

Colonialism and the Repression of Nairobi African Women Street Traders in the 1940s

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Abstract

By the 1940s, the Municipal Council of Nairobi had enacted a host of By-Laws to control the presence of Africans, especially women, and had set up several agencies to implement them. Consequently, women street vendors were not only denied access to legal trade, but remained unwanted in the town except under very special circumstances. Nonetheless, pushed by their adversity, a number of them resorted to illegal hawking and demonstrated their resilience against the odds. However, as the hawkers' earnings subsidised the colonial low wage migrant labour system, it became difficult for the colonial administration in Nairobi to resolutely stamp out their activities, especially in Eastlands. Besides, by the end of the 1940s, the Council's fight against hawking had slackened owing to unsustainable expenses.

This paper examines the effect of colonial repression of African women street traders in Nairobi's Eastlands area in the 1940s. Using the Gender and Development (GAD) perspective along with data mainly from libraries, archives and oral sources, it interrogates the women's attractions to Nairobi and the logic behind their street trading activities. It also examines the colonial dynamics that exploited the attitudes and beliefs of African male elders to validate the colonial government's gender marginalisation policies against women, particularly the hawkers. The paper concludes that the gender-based constraints against African women traders notwithstanding, propelled by need, the women irrepressibly struggled to find space in the prosperous economy of Nairobi in the 1940s.

Keywords

Racism, gender discrimination, patriarchy, street trading, hawkers, licensing

Introduction

Since the inception of colonial Nairobi in 1899, its colonial authorities aimed to make it exclusively for white people. Therefore, they passed a number of by-laws, particularly to regulate the migration into, and stay of, Africans in the town. Except for the fulfilment of the European labour needs, the administration discouraged the staying of Africans in Nairobi (Werlin 1974, 41-42). The preferred labour was that of the males, as a result of which a tax was imposed on them from the onset of colonization.¹ This quest for male labour rendered employment for African women rare. Yet they had to operate within the new colonial money economy to accommodate the changes in lifestyles, which basically needed cash, compelling some women to conduct trade in Nairobi. These concerns are partly articulated and illuminated by oral data from the women traders themselves as well as from other eyewitnesses to their trade and related matters.

Furthermore, in the European struggle to create a white-people-only-town, the 1930s saw a systematic removal of African petty traders, especially women, from the city centre, pushing their petty commodity trade to the African areas in Eastlands. During the 1940s, the Nairobi municipal authorities introduced more racist policies that had a negative impact on the vending activities of Africans, particularly women. Additionally, African patriarchs felt duty bound to save

¹ Sandhu (1979) indicates that to a great extent, the colonizers misunderstood women's roles in African societies. Influenced by the limited role and status of Western females in the early part of the twentieth century, Western males totally ignored or played down the role of women in African cultures, hence the preference for male labour. See Sushani Datta Sandhu (1979) "The Civic and Political Participation of the Nairobi Female Elites in Kenya". Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Nairobi, p. 15. In most parts of Kenya, a hut tax of one rupee, to be paid by all males owning a hut, was introduced in 1901 and increased to three rupees in 1903. In 1915, it increased to 5 rupees and in 1921, it was raised to eight rupees (16 shillings), but was reduced to twelve shillings after a stormy protest by Africans. At the same time, both men and women needed money to fulfil the desire for the cheap Western imported goods. These factors induced the migration of male labour to towns such as Nairobi which paid relatively better wages and were comparatively free from the disciplinary abuses of agricultural labour (see Stichter, S. 1982. *Migrant Labor in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response, 1895-1975*. Essex: Longman, pp. 32-37 and White, L. 1990. *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 52.

women from ‘moral decay’ which they perceived Nairobi to engender. Consequently, they constantly instigated the administrators against women’s migration or visits to Nairobi, particularly to conduct street trading. Thus, whereas all African hawkers, notably in illegal vending, had to contend with racially discriminatory policies, women petty traders had, in addition to racial segregation, to face gender biased policies.

Using published material, key informant responses and archival sources, this paper examines the struggles of African women street traders to find space in the commercial sector of Nairobi’s prosperous economy in the 1940s. It is divided into four main sections. The first, which presents the background to the events of the 1940s, offers a glimpse into the situation of the women street traders in Nairobi from the Indian bazaar to the outbreak of the Second World War. The second section examines the opportunities for trade in Nairobi in the 1940s that led to the attractiveness of the town to African petty traders. The third section is a discourse on the double discrimination that women petty traders experienced in Nairobi in the 1940s. The final section is the conclusion which outlines the main points of the paper.

