

**THE MIGRANT LABOUR SYSTEM IN THE ASIAN-OWNED SUGAR  
PLANTATIONS IN KISUMU COUNTY, KENYA, 1940 –1963**

**DR. JOSHIA OTIENO OSAMBA\***

\*Dept. of Humanities, Karatina University, Kenya

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the contribution of the African migrant labour to the expansion of Asian sugar plantation industry in Kisumu County of Kenya. These factors included government policies and the availability of cheap African labour. The article is informed by the underdevelopment theory. Using the perspective, the paper demonstrates how colonial land and labour policies led to the underdevelopment of the peasant sector in Kisumu County. It was through the establishment of colonial rule that the County was incorporated into the World Capitalist System. Asian capitalist farming was concentrated in few areas such as the Kibos-Muhoroni Settlement, leaving the rest in pre-capitalist state which could be exploited as low cost labour reservoir. Thus, the Asian settlement area served as an "export enclave" to which the African reserves provided cheap labour. The growth of such "export enclaves" contributed to the underdevelopment and impoverishment of the peasant sector. The article contends 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. Material for the article is derived from archival research, oral interviews and analysis of existing works on socio-economic history in general and agriculture in particular. The study contributes to the Asian historiography in Kenya.

**KEYWORDS:** Asian Capitalism; Migrant Labour; Peasants; Plantation; Sugar Industry; Underdevelopment.

**1.1 INTRODUCTION**

This article traces the role of African migrant labour in the expansion of the Asian sugar plantation economy in Kisumu County after the Second World War. This expansion is analysed in relation to the African labour in these plantations. The article also highlights the origin, scope and the organization of the African labour force in the sugar plantations. The Miwani Sugar Mills is used as a case study to focus attention onto the categories of labour, the working conditions and the employer-employee relations in the sugar plantations. This is

because the Miwani Sugar Mills owned the largest sugar plantations in the area and employed about 60% of the total labour force in the sugar industry (Osamba, 1996).

Although the Asian farmers introduced the cultivation of sugar cane as a commercial crop in the County, the major benefit of the Asian sugar industry to the local people apart from the introduction of a new foodstuff in the diet of the people, was the provision of approximately 4,000 - 8,000 job opportunities annually especially of unskilled nature such as weeding and cane cutting (Osamba, 1996).

### **1.2 Theoretical Considerations**

The article has used the dependency/underdevelopment paradigm to analyse the migrant labour system in the Asian-owned plantations. The key proponents of this perspective were Latin American scholars such as Dos Santos, Baran, Cardoso and Gunder Frank among others who use it to explain the underdevelopment in Latin America despite many years of foreign rule in the 1960s (Muthee, 2013; Munoz, 1981; Bernstein, 1976; Frank, 1976). The dependency/underdevelopment theory was a response to the modernization approach which had asserted that underdevelopment in the Third World was largely due to internal shortcomings.

Proponents of the dependency perspective posit that the underdevelopment of the Third World can be attributed to Imperialism which led to the emergence of a highly unequal international capitalist system of poor and rich countries (Munoz, 1981; Bernstein, 1976). The developed countries have leverage over the underdevelopment countries where the relationship is one of inequality, characterised by exploitation and economic control of the metropole. It thus leads to a core-periphery dichotomy. As such, the international capitalist system contributed to a global polarization, where the peripheries became marginalized and remained in unending poverty, with the centre developing at their expense.

Walter Rodney (1989) and Samir Amin (1976) popularised the underdevelopment approach in Africa. They contend that colonialism contributed to the exploitation of both natural and human resources of the Third World. For example, Samir Amin observes that wage levels in the periphery were generally lower than those in the metropole. This meant that the labourers in the peripheries subsidised those in the metropole. Similarly, Palmer and Parson (1985) posit that the capitalist system subordinated and impoverished Africans. Such a state of affairs 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 paper 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 in that it attracted 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 of Kano, Kajulu and Nyakach which provided the bulk of cheap labour and only served as a labour reservoir (Fearn, 1961). The nearby African locations were thus deprived of its most energetic young men who sought wage labour in the Asian enclave at low wages. The growth of such "export enclaves" contributed to the underdevelopment and impoverishment of the peasant sector.

Such underdevelopment was achieved in two ways. On the one hand, directly through the extraction of surplus produced by the low paid African labour and on the other hand, indirectly from the sale of high priced manufactured goods sold to the Africans. For example, in the 1950s an average of 65% of the District's able bodied males had joined wage labour (Osamba, 1996). No doubt this enormous withdrawal of labour had considerable negative effects on the economy of the reserve.

### **1.3 Labour Dynamics in the Asian Sugar Plantations**

The Asian farmers drew their labour from the nearby African locations of Kano, Kajulu and Nyakach. These labourers were paid low bachelor wages. Consequently, the labourers' families had no choice but to stay in the family land because the wages were insufficient for the maintenance of families. Employers favoured a migrant African workforce rooted in the traditional social system and rural economy. Such labour was cheap because it saved the employers from meeting the long term social costs of labour.

In the 1950s about 30% of the labourers in the sugar plantations were accompanied by their families (Osamba, 1996). This was more so with contract labourers. Undoubtedly, their contribution to agricultural development in their home areas was minimal. Although it has been pointed out by some scholars that in the traditional society, males' role in agriculture was minimal compared to that of women and children, the absence of the males especially in the 1950s meant that there were very few people to clear up virgin lands for cultivation (Hay,

1972; Fearn, 1961). Consequently, the already cleared land was overused and deteriorated with resultant low agricultural yields (Stichter, 1986). The result was the propensity of more males to seek wage labour. In the 1940s and 1950s a man or woman could earn more income through wage labour of six months contract than what he/she could earn from an acre of cotton or maize. Thus, the prospects of wage labour made men less enthusiastic about agricultural improvements in their locations.

