

The Changing Dynamics of Colonial African Labour in the Asian-Owned Sugar Plantations in Kisumu County, Kenya, 1919-1945

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Abstract

This article examines colonial African labour in the Asian owned sugar plantations in Kisumu County. The basic premise of the study is that the incorporation of the County into the world economy through British colonialism progressively undermined the African peasant society. The paper contends that Asian settlers just like their European counterparts, exploited African labour. This was evident in the low wages, poor working conditions and arduous tasks. The article also demonstrates how the sugar plantation economy undermined the African peasant sector. It further observes that although Asian farmers paid their labourers low wages compared to other employers, a significant number of Africans preferred to work for them for reasons of proximity to African reserves, short contracts and the daily payment practice adopted by Asian employers. Material for this study was obtained from archival sources, oral interviews and analysis of existing works on socio-economic history in general and labours in particular. The study was informed by the underdevelopment theory. Using the underdevelopment perspective, the paper demonstrates how colonial labour policies led to the underdevelopment of Kisumu County. It points out that the colonial government in Kenya established and maintained authoritarian labour policies characterized by forced labour, land alienation and taxation, which gradually induced Africans to join wage labour in the Asian sugar plantations and elsewhere. Even though the colonial labour policies were mainly aimed at assisting the European settlers, coincidentally the Asian settlers to some extent benefitted too. Kajulu, Kano and Nyakach locations were set aside for labour within Kisumu County. The article posits that colonial capitalism had numerous negative effects on the African peasants in Kisumu County. It concludes that colonialism in its manifold forms intensified the underdevelopment in Kisumu County. The study contributes to the Kenya's labour.

Key Words: Agriculture; labour exploitation; migrant labour; peasants; sugar plantation

1. Introduction

Asian owned Sugar plantations were some of the earliest foreign agricultural enterprises in Kisumu County of Kenya. The earliest sugar farms were started in Kibos area in 1904 by Asian farmers. Although Asian farmers paid their labourers low wages compared to other employers, a significant number of Africans preferred to work for them for reasons of proximity to African reserves, short contracts and the daily payment practice adopted by Asian employers. Later Africans began to work for longer contracts in the sugar plantations *because* they realised that wage labour was a more reliable means of earning an income than peasant agriculture (Stichter, 1982).

At the same time due to competition for labour by other employers, the Asian farmers engaged labourers on longer contracts. Although wage rates were comparatively low in the Asian owned sugar plantations up to the 1960s, the majority of labourers from East Kano, North Nyakach and to some extent Kajulu locations sought wage labour in these same plantations. This was because of the poor climatic conditions which made the locations prone to droughts and famines. Furthermore, prices for African agricultural produce such as cotton were comparatively low. Thus, by the late 1940s wage labour came to be seen as a more reliable means of earning a living than agricultural production which was prone to the vagaries of weather. As many as 75% of the sugar plantation labourers in the county came from Nyakach and Kano (Osamba, 1996).

The two locations had been set aside by the colonial government in 1919 to provide labour for the settler farms within Kisumu County. As a result, a tradition emerged among the people of the two locations to seek wage employment in the sugar plantations. The Asian sugar plantations also were popular with the people from the two locations because of their proximity.

Wage employment undermined the African peasant economy because many able bodied African males entered into the wage labour market. Consequently, agricultural production was left mainly in the hands of women and children. This could be attributed to the decline in food production in the reserve, especially from 1940 onwards. The Africans preferred to work on the Asian sugar plantations despite low wages because of social and economic factors. For example, before the post-economic depression boom of the 1930s the majority of the labourers were engaged as daily paid casuals or on one month verbal contracts. Thus they could easily combine wage labour and the peasant economy. However, this practice started to change in the 1940s when an increasing number of local people started enlisting as migrant labourers on six month contracts, renewable on expiry on mutual agreement.

The wages paid to the labourers were mainly meant for subsistence and therefore were not adequate to be saved for other investments back at home such as trade. Consequently, the vicious cycle of low wage labour and low production in the African reserves continued. The Africans, therefore, faced a "double jeopardy", in that the labourer was paid low wages and at the same time the prices for African agricultural produce were also low. Wage employment in the sugar plantations to a large extent undermined the African agricultural production in Kisumu County. This was more so in East Kano, Nyakach and Kajulu locations where the bulk of the labourers came from.

In the 1950s the Asian farmers as well as the Miwani Sugar mills increased the number of migrant labourers on long contracts of six months or more. These labourers were required to reside in the labour camps within the plantations. Thus it became more difficult for the labourers to participate effectively in wage labour and the peasant economy as had been the practice before. Furthermore, apart from male labour, women and juveniles were also employed in the sugar plantations. This meant that the people who could have worked on the family farms in the absence of the males were also drawn into wage labour. Needless to say, the African agricultural production plummeted while that in the Asian plantations increased. As such, by the 1950s Kisumu County had become dependent on maize supplies from Kericho and other neighbouring Districts.

1.1 Theoretical Considerations

The article is informed by the dependency/underdevelopment paradigm. The perspective was spearheaded by Latin American scholars such as Dos Santos, Baran, Cardoso and Gunder Frank among others in the 1960s (Kay, 2013; Muthee, 2013; Frank, 1976). It was a reaction to the modernization approach which had attributed the Third World's underdevelopment to internal causes. Proponents of the dependency perspective have argued that the underdevelopment of the Third World was due to the historical evolution of a highly unequal international capitalist system of poor and rich countries. They point out that the relationship between the developed and underdeveloped countries is one of inequality, characterised by exploitation and economic control of the metropole (Rodney, 1989; Frank, 1976).

Consequently, contact with the metropole does not culminate in the diffusion of advanced technology, but rather leads to intensification of underdevelopment in the peripheries. Furthermore, the perspective postulates that the articulation process between the peripheral and the central economies was characterized by the destruction of the traditional societies and economies through market forces under industrialization. It further contends that the international capitalist system brought a global polarization, where the peripheries became marginalized and remained in perpetual poverty, with the centre developing at their expense.

