuses were rarely conducted, and population estimates were made by merely scrutinising employment records at KURH. These records did not even capture non-contracted workers. After the census of 1921, it would be 1948 before the next one was conducted, and the subsequent one in 1962. Official population numbers in colonial Mombasa thus remain contentious.

Mijikenda. Moving to work at the rail and port thus presented opportunities for irregular attachments to women, and made it difficult for migrant Luo men to exercise influence over Luo women. This predicament was exacerbated by the fact that, in the initial years of male migration, women who had been left behind in Luoland changed their loyalties, and many abandoned matrimonial homes to remarry elsewhere. From the 1910s up to the 1950s, several cases of the cuckolding of migrant men were presented to the Central Kavirondo LNC's.[485] This changing of loyalties was certainly made possible by customs that viewed marriages as lifelong processes rather than events, hence the last bull cementing marriages "*riso chege*" exchanged when both parties were old.[486]

The loneliness of Luo labourers in Mombasa was compounded by the colonial practice of segregating living arrangements. The various ethnicities working for the KURH were housed in separated quarters, which made it impossible for the Luo to have meaningful interactions with anyone other than male Luo labourers. Furthermore, the low status of *wabara* Luo at the Swahili coast limited labourers' access to women of coastal ethnicities. Luo labourers in Mombasa were therefore walking a tightrope, balancing trying to survive in Mombasa with trying to keep marriages and relationships going in their rural homes. These tensions were worsened by growing contests between the older generation of Luo men in Western Kenya and the relatively younger migrants in Mombasa over control and access to women. The constant oscillating between the urban and the rural,[487] in efforts to keep relationships going, caused considerable work disruptions, and by the end of the 1920s, colonial authorities overlooked as the nascent features of Luo women's migration to Mombasa began manifesting.

The contest between older men in rural areas and younger men in Mombasa influenced the earliest cases of Luo women migrants to Mombasa in the period 1920–1940. Older men wanted to maintain control over their daughters who, at this time, were their primary means of accumulation. Younger migrant men, by contrast, were unable to gather enough money from their wages to pay a bride priceand yet still, were seeking wives who would move with them to Mombasa.[488] Fathers in Luoland had began to arbitrarily demand for extra favours and monies to allow access to their daughters, even as LNCs, which, in this period, acted as the *buch piny*, failed to stabilise an official mechanism for bride price payment. Young men asked for a reduction of the number of ceremonies that followed marriage, but elders were adamant on them following the established, tedious processes. As the battle over access to women raged on, young men changed tack, and resorted to *por* elopement. Indeed, the majority of the first

[485] KNA/PC/NZA/2/7/16 Native Tribunal Courts, Central Kavirondo, 1932–38.

[486] Wilson, *Luo Customary Laws and Marriage Laws Customs.*

[487] Labourers were often forced to leave their workstations to tend to domestic issues in Luoland. These labourers' rarely made it back to Mombasa because of the costs involved. Mombasa's KURH thus lost a number of skilled labourers, many of whom opted to move to Nairobi or Kisumu towns that were closer to Luoland.

[488] KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/376 Administration (Ramogi African Welfare). Joel Omino's comments at a Central Kavirondo LNC meeting in Kisumu, on 26 May 1946. He reiterated that migrant labourers were in the habit of misleading girls and even people's wives in order to get them to go and live with them in the towns.

batch of Luo women arriving in Mombasa came following a *por* marriage.[489] As Wilson aptly put it:

> *[T]his form of marriage that can only be directly translated as elopement is becoming increasingly popular among young, educated Luo […] the preliminary ceremonies are omitted. When escape to the towns is easily accomplished then brideswealth is not paid at all and these unions end in separation, and these women frequently turn to other forms of marriages or concubinage which are outside the customary laws of the Luo.*[490]

Por marriage was allowed in pre-colonial Luo society as it was believed that a young bridegroom in constrained circumstances would eventually pay the bride price. In particular, though, it was hoped that *por* unions would produce girls who would get married in the future, and the family of the mother would then take the cattle of the daughter's bride price as compensation for their daughter. *Por* thus ensured that even the poorest had a chance at marriage and subsequent extension of their lineage.

