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

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## CONCLUSION

In 1961, a petitioner for Kenya's coastal autonomy presented a memorandum to the chairman of the Robertson Commission, vocalising his support for the politics of the *Mwambao*[503] movement, whose main agenda was to demand the reclamation and restoration of Zanzibari indigenous rights. The petitioners statement said, among other things:

> *We would like to explode the fallacy that is very prevalent in this part of Africa, that as long as one has a black pigmentation and fuzzy hair, one has citizenship rights in Africa. Might was right in 1885 and in 1961 Black is right. These people swarming from upcountry in busloads and bogey loads come to earn a living or to shelter from the famine that ravages their country from time to time. They never regard this as their home and they have got their roots firmly entrenched in their own homes. . . . To grant political rights to such a people, who have no patriotic sentiments to the Coastal Strip or who have dual loyalties is a mockery of democracy and a direct threat to the wellbeing of the true nationals of this country. This threat looms very large on our heads, the true sons of Mwambao*[504]

The position of Mombasa and the 16-mile coastal strip came into sharp focus from the beginning of the 1950s, when African mobilisation for political independence gained momentum throughout the colony. While the Mau Mau movement in Central Kenya aimed at reclaiming land rights limited by the introduction of settler farming and the declaration of the White highlands,[505] Mombasa's was dealing with two specific struggles. One group, led by majority upcountry labourer populations, sought to improve worker conditions and was pushing for more African representation in the labour governing structures of the colonial state. This faction was spearheaded by the rail and port workers' trade union networks. A second struggle for independence emerging in Mombasa was commanded by Swahili and Arab indigenes. The concerns of this group were rooted in fears of losing sovereignty when the inevitable independence was gained. This second struggle was testament to, and a response to, the obvious transformations in Mombasa's topographical features, and which were mainly driven by migrant labourers, the majority of whom were Luo KURH workers.

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[503] The *Mwambao* movement was a political campaign led by Arab and Swahili residents of the Kenyan coast. The movement's activities ran between 1953–1963, and its aim was the pursuit of a sovereign region on the coast, which was previously the property of the Sultan. *Mwambao* adherents' claims hinged on fears of political domination by Africans living along the coast and migrants from upcountry, as Kenya moved towards self rule. A more in-depth understanding of the movement's activities can be read in James Brennan, "Lowering the Sultan's Flag: Sovereignty and Decolonisation in Coastal Kenya," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50 No.4 (2008), pp 831–861.

[504] CO/ 894/13/2, Memorandum written by Coastal People's Party (CPP) to the Richardson commission looking into coastal autonomy.

[505] Frank Furedi, *The Mau Mau War in Perspective* (Nairobi and Athens: James Currey and East African Educational Publishers, 1989); Robert Bates, "The Agrarian Origins of Mau Mau: A Structural Account," *Agricultural History*, 61 No.1 (1987), pp 1–28.

The migrant Luo rail and port workers arrived in Mombasa's cultural space as the official labourer class, whose main role was to assist the expansion and maintenance of East Africa's grandest colonial project. In no less than half a century, the labourer had revolutionised and transformed the topography of Mombasa's economic and social space, to the extent that their presence contested the town's positionality, particularly with regard to questions of sovereignty and conceptions of nationhood and citizenship rights. The contradictions of Mombasa's evident outlook vis-à-vis agreements made with the Sultan placed considerable pressure on the colonial governing structure, as they attempted to mediate the construction of a post-colonial order for the protectorate, and for the colony. As various interest groups within Mombasa and the larger coastal strip appealed for recognition, ethnic tensions heightened and Mombasa became a volatile zone.

Even though Britain was pursuing decolonisation, Mombasa and hinterland Kenya were still regarded as highly strategic. The importance of these two regions was largely informed by the rail line and Mombasa's harbour, which, by the end of the 1950s, connected the economies of the entire East African region. Britain thus aimed to facilitate the structuring of a post-colonial order that maintained links with the region where KURH infrastructure lay. The decision to secure Mombasa, and Kenya in general, was additionally informed by concerns about the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic's (USSR) growing influence in Africa. The possibility of communism spreading to strategic lands in Africa was becoming evident as Tanganyika, next door to Mombasa, adopted an Africanised system of socialism known as *Ujamaa*.[506] Britain, furthermore, was apprehensive about losing control of East Africa to the growing Arab influence in Africa. The open support given by Arabic countries to the *Mwambao* movement, and their active participation in pushing *Mwambao* rhetoric in their own country, was seen as a threat to European hegemony, and they feared that Mombasa could be used as a gateway to effect Islamic influence in other African countries.[507]