The underdevelopment approach was popularized in Africa by Walter Rodney (1989) and Samir Amin (1976). They point out that colonialism contributed to the exploitation of both natural and human resources of the Third World. For example, Samir Amin notes that wage levels in the periphery were lower compared to wage levels in the metropole. This meant that the labourers in the peripheries subsidised those in the metropole. This was achieved through the extraction of wealth from the indigenous modes so as to transform the Africans into cheap migrant labourers. Using the dependency/underdevelopment perspective the study demonstrates that it was through the establishment of colonial rule that Kisumu County was incorporated into the World capitalist system.

In the County, Asian capitalist farming was concentrated in few areas such as the Kibos-Muhoroni settlement, leaving the rest of the county in pre-capitalist state which could be exploited as low cost labour reservoir. As such, the Asian settlement area of Kibos-Muhoroni served as an "export enclave" or a peri-metropole by attracting African labourers whose labour surplus was drained to serve the needs of the Asian capitalists. Thus, while the Asian enclave was developing there was a corresponding stagnation of the nearby African locations which provided the bulk of cheap labour and only served as a labour reservoir. It was deprived of its most energetic young men who sought wage labour in the Asian enclave at low wages (Stichter, 1982). The growth of such "export enclaves" contributed to the underdevelopment and impoverishment of the peasant sector.

1.2 Challenges faced by Asian Sugar Plantation Agriculture in the Inter-War Period

The 1919-35 period witnessed two economic depressions of 1921-22 and 1930-35, which adversely affected the Asian sugar cane farmers as well as the African labourers in Kisumu County. At the end of the First World War, the colonial government introduced the Ex-Soldiers Settlement Scheme which aimed at doubling the number of European settlers in Kenya (Bennet, 1987; Van Zwanenberg, 1975). Under this Scheme, about 15 European settlers were granted land in the Kibigori-Chemelil area of Kisumu County. This area was located within the lowlands where a number of Asians had already settled (Aiyar, 2015; Carter Report, 1934). By 1919 the Asian farmers in the Kibos-Muhoroni area had put 8,000 acres under cultivation, and employed about 1,000 African labourers (Kenya National Archives (KNA)/ KDAQ, 1919).

The European settlers in Miwani, Kibigori, Chemelil and Koru areas planted either sisal or sugar cane, though some planted both (*ibid.*; KNA/KDAQ/1947). The expansion of plantation agriculture especially among the white settlers in the country stimulated demand for more African labour. The European settlers had been impressed with the efficacy of the colonial government's labour recruitment for the war effort. Thus they called for its continuation. In 1919, the Governor, Edward Northey issued the "infamous" 1919 Labour Circular in which the local administration was to "encourage" labour through lawful means (McGregor-Ross, 1927). The Circular resulted in the resurgence of the recruitment of forced labour. "Encouragement" was a euphemism to cover a policy which authorised the colonial government officials to be in the forefront of labour recruiting. The Circular also recommended that women and juveniles be encouraged to seek wage labour in the nearby plantations. In the same year, the colonial administration re-stated that Kano location was set aside, to provide labourers for the farms within Kisumu County (KNA/ KDAQ/1919).

The following year, the colonial government introduced compulsory paid communal labour for 60 days, in the African reserves (Okoth-Ogendo, 1991; KNA/PC/NZA/3/20/4/2/1925). This was to be carried out by Africans who had not been in wage labour for at least three months of the preceding twelve months. Such communal work included construction and maintenance of roads and make-shift bridges among other work. The chiefs and headmen were very harsh supervisors of the people during the communal work. As such, some peasants opted to join wage labour rather than perform such compulsory labour. The *Kipande* system was another mechanism which the colonial government used to organize and regulate the wage labour system in Kenya. It was introduced under the Native Registration Ordinance of 1915 and was implemented in 1920, though officially promulgated under the Native Registration Ordinance of 1921 (Clayton & Savage, 1979; Van Zwanenberg, 1975; McGregor-Ross, 1927). Under the Ordinance each and every adult African male above the age of 16 years was to obtain an identification certificate. The *Kipande* contained the personal particulars of the bearer such as name, ethnic origin, district, location, clan and village. In the case of an employee, the employer also recorded type of work performed, duration of employment, wage scale and general comments on the individual. The germane aim of the registration system was to track down labour deserters who broke their labour contracts.

Deserters could be punished under the Masters and Servants Ordinance of 1910 (Stichter, 1986). Desertion which had been a very serious problem especially in European settler plantations now came to be regarded as a criminal offence. Prior to the introduction of the *Kipande* system some labour deserters could not be traced. This was because such labourers tended to use pseudonyms or to migrate from their home areas (KNA/KDAR/1921). A labour deserter if caught could be sentenced to pay a fine of 100 shillings or serve a two months' jail term (Leys, 1975). This was a very severe punishment because the 100 shillings fine was equivalent to about six months' wages for an unskilled labourer. Desertion was mainly of two types. First, labourers tended to quit plantations where wages were comparatively low and working conditions poor, for other plantations which ostensibly provided higher wages and better working conditions. For example, the local people knew the so-called "bad" employers,

who were very strict on their employee insisting that they had to perform a full day's work (Osamba, 1996). The "good" farmers were those who tended to be less strict on the labourers, lessening the daily task and offering other incentives such as better food rations than those provided by other Asian farmers. The other form of desertion was the return of the labourer to the reserve to continue with the peasant economy. This was especially so during the peak labour demand seasons when such work as ploughing, planting and harvesting of crops was done.

On the whole, during the inter-war period the desertion rate was low in the Asian sugar plantations because approximately 80% of their labourers were daily paid labourers or those on 30 day verbal contracts (Osamba, 1996).