To legitimise *por*, a young man brought the woman he wanted to marry to his *simba* and had intercourse with her. She would then remain in his home and *cook in his mother's hut*. Cooking was the definitive action signalling that she was now a married woman. The Luo word for marriage, *tedo*, is in fact, the same word for cooking. *Por* was also deemed legitimate if a man ran off with a woman and went to live with her in "distant lands" and amongst a different ethnic group. In the pre-colonial era, when distant lands actually meant neighbouring *pinje* or Bantu lands, her family generally went in search of the pair to try and convince the woman to come back. If she refused, they would accept some cattle as compensation for her bride price. The number of cattle was usually less than in a normal marriage negotiation. For young Luo KURH labourers in Mombasa, distant lands presented opportunities to acquire partners in an economy that had limited avenues for wealth accumulation. Contrary to the rules of *por*, however, young Luo men were not willing to defer payment of the bride price; rather, they planned to ignore it altogether.

Finding themselves in strange lands and with an illegitimate status, the first batch of Luo women in Mombasa began their migrant experience from a disadvantaged and vulnerable position. Many found themselves in deplorable living conditions, sharing rooms in lodges and as tenants in dilapidated accommodation, as colonial authorities continued to neglect housing for its African labourer population. Even as the housing situation deteriorated through to the 1930s, the Carter Commission in 1934 recommended no changes to the reserve policy, which could have allowed changes in land ownership for non-coastal indigenes. The commission claimed that migrant ethnicities were not forced to bring their families along to live with them in the

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[489] Ibid. The Ramogi Association's memo to the governor of the Kenya colony contesting the Native Christian Marriage and Divorce Ordinance 1931, which gave autonomy to girls to choose their marital partners. It was particularly difficult to follow up on bride price if a daughter had run off to Mombasa. Memo dated 31 July 1946.
[490] Wilson, *Luo Customary Laws and Marriage Laws Customs*. p.118.

urban areas and, if they did, they could always find accommodation further inland in the more rural areas.[491] This was untrue. All land falling under the colonial side of greater Mombasa were either community owned or crown land, and, because the reserve policy had created land shortages, strangers were not welcome in *wapwani* communal lands. Moreover, Luo women's vulnerability increased in their new abodes as, in this period, communal mechanisms for dispute resolution were evolving and becoming much more patriarchal.[492] Quinney's supposition that personal and social values shape people's concept of victims, and that victimhood is a social construct used as a means of social control by those in power,[493] was clearly evident in Mombasa, where women facing marital challenges were viewed as delinquents who were fomenting female disobedience. Having eloped from Luoland, which blocked their father's access to their bride wealth, these women's status as victims of deception changed, and they acquired pariah status as deviant women.[494] Mechanisms to provide recourse for redress whenever they had marital problems were therefore blocked, as their situation in Mombasa was regarded as having neither customary status nor communal favour.

5.9.4 Luo women and the transformation of the positionality of Luo ethnicity in colonial Mombasa

Other Luo women followed the railway line to Mombasa shortly after the group who had left partnered with men. This second set of women was in search of ways to improve their material conditions, as the effects of the cash economy and male migration had negatively impacted their general welfare. For some, Mombasa presented opportunities for income generation, while others hoped that far-off lands could finally provide enough distance to escape familial and community bonds. Mombasa was a favourite destination for "misfit" Luo women: those running away from their husbands or marriage arrangements; those who had produced *kimirwa and nyithi simba*; those who had been accused of witchcraft, sex workers, "wild" and worldly women, and swathes of other women whom Luo men regarded as eccentric. These women hoped to eke out a living and begin new lives as part of the new African urban population in Mombasa.

The colonial economy in Mombasa, however, presented limited options for Luo women looking to eke out a living in the town. This was the case in many colonial towns, where women were not only heavily policed, but also offered chances of gainful employment only if the work fell within the boundaries of Western representations of gendered female roles. Aderinto argued that these restrictions were reflections of perceived threats women had to transverse racial lines,

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[491] R. Carter, *Kenya Land Commission Report* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1934), Paragraph 1351–1365 discusses native tenants in the coastal mainland and native tenants in Mombasa.

