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Travaux de Recherche sur l'Afrique de l'Est

## AFRO-ASIAN RELATIONS IN KENYA

### A SOCIO-ECONOMIC HISTORY OF KISUMU DISTRICT, NYANZA PROVINCE

Gordon Omenya

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*Since the establishment of populations of Indian or Asian origin in Kenya, the history of Afro-Asians relationships has been shaped by changes in the economic and political context. However, due to the specific position and status occupied by most Asians in comparison to the majority of Africans since colonial rule, segregation and tensions expressed in racial terms have been significant features of such relationships. The case on the city of Kisumu, in Nyanza region, illustrates this argument about identity formation and race relations against the backdrop of the social, political and economic history in Nyanza region.*

#### The Foundation of Kisumu and Early Asian Settlements

The town of Kisumu was founded in 1893 when the chief engineer of the railway under construction and a railway surveyor agreed to make it the Western terminus. It was named Port Florence after the engineer's wife. A food depot was established then telegraph lines, roads and other means of communication built in order to connect the new port with other settlements<sup>1</sup>. As the Uganda railways steadily approached Lake Victoria, C.W Hobley, a British administrator (locally nicknamed Obilo), was ordered to move from Mumias to establish the new headquarters for Nyanza Province. In 1900, he appointed Odera Ulalo, chief of several Luo *pinje* (multilineal territories) and, together with Hobley, established a new administrative station, which later developed into the Kisumu town of today<sup>2</sup>.

Indian immigration into Kisumu was facilitated by the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway which was completed in 1901. After its completion, indentured Indian labourers contracted to build the

railway were given an option to stay or go back to India. A number of them decided to remain and settle in Kenya. Nevertheless, the first official formal Indian settlement was established in 1905 at Kibos within Kisumu District. Molliner<sup>3</sup> argues that migration is often a very disruptive experience that generates a sense of insecurity, resulting from uprooting and marginality. In their adaptive strategies, immigrants redefine their self perceptions and their collective identities. The representations and relationships thus generated are highly unstable, as they depend on complex interactions between the global, regional, national and even local contexts.

#### Early Forms of Afro-Asian Relations

The colonial administration's encouragement of trade was undertaken within a broad economic policy framework which assigned the different races in Kenya and fractions of merchant capital with specific roles. Occupying the highest rank on the commercial ladder were European importers and exporters. Asians occupied a middle position while Africans formed the lowest chain in the marketing

<sup>1</sup> Obudho, R.A., (1976). *Periodic Markets Urbanisation and Regional Planning: A Case Study from Western Kenya*, London: Greenwood Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ogot B.A., (2003). *My Footprints on The Sands of Time: An Autobiography, Kisumu*. Anyange Press limited.

<sup>3</sup> Molliner, M (2007) "Freres ennemis? Relations Between Panjab Sikhs and Muslims in the Diaspora", *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, 1.

system. The colonial government also employed indirect and direct compulsion to 'encourage' trade. For instance, in addition to raising revenue, the imposition of the hut tax early in 1902 was also intended to induce Africans to grow and sell surplus produce if they were to be able to meet their tax obligation<sup>4</sup>. In such situations, Africans were compelled to engage in exchange of goods within Kisumu, and other parts of Nyanza province with the Asians so as to raise money to pay for their tax.

As early as 1902, Jamal Hasham an Asian trader nicknamed bwana mzuri (good man) by the locals in Kisumu, dealt in *marekani* cotton<sup>5</sup> and coloured cotton textiles known as *kitenge* and *kanga*, originally imported from Holland and a popular wear for the great majority of African women. The importation and distribution of the fabrics were also to be the work of Asian traders<sup>6</sup>. Between 1910 and 1920, Kisumu was a major axis where goods imported from outside British East African raw materials gathered from African periodic rural markets, all destined for Nyanza Province and Eastern Uganda, could be taxed<sup>7</sup>. Afro-Asian relations in Kisumu district were not centered on trade in cloth and food items alone. Many of the skilled immigrants such as Rehmat Khan, Hayer Bishan Singh and Abdul Kassam were to launch a variety of