The purpose of the *Kipande* system was to enforce labour contracts. The system also institutionalised low wages for the African labourers. This was because it hindered the labourer from bargaining for wages above the rate of his previous job. In addition, it curtailed the free movement of the Africans. For example, failure to produce the *Kipande* when demanded by a policeman or any other authorized government official could result in court action leading to a fine of 300 shillings, with or without one month's jail term (Van Zwanenberg, 1975: 184). Following the introduction of the *Kipande* system, the colonial government called on the employers not to engage, on written contracts, any African males of registration age who had not acquired the *Kipande* (McGregor-Ross, 1927). This made it compulsory for any would be labourer to acquire the *Kipande*. It's important to note that forced labour was not used in the Asian sugar plantations. Very few Asian farmers obtained labourers from the professional labour recruiters (Osamba, 1996) except during periods of serious labour shortage resulting from good harvests in the nearby African locations of Kano and Kajulu. However, it is worth noting that the local people on monthly contracts tended to complete more 30 day ticket contracts than those enlisted on six months contracts by professional labour recruiters and agents (KNA/KLDAR/1926). In other words, the Africans preferred to enter wage labour under their own terms and not those of labour agents.

In 1921 an economic depression hit Kenya. This led to a fall in prices for agricultural produce and high prices for manufactured goods. In an attempt to offset the effects of the economic depression the agricultural employers reduced minimum African wages by one third (Van Zwanenberg, 1975: 43). The wage cut led to a serious labour shortage in the plantations in Kisumu District (McGregor-Ross, 1927:234). In 1921 the hut and poll taxes were raised to 16 shillings in total per person per annum (Stichter, 1986). In the same year, some local Luo and Luyia elites such as Jonathan Okwiri, Benjamin Owuor and Simeon Nyende, among other people formed the Young Kavirondo Association (KNA /CKDAR/1921-22). The Association was also known as *Piny Owacho* (translated as the will of the people movement). The movement made demands such as the abolition of forced labour camps in Nyanza Province and the *Kipande* system. It also registered its opposition to the increase of the hut and poll tax, and the lowering of the African wages.

In general, the movement aimed at ameliorating the working conditions of the African labourers. The Governor, Edward Northey met the officials of the movement and consented to some of their demands (McGregor-Ross, 1927). For example, he announced the abolition of the labour camps and reduction of taxation from 16 shillings to 12 shillings. However, he declined to abolish the *Kipande* system, pointing out that the *Kipande* had been introduced for identification purposes and was aimed at benefitting the Africans (McGregor-Ross, 1927). The movement also protested to the colonial government against the system of forced labour in the reserves (KNA/PC/NZA 2/20/13). It pointed out that the chiefs and headmen were compelling people to enter the wage labour market as well as forcing juveniles, women and old men to perform arduous compulsory communal labour. Due to the outcry over the misuse of compulsory labour, the then British Colonial Secretary of State, Winston Churchill, sent a dispatch to the colonial government, stating that forced labour should only be used in government undertakings and other essential services (Clayton & Savage, 1979:136).

Although the Northey Labour Circular of 1919 was rescinded and amended it still contained some elements of compulsion. It stated: "When unemployed young men are found in the Reserve, enquiries should be made as to whether they have paid their poll tax... No actual force can be employed to compel a man to go out to work, he can however, be made to pay his tax" (Brett, 1979: 188). Up to 1922 all the sugar cane produced by the Asian farmers was used to manufacture *jaggery* (solid brown sugar). In 1923, a white settler owned company, the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Company established a white sugar mill at Miwani in Kisumu County (KNA/KDAR/1923). It crushed cane from its own plantations and also purchased cane from the nearby Asian plantations. The company contracted about 75% of the local Asian farmers to supply the mill with sugar cane. Sugar cane was taken to the mill by the company's trolleys from as far as Kibos.

All this gave impetus to the Asian farmers to increase cane production and about half the cultivated land in the Kibos-Miwani area was put under cane. Henceforth, only about 20% of the Asian sugar cane farmers particularly those whose farms were located far away from the trolley line in Kibos and those in remote farms in Chemelil and Kibigori continued to rely on the manufacture of *jaggery*. Cane production in the Asian farms thus increased tremendously from 5,299 tons in 1925 to 49,042 tons in 1931 (see Table 1.1). During the 1920s-30s the activities of Asian absentee landlords and land speculators became more pronounced. They purchased land from both European and Asian farmers in the Kibos-Chemelil area, which they leased to Asian tenant farmers (KNA/DC/KSM 1/3/188-22/1947-59). Examples of these Asian land speculators included Maganlal Patel, a renowned money lender in Kisumu and N.J. Desai, an advocate's clerk and insurance broker in Kisumu town. The two men owned large farms in Kibos, Kibigori and Chemelil.

Table 1.1: Amount of Sugar Cane Purchased by the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Company from the Asian Planters, 1925-31 (selected Years)

| <u>Year</u> | <u>Amount in tons</u> |
|-------------|-----------------------|
| 1925 | 5, 299 |
| 1929 | 39, 546 |
| 1930 | 35, 494 |
| 1931 | 49, 042 |

Source: KNA Lab 9/2132, Labour Inspection Report 9th Aug. 1932

By 1928 there were 48 Asian farmers in the Kibos-Miwani area each with approximately 200 acres under cane (Harlow, Chilver & Smith, 1965:214). In 1930, the 4,500 acre, Walji Hirji and Sons Estate was leased to Asian tenants at the annual rent of 50cents per acre (KNA/AGR/6/4308/1956-58). The tenants invested on cane cultivation since the farms were located only five kilometres from the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Mills at Miwani. Out of the estimated 48 Asian farmers in the area in 1928 about 60-70% were absentee landlords, especially in the Kibigori-Chemelil area (Osamba, 1996; KNA/ DC/KSM/1/3/122/1952). However, hardly any of them were Sikhs. They were described as the "shopkeeper type of Asians". It can be argued that apart from the Sikhs who were genuine farmers, the other Asians were mainly interested in land speculation and marketing of agricultural produce. For example, in 1947, the District Officer of Kisumu made the following comments on Asian farmers:

“ Kenya there are no Indian cultivators in the true sense of the words, but the farmers are owners of land and directors of labour. Many of them too come from classes having no inherited connection with the land and so lacking the love for the land so necessary for a good” (*ibid.*). By 1930 there were 56 Asian farmers in Kibos-Miwani area, occupying 15,400 acres of land, of which 9,120 acres was under sugar cane (Fearn, 1961: 106). At the same time there were some European owned sugar plantations, two of which owned sugar mills. The Muhoroni Sugar Company crushed only cane from its own plantations (KNA/NPAR/1925-39), while the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Company purchased cane from the Asian farmers as well. The boom induced by the establishment of the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Company was short-lived. In 1930, the new Managing Director of the Company, B.Y. Abel unilaterally abrogated the contracts for the supply of cane to the Company by the Asian planters (KNA/PC/NZA/3/3/122/1950). This decision caused great financial loss to the farmers whose mature cane was destroyed. Consequently, there developed a period of distrust between the two parties which led to a fall in cane and sugar production (see Table 1.2). The decline in sugar production was also due to the drought and locust infestation of 1930 -32.