[492] Samwel Okuro, "Our Women Must Return Home: Institutionalized Patriarchy in Colonial Central Nyanza District, 1945–1963," *Journal of Asian and African Studies,* 45 (2010), pp. 522–33.

[493] Richard Quinney, "Who is the Victim?," *Criminology,* 10 No. 3 (Sage Publications, 1972), pp. 314-323.

[494] Okuro, "Misfit Mothers, Wayward Wives and Disobedient Daughters."

which, if followed through, could jeopardise the potency of empire and, by extension, imperial, male, national self-esteem.[495] This fear of women was evident in colonial Mombasa where prostitution was a recurring topic of discussion in government circulars and legislative agendas.[496] The colonial state turned to Luo welfare organisations, and co-opted their influence to police the movement and behaviour of Luo women. Insisting on Luo womanhood mirroring Victorian femininity, Luo men, through welfare organisations, pushed for women's employment to be restricted to caregiving positions. This meant that a majority of working Luo women – because they worked in defiance of men – were pushed into the margins of the colonial economy. Hawking and petty trading, sex work, cleaning, and beer/liquor brewing thus became the most common economic activities for Luo women from the 1920s up to the 1950s.

How, then, did Luo women's mobilities transform Luo positionality in Mombasa town? How did their movement contribute to, especially, the economic changes witnessed by the Luo population working for the KURH? Because women operated in the periphery of the official economy in Mombasa, official figures regarding their contribution to the developments witnessed in the town do not exist. Their influence on improvements seen in Mombasa is, however, indisputable. Firstly, Luo women's presence in the town was a key factor contributing to the changes witnessed in Mombasa's housing policies starting in the 1920s and running through to the decolonisation years of the 1950s. Whereas the colonial government overlooked the issue of migrant labourers' housing, from the mid-1920s, KURH management began investigating this question and, in particular, looked into how they could settle married migrant workers with families in better living quarters.[497] From the 1930s, workers were given housing allowances. A key reason for this development was to enable labourers with families to find better housing. Though negligible, the allowances progressively increased from the late 1930s to the 1950s, and this allowed a cadre of Luo labourers to live a more agreeable urban life in Mombasa.

In addition, Luo families influenced the commencement of housing schemes in Mombasa. Several housing schemes aimed at settling rail and port workers were started after World War II. These provided proper modern housing, with plumbing and running water, similar to those occupied by Europeans. The housing schemes continued well into the 1960s and were the reason why some Swahili groups wanting to access them, began requesting the colonial state to recognise them as African. The photographs in Figures 5.5 and 5.6. show the Mombasa Railways housing scheme in 1940, and today.

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[495] Aderinto, "Journey to Work." The European colonist was particularly wary of white men mingling with African women.

[496] KNA/PC/COAST/1/10/166 Township Matters, 1913; KNA/CQ/I/19/25 Annual report Mombasa district, 1932–1939.

[497] KNA/K/331/11/87-842 *Straight Talk on Labour,* (Nairobi: Government printer, 1928).

Figure 5.5

Figure 5.6.

Fig 5.5 and 5.6. Mombasa Railways housing scheme in the 1940s and a photo taken by the researcher in 2019. The housing scheme catered to migrant labourers with family. 1940s photograph is courtesy of G.C.W Ogilvie, *The Housing Of Africans in the Urban Areas of Kenya* (Nairobi: The Kenya information office, 1946).

Luo women, moreover, made significant contributions to the appraisal and stabilisation of Luo household incomes in Mombasa. By engaging in work in the periphery of the mainstream economy – i.e. the black economy, which drove Mombasa's booming informal sector – they were able to supplement household incomes and contribute to the matter of property acquisition.[498] Jacinta[499] owns several plots of land in Magongo, which were inherited from her mother, who, in turn, inherited them from her grandmother. She suspects that her grandmother, who was the original owner of these plots, was a sex worker. Her grandmother was already a wealthy woman in the 1950s, at the time she met her grandfather, who was a train engine fireman. She pegs her suspicion on the fact that there is no clear line tracing the origins of their wealth as both grandparents were neither educated nor from elite families. Luo sex workers were, indeed, able to accumulate a tidy sum as they negotiated for higher pay from European, Arab, and Asian clients, and this money was used to accumulate property, which later became family property. Mercy[500] is another example. She owns and runs an illegal distillery in Bangladesh, where she makes the popular liquor *chang'aa*, which is distributed throughout several informal settlements in Mombasa. Mercy says that her family business spans four generations of women, and that knowledge of brewing, and distribution through underground networks, was passed down from mother to daughter. *Chang'aa* brewing has afforded Mercy a comfortable life in Mombasa. Though educated (she holds a university degree), Mercy says she continues operating this illegal business because it is more lucrative than formal employment. She owns several houses in Bangladesh and Magongo, where she collects monthly rent, but she insists that her core business is *chang'aa* brewing. Mercy and Jacinta's maternal predecessors were key players, laying foundations for their current material status, and their stories of women pioneers were replicated in a number of Luo households that I interviewed.