By 1961, the estimated population of the coastal strip stood at almost 400,000. This included about 300,000 Africans, 37,000 Arabs, Swahili, and Bajuni, 48,000 Asians, and 7000 Europeans.[508] Of these, 117,000 Africans, 27,000 Arabs, 34,000 Asians, and 6,000 Europeans lived in Mombasa. Migrant Luo rail and port workers comprised a sizable portion of the African population in Mombasa. Luo numbers swelled from the beginning of the 1950s, as the political climate became even more accommodating to Luo labourers.[509] In addition to searching for employment, they came to enjoy the trappings of urban life, which included schools, hospitals, roads, and shopping centres, which were scarce in Luoland in Western Kenya. In this period,

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[506] Arrigo Pallotti, "Post-Colonial Nation-Building and Southern African Liberation: Tanzania and the Break of Diplomatic Relations with the United Kingdom, 1965–1968," *African Historical Review*, 41 No.2 (2009), pp. 60–84.

[507] Ibid.

[508] James Robertson, *The Kenya Coastal Strip: Report of the Commissioner* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1961).

[509] In the 1950s, the colonial state was embroiled in a struggle with the Mau Mau, and the Kikuyu were hence viewed with suspicion. The state moved away from recruiting ethnic Kikuyu and turned to the Luo, who were largely incorporated into the colonial Africanisation policy.

KURH offered a better working environment for migrant labourers as the decolonisation era struggles had resulted in the granting of several worker concessions, including better wages and housing. The Luo were then presented with the space to feel at home in Mombasa. Consequently, the town's demography shifted, as it became more African and more inland dominated – a Kavirondo town in the literal sense. As questions of coastal autochthony and citizenship rights became amplified in the late 1950s, colonial authorities were prompted to re-evaluate the treaty that had established, in law, separate political identities for the colony and the protectorate. The Colonial Office in London created a commission of inquiry led by James Robertson, whose main aim was to look into and report on changes considered advisable in the 1895 agreement relating to the coastal strip of Kenya.

Migrant Luo KURH labourers, with roots in both Mombasa and inland Kenya, had now become key stakeholders in the political and economic affairs of Mombasa. These labourers wanted a unitary state encompassing the Kenya colony and the independent coastal strip.[510] Arabs and Swahili populations, and some Europeans, on the other hand, supported an autonomous state along the coast, which was to include Mombasa. Robertson's first suggestion was a referendum, but it was rejected as there was no agreement on exactly who should be included in the vote. *Wapwani* argued that migrant groups should not be allowed to vote and it was therefore felt that the results of any such referendum would not reflect the true will of the people involved with the affairs of the coast and particularly its most strategic town, Mombasa. Robertson conducted a series of meetings with various interest groups, noting their views for and against coastal autonomy. His final report recommended the unification of the protectorate region with the colony.

Robertson gave various reason for his recommendation of a unitary state. His key point, however, was that the coastal strip would not be a viable entity if allowed to exist separated from the colony. Firstly, he argued that it would be extremely expensive to establish independent administrative structures for the new area, as the region had always been administered from Nairobi.[511] A new administrative region would, indeed, require a civil service, police, treasury, amongst other governing structures, and their establishment in that period would have been an expensive venture. Mombasa's civil service, of which a key part included the management of the rail and port, was certainly run by upcountry migrant labourers of whom the Luo were a sizable number. Robertson was categorical that marking out the boundaries of an independent coastal strip would pose challenges and, perhaps, create new contests with Mijikenda groups. The boundaries of the strip belonging to the Sultan had never been officially defined, and attempting to establish new ones in that period would have possibly cut off ethnic groups caught in the middle. The strip, and Mombasa in particular, also relied on the inland for many of its vital resources. KURH, for example, could not survive at that time without the migrant labourer population. The source of Mombasa's freshwaters, Mzima

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[510] Donald Rothchild, *Racial Bargaining in Independent Kenya: A Study of Minorities and Decolonization* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).
[511] Robertson, *The Kenya Coastal Strip.*

Springs, was, moreover, located in the inland area of Taita Taveta. With plans to build a new refinery already underway, and projections of further expansion of the port, it was expected that Mombasa would require even more labourers, and more water from inland for the anticipated population growth. If separation occurred, then it was expected that hinterland Kenya would retaliate by, for example, disconnecting the freshwater line, placing the coast and Mombasa in particular in jeopardy.[512]