In 1930 the colonial government auctioned farms No. 1595 and 1997 at Kibos (*ibid.*). The two farms had been divided into 13 plots of approximately 160 acres each. The Nyanza Indian Farmers Association bought two of the plots at 23,700 shillings and 21,700 shillings respectively for its members (KNA/PC/NZA/22/10/1935). The price per acre was thus £7.80 and £6.11 respectively, though the reserve price had been set at £2 per acre. Undoubtedly, Asians were willing to pay high prices for land. This shows that demand for land by the Asians in the District was high. The 1930-35 economic depression adversely affected Asian cane farmers in the county. Due to the depression as well as Abel's policies, the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Company was not willing to purchase cane from the Asian farmers claiming that sugar prices were low (KNA/KLDAR/1930). As such, in 1931 the company contracted only nine Asian farmers to supply cane to the factory at two thirds of the 1930 price. The prices of maize also fell from 12 shillings to less than four shillings in 1930 (Fearn, 1961). The recession created economic difficulties for the farmers. For example, because of bankruptcy, five Asian farms were auctioned in Chemelil and

Kibos for £3,581(KNA/NPAR/1935). The farmers asked the government to waive the payment of rates for their farms. The Nyanza Indian Farmers Association which had bought plots at Kibos appealed to the government to defer payment of arrears for the farms for the next two years.

Table 1.2: Sugar Production by the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Company (Miwani) 1930-33(in tons)

| Year | Amount in tons |
|------|----------------|
| 1930 | 7,450 |
| 1931 | 3,500 |
| 1932 | 2,500 |
| 1933 | 2,836 |

Source: KNA DC Kisumu-Londiani, AR 1930-33

In 1931, a total of 15 out of approximately 56 Asian farmers in the Kibos-Miwani area were not able to pay their 1931 land lease revenue, ranging from 2,900 shillings to 6,400 shillings (KNA/PC/NZA/2/2/35/1932-45). During the 1930-35 period, about 50-60% of both sugar cane and maize crops were destroyed by droughts and locust infestation of 1930-32 (KNA/KLAR/1930). For example, in 1930, about 700 acres was under maize while in 1931 no maize was cultivated. About 50% of the full time Asian farmers opened up shops on their farms to make ends meet. In 1931 the colonial government launched the Land and Agricultural Bank, which aimed at assisting the farmers to continue with their agricultural enterprises (Van Zwanenberg, 1975). However, the Bank provided loans mostly to the European settlers (Aiyar, 2015). Nearly all the Asian farmers who sought financial assistance from the bank were unsuccessful (KNA/DC/KSM/1/3/125/1936). Even during the period of economic depression of 1920-21 and 1931-35 the government did not provide incentives to the Asian sugar cane planters. For example, the government did not offer subsidies for sugar cane as was the case with other agricultural commodities such as sisal, pyrethrum, coffee, barley, and wheat which were cultivated mostly by white settlers. The producers of these commodities were also offered good prices and other incentives such as guaranteed minimum returns against crop failure.

As such, the Asian planters complained that although the government fixed consumer prices for sugar it did not do the same for the producer price of sugar cane as was the case with white settler cultivated crops (Osamba, 1996). Subsequently, the price of sugar cane was determined by the sugar millers themselves who tended to fix low prices. For example, prior to 1947 the cane prices offered to farmers was decided by the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Company, a role later taken up by the Miwani Sugar Mills. The Asian settlers were also unhappy with the ban on *jaggery* export in the 1940s despite request by the Ministry of Supplies in Britain and other manufacturers such as Mackintoshes Toffee Limited for *jaggery*. In 1936 the colonial government under the Farmers Assistance Ordinance, formed the Farmers Conciliation Board (KNA/DC/KSM/1/3/123/1932-35). The aim of the Board was to assist farmers who had financial difficulties so that they could continue with their agricultural activities. Under this scheme a farmer was given a breathing space of five years by his or her creditors from paying his or her debts. The Board provided the farmer with an advance to enable him or her improve his existing farming activities. The farm, however, was put under a temporary supervisor appointed by the Agricultural Board. Each application for the assistance had to be approved by the local agricultural committee first before it was forwarded to the Agricultural Board.

Although nearly all the Asian farmers applied for financial assistance under this scheme less than 10% were successful (KNA/DC/KSM/1/3/123/1952). Needless to say, some of the unsuccessful farmers borrowed money from private money lenders such as Maganlal V. Patel whilst others became bankrupt and sold off their farms to the Asian land speculators (Osamba, 1996). Thus, as Table 1.2 shows, between 1930 and 1933 there was a fall in sugar production. During the 1919-35 period the number of African labourers in the Asian plantations fluctuated between 1,000 and 3,000 annually (KNA/KDAR/1919-29: KNA/1930-35). The Asian farmers started to experience severe labour shortage, especially during the periods of peak labour demand in the African reserves. The expansion of European sisal and sugar cane plantations in the Miwani, Kibigori, Chemelil, Muhoroni and Koru areas also deprived the Asian farmers of some of their potential labourers from Kano location. During the First World and immediately afterwards the world prices for sisal was very high hence the expansion of Chemelil and Koru sisal estates (KNA/NPAR/1927&29).