Being capitalists, the Asian farmers could not be fully committed to the interests of their labourers. They only aimed at making maximum profits at minimum costs to themselves. Thus the low wages offered to the labourers ensured that the Asian settlers maximized the appropriation of surplus through exploitation. By the 1950s Asian Sugar plantations were making profits because of the good price for jaggery and white sugar (Osamba, 1996). On the contrary, there were no real improvements in the labour wages and working conditions. Farm profits were repatriated abroad by the Asian farmers while some was invested in non-agricultural undertakings in Kisumu town. This fact supports the major law of capitalist system, the production of maximum surplus value through intensification of exploitation by expansion of production.

The Asian sugar cane farmers maximized profit through the payment of low bachelor wages. Jaggery production in the Asian plantations expanded after 1936 and especially in the 1950s after the decontrol of jaggery prices, yet there were no significant corresponding increase in labour wages (Osamba, 1996). This meant that as the Asian farmers were becoming more prosperous because of good prices for jaggery and sugar in the 1950s the African labourers were increasingly becoming poorer. This was because the wages were either static or only increased slowly compared to the prices of consumer goods.

Thus, it can be said that a significant outcome of the food shortage and poor agricultural yields in the County was a deep increase in labour migration. Although from the perspective of agrarian crisis in the District, increased proletarianization of the local people may have been a welcome development. But in the context of colonial capitalism this was not the case because the labourers were paid "bachelor" wages instead of "family" wages (Stichter, 1986). It is therefore evident that labour migration involved a large element of exploitation. The withdrawal of such a large number of labour force had far-reaching repercussions on the reserve because it resulted in inadequate labour being available in the peasant sector (Fearn, 1961).

#### **1.4 Expansion of the Asian Sugar Plantations**

During the Second World War and in the 1950s, Asian family concerns expanded into the manufacturing sector. This was mostly in the sugar, sisal and cotton industries (Swainson, 1980). This expansion was attributed mainly to the general competitiveness of the family based Asian enterprises, their business acumen and economic resilience.

The Asians managed to extend their operations with the steady accumulation of capital and the acquisition of new professional and technical skills. For example, a total of five white settler farms in the Kibigori - Chemelil area were purchased by Asian farmers during the War (KNA/DC/KSM/1/3/122/1952). In addition, in 1942 an Asian company bought the European settler owned 4,800 acre Muhoroni Sugar Company plantation. All these purchases had to be approved by the Governor since the farms were located within the White Highlands.

However, in the course of the Second World War, cane, production plummeted. A large number of African males in Kisumu County had been recruited into the military for the war purpose (KNA/ Lab 5/19/1945). Thus, there was labour shortage which affected production in both the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Company estates and in the Asian owned plantations. Furthermore, in 1942-43 there was a serious drought which led to famine referred to locally as *Otonglo* (ten cents) (KNA DC/KSM/1/3/22; KNA/ KDAQ/1943-45) in the County. The drought adversely affected sugar cane production. During the War, the Asian farmers had increased the acreage under maize. This was because of the good prices and other incentives such as grants for breaking new land offered by the colonial government to boost production for the war effort (KNA/ DC/KSM 1/3/122).

In the course of the War, the colonial government enacted the 1940 Defence Regulations under which Provincial Commissioners were empowered to enlist labour quotas for the military and essential undertakings, such as agriculture (KNA/DC/KSM/1/17/22/1945). The sugar plantations fell under essential agricultural industries. Therefore, they obtained conscripted labour to boost production for the War effort. For example, the number of conscript labourers in the sugar industry in 1943, 1944 and 1945 was 1,220, 1,060 and 1,052 respectively (KNA/Lab 5/9/1945). Many conscripts who were rejected as unfit for military service were also sent to the nearby European and Asian plantations. Through such labour conscription, the colonial government to some extent ensured the continuation of production in the heavy agricultural industries such as sugar.

The Provincial Commissioners of Kenya in their meeting of 1944 agreed that due to the absence of male labour because of military conscription, women should be encouraged to seek wage labour in the nearby Asian and European plantations (KNA/DC/KSM/1/17/98/1944). Undoubtedly, this meant that women would be overburdened with additional tasks apart from their domestic chores. Nonetheless, the response of the women was favourable. For example, in 1945, the total number of sugar plantation labourers in Kisumu County comprised 2,480 men, 585 women and 1,135 juveniles (KNA /Lab 5/19/1945).

During the War the government realised the need to closely monitor agricultural production in the White Highlands to ensure maximum production for the war effort (Sandbrook, 2008; Odingo, 1971). A Board of Agriculture (Schedule Area) was created to organise increased production of crops. At the same time, the Increased Production of Crops Ordinance of 1942 was introduced. Under this Ordinance the government provided financial assistance to farmers in the form of free grants for the breaking of new land and guaranteed minimum prices for their crops. The Board established agricultural committees and sub committees whose duty was the collection and collation of farm statistics. The system of agricultural sub-committee was institutionalised under the 1955 Agricultural Ordinance.

In 1946 the Asian farmers in Kisumu District formed three production subcommittees (KNA DC/KSM/1/3/122). First, there was the Kibos production Sub-committee with over 40 members. Second was the Miwani-Kibigori production Sub-committee with 16 members and lastly the Chemelil-Muhoroni production Sub-committee with 10 members. Apart from collecting and collating farm statistics the committees also reviewed farming activities of the previous season and made up plans for the next season. The officials of the production sub-committees were elected by the members. These officials in liaison with the Department of Agriculture could recommend farmers for loans and other assistance to boost farming. These committees were headed by educated, rich, and influential part time Asian farmers. This was because the Asians who were solely farmers were illiterate or semi-literate. Almost all the Asians with the necessary qualifications for membership of the production committees were principally tradesmen or professionals who only participated in farming on part-time basis.

In 1947 an Asian entrepreneur, Devjibhai Hindocha who was the proprietor of the Kakira Sugar Works in Uganda purchased the then white settler owned Victoria Nyanza Sugar Company in the County (KNA/KDAQ/1942). He renamed the company, the Miwani Sugar Mills. Hindocha immediately embarked on the expansion of the sugar mills and its

plantations. The Company had three plantation Estates under cane namely Miwani of 9,300 acres, Chemelil of 4,252 acres and Kibigori of 543 acres (KNA/Lab 9/256/1947). Each Estate was under an Asian overseer and supervisor.