Time clock@Omenya

business enterprises as contractors, outfitters, builders and mechanics. The activities of the Indian commercial population witnessed a steady expansion during this period<sup>8</sup>. With their skills in various fields, Asian artisans imparted to Africans invaluable vocational skills in making furniture, repairing bicycle, printing magazines and books, stocking shops, crafting leather shoes and handbags and teaching so many other income-generating occupations. Through such trainings, there emerged a permanent skilled class of African artisans, mechanics and technicians within the region and especially in Kisumu. In commerce, the activities of the Kavirondo Taxpayers Welfare Association (KTWA), the first African political organization in Nyanza in the 1920s stimulated co-operative self-help schemes, particularly in grain milling by waterpower thus competing with the Asians.

However, conflicts of interest between established Asian businesses and those of new African entrepreneurs also arose in the

1920s. The Kavirondo Chamber of Commerce, an all-African economic pressure group representing the Luo and Luhya African traders, passed several resolutions in the 1930s seeking restrictions on the activities of Asian traders. The Chamber even suggested separate trading centres for Asians and Africans; it also condemned the Local African Council's unpopular practice of allocating plots to Indians in the newly established trading centres against the interest of African traders<sup>9</sup>. Other avenues of economic contestations were also realized through the Bondo Thrift Association and the Luo Thrift and Trading Company formed by Oginga Odinga alongside other people in 1945. Yet even though the Luo Thrift Trading Corporation was a rival and counter corporation to the Asians' dominance in trade in the Nyanza area, the directors of the company still sought help from the Asians in terms of construction materials for the building of AFRIKA HOUSE. They also went ahead and leased Ramogi House to Asians<sup>10</sup>.

In spite of trade conflict between Asians and Africans, a tall Town Clock (*saa maduong*) was built by the sons of Kassim Lakha along the main Oginga Odinga street in Kisumu. This clock was unveiled by the then Governor H.E. Sir Robert Brooke Pophan in memory of Kassim Lakha on 19 August 1938. This monument is evidence of the extent to which the Asians were entrenched in Kisumu. For instance, both Asians and Africans attended separate schools due to the colonial segregation policy which affected Afro-Asian social integration<sup>11</sup>. Zoning of residential

4 Ndege, P., (1992). 'Internal Trade in Kenya 1895-1963' in Ochieng W., and Maxon R., (ed) *An Economic History of Kenya*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.

5 Salvadori, C., (1996). *We Came in Dhows* Vol 1-3, Nairobi : Paperchase Limited.

6 Seidenberg, A. (1996) *Mercantile Adventures: The World of East African Asians 1750-1985*, New Delhi: New Age International (P) Limited Publishers.

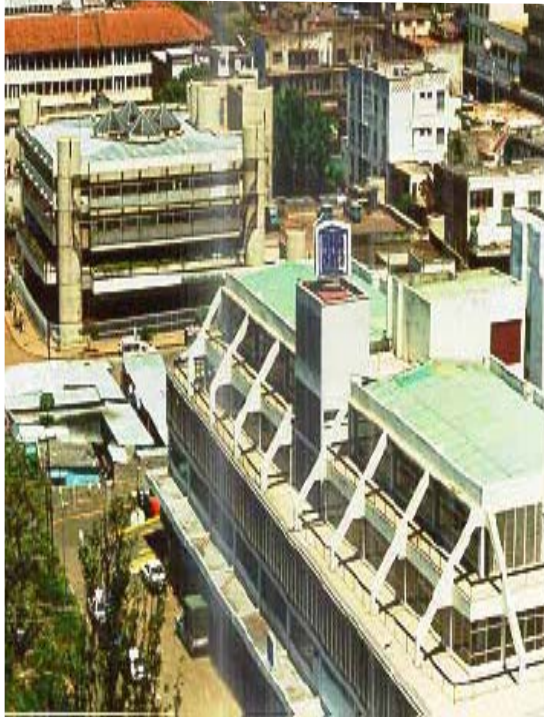
7 KNA, PC/NZA/1/4 Annual Report 1908/9 Anyumba, G. (1995) *Kisumu Town: History of The Built Form, Planning and Environment 1890- 1990*. Ph.D. Thesis, Moi University.