The sisal estates and the European- owned sugar plantations such as the Victoria Nyanza and Muhoroni Sugar Companies offered higher wages than the Asian farmers. For example, in 1935 the two European sugar companies offered wage rates of 13/50 shillings per ticket while the Asian farmers offered six to eight shillings per ticket (KNA/NPAR/1927&29). The gold mining industry which had mushroomed in Seme and Sakwa locations in the province also attracted labourers because of the good wages offered compared to the Asian farmers. For example, in 1935 the mines were offering wage rates of 12 shillings per ticket while the Asian farmers were paying six to eight shillings per ticket (KNA/ DC/KSM/1/1/14). It is worth noting that the European owned sugar and sisal plantations employed about 70-75% of their labour force on six month contracts. Thus they were provided with accommodation in the companies/plantations' labour camps. They were also supplied with food rations. To counteract the labour shortage due to competition by other employers, Asian farmers also started to engage some labourers on six month contracts (Osamba, 1996).

Such labourers were provided with accommodation and food rations. However, their numbers were small, estimated at 15-25% of the total labour force. During the economic depression of 1921-22 and 1930-35 the Asian farmers laid off about 50% of their labourers (KNA/KLAR/1930-35). They also reduced labour wages from eight shillings per ticket to seven shillings per ticket. The annual reports of 1930-35 show that the Africans had difficulty in meeting their tax obligations. As such, a number of Africans were moving from farm to farm looking for work and were ready to accept any wage offered. Thus, during the 1930-35 economic depression the labour supply exceeded demand. As Stichter (1986) has observed, taxation became a heavy burden on the Africans during periods of economic depression such as 1921-22 and 1930-35 when both wages and prices of African produce fell while taxes did not.

1.3 African Labour in the Immediate Post - Depression Era

From 1936 the Asian farmers in Kisumu County began to recover from the devastating effects of the 1930-35 economic recessions, droughts and the locust invasion. The immediate post-depression period was marked by an economic boom as the prices of agricultural commodities stabilised. As such, Africans entered into wage labour because of the prospects of increased income. Meanwhile, the droughts and famines of 1928 and 1931-34 locally known as *Nyangweso* and *Bonyo* (locusts) respectively had adversely affected African agricultural production (Ochieng, 1988). Furthermore, with population increase the mode of farming was changed. Shifting cultivation was given up as the people were now forced to adjust to two related problems, land shortage and soil exhaustion. Migrant labour therefore proved to be the best outlet of earning an income.

Migrant labour system refers to an arrangement where the labourer-peasant periodically moved to and fro between the peasant economy and wage labour (Stichter, 1986). A man moving to a sugar plantation would stay for a period of three to six months leaving the farming activities to his wife. In addition, the spread of Asian merchandise stimulated new wants among the Africans. Consequently, African labourers sought wage employment to acquire cash for material possessions such as clothes, bicycles, blankets, household goods and other such things (Stichter, 1986). As such, labour migrancy was the Africans' special mechanism of balancing and coping with the demands of both agriculture and wage labour. In 1936 the Asian farmers in the county formed the Nyanza Farmers' Cooperative Society (KNA/DC/KSM/1/3/122;K-LDAR/1936).

The Society sold members' agricultural produce and also supplied them with farming implements. Initially it had a capital of 200,000 shillings divided into ordinary shares of 20 shillings each. All members were expected to sell produce through the society. The Society was granted monopoly of selling *jaggery* in the country and for export in 1937. It charged 25% of the value of commodity per *frasila* (36 Ibs) as commission for agricultural produce sold through it. Before the formation of the Society, the price of *jaggery* was low, at 65 cents per *frasila* (KNA/PC/NZA/1/3/122). But after its establishment the local price of *jaggery* rose to three shillings per *frasila*. This was because the Society controlled the market. It exported about 1,000 tons of *jaggery* annually to Great Britain, India and Uganda.

The export of *jaggery* proved profitable and the farmers expanded acreage under cane. They also installed engine driven crushers to produce high quality *jaggery* (KNA/ DC/KSM/1/3/122). Out of the estimated 80 Asian farmers in the county, 40-45 were producing *jaggery*. By the mid-1930s annual *jaggery* production was 3,000-4,000 tons from 1,000-2,000 tons in the 1920s (KNA/AGR 6/4599). The Asian farmers, especially those who had *jaggery* manufacturing plants, employed between 15-150 labourers each on six month contracts (KNA /DC/KSM/1/17/95).

The Asian farmers employed labourers mostly on six-month contracts because *jaggery* manufacture kept the labour force busy when the season was wrong for cultivating. Sending labour away during low seasons created the problem of slow and painful rebuilding of the labour force when required.

However, their wages were lower compared to those of labour on European farms. For example, by 1938 Asians were offering 6-12 shillings per ticket while the European settlers were paying 9-15 shillings per ticket (KNA/DC/KSM/1/17/95). In 1939 the sugar industry in the county employed 2,400 adults and 700 juveniles at the wage rates of 10 shillings and five shillings per ticket respectively. As such, African labourers were earning a total of £16,500 per annum (KNA/NPAR/1939). In sum, in the 1930s a combination of both economic and social factors stimulated people to seek wage labour. The majority of labourers in the sugar plantations were people from the nearby locations of Kano, Kajulu and Nyakach. Labour contracts began to lengthen and LABOUR migrancy made its appearance as the Africans' special mechanism for balancing and coping with the demands of both agriculture and wage labour.

1.4 African Response to the Asian Sugar Plantation Economy

During the 1919-39 period an increasing number of Africans entered into wage labour in the sugar plantations in Kisumu County. This was the result of a combination of social and economic factors. First, the colonial government had attempted to continue with the cotton cultivation campaign in the county but met with very little success. This was because the crop was labour intensive but yielding very poor cash returns. In 1920 the colonial government through the local administration distributed 1500 lbs of cotton seeds in Kano and Kajulu locations for planting (KNA/ KDAQ/1920). However, the response was discouraging due to the low price offered. As such, in 1921 no cotton was planted by the peasants. In 1922 a total of six hundred acres of cotton was planted in Kano and Kajulu locations (Kitching, 1980). The price offered for cotton was 25-30 cents per pound. Between 1923-31 cotton prices plummeted by about 66%, that is from 30 cents in 1923 to 11 cents in 1931. The fall in price discouraged the local people from cultivating the crop. Thus to a large extent by the 1930s the cotton experiment had failed in Kisumu County (*ibid.*).