The Company introduced a light railway network system which transported sugar cane from the plantations to the factory. Prior to the purchase, the Victoria Nyanza Company had frustrated the Asian farmers by its refusal to purchase all their cane, unilaterally abrogating contracts with the farmers and paying them low prices for the cane delivered (KNA/Lab 9/250/1932). And yet, there is evidence that the company accumulated huge profits which were expatriated abroad. The new Asian owners of the Miwani sugar mills, with the support of the colonial government, encouraged the Asian farmers to increase cane production to meet the increasing demands of the mills.

In response to the encouragement, the farmers purchased new agricultural machinery and also obtained loans mainly from private Asian money lenders in Kenya to produce high quality cane (Osamba, 1996; KNA/AGR/ 6/4599). Thus production of both cane and sugar continued to increase after 1947. For example, the Miwani Sugar Mills production increased from 6,322 tons in the 1947/48 season to 10,430 tons in 1951/52 (KNA/ Lab 9/256/1956). By 1947 there were a total of 83 individual Asian farmers in the district owning a total of 22,071 acres (see Table 1.1).

In 1947, the newly opened Asian owned Miwani Sugar Mills embarked on serious cane variety trials. The company obtained cane seeds from Sat Badian Singh and Bharmant Singh's farms located at Miwani. The following year the Company offered the Government a plot adjacent to Ngeta River about three kilometres from the Miwani Sugar Mills for sugar research. The department of agriculture approved a capital expenditure of £3,480 and a recurrent expenditure of £1,361 for the project (KNA/ Lab 9/256/1956). The aim of the sugar research station was to help identify disease resistant varieties adaptable to the environment and high yielding.

In 1948 the government appointed an Asian, Gill Singh who had knowledge in sugar cane cultivation as an assistant agricultural officer in charge of the Asian farms (KNA/ Lab 9/256/1956). He instructed the Asian farmers on good farming methods and on how to improve their farming activities. Singh also conducted research on cane varieties. Prior to his appointment, the then District Officer for Kisumu town, E.M. Magor had toured the Asian farms and noted in his report that the farming methods were poor. For example, planting on most of the farms was across slopes and not on contour. This tended to cause soil erosion.

Meanwhile, Magor observed that most farmers tended to ratoon their cane six to eight times instead of maximum three times as was the case in India. This contributed to poor cane yields.

In 1953 about 56% of the total acreage held by the Asians had been put under cane (KNA/EAHC/1957). Sugar cane continued to be the dominant crop in the area. However, about half the land holdings in Muhoroni, Kibigori and Kibos had not been put under cane. This was because of the long distance from the Miwani sugar mills, among other factors. Furthermore, the land in the Muhoroni and Kibigori areas was less fertile thus much of it was used as grazing ground by the Asian farmers. It's important to note that the Asian settler farms were small compared to those of their European counterparts. For example, by 1957 more than 50% of the Asian land holdings were less than 200 acres whereas only about 3% were over 2000 acres (KNA/EAHC/1957; see Table 1.2).

Available evidence shows that the white settlers used their access to state power to impose technical and financial control against Asian agriculture in Kenya (Osamba, 1996; KNA/AGR 6/4599). As a result, resources were given to the Asian settlers more selectively. Moreover, the colonial government did not whole heartedly support Asian agricultural undertaking as was the case with their white counterparts. The colonial government provided nearly all the agricultural extension services, infrastructural developments and credit facilities to the white settler plantations at their expense.

Under the 1930 Agricultural Advance Ordinance, a local land board was set up in Nyanza. It comprised the Provincial Commissioner, the District Commissioner of Kisumu-Londiani District, the Kisumu branch managers of the National Bank of India and the Standard Bank of South Africa. The board also included two European settlers, Thomas Allen and Eric Mayers, then proprietors of Muhoroni and the Victoria Nyanza Sugar Companies, respectively. The board mainly recommended white settlers for credit facilities at the expense of the Asian farmers. Needless to say, the Asian farmers mostly borrowed money from private money lenders who charged higher interest rates of more than 6% charged by the Land and Agricultural Bank (KNA/AGR/ 6/4599).

**Table 1.1 Approximate Number of Asian Farmers and Acreage held in Kisumu District, 1947**

S/No	Area	Acreage	No. of farmers
1.	Kibos	11,321	51
2.	Miwani	1,920	11
3.	Kibigori	3,990	8
4.	Chemelil	4,335	7
5.	Muhoroni	505	4
6.	Total	22,071	83

Source: KNA/DC/KSM 1/3/122 Agricultural Production on Indian Farms, 1947.

Before 1945 very few Asian merchants had moved into the industrial and manufacturing ventures in Kenya. This was due to financial constraints and lack of credit facilities from the European controlled Banks. However, in the mid-1940s the Asian banks of India and Baroda were established. They became the major sources of credit to the Asian entrepreneurs. It is evident that in the late 1940s and thereafter many Asian firms expanded into larger units by the takeover of smaller companies (Aiyar, 2015; Oonk, 2012; Patel, 2002; Himbara, 1994). The Miwani and Muhoroni sugar companies are classic examples. In the 1960s the Mehta group took over and revived the Muhoroni sugar company. The related Hindocha and Madhvani families had interest in sugar industry and other industries in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The Madhvani family acquired the Ramisi sugar mills situated near Mombasa from the former European owners in the 1960s.

**Table 1.2 Analysis by Size of Asian Agricultural Holdings in Kibos-Muhoroni area in Acres, 1956-57**

Average	1956	1957
Under 200	34	42
200-499	20	20
500-999	8	8
1,000-1,499	3	3
2,000-4,999	2	2
5,000-49,999	1	1
50,000 and over	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>77</b>

Source: Extracted from The East African High Commission, Kenya Agricultural Census, 1957 Summary of Results, Nairobi, July 1958, Table 4.

These Asian families combined agricultural enterprises and manufacturing concerns. From profit generated by the sugar mills these families diversified into other industrial

undertakings such as textile manufacture, steel rolling mills among others. Thus by the 1960's these Asian families had achieved the status of corporate capitalists (Aiyar, 2015; Himbara, 1994). They had business interests in East Africa, India, Canada, Australia and Britain.

