



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

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

Okelo, B.A.

Citation

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

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4260331>

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

SUMMARY

Mombasa town has long been a forum for contact, and the portal for the transfer of goods, technology, and ideas between various groups of geographically distant actors. Notably, the town became a central player in the imperial expansionist project when Britain set out to export European institution models to Africa as part of the global expansion of a European international order. Mombasa's positionality in the grand colonial project was informed by the existence of two key infrastructures: the Kenya–Uganda rail line and the Mombasa port. The rail and port were, indeed, key factors influencing the production of colonial Mombasa's urban outlook when the colonial state merged the productive forces of the colony and the protectorate and attempted to structure the modes of interactions of the actors at play. These features include a volatile wage labour economy, a town deeply divided along ethnic lines, and a town that was evidently dominated by the African labourer class. Using migrant Luo labourers as the unit of my analysis, this study aims to analyse how the Kenya Uganda Railway and Harbour labourer contributed to the manifestation of the defining features of colonial Mombasa in the years 1902–1950s. Essentially, the study examines how the introduction of the Luo labourer into Mombasa's distinct cultural space, revolutionised the town's economic and social landscape to produce the features mapping out colonial Mombasa's urbanity.

The study is qualitative and based on the use of both primary and secondary data. The primary data used were mainly archival records sourced from the Kenya National Archives, the British National Archives in Kew, the Mill Hill Mission Archives in Oosterbeek Netherlands, and the digital archives of United Kingdom's parliamentary proceedings. To place the individual experience in the grand narrative of the development of Mombasa's colonial space, oral interviews were also conducted with principals and descendants of colonial era rail and port workers. The primary data was analysed and edited contrasted against an array of secondary data, which aided in juxtaposing my study against the theme of colonial expansionism and how it affected spatial mobility and the development of present outlooks of African urban spaces.

The study findings are presented in five empirical chapters. The introduction chapter gives an overview of the research, including background information, objectives, research methods, and outlines the structure of the thesis. Chapters Two to Five provide the key arguments about the interactions of the Luo migrant labourer with the colonial state and the Swahili social landscape, and explores how these interactions produced the defining features of Mombasa's colonial urban space. The conclusion chapter discusses how Mombasa's colonial map influenced the unification of the protectorate and colony sections of imperial Kenya to produce the Republic

of Kenya, with a focus on how the migrant Luo rail and port worker was the central figure in the development of this outcome.

Mombasa was a key commercial centre in the complex Indian Ocean trade network. Luxury goods sourced from the interior regions of East and Central Africa-like ivory, hides, gold and precious stones-were traded in this coastal town, and exchanged for cloth, glass, and jewellery among other goods, from the Middle East, China and South East Asia. The expanding of the trade network with Muslim players during the Middle Ages gradually transformed Mombasa's and generally, East Africa's coastline, particularly because Arab merchant families began settling on the coast and established familial bonds with local Bantu populations. The meeting and merging of the two cultures produced Swahili culture, which was deeply embedded in Mombasa's political and social networks in the later years of the 19th Century, when Britain began showing interest in the region. Chapter Two of this thesis deliberates on the conjunction of Mombasa's pre-colonial urban space, British imperial capitalist ideology, and the Luo labourer, in the nascent years of the 20th Century. The chapter analyses how at the onset of British occupation, Mombasa's political and social structure offered a labour market that was contradictory to British imperial needs, and explores how Britain was able to navigate and resolve this contradiction by introducing the Luo labourer into the town's urban space. The chapter then narrates the processes of migration of Luo rail and port workers into Mombasa, amidst a backdrop of worsening living conditions in Western Kenya's Luoland.

Mombasa's labour landscape was turbulent and disorderly. This spectacle is examined in Chapter Three of this thesis. The chapter elaborates on how the governing policies put in place to develop the rail and port network, influenced the influx of huge numbers of Luo migrant labourers into the town, and contributed to the development of an urban proletariat class in Mombasa. The chapter also discusses the proletariat struggles of Luo rail and port workers, and evaluates how their positionality stimulated the development of worker's organisation. Additionally, the chapter explores how colonial capital developed mechanisms to control the articulation of rail and port workers grievances, in the backdrop of growing tensions between capital and the working class.

The *wabara/wapwani* (visitor/local) ethnic divide was one of the hallmark features of colonial Mombasa's urban landscape. This feature is discussed in Chapter Four. Essentially, the chapter examines how the racial structure of the imperial economy nurtured the emergent politics of class and identity in colonial Mombasa. Using the personal experiences of colonial era rail and

port workers, the chapter illustrates how Mombasa society delineated ethnic and racial lines by framing the outlines of *u'bara* and *u'pwani* identities. Moreover, the chapter demonstrates how contests over identity impacted Mombasa's cost of living and made it one of the most expensive towns for migrant Luo labourers to live in. Lastly, the chapter explores the Swahili coast's reinterpretation of *kafaáh* marriages, and adoption of *ngoma*, which were aimed at invigorating Swahili cultural purity, for reasons of upholding imperial social and racial demarcations.

By the beginning of the 1920s, Luo rail and port workers numbers had swelled in Mombasa, to the extent that the town acquired the pejorative tag of being a "Kavirondo Town". This phenomenon—the development of a diaspora Luo community in colonial Mombasa—is elaborated in Chapter Five. The chapter examines how Luo labourers navigated Mombasa's turbulent urban landscape by way of embracing a pan-Luo identity, which worked to create numbers, a valuable asset when it came to negotiating for better terms of service with the rail and harbour management. The chapter also analyses how Luo labourers attempts to integrate into Mombasa's elite circles, influenced the foundation of a neo-Luo identity. This new identity aligned with Western interpretations of modernity, and the Luo were gradually recognised as one of the few "civilised Africans" in the colony. The "Kavirondo Town" tag was however firmly registered when permanent Luo households emerged in Mombasa. This feature was the outcome of the migration of Luo women, which is also discussed in this chapter. The diaspora Luo community in Mombasa, indeed, contributed to the dramatic demographic shift witnessed in the town, and Mombasa struggled to embrace its new identity as an African town.

This thesis ultimately works at the intersection of history and anthropology in its interrogation of how migrant groups interacted with, and shaped the outlines of colonial urban areas. The work contextualises the Luo labourer's position in the formation of Mombasa's urban features at a significant historical moment, and offers a narrative of the mapping of a town that became the most important trading post on the coast of East Africa in the 20th century