At the same time the prices for African produced maize also fell from 4-12 shillings per load in 1919 to between 75 cents to two shillings in 1920-21(KNA/ PC/NZA/1/15/4; KNA/NPAR/1920-21). Moreover, as the PC for Nyanza in 1911 noted, during periods of good harvests the Asian traders often could not buy all the produce that the Africans were willing to sell (KNA/ PC/NZA/1/15/4). Consequently, increased production often resulted in low producer price for the farmer. All these things tended to discourage farmers hence the propensity of people to seek wage labour.

Secondly, the droughts and famines which hit Nyakach and Kano locations in the 1920s and 1930s forced an increasing number of people to seek wage labour in both the European and Asian plantations in the Miwani-Muhoroni area (KNA/PC/NZA/1/15/4). The chiefs of Nyakach and Kano locations started complaining in 1920 that the outflow of African males to the plantations was detrimental to local agricultural production. By the 1920s, due to soil deterioration and declining crop yields, wage labour was seen by the Africans as a more reliable way to earn an income than agriculture(Ochieng, 1988; Stichter, 1986; Anyang' Nyongo, 1981; Lonsdale, 1964).

Thirdly, in 1925 the colonial government issued a circular on the Dual Policy under which the Africans were to be encouraged to contribute to the country's development (KNA/PC/NZA/3/20/4/2/1925). This could be through wage labour or increased agricultural production in the reserves. This policy of parallel development in the reserves and in the settled areas was the brainchild of Governor Robert Coryndon (1922-25). However, the programme failed due to opposition by the settlers and lack of skilled agricultural manpower in African areas (Lonsdale, 1964). The settler controlled newspaper, *The East African Standard*, claimed that the policy could lead to idleness of the Africans in the reserves because the government would not have power to compel them to go out and work against their wish (*ibid.*).

In 1925 the Labour Commissioner recommended that juveniles should not be employed outside their counties but should only be engaged as casual labourers within their Districts (KNA/ PC/NZA/3/20/17/1). This was an attempt to ensure that such juveniles did not become delinquents and stranded outside their districts and to ensure they were not engaged in arduous tasks. Both the Asian and European sugar plantations employed women and juvenile labourers as well (KNA/Lab/9/2132/1932-49). The Employment of Servants Ordinance of 1937 defined a juvenile as a person under the age of 16 years. Juveniles were not supposed to be employed in arduous tasks such as cane and sisal cutting, quarrying, fuel cutting, lifting and carrying of heavy loads.

They were also not to be deployed in mining or in the factory. The Asian farmers employed women and juveniles mostly in planting and weeding sugar cane. In 1932 the colonial government appointed the Kenya Land Commission under the chairmanship of Morris Carter. Among its terms of reference was to consider the land needs and grievances of the Africans and to define the boundaries of the White Highlands among other issues (KNA/DC/KSM/1/18/98/1933). During the Commission's hearing, Luo witnesses claimed that the establishment of the Asian farms in the Kibos-Miwani area had led to the destruction of Luo homesteads (The Carter Report, 1934).

The Kavirondo Taxpayers Welfare Association (KTWA) in their memorandum to the Commission demanded compensation for African land alienated in the Kibos-Miwani Area. The Commission, however, rejected the Luo claims to the alienated land on the ground that the land north of the Kenya-Uganda railway line had been a buffer zone between the Luo and their neighbours, the Nandi, and was thus unoccupied. According to oral information, this decision was very unfair to Jokajulu to whom the Kibos area belonged. The Asian witnesses also petitioned the Commission on the issue of land ownership in the White Highlands (Swainson, 1980). They pointed out that the Asian farmers who had acquired land in the Muhoroni-Chemelil area before the extension of the Highlands boundary from Fort Ternan to Chemelil found it difficult to expand their holdings. This was because they had to obtain the approval of the Colonial Governor. Furthermore, these Asians acquired their land at comparatively high prices, although plenty of land was offered freely to European settlers.

The colonial government was also ready to extend to European farmers essential services such as infrastructure, agricultural extension services and marketing facilities. Asian farmers were very bitter with the government's restriction on Asian land ownership in the Highlands. They appealed to the colonial government to grant them more agricultural land, claiming that overcrowding in the Kibos-Miwani area was the cause for the poor farming methods and low production (KNA/DC/KSM/1/3/122/1947-59). There were three Asian farms south of the railway line at Kibos, which encroached on the then "Kavirondo" reserve (KNA/PC/NZA/2/4/139/1942). The Kenya Land Commission of 1933 had not been notified about the existence of these farms. This was because the Asian grantees had abandoned them for many years and the local people had started to cultivate them, thinking that the plots had reverted to them. The colonial government wanted to purchase the three plots because they were located outside the Asian Settlement Area. It hoped to incorporate them into the African Land Unit. The acquisition of the plots by the government was meant to compensate Jokajulu who had lost the land lying between River Kibos and Ngeta to Asian settlers (*ibid*).

During the economic depression of 1930-35 the Africans in the County who had been laid off by their employers or those who did not join wage labour increased their agricultural production (KNA/CKDAR/1930-35). For example, cotton production increased from 800 tons in 1935 to 2,719 in 1936, and the acreage under the crop expanded by 100 % (Kitching, 1980). This fact to some extent justifies the assertion that the failure of cotton cultivation experiment in the County was due to the absence of male labour as well as lack of qualified agricultural personnel among other causes (Kitching, 1980; Fearn, 1961). However, during the post-depression boom of 1936-39, an increasing number of local people sought wage employment in the nearby sugar plantations. On the whole, the number of labourers in the Asian sugar plantations in the period 1919-39 was small. However, other non-Asian employers also employed African labourers. Consequently, the aggregate total number of Africans from the county in wage employment was high, estimated at 60-65% of the adult male population (KNA DC/KSM 1/2/122; KDQAR, 1939). The majority of the labour force in the sugar plantations were engaged on daily basis or on short term contracts.

1.5 The Impact of the Sugar Plantation Agriculture on the Peasant Economy

The Asian sugar plantation agriculture had both negative and positive effects on the African peasant economy. During the 1953-63 period production of both sugar and *jaggery* increased tremendously (See Tables 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5).