8 Omenya, G. (2010) *The Relations Between Asian and African Communities of Kenya' Nyanza Province 1901-2002*, M.A Thesis, Kenyatta University

9 Memon, P., (1976), "Colonial Marketing, and Urban Development in the African Reserves," *Journal of Eastern Africa Research and Development*. Vol 6,2.

10 KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/404 1955-1956

11 Omenya (2010), *op.cit*.



Kisumu CBD © Omenya

areas according to race was also the rule. However, it did not prevent Afro-Asian daily interactions and forms of sociability. At the Asian Jamnadas residence in Kisumu, for example, African children would go to the compound to eat a fruit locally known as "jamna" coined from the name "jamnadas". Henceforth, they would say that they were going to "kajamna" (Jamnadas place) – a name which has stuck with the Africans up to date.

### The Political Economy and Afro-Asian Social Engagements During the Decolonization Period 1945-63

Several organizations such as the Kenya African Union (KAU), the Central Nyanza Chamber of Commerce, the Ramogi African Welfare Association (RAWA), the Nyanza Soldiers Association, together with numerous clan and sub-clan welfare organizations, were formed to air African grievances and challenge the dominance of Asian traders in the rural areas in 1942 and 1945. These organizations represented voices of protest, negotiation, and compromise. They were initial

avenues through which Africans wanted to take over political and economic power. Widespread resentment against Asian traders intensified around the middle of 1948 by what was felt by Africans to be serious malpractices.

The pre-independence period also saw the move of Asians living in the rural areas to Kisumu to seek education after attending lower primary schools in the rural areas. The Kisumu Asian Housing Committee was also put in place around this period to cater for the housing interests and needs of the Asians who were posted to Kisumu to work for the government<sup>12</sup>. In 1956, the Kisumu Ismailia Housing Society Limited put up sixteen flats for Asians, namely the Aga Khan flats near the new Goan school<sup>13</sup>. By 1960, Afro-Asian relations was seen in the activities of the Kisumu Municipal Council. This was exemplified by the participation of Mr M.F Shah, Mr M.P Ondiek (Mayor of Kisumu) and the DC in the activities of the Allocations of Plots (African location) Committee. Between 1961 and 1962, the Municipal Council of Kisumu started to solve the Asian housing problem through the Asian Tenant Purchase Housing Scheme<sup>14</sup>. It is clear that housing development was administered and managed along racial lines by the colonial government and this influenced Afro-Asian relations because it reduced interaction only to areas of economic exchange like the trading centres. Africans were given land in the peri-urban areas of Kaloleni, Shaurimoyo and Kibuye. Asians did not move to these areas but concentrated in getting houses within the Central Business District in Kisumu. In July 1962, councilors

Ondiek and Bashir Ud-Deen (an Asian) were re-elected as Mayor and Deputy Mayor respectively for a second term of office<sup>15</sup>. In the following year 1963, Jamal Amir was re-elected Member of Parliament for Kisumu Town. Were Olodhe, a Luo by ethnicity was his interpreter in situations where he could not articulate issues properly in Dholuo during his campaigns<sup>16</sup>. Last, the issue of separate and segregated school system was sustained into the independence era before the African government came up with the policy of integration in public schools<sup>17</sup>.

### Afro-Asian Interactions in the Kenyatta, Moi and Kibaki Eras

Afro-Asians relationship deteriorated during the postcolonial period. Apart from the Africanization policy and the Citizenship Act of 1969, other developments in the post independent period such as the killing of Pio Gama Pinto on 24th February 1965<sup>18</sup>, deportation of Pranlel Sheth and the stern warning by president Kenyatta in 1966 on the Asians instilled fear among the Asians<sup>19</sup>. Such warnings laid the foundation upon which Afro-Asian hostilities were based during the Kenyatta era. In Kisumu specifically, the boundary of areas set aside for 'citizens only' due to the Africanization policy were Accra Street, Otieno Oyoo Street, Joshi Avenue, Achieng' Onoko Street and new station road. Others included Kibuye Estate, Mosque Estate, Makasembo, Shaurimoyo, Ondiek, Kaloleni, Lumumba, Nyalenda, Omino Crescent and Pembe Tatu estates surrounded by the Nairobi road, Street, Sailors Close, Karachi