Luo women did not, however, freely operate in colonial Mombasa. They were constantly intimidated, harassed, and some were even repatriated for seeking wage employment in the town. The Ramogi African Welfare Association and the Luo Union were the greatest challengers to their freedom, as they literally went on the prowl, looking for Luo women living in the town and wanting to know why they were there. Women merely existing in Mombasa were regularly accused of engaging in sex work, and then indicted for being disloyal to the ethos of Luo womanhood and identity. Ramogi was procedurally pedantic in policing Luo women, so much so that a stipulation in the organisation's rulebook spelled out that "[…] any Luo girl or woman found smoking cigarettes with the lit end inside the mouth and drawing money from the underwear pocket will be liable to prosecution."[501] The association made it difficult for even married women to visit their spouses in Mombasa and women spotted there were interviewed on the nature of their business. When the land consolidation processes began in the late 1950s, Luo Union and Ramogi Welfare found new impetus for deporting women

[498] The Mombasa social survey of 1939, for example, revealed that migrant labourers' wives contributed to household incomes by engaging in trade.

[499] O.I, 12 February 2018. Named changed for privacy purposes.

[500] O.I, 6 February 2018. Named changed for privacy purposes.

[501] KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/376 Administration, (Ramogi Welfare) 1944–1947.

back to Western Kenya, arguing that their presence there was needed to protect land rights of men in urban areas.[502]

Conclusion

The formation of a diaspora Luo constituency in Mombasa was related to the establishment of mediums for negotiating with the colonial state, which would enable the appraisal of Luo positionality in Mombasa's colonial hierarchy. The outcomes of these endeavours were, however, much more profound, and they produced what can only be described as a social revolution in Mombasa's urban landscape. Firstly, the Luo definitively changed the demographic map of Mombasa, shifting its positionality from an Arab settlement to a solidly African town. The consolidation of the various Luo identities into a single ethnic constituency gave them numerical strength, to the point that, by the beginning of the 1940s, even *wapwani* recognised that Mombasa had shifted from being a Swahili town to become a Kavirondo town. Luo KURH labourers additionally influenced the town's spatial development, in that they prompted the construction of modern housing and infrastructure specifically catering to its key demographic, the African labourer class. KURH labourers' experiences, moreover, featured prominently in anti-colonial narratives, and these were appropriated to gain political space in Mombasa in the years leading up to Kenya's independence.

The Luo Union's role in these revolutionary endeavours is worth special mention. The organisation was indeed, the substructure that forged a pan-Luo identity in Mombasa. In addition to providing the platform from where the current Luo identity emerged, the Union was also responsible for shaping and launching the careers of prominent Luo politicians, including Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga. These politicians were instrumental in effecting the transformations witnessed in Mombasa's political status as Kenya's independence drew near. The merging of Luo and Kikuyu ethnic constituencies in the Kenya African National Union (KANU) in the 1950s, enabled a successful negotiation for power with colonialists as the independence agenda was visualised through the lens of the colonial experience of these two ethnic groups. Though current narratives of the Union evoke memories of little more than the establishment the of *Gor Mahia* Football club, whose fanatical following is associated with ethnic Luo, the Union's consolidation of Luo ethnicity in the exact period when Luo rail and port workers needed a community, was truly an accomplishment in surviving Mombasa.

[502] KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/316 Administration: Associations and Institutions, Luo Union, 1951–1955.