Some of the Asian farmers expanded their cane acreage through purchases or leases from the Asian landlords such as the Walji Hirji Estate (See Table 1). As the Asian plantations expanded there was a corresponding increase in the number of African labourers in these plantations. Asian owned sugar plantations offered employment opportunities to approximately 5,000-8,000 Africans annually, mostly from Kisumu County by 1960 (Osamba, 1996; KNA/Lab 5/2132).

Table 1.3: Asian Landholdings and Acreage under cane in Kisumu District, 1953

| S/No | Area | Acreage under Cane | Total acreage |
|-------|------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| 1. | Miwani Sugar Mills Main Estate | 7,000 acres | 9,000 |
| 2. | Miwani Sugar Mills Chemelil Estate | 3,500 | 5,000 |
| 3. | Kibos Asian Farms | 6,000 " | 12,000 |
| 4. | Miwani Asian Farms | 2,000 | 3,000 |
| 5. | Kibigori | 700 | 3,000 |
| 6. | Muhoroni | 300 | 1,500 |
| Total | | 19,500 | 33,500 acres |

Source: KNA/DC/KSM 1/3/118, Agricultural Production, Kisumu, 4th May, 1953

The majority of the labourers in the sugar plantations were males, especially young energetic ones. The absence of these people from the African economy had some adverse effects (Anyang'-Nyong'o, 1981). However, some scholars such as Kitching (1980) and Hay (1972) have postulated that in the traditional setting, men did not contribute in regular agricultural work and that therefore they were no loss to the African agricultural economy. Regular day to day work was done by the women and children with men only coming occasionally to clear virgin land or to break the ground at the beginning of the agricultural season or supervise the work of women and children.

The absence of male labour meant that the women found it difficult to maintain agricultural production. Between 1946 and 1952 there was a continued decline in agricultural production of maize, eleusine and sorghum in Central Nyanza County. For example, in 1946 the County had produced 4,690 tons of maize while in 1951 the volume was 3,385 tons. During the same period the County had produced 272 tons of sorghum in 1946 while in 1951 the volume was a paltry 107 tons (Kitching, 1980: 132). By 1952 the County had become dependent on maize from Kericho and other neighbouring Counties. This was attributed to the absence of male labour in the county. Moreover, in some areas of the County there was serious shortage of males in the 1950s to clear virgin land for cultivation (Anyang'-Nyong'o, 1981). This in turn led to overuse of the same land resulting to soil impoverishment and decline in agricultural yields. Thus the tendency of more males to seek wage labour to earn income rather than to engage in arduous agricultural tasks, with limited returns.

Table 1.4 Cane Productions by Asian Farmers in Kisumu District, 1953-58

| Year | Production (in tons) |
|------|----------------------|
| 1953 | 129,602 |
| 1954 | 102,726 |
| 1955 | 119,957 |
| 1956 | 170,967 |
| 1957 | 221,967 |
| 1958 | 234,952 |

Source: KNA CNDAR 1953-58

The labourers in the sugar plantations were earning low wages compared to labourers in the urban areas (see Stichter, 1986). This was because it was argued that the cost of living in the towns was higher than that in the rural areas. For example, the sugar plantation labourers were offered accommodation by the employers. Thus they did not pay house rent as was the case with most urban employees. The rural labourers were also given food rations, though of poor quality. In addition, the rural labourers could obtain water and firewood freely while employees in towns had to buy such articles.

However, it should be pointed out that all capitalists are profit oriented thus the wages they paid their employees were low. This was due to the fact that they wanted to maximize profits while minimizing costs. The Asian farmers were no exception to this rule. According to oral information, in the 1950s Asian farmers were making profits from *jaggery* manufacture yet labour wages remained static or rose slowly (Osamba, 1996). Despite the low wages and arduous tasks Africans still sought wage employment in the Asian sugar plantations.

The major reason was that Kano, Nyakach and Kajulu locations, which provided the bulk (about 70%) of the sugar plantations' labour had poor climatic conditions and were therefore prone to droughts and famines (Osamba, 1996). Thus, it was easier to earn a higher income through wage labour than through agriculture.

For example, in 1953, a man could earn an income of 238/50 shillings per annum from one acre of maize and 147 shillings from one acre of cotton (Fearn, 1961: 197). On the other hand, such a man could obtain 20-40 shillings per month as unskilled labourer in the sugar plantations. As such, it was possible for an African to obtain more income from a six month contract as unskilled labourer compared to what he could earn from the cultivation of one acre of cotton or maize. In addition, the labourer was provided with *posho* as well as accommodation.

As a result, an increasing number of people entered into wage labour, which they began to view as a more reliable means of earning an income compared to agricultural production, which was prone to the vagaries of weather, anyway. But they maintained both when they could. The Africans needed both, so they reorganised the family to meet new needs. Hay (1972) has correctly pointed out that the Africans viewed agriculture mainly as a means of subsistence while wage employment was seen as the avenue to increase income and accumulate wealth. Moreover, prices offered for African agricultural produce such as cotton was low and not worth the labour input if this labour was going to consist largely of women. Furthermore, the Asian sugar cane plantations also employed women and juvenile (see Table 1.5). As such, in the 1950s, while the agricultural production in the African areas in the District was declining that of the Asians was showing a marked increase. For example, the Asian farmers produced 131,871 tons, 170,967 tons and 221,494 tons of cane in 1955, 1956 and 1957 respectively (KNA/AGR 6/4576). In 1954 Africans in the County earned 3,177,462 shillings from maize and cotton while Asian farmers earned 5,298,071 shillings from maize, sugar cane and jiggery (KNA/KDAR/1955-57). In 1956 Africans earned 453,954 shillings from export crops while Asian planters earned 842,054 shillings. These excluded income by the Miwani Sugar Mills from the sale of white sugar.