Robertson's decision, however, was primarily informed by the question of migrant upcountry folks and their place in an independent state if autonomy was granted; and by the KURH, which, in this period, connected the economies of the entire East Africa region. The creation of separate and distinct independent states would have required the renegotiation of the positionality of the upcountry migrant, and mediation of a truce between them and the coastal elites whose relations had, by then, badly deteriorated. If coastal elites decided to expel upcountry populations from the territory on gaining autonomy, would the KURH survive such a massive shock? How, too, would a much stronger inland Kenya react? Pushback from inland would certainly mean war and the coast would not be able to defend itself.[513] A conflict between Kenya and an autonomous coast would, moreover, put the rail line, and, by extension Uganda, a region not party to the conflict but heavily dependent on Mombasa's port, in peril. Therefore, Robertson believed that abrogating the 1895 agreement was only appropriate if the two regions were to co-exist side by side.

Robertson intimated the importance of addressing anxieties expressed by minority groups requesting coastal and Mombasa's autonomy, and asked that safeguards be put in place to secure some vital rights for *wapwani* and especially for Arabs and Swahili populations when the coast became incorporated within boundaries of the Republic of Kenya. He recommended that the Sultan's sovereignty be nominally acknowledged, and he argued that showing such statesmanship would assure Muslims at the coast that their historical rights in the region were recognised. Recognition would, furthermore, reassure them that the Kenyan government was sympathetic to their customs and way of life. He also called for the continuation of Islamic jurisprudence customs by way of instituting *kadhi* courts in Kenya's judicial system, and absorbing the traditional offices of *liwali* and *mudir*, (regarded in the colonial period as appendages of provincial administration in the same vein as chiefs) into the provincial administrative body. Robertson additionally advised that only Muslim administrators should be deployed in Muslim majority settlements in Mombasa and the larger coastal region. The commission, moreover, recommended that a coast province be created as one administrative unit of a unitary Kenya. To address the unique coastal land question – did it belong to Arabs, the African *m'pwani*, or the inland administrative unit that the *wabara* were set to take over – the commission advised the creation of a Coast Lands Board, whose main duty was to advise government on land policy particular to the coast. He suggested that the board devise policies

[512] Ibid.
[513] Ibid.

encompassing the disposal and use of public lands, the transfer of lands owned privately by local coastal people, and on methods of settling disputes between landlords and tenants.

On 8 October 1963, the protectorate section, including Mombasa, was transferred to Kenya in an agreement between the colonial secretary Duncan Sandys, the Zanzibar sovereign Sultan Jamshid, the Kenya Prime minister Jomo Kenyatta, and the Zanzibar prime minister Mohammed Shamte. Kenyatta pledged to guarantee safeguards outlined by the Robertson Commission, but this position was quickly abandoned when Mombasa came under Nairobi in 1964 and upcountry folks, who were largely Christian, began dominating the coastal administrative machinery and political scene. The land question was pushed to the periphery and, in fact, was exacerbated by the resettlement of more upcountry folks on government land while Afro coastal indigene land rights remained in limbo. Political patronage increasingly determined land access and various connected individuals from the coast, but mostly from upcountry, were awarded prime and large tracts of land in this region. This deepened tensions between *wabara* and *wapwani*.

The current political struggles at the coast and Mombasa, in particular, are reproductions of feelings of dissatisfaction with the Robertson Commission solutions, and particularly with regards to the question of the place of the migrant population in Mombasa's political and social space. Though it might be argued that migrant Luo labourers have earned their place and residential status in Mombasa, their presence remains a cause of the disharmonious co-existence between *wabara* and *wapwani* in Mombasa. Sentiments of a sovereign coast separate from mainland Kenya have survived and offer *wapwani* an emotionally attractive, even if impractical alternative to the patronage contests of Kenyan national politics. Though the constitutional changes of 2010, which created counties as semi-autonomous administrative units, provided some reprieve, as the coast felt it was now involved in the running of its own affairs, Kenya's government has nevertheless largely disregarded coastal indigenes' appeals for recognition. Instead, it is making efforts to supress dissent, for example among MRC adherents who echo *Mwambao's* sentiments. A more agreeable co-existence framework may be achieved if inquiries are made into why and how recommendations of the Robertson Commission were largely disregarded, and if there are ways in which *wapwani* can feel their place in Mombasa's political and social landscape is respected. If this does not happen, then the migrant Luo who arrived in Mombasa and made immense contributions to what the town looks like today, will forever live in peril, and the underlying conflict is simply postponed.