### **1.5 Categories of Labourers in the Sugar Plantations**

By 1940 the labourers in the Asian sugar plantations consisted of both casual and long term contract labourers. As with all agricultural undertakings the demand for labour in the sugar plantations fluctuated seasonally. The peak labour period commenced in March to November during the planting, weeding and harvesting season (KNA/ Lab 9/1804). However, the Miwani sugar mills which owned the largest sugar plantations in the County required African labourers throughout the year, both in the farms and in the sugar mills. Furthermore, the good climatic conditions in the area made it possible for harvesting and crushing of cane to be distributed throughout the year.

A large number of unskilled labourers were required during the peak demand periods. About 90% of the labourers in the sugar plantations were unskilled and virtually illiterate (Osamba, 1996). Tasks such as planting, weeding and cutting sugar cane did not require high skills but physical fitness and experience of the labourer. The Asian farmers, prior to the 1950s favoured migrant labour because it was cheap. Thus during periods of low production and economic depression, the labourers could be dispensed of, without creating any major social upheavals (Osamba, 1996). The system therefore saved the employers from such social costs of labour as accommodation, diet and medical attention.

The Miwani Sugar Mills transported casual labourers daily from Awasi, Ahero and Nyakach especially for cane cutting and weeding (Osamba, 1996). Furthermore, the Company employed a large number of contract labourers and other migrant labourers particularly from Uganda and the Belgian Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo), especially after 1947. These comprised skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled labourers. In 1947 Devi Hindocha came to Miwani with about 300-400 of his former workers at the Kakira sugar works in Uganda (Osamba, 1996). These workers formed the bulk of the pioneer semi-skilled and skilled African labour force in the Miwani sugar mills. For example, the Teso and Lugbara were mainly *askari* (guards) while the Acholi were *fundi* (artisans), drivers and factory supervisors.

However, this does not mean that there were no skilled or semi-skilled local labourers. The missionary sponsored schools as well as the colonial government who managed primary schools in Kenya emphasized technical and vocational education for Africans in their curriculum (King, 1976). For example, they produced trained artisans such as carpenters, masons, plumbers and clerks. In addition, after the Second World War thousands of ex-servicemen obtained some technical training at the Native Industrial Training Depot (NITD) in Nairobi. Asian artisans in the Townships such as Kisumu, Kericho and Kibos also provided rudimentary training to African artisans in their workshops. Consequently, by the mid-1940s the number of African artisans such as drivers, mechanics, masons and carpenters had increased to thousands.

There were three classes of African artisans in Kenya (KNA/ DC/KSM 1/17/34). These were as follows: Class I which referred to an African who was fully trained and qualified at the NITD, Class II which denoted an African having three years training at a mission or government training school, and Class III which referred to untested Africans who claimed to be artisans. Some of these artisans obtained wage employment in the Asian sugar plantations. For example, the Miwani Sugar Mills and some of the other Asian farmers had acquired ex-military lorries which were used to transport sugar cane. As such, there was high demand for drivers for the lorries and locomotives which were used to transport sugar cane. In 1948 about 80 African drivers were employed in the Asian sugar plantations (Osamba, 1996).

It's worth noting that some Asian employers such as the Miwani Sugar Mills preferred migrant labourers from outside Kenya because they were on long contracts of three years (Osamba, 1996). Such workers were accompanied by their families thus ensuring labour stability. These employers provided accommodation and food rations for such labourers and their families. From the 1950s the labour force in the Asian plantations became more stabilized than hitherto (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1956). This was due to a variety of socio-economic factors. For example, local people still sought wage employment to obtain cash to meet specific needs such as tax, school fees, bride wealth and consumer goods (Hay, 1972). More than 50% of the informants asserted that they joined wage employment due to poverty and desire to acquire material possessions (Osamba, 1996).

Furthermore, as a result of the post-war economic boom, people entered wage labour because of the prospect of increased income. For example, wage labour was seen as a quicker and more reliable means of earning an income compared to agricultural production

in the reserves which was prone to the vagaries of weather (Osamba, 1996). In this situation, contrary to the previous practise whereby Africans did not engage in long contracts but only worked to obtain cash for a specific target, from the 1950s Africans were willing to engage in longer contracts of six months or more (see Table 1.3).

Contract labourers in the sugar plantations came mainly from Nyakach, Yimbo, Gem, South Nyanza, Uganda and the then Tanganyika (Osamba, 1996: KNA/Lab 9/256/1948). They were employed on six month contracts which were renewable on expiry with the mutual agreement of the two parties. They were referred to as *Jo-ogirimiti*(people of contract). Such labourers were accommodated in the labour camps and this resulted in labour stability compared to the daily paid casual labourers whose daily turnout was low. Some of the labourers recruited their relatives and friends for wage labour in the sugar plantations.

Labour recruitment for the Miwani Sugar Mills was carried out by African clerks and headmen. In Kisii Township in the then South Nyanza County the African recruiters were under the supervision of an Asian clerk (KNA/ Lab 9/2132/1956). Messrs Gethin and Dawson acted as the forwarding Agent from Kisii. By 1952 about 62% of the adult males in Kisumu County were already in wage employment (KNA/CNDAR/1950). Thus, the labour force in the County was depleted. Recruiters and employers turned to South Nyanza to recruit labour. For example, the Miwani Sugar Mills established a labour recruiting centre at Migori, manned by an Asian clerk. This resulted in the recruitment of Kuria labourers, some of whom were informed that their tasks would be to keep crown birds (*owang*) off the sugar cane (Osamba, 1996). When these labour recruits reached Miwani, however, they were deployed to harvest sugar cane! The majority of these labourers deserted though some of those who remained later gained experience and became good cane cutters (*ratego*) and cane loaders.

In the 1950s individual Asian planters who hitherto relied heavily on casual labourers increased the number of their contract labour force(KNA/CNDAR/1951). They employed labourers on monthly contracts and also required them to reside in the labour estates within the plantations. This was an attempt to ensure a stable labour force and to increase their productivity. The Asian farmers employed a small number of contract labourers ranging from 15 to 300 depending on the sizes of their Estates. The number also depended on whether there were jaggery manufacturing mills in the Estate or not. The mills operated 24 hours thus the labourers worked in three shifts hence the need for a large labour force. For

example, in 1950, a total of 63 out of the 100 Asian farmers in the County were involved in the manufacture of jiggery (KNA /T&C /119/1950).