15 KNA, HT/17/3 AR Central Nyanza District 1962, KNA, DC/KSM/1/30/ 53 1959

16 *Daily Nation*, 2/2/1990

17 Omenya, (2010) *op.cit.*

18 Zarina, P., (2004). 'I am A Kenyan South Asian' *Awaaz Issue 11*

19 Rattansi: 2004, Theoroux, (1969:4)

12 KNA/PC/NZA/2/16/60

13 KNA/PC/NZA/3/1/404 1955-51

14 KNA, NHC/1/152, 1961



Road and Kakamega Road<sup>20</sup>. The overall image of Asians was so negative that Kisumu was referred to as the 'Bombay of Kenya' on account of the Indian hold on commerce<sup>21</sup>. Some Asians started closing down their businesses. However, the above warnings by president Kenyatta did not affect Asian participation in politics in Kisumu District. By 1967, the Asians who were in politics as members of the Kisumu Council were Abdul E. Dahya who was the deputy mayor, M.F Shah, and Y.J. Farjallah<sup>22</sup>.

During Moi era 1978-2002, the Moi-Asian nexus that consolidated explains why the Asians were viewed as pro-Kenya African National Union (KANU) in Nyanza province, an area which was an opposition zone and anti-KANU government. This made the Asian community in Kisumu vulnerable to attacks and intimidations whenever general elections approached. In 1987, renewed tensions arose over the issue of entry into Simba Club (Sikh Union) as Africans were denied entry to watch rallying cars competing during the 1987 Safari Rally Competitions<sup>23</sup>. Conflicts over selling of second hand clothes (*mitumba*) by Africa traders and manufactured clothes from the Kisumu Cotton Mills owned by Asians were also reported in the 1980s. These conflicts were followed by anti-Asian sentiments from local political leaders like Dennis Akumu in Kisumu.

It is important to note that, during

the post independent period, Afro-Asian engagement was characterized by skilled African labourers and professionals employed to work as teachers, engineers, or bankers in Asian institutions. Yet Asians entered into business relationship with Africans at a higher level. For instance in 1991, there was a joint business venture in Kisumu between Asian and African personalities like J. Nyaseme, Mr J. Shah, the late Bishop H. Okullu and the late Hon H. Omino who jointly run the Victoria Finance and Lake Credit Finance<sup>24</sup>. Afro-Asian social engagement in the 1990s therefore started to shift from strictly racial considerations to shared economic class interests. Rich Africans started to take their children to Asian owned private schools such as Jalaram Academy, Mahavir School and Kisumu Senior Academy<sup>25</sup>. By 2002, the new forms of Afro-Asian relations and engagement were characterized by a constant shift along the lines of socio-economic and class interests. In the 1990s in Kisumu, there was increased interest among African youth on Indian films shown at Indian film theatres like Tivoli and the Kenya cinema. In these places, some close Afro-Asian relations also emerged<sup>26</sup>. Asians continued to enjoy economic dominance during the Kibaki era, although some Asians were seriously affected by post-election violence of 2007/8

post-election violence of 2007/8. For instance, an Asian supermarket, Ukwala, was looted and accidentally burnt down. Asian entrepreneurs and businessmen have come back to buy premises which were hitherto owned by Africans from central province. These include the former Kimwa Grand Hotel in Kisumu, part of which is now operating as a supermarket, Tumaini supermarket currently located at a Timber yard initially owned by a Kikuyu from central province. It is therefore evident that interethnic political rivalry amongst Africans during the Kibaki era resulted in an enhanced and closer relations between Africans and Asians in Kisumu – a surprising turn after the deep-rooted past rivalry between Asians and Africans in this region of Kenya.



Kisumu Senior Academy©Omenya

20 East Africa Standard October 10, 1969.

21 East Africa Standard August, 13 and 17 1978)

22 (KNA, DC/KSM/17/40, 1964, KNA, HT/17/19, 1967

23 Omenya, (2010) *op.cit.*

24 The Weekly Review, 8/3/1991.

25 Bindra, S. (2005) 'We are Kenya Damu', *Anaaaz* edition Issue 1.

26 Omenya (2010) *op.cit.*

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