Women Street Traders in Nairobi: From the Indian Bazaar to the Outbreak of World War Two

African women traders have over the years done exploits in the exchange of goods and services, enabling the sustenance of life in both rural and urban areas of Kenya. In Nairobi, their trading activities predate the emergence of the town. The pre-colonial Nairobi site was a market area for Kikuyu, Kamba, Maasai and Ogiek women who exchanged various commodities (Ngesa 2014, 66).

Nairobi emerged as a Railway town, having been selected as a depot for storing railway equipment in 1896. Following the arrival of the railway line at the town’s present site in 1899, it became the headquarters of the new line. Consequently, many workers and a host of railway camp followers settled in the budding town. As early as 1901, the population of the town, consisting of men and women from different backgrounds, was already approaching 8,000 (Hake 1977, 35). From

1905, when Nairobi replaced Machakos as the capital of Kenya, its population saw further growth. In 1924 the African population alone was approximately 12,000 (Parker 1949, pp.I-III; Hake 1977, 42). Alongside the rising population was a corresponding growth in the needs of people that created a growing market for traders' goods (Hake 1977, 43; Ngesa 2014, 67).

Meanwhile, colonialism introduced a monetary exchange system in which both women and men needed opportunities to earn cash. However, the colonial labour structure, African's main entry into the money economy, largely sought male workers, effectively side-lining women. Concomitantly, colonialism introduced imported Western goods which only money could buy, and for which Africans developed a taste over time. By 1909, such goods as blankets, beads and wire imported from Germany, and white clothes imported from the United States of America and Bombay, had become household items in a number of African homes. By 1915, Africans also bought other goods such as hoes, slashers, umbrellas, sugar, salt and rice. By 1927, African lifestyles had changed so remarkably that the demand for European goods such as second hand clothing surpassed the supply (Ngesa 1996, 41, 68).

However, in many cases, the married male migrant labourers, who usually left their wives in the rural areas, could not adequately fulfil family requirements because of their low wages, which, as late as 1924, ranged between £6 and £15 a year (Hake 1977, 42-43). The labourers' measly wages also meant their dependence on cheap goods to survive in towns. The shortage of cash to support the labourers' families upcountry, as well as the labourers' own need for cheap goods, gave rise to a group of women commuter traders who travelled to Nairobi from neighbouring areas to sell agricultural produce to its residents in order to obtain cash (Ngesa 2014, 68).

As Nairobi grew, African women formed a significant segment of its resident population. The women consisted of those who had been born in Nairobi, as well as others drawn from areas just outside the town, largely owing to landlessness resulting from the colonial land alienation policies (Morgan 1969, 176; Van Zwanenberg 1972, 190; Hake 1977, 35). In the absence of employment, some of

these women took to trade for a livelihood. By 1902, Kikuyu women exchanged goods in the Indian Bazaar as well as in a nearby market (Ngesa 1997, 37-39).

Nevertheless, from Nairobi's nascent years, the European colonisers aimed to develop it exclusively for white people. The boundaries of the town, like other colonial urban areas, were cautiously delimited by the early administrators in order to exclude proximal regions of indigenous subsistence farming and settlement. The European upmarket residential areas were protected from competing urban uses by buffer zones of public open spaces. The presence of an indigenous African population, except as workers, was proscribed and carefully policed. The areas, therefore, were to a large extent out of bounds for Africans, including traders (Hake 1977, 26, 62; Memon and Lee-Smith 1993, 31; Kinyanjui 2014, 15).

An outbreak of plague in 1902 in the Indian Bazaar provided the authorities with the justification to openly segregate Africans. The township authorities immediately blamed the plague on overcrowding and poor hygiene of Africans. Subsequently, the market was moved north of Nairobi River as an African market to perform the divergent functions of having Africans provide the needs of the town, yet isolated enough to reduce the possibility of them transmitting disease to other races. The market, later renamed Kariokor, was a crucial trading ground for women residents and commuters visiting Nairobi to sell their rural produce.

However, it was not in the interest of Europeans to promote African commercial activities in Nairobi, as this would interfere with the flow of labour to European enterprises. Accordingly, African trading facilities in the town remained few and far between. It was not surprising, therefore, that the dominant area of African trade was the street pavements (Onstad 1990, 49; Kinyanjui 2013, 153; Ngesa 2014, 68).