Contract labourers were entitled to repatriation home by the employers on completion of their contracts. At the Miwani sugar mills this was done either by providing the labourers with train tickets or travel warrants to their homes. Sometimes the company lorries were used to transport the labourers to their locations. Labourers who renewed their contracts were referred to in jest by other labourers as *Malaya* (“prostitute”) (Osamba, 1996). This was because many labourers still believed that farming in the reserves was their primary activity and that wage labour was for the achievement of certain targets.

Slow, lazy and weak labourers could take up to two months to complete a 30-day contract ticket (Osamba, 1996). For example, those who signed for six month tickets could be compelled to work for eight to nine calendar months. By the mid-1950s about 75% of the labourers in the Miwani Sugar Mills were Luo, 15% were Kuria, Abagusii, Kamba, Kikuyu, Nandi and Luyia while about 10% were Ugandans, Rwandese and Sudanese (KNA/Lab 9/256/1948).

**Table 1. 3 Comparison of Estimated Income of African Farmer from the yield of one Acre of Maize or Cotton and Monthly Wage Rates in the Sugar Plantations, 1943-53**

Year	Maize (Shs.)	Cotton(Shs.)	Wage rates(Shs.)
1943	60.00	45.00	13-14/=
1944	65.00	40.00	14/=
1945	65.00	40.00	15/=
1946	67/50	51.00	15-16/=
1947	87/50	57.00	16-19/=
1948	113/75	63.00	16-20/=
1949	115/50	87.00	18-20/=
1950	122/50	90.00	18-20/=
1951	136/50	132.00	22-25/=
1952	228/50	147.00	20-40/=
1953	283/50	147.00	20-40/=

Source: Extracted from Fearn, N., *An African Economy: A Study of the Economic Development of the Nyanza Province of Kenya, 1903-1953*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961 and KNA/Lab 9/2132, Labour Inspection Report, 1943-46.

The Asian sugar plantations employed a significant number of both women and juvenile labour both as casual labourers and on ticket contracts. The juveniles on ticket contract were provided with accommodation and *posho*(food rations) by the employers.

Such juveniles shared housing with adult labourers. They were paid half the adult wage rates. Their food rations consisted of the following items in Table 1.4.

According to the Employment of Juveniles Rules of 1950 any firm which employed more than fifty juveniles was required to appoint a special supervisor in charge of the juveniles. Employers were also supposed not to engage juvenile labour in hard and dangerous tasks. In 1951 the Labour inspector recommended that the Miwani Sugar Mills should not be allowed to employ juveniles because of the poor working conditions (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1951). The Labour inspector pointed out that the Miwani labour camps, were characterised by congestion of occupants, poor food rations and hard tasks. However, the Company promised to improve the working conditions.

It's worth noting that according to the 1952 Employment of Juveniles (Hours of work and Welfare) Rules, juveniles were supposed to work for six hours a day (Kempe, 2013). As per the Employment of Servants Ordinance of 1937, juveniles were not to be employed in hard tasks, such as cane and sisal cutting, fuel cutting and carrying heavy loads or in industrial undertakings such as mining or in the factory. Such rules however were flouted by the Asian farmers who over tasked and underfed them (Osamba, 1996). For example, in 1953 Bhanji Walji was found by the Labour Inspector to have employed juveniles in his jaggery manufacturing plant at Chemelil contrary to the Employment of Servants Ordinance of 1937(KNA/ DC/KSM 1/17/22/1937).

There were two types of juvenile labourers. On the one hand were those recruited with or without parental consent by private labour agents. On the other hand were those who joined employment voluntarily with the consent of adult relatives. The latter category was prevalent in the sugar plantations (KNA/DC/KSM 1/17/22/1937). According to labour regulations, juveniles could only be employed with the consent of their parents. However, this rule was circumvented by labour recruiters and employers. The Orde-Browne Report of 1946 on labour conditions in East Africa had argued that most of the tasks performed by juveniles in the agricultural sector were not arduous. The report pointed out that since the juveniles were entitled to some wage, housing and food rations, employment was beneficial to them.

Although initially most of the women labourers in the sugar plantations worked as daily paid casuals, by the 1950s the number of women on six month contracts had increased. This was probably due to the employers' preference for contract labourers. For example, in 1957, the Miwani sugar Estate employed 973 women on contract (KNA/ Lab 9/2132/1957).

Out of this figure, 878 stayed in the labour camps. According to oral information squatter labour was not common in the Asian sugar plantations (Osamba, 1996). For example, between 1954-57 the number of squatters in the Asian farms especially in the Chemelil-Muhoroni area ranged between 200-300. These squatters were mostly Luo and Nandi. They were given limited grazing or farming rights in return for their labour.

### **1.6 Working Conditions in the Sugar Plantations, 1940-55**

The colonial government had created the Department of Labour whose main duty related to the enforcement of the various labour Ordinances in Kenya. The Labour Inspectorate was one of the sections of the Department. The labour inspectors mainly dealt with enforcement of the Employment Act.

During the Second World War the Labour Commissioner had argued in his report of 1943 that the working conditions in the sugar plantations fell short of the minimum requirement for the provision of conscripted labour (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1957). He thus recommended that such plantations should not be provided with conscripted labour unless they improved the working conditions. Despite this, the Provincial Commissioner of Nyanza provided conscripted labour to some of the farmers in the Miwani-Chemelil area. According to the conscripted labour regulations, such labourers had to be accommodated near the place of work or transported to work. Furthermore, they were to be supplied with food rations and a basic wage rate of 14 shillings per ticket.