From the above information it can be inferred that the Asian enclave was developing at the expense of the African peasant sector (Osamba, 1996). Consequently, there was under development in the African reserve because of labour migration. Due to the profitability of cane and *jaggery*, demand by Asians for land in the Kibos-Muhoroni area increased. Henceforth, undeveloped land began to sell at between £12-15 per acre or more at Kibos. This was described as very high price for land in the lowlands (KNA/ AGR 6/4576). For example, in 1959 Santa Singh and Company bought 820 acres from Walji Hirji Estate at £ 31 per acre (KNA/DC/KSM 1/3/118).

The sugar plantation economy boosted local trade because there was more money in circulation as the result of the post Second World War economic boom. Contract labourers in the plantations tended to supplement the *posho* supplied by their employers, by buying additional foodstuff from the local producers and traders (KNA/KDAR/1955-57). The foodstuffs which were in high demand were ghee, fish, chicken and fruits. The labourers also purchased articles such as pots, calabashes, baskets and other objects of traditional manufacture from the local people. These demands invigorated production and trade within the sugar cane producing zone. Information derived from informants indicated that women were in the forefront in this trade especially that of agricultural produce. They made profits, some of which they invested in the expansion of agricultural production or in the education of their children. It was mainly the local people near Miwani who profited much from sale of produce to the labourers since the Miwani Sugar factory employed as many as 3,000 labourers by the 1950s (Osamba, 1996; also see Table 1.5).

The Asian sugar industry introduced a new foodstuff namely sugar in the diet of the Africans. In Kenya under the Sugar Ordinance of 1935 sugar was a restricted commodity whose supply was controlled by the colonial government. Consumption in the country was also artificially restricted by transport and distribution difficulties. There is little doubt that as the purchasing power of the Africans increased and with improved distribution network in the late 1950s consumption increased (KNA /MC/6/1147).

The effects of land alienation for Asian settlement became more pronounced on the local people in the 1950s due to population increase. However, Fearn (1961) contends that the creation of these Asian settlements were beneficial to Kisumu District because the alienated area of Kibos-Miwani was mostly suitable for cane cultivation. As such, the Africans would not have gained much from it anyway. It's worth noting that the Asian settlements were located in the most fertile land adjacent to the Nandi Escarpment, with better climatic conditions and soils compared to the area south of the then Kenya-Uganda Railway line.

Furthermore, the loss of these fertile lands meant that the original inhabitants of the area such as Jokajulu and Jokano were restricted to the drier and infertile land (Osamba, 1996).

Table 1.5 African Labourers on Permanent Employment in the Kibos Asian Farms, 1954-57

| Year | Male | Female | Juvenile | Total |
|------|-------|--------|----------|-------|
| 1954 | 3,000 | 300 | 700 | 4,000 |
| 1955 | 3,100 | 300 | 800 | 4,200 |
| 1956 | 3,700 | 700 | 1,200 | 5,600 |
| 1957 | 2,100 | 400 | 500 | 3,000 |

Source: East African High Commission, *Kenya Agricultural Census, 1957*, 79.

By the late 1940s Kajulu location had the highest population density in Kisumu County (see Table 1.6). This resulted into small land holdings giving low and poor crop yields. Indeed, the hostile climatic conditions of Kajulu location and the overcrowding within forced a large number of Jokajulu to seek wage labour in Kisumu town and in the nearby Asian plantations. There was also perennial food shortage in the location forcing people to migrate to the nearby Nyangori location and South Nyanza District (KNA/ CKDAR/1936). Therefore, it can be correctly pointed out that land alienation for Asian settlement adversely affected the Luo, especially Jokajulu. This was because they lost an important and fertile area which could have served as an expansion ground for the increased population in the 1950s and thereafter. Thus, the objective of colonial land alienation policies to force out Africans into wage labour was realised to some extent especially among Jokajulu.

Table 1.6 1948 Population Census: Kisumu District

| S/No | Location | Population | Area in Sq. Mile | Density per sq. Miles |
|------|-----------|------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. | Kajulu | 7,970 | 14 | 569 |
| 2. | East Kano | 36,601 | 155 | 236 |
| 3. | West Kano | 36,783 | 112 | 328 |
| 4. | Nyakach | 36,793 | 143 | 257 |
| 5. | Kisumu | 34,860 | 84 | 415 |
| 6. | Seme | 38,829 | 108 | 313 |

Source: H. Fearn, *An African Economy: A study of the Economic Development of Nyanza Province 1903-53*, OUP: London, 1961: 237.

1.6 Conclusion

The paper has discussed African labour and Asian agriculture in Kisumu County in the inter-war period. It has been pointed out that the period was marked by two economic depressions of 1920-21 and 1930-35 which impoverished and caused great distress to both the labourers and the Asian farmers. The Asian farmers laid off some of their labourers and also reduced the wage rates because of the economic recession. Some of the farmers became bankrupt and sold off their farms to Asian land speculators.

It has noted that since inception and more so from the mid-1920s and 1930s the Asian farmers often experienced labour shortages. This was the result of competition from European settlers' owned sugar and sisal plantations as well as the gold mines in the county which offered higher wages than the Asian settlers. Against this background, the Asian planters started to increase the number of their employees engaged on six month contracts and whom they required to reside on the plantations. However, the number of such labourers was small compared to those engaged as daily paid casuals.

The Asian farmers were not willing to increase wage rates to be at par with the sisal and mining industry. It is therefore evident that labour migration involved a large element of exploitation. This had started to become evident in the Asian sugar plantations during the inter war period. The low wages given to the Africans were an expedient measure to minimise cost. Needless to say, this was a form of exploitation of labourers for the benefit of the employers. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that both social and economic forces induced the local people to seek wage employment in the sugar plantations.

Asian merchandise and the money economy stimulated new wants among the peasants. The price of African grown cash crops such as cotton was low. Thus the local people had realised that wage labour was a more reliable means of obtaining an income compared to agriculture.

However, the withdrawal of people from the peasant economy had started to bring far - reaching repercussions on the County. This study therefore concludes that colonialism in its manifold forms intensified the underdevelopment in Kisumu County. For instance, colonial land policies undermined the local people's economy while extraction of surplus through taxation weakened the social basis of production. Thus, commodity production and labour migration partially destroyed the domestic system of production. The Asian sugar plantation economy would not have taken root without the government land and labour policies which served their interests in one way or another.

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