In 1943 the colonial government introduced the task system of work in agriculture (KNA DC/KSM/1/17/16/1943). This was a system in which each labourer had to perform a given amount of work per day. The colonial government claimed that underemployment was rampant in the agricultural industry due to the indolence of labourers and apathy by employers in enforcing diligence for fear of becoming unpopular with labourers. It was hoped that the task system would lead to increased production. The system of written ticket contracts and work organised as daily tasks operated as follows:

Each man is set a daily task, when he has completed it he may go, even if it has only taken two hours to complete it. Each completed task is recorded on a ticket with which he is issued at the commencement of the contract. This ticket states his daily [task], rate of pay, and the contract is either for a month or forty two days. The monthly contract has twenty six working days and forty two day contract has thirty working days. Each worker is paid at the expiry of his contract (Elkan, 1960: 113).

Elkan (1960: 114) further notes that task work differs from piece work and other similar types of payment by the fact that it rewards extra effort not by extra earning but by extra leisure. Although Elkan's study was based in Uganda his findings are applicable to the sugar plantation labour in Kisumu County. For example, in the 1950s less than 10% of the labourers at the Miwani Sugar Mills were willing to perform more than the basic daily task, even for overtime payment (KNA/Lab 9/256/1957). Despite the fact that Asian farmers paid low wages compared to other employers, some Africans preferred to work for them. According to oral information this was because Asian employers extended credit facilities to them in the form of goods or cash (Osamba, 1996). The Asian employers expected their labourers to keep on borrowing money or goods so that at the end of the month the labourer's wage earnings was negligible. Thus, the credit facilities were inducement for the labourers to stay longer in employment.

The wages paid by the Asian farmers in 1941 ranged from 6 - 10 shillings per ticket while the Victoria Nyanza sugar company offered wage rates of 9 - 15 shillings per ticket (KNA/ DC/KSM/1/7/95). According to oral information such wage rates were very low to adequately meet the needs of the labourers. The labourers hoped to meet their tax obligations and purchase some consumer goods for themselves and their families. For example, in 1946 the poll tax rate was 14 shillings and the Local Native council tax rate was two shillings per annum (KNA/ DC/KSM/1/1/14). This means that a labourer who had to pay tax for three relatives would have to work for at least five months to accumulate just enough money for tax and nothing else. It should be noted that the labourer also had to buy some food stuff to supplement the food rations which in most cases were inadequate and of poor quality.

The sisal plantations and mines offered higher wages compared to the sugar cane farmers. Some of the gold mines were in Seme locations in the County. They were owned and managed mainly by Europeans. In the 1940s the mines offered 12 shillings per ticket (KNA/ DC/KSM/1/1/14). The sisal plantations were located in Kibigori, Chemelil, Muhoroni and Koru. They were owned by both Europeans and Asians. In 1947 the District Commissioner (DC) of Kisumu noted that the sugar plantation wages were low compared to the labourers' monthly expenditure. He estimated that a married labourer in Kisumu town with two children spent 53.38 shillings per month while a single labourer spent 36 shillings per month on food, accommodation, clothing, medical and other expenses (KNA/DC/KSM/1/17/54).

Furthermore, the DC estimated that the minimum cost of living for a single person outside Kisumu town was 30 shillings per month. According to the informants, these were conservative figures and did not reflect the real situation. By 1950, the wage rates for unskilled labourers in the Asian sugar plantations ranged between 18 - 25 shillings per month (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1950). The low bachelor wages paid to the contract labourers in the Asian plantations meant that the labourers were subsidized by production from the family farm.

At the Miwani Sugar Mills, on engagement a contract labourer was provided with a blanket, a *karai* (trough), eating bowl, a plate and a sleeping mat (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1950). All these things became the property of the employee on completion of a six month contract. The employee was also provided with a working tool (a hoe or cane slasher) which had to be returned to the company on completion of the contract. From 1947 such labourers were accommodated in the labour camps and provided with food rations consisting of maize flour, beans, sugar, salt and cooking fat (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1950). However, according to oral information, the food rations were inadequate and of poor quality. This view is supported by the labour inspection report of 1952 which stated that the *posho* was weevil infested and unfit for human consumption (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1952).

Miwani Sugar Mills provided some welfare services such as a small dispensary, primary school and sports facilities to attract and retain labourers (Osamba, 1996). However, the six bed dispensary did not have enough medicine and was poorly managed. In 1952 the labour inspector described the dispensary as under "an old lazy Indian doctor" (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1952). The Company allowed married labourers to stay with their families although the labourer was still paid bachelor wage rates. However, the wives of the labourers could also seek employment in the company's plantations if they wished. It is estimated that 50-60% of them did so (Osamba, 1996).

During the 1930s the labour camps resembled African villages and were known by the headman's name. Occupants included men, women and children. There were no latrines or means of waste disposal (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1933). The labour inspector in his 1932 report advised the Asian employers to improve the labour working conditions. However, the Victoria Nyanza Company and the Asian planters did not heed the labour inspector's advice. Thus, in 1933 the Company and three other Asian farmers were fined 100 shillings each for failing to comply with the order of the labour inspector to keep their labour camps clean and in sanitary conditions.

The 1936 labour inspector's report was critical of the permission which had been granted to the labourers to construct their own houses in the plantations (KNA/Lab 9/2132/1936). It noted that the houses were haphazardly arranged, overcrowded and a health hazard. The Inspector therefore recommended that the sugar estates be inspected regularly because of their unsatisfactory records. The housing situation in the sugar plantations deteriorated in the 1950s as a result of the expansion of the labour force without a corresponding increase in the labour camps (KNA/ Lab 9/256). In 1956 the Labour Commissioner in his report described the housing as very poor and sanitation as below average (KNA/ Lab 9/256).

Daily work in the Miwani sugar plantations commenced between 6.30 - 7.00 am (Osamba, 1996). The average work load in the plantation took up five to six hours daily because of the heavy nature of the tasks such as cane cutting and weeding. The hot weather conditions ranging from 17°C to 25°C also added to the burden. On the other hand, the factory and non-task labourers worked on eight hours daily shifts (8.00 am - 4.00 pm, 4.00 pm - midnight, and midnight - 8.00 am) which alternated weekly. For plantation labourers no work was performed on Sunday except for emergency work. Such emergency work consisted of loading cane or transporting already harvested cane to the factory to make the sugar mills continue operating or to forestall possible loss of already harvested cane. This was because the factory required enough cane to operate 24 hours daily.

In 1952 daily tasks in the Miwani Sugar plantations were as follows: three men were expected to cut enough cane to fill two trucks of 2.5 – 3.0 tonnes per day; weeding labourers were supposed to remove weeds left by a mechanical weeder in an area of 4.0– 6.0 feet by 120 feet per task. Planting was mainly done by mechanical means except in swampy areas where a labourer's task was to plant seeds in an area of 2,000 sq. feet (Osamba, 1996). Two juveniles were expected to perform weeding tasks equivalent to an adult labourer. On the other hand, clerical staff worked during the normal office hours commencing at 8.00 am to 4.30 pm.

Cane cutting was considered a very arduous and dangerous task (Osamba, 1996). It was therefore unpopular and thus suffered perennial labour shortage. According to oral information, during the colonial period, cane was not burnt before cutting as is the practise today. Not only did this make cane cutting difficult, it also made the task a risky exercise because of the presence of snakes and other wild animals in the cane bush. However, cane cutting depended on the labourer's physical strength. Experienced cane cutters completed

their daily tasks earlier and could even manage a double task. Failure to complete a day's task meant that the work ticket was not marked. However, if the labourer was on contract, he was still entitled to the daily food ration (*posho*). Information derived from informants indicated that the daily tasks were very heavy and unfair. Moreover, the supervisors tended to victimise vocal labourers whom they often forced to repeat the same task under the pretext that the task was not satisfactorily carried out.

In 1952 there were four labour camps in the Miwani Estate (KNA /Lab 9/256). The first was the Factory camp which consisted of 394 huts. Thirteen of these huts were murram-mud brick *rondavels* (round huts). Secondly, there was the Section 2 camp with 143 *rondavels*. Thirdly, there was Section 3 camp with 127 *rondavels* and lastly there was the ox-camp with 32 *rondavels*. Each labour camp was under an African headman known locally as *nyapara* who was responsible to the company's welfare officer. On the other hand, Chemelil Estate had four camps for labourers namely B1, B3, L1 and C7.

There was shortage of housing in the sugar plantations so that as many as three labourers often shared one hut (see Table 1.2). Married women and juveniles lived with their husbands or relatives. However, the unmarried women and juveniles who had no relatives shared accommodation with other labourers. There were no separate estates either for the married people or women. There was congestion in almost all the labour estates. The most congested labour camp in Miwani was the Factory camp. According to oral information, the congestion in the labour camps often led to the outbreak of epidemics such as typhoid fever, dysentery and plague (Osamba, 1996). For example, in 1947 and 1952 there was a serious outbreak of plague in Section 2 and Section 3 labour camps which claimed the lives of five and seven labourers respectively (KNA /Lab 9/256). The health and labour inspector ordered the demolition of some of the huts in the camps to contain the situation.

When the Labour Department exerted pressure on the farmers to improve the housing conditions, some of them retorted that the African huts in the reserves were no better than the ones they provided (KNA/Lab9/256/1952). The sizes of the *rondavels* ranged from 16 to 18 feet in diameter. These houses were not partitioned yet each served as a kitchen, sitting room and bedroom for several labourers and in some cases their families. By the late 1940s and early 1950s the labour camps in the Asian plantations consisted of *rondavels* of mud and wattle or corrugated iron walls with thatched roofs. The walls were about four feet high and some of the houses had neither windows nor door shutters. Maintenance was negligible so that these *rondavels* were in poor conditions, leaking, and also, mice and vermin infested

(KNA/Lab 9/256). It is reported that in the labour camps, the labourers led a social life which was reminiscent of that in the African villages. For example, beer was brewed and dances organized by the various ethnic groups in turn, weekly (Osamba, 1996). The relationship amongst the labourers was generally harmonious.

Chewing of sugar cane from the Miwani Sugar Mills' plantations was forbidden (Osamba, 1996). Security men were deployed to guard sugar cane. Any labourer who was caught chewing cane was publicly humiliated by being frogmarched to the labour camps with the cane tied to a string around his neck. Thereafter he was handed over to the police at the nearby Miwani Police Station. Such a labourer could be imprisoned for as many as two months.

**Table 1.5 Labour Housing and Occupants in Miwani Estate, 1954**

S/No	Camp	Total No of rooms	Men	Women	Juvenile	Children
1.	Section 1	117	185	54	95	85
2.	Section 2	112	109	33	79	38
3.	Section 3	112	196	32	110	6
4.	Ox-camp	32	21	5	7	9
5.	Factory	401	845	228	156	120

Source: Extracted from KNA / Lab9/256 Labour Inspection Report 13<sup>th</sup> May, 1954.

Almost all the senior management posts in the Miwani Sugar Mills were the exclusive preserve of Asians and Europeans (Osamba, 1996). Even the senior clerks and supervisors were Asians. Asian clerks and supervisors had great contempt for African labourers. Nearly all the company's records were written in Gujarati. According to informants the Asian supervisors and clerks were corrupt. They tended to cheat the illiterate African labourers of part of their wages. In addition, they fraudulently pocketed wages of deceased labourers. These Asian officials were very hostile to any labourer who attempted to make any complaints. African labourers therefore feared them very much because of the excessive powers of employing and sacking bestowed on them by the company's management.

Asian artisans and clerks were given higher salaries and wages compared to African labourers who had better or the same qualifications (Osamba, 1996). For example, Africans were paid less than half the salary scales of Asians engaged in similar tasks. Any attempt by an African employee to complain about his professional qualifications was anathema to the Asian employers. This could lead to instant dismissal. The Asian planters appointed supervisors among the labourers. Both Asian farmers and their African supervisors did not like educated African labourers in their farms. The supervisors feared educated African

labourers as competition for themselves. At the same time such labourers, because they were conscious of their rights, were regarded with apprehensions as prospective trouble makers who might have undue influence on other labourers.

The Miwani Sugar Mills offered higher wages in comparison to those of other Asian sugar cane farmers. For example, in 1955 the Miwani Mills wages for unskilled labourers was 25 shillings to 40 shillings per month while the other Asian farmers offered 18 - 20 shillings per month (KNA/Lab 9/256)). Thus the labourers in the Miwani Sugar Mills referred in jest to those in the other Asian farms as "B" labourers(Osamba, 1996;KNA/Lab 9/256). Table 1.3 shows a comparison of the Miwani wage rates in 1952 and 1955. The labourers who were working on 30 day tickets received wage increases between 1952 and 1955 while casual labourers' wage rates remained stationary.

Skilled and semi-skilled labourers in the Asian sugar plantations such as clerks and artisans were paid higher wages compared to the unskilled ones. They could be paid as much as three to four times the minimum wage of unskilled labourers. For example, in 1952 unskilled labourers at the Miwani Sugar factory were earning 20 - 30 shillings per ticket while skilled labourers were getting 60 - 125 shillings per ticket (KNA/Lab 9/256; KNA/DC/KSM/1/17/54).

**Table 1.3 Monthly Labour Wage Rates at Miwani Sugar Estate, 1952 and 1955**

S/No	Category	1952	1955
1.	Cane cutters	30/= per ticket	40/= per tickets
2.	Factory Labourers	25-40/= per ticket	30-60/= per ticket
3.	Headmen	40-90/= per ticket	50-120/= per ticket
4.	Artisan and drivers	60-125/= per ticket	75-150/= per ticket
5.	Clerks	50-200/=per ticket	75-225/= per ticket
6.	Juveniles	10-15/= per ticket	12-20/=per ticket
7.	Casual labourers	3/= per day	3/= per day
8.	Juvenile casual labourers	Shs. 1.50 per day	Shs. 1.50 per day

Source: Extracted from KNA Lab 9/256 LIR, 29<sup>th</sup>July, 1952 and 16<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1955.

On the whole, working conditions in the Asian sugar plantations in Kisumu County were poor and characterised by low wages, poor housing, inadequate food rations and heavy

tasks. Throughout the colonial period very little improvements were made on the labour working conditions.

### **1.7 Impact of the Asian Sugar Plantation Agriculture on African Peasants**

The Asian sugar plantation economy contributed to socio-economic differentiation within the local community. This came about through increased earnings from wage employment, the cultivation of sugar cane or trade. Such income raised the peoples' purchasing power of various manufactured goods. This was evident in the mushrooming of Asian shops in Kibos, Miwani, Kibigori and Muhoroni within the sugar producing zone. The income from wage employment was used by enterprising labourers to increase agricultural production, trade, purchase of land, or to meet the school fees for relatives. This was particularly so in the 1950s and 1960s. There are some examples of this development.

Sasia Oyare of East Kano became prosperous through wage labour in the Asian sugar plantations (Osamba, 1996). He worked in Miwani for ten years before he started to organize the local casual labourers into weeding and sugar cane cutting groups in the 1940s. He realized that these labourers would be in a position to bargain for better wage rates as a group than as individuals. The Asian farmers who required a large number of casual labourers would approach Oyare, who acted as a broker. If the wage rates offered by the farmer were acceptable then Oyare deployed the labourers under his control. Oyare was paid by the Asian farmers a lump sum amount which he then paid the labourers each according to his/her input. However, he retained a larger portion of the money by virtue of being the leader. Through such labour contracts, Oyare accumulated money which he invested in the education of his children, payment of bride wealth for his three wives and the improvement of his farms, among other things.

Another skilled labourer of the Miwani Sugar Mills who became prosperous through wage employment was Opiyo Agwambo. Agwambo joined the factory in 1955 as a clerk at the wage rate of 85 shillings per month (Osamba, 1996). He invested his income to purchase land in East Kano. Agwambo also invested in agriculture back at home and in the education of his children. Similarly, Opande Ondiala was also one of the skilled labourers at the Miwani Sugar Mills, which he joined in 1957 as a store keeper. Ondiala's wage rate then was 70 shillings per month. He invested his earnings to purchase land in East Kano location. At first Ondiala leased land on which he cultivated food crops such as millet, maize, beans and vegetables which he sold to the labourers at Miwani. In 1961 he bought a plot at *Kaeli*

(Elly's place) market where in partnership with his brother, Stephen Ondiala he constructed business premises where he conducted petty trade.

It would thus appear that only a small number of African labourers in the sugar plantations managed to significantly improve their socio-economic status. For the majority of the labourers, especially the unskilled, life was hard and they were only struggling to make ends meet with their meagre wages. For example, they could not send cash to relatives at home on a regular basis. However, in comparison to people who did not join wage labour, the labourers had higher and more reliable income. Thus some of them were able to pay school fees for their children and relatives so as to improve the socio-economic status of the family.

### **1.8 Conclusion**

This article discusses the expansion of the Asian sugar plantation economy in Kisumu County from 1940 to 1963. During this period more Asian entrepreneurs invested in the sugar industry. Thus production of both cane and sugar in the Miwani sugar mills and in the other Asian farms increased tremendously. This also necessitated the employment of a large African labour force in the sugar plantations.

It can be argued that to some extent, wage employment undermined African agricultural production especially in Kano, Kajulu and Nyakach locations from where the majority of the labourers came. Furthermore, wage labour and cane cultivation led to the emergence of social differentiation within the local community. Lastly, land alienation for Asian settlement had adverse effects on the local people, especially Jokajulu. The population increase in Kajulu location in the 1950s led to overcrowding in the location which in turn created social and economic difficulties. Thus some people sought wage employment in the sugar plantations so as to be assured of a reliable income.

Before the 1950s the local people preferred to work in the plantations as daily paid casuals. This was because of economic and social reasons. However, in the 1950s the number of contract labourers who resided in the plantations had increased. Labour exploitation was rampant in the Asian sugar plantations. This was manifested in the form of low wages and poor working conditions. However, the labourers never accepted their poor working conditions. They attempted to organize themselves in order to negotiate or force the amelioration of their working conditions. They organized protests and small scale strikes. Most of these strikes, however, were spontaneous and poorly organized. They failed to

achieve their objectives. However, they marked the emergence of labour consciousness which later became entrenched into a strong labour movement in the sugar plantations.

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