The plague of 1902 was also followed by the first Vagrancy Laws in 1902 and the Township Laws in 1903. The laws, both of which were amended from time to time, were meant to impose restrictions on the influx of Africans into the town except as labourers. Since employers preferred male labour, women, who were

usually stereotyped as prostitutes and were, therefore, to be kept away from the town to “save them from moral degradation” became a major target of the laws (Hake 1977, 270; Onstad 1990, 49; Home 2012, 180-189; Kinyanjui 2013, 153). Even so, propelled by their need for money to purchase the inexpensive imported goods, women commuters disregarded the label of sex workers, and took advantage of the lax enforcement of the laws to sell their goods in Nairobi. They exchanged their wares, most commonly baskets of produce, especially in the African market at Kariokor. Having in its vicinity a growing African settlement of migrants following the Railway from Mombasa, by the first decade of the 20th century, Kariokor market was already an important supply centre (Hake 1977, 130, 13; Ngesa 1996, 47, 70). The market offered cheaper goods than what Asian groceries in the town sold, but gave fairly good returns to the women to warrant their journey to and from Nairobi. From their trading proceeds, the commuter women traders were able to quench their appetite for the imported goods, while some of them progressed to accumulate wealth in livestock or to set up shops in their rural home areas (Ngesa 1996, 47, 70; Kinyanjui 2014, 11).

During the First World War, 1914-1918, the British army recruited a contingent of Africans, the Carrier Corps, to carry their luggage during the East African Campaign. A camp for the corps recruited in and around Nairobi was subsequently established in present day Kariokor, further increasing the demand for the produce sold by African women commuter traders, especially at the market. By the end of the 1920s, trading had become a major source of income for some of the commuter women traders. By 1929, African women’s trading networks between Nairobi and its surroundings, including Kiambu and Muranga, were clearly discernible (White 1990, 66; Ngesa 1996, 60-68; Ngesa 2014, 68; Kiruthu 2006, 142).

The declaration of the Devonshire White Paper of 1923 gave African commuter petty traders a free hand to sell their goods in Nairobi. In the spirit of the paramountcy of African interests, which the paper proclaimed, the hawker licensing regulations (which had remained largely non-functional in managing

illegal hawking),² were amended. Since 1921, the regulations had allowed Africans with produce from their rural homes to sell it in Nairobi without paying for a license. However, those traders who purchased commodities from rural producers had to be licensed to sell them in Nairobi. The 1923 amended hawker laws removed the licensing provision from all African rural produce brought to the town for sale. However, as regulations barring African entry into European neighbourhoods remained in place, African traders, both women and men, principally operated in the African areas of Eastlands and parts of the central business district (Hake 1977, 131; White 1990, 66; Ngesa 1996, 60-68; Ngesa 2014, 68).

Like their commuter counterparts, it was material deprivation that spurred the women residents of Nairobi into trade. Again the activities of this group were facilitated by the ineffectiveness of the law enforcement machinery. The residents acquired commodities, mainly agricultural produce, from the African market and sold it mainly in the African locations where they lived. Initially, these African locations were unplanned and included the residential areas of Pangani, Mji wa Mombasa, Maskini, Kaburini and Kileleshwa which had informally sprung up with the town. After the establishment of Pumwani, the earliest official African location in the Eastlands region, the population of Mji wa Mombasa, Maskini and Kaburini was gradually moved to Pumwani between 1921 and 1923, and the three informal settlements were subsequently destroyed. As the women traders shifted residence, their street trading operations also moved to the new estates. Nevertheless, their hawking operations were largely unlicensed because the idea of licensing was alien to them (Hake 1977, 24; White 1990, 66; Ngesa 1996, 60-68).

In 1927, the Feetham Commission granted Europeans hegemonic powers in Nairobi (KNA Report of the Local Government Commission 1927, 51-60). In

2 The native hawker's By-Law was first passed in 1909 and by an amendment in 1921 it stated that "No person shall hawk any meat whether fresh or cooked or any fresh foods other than vegetables or fruits, and no person shall hawk any goods without being licensed by the Town Clerk." The license fees were Florins 5/- for farm produce; and Florins 10 for general hawkers License. Police were to execute the laws. KNA AG 5/470 Native Hawkers By-Law, Licensing of.

turn, the Europeans attempted to use their newfound authority to achieve their long desired dream of making Nairobi a European only town. The decision to put the pass laws into effect was one of the measures to achieve this goal. First issued in 1903 to control the entry of Africans into Nairobi, the pass laws had remained dormant owing to shortage of African labour. However, in the aftermath of the First World War, Nairobi experienced a higher inflow of Africans than before, leading to excess labour. Consequently, the legislations were enforced for the first time, although their operation was suspended again by the end of 1918. Nevertheless, from the mid-1920s, Nairobi always had an oversupply of labour, so that imposing limits on African migration into the town became urgent. Against this background, the Feetham Commission advised the municipal administration to strictly execute the pass laws. By the original provisions of the laws, only Africans in gainful engagement in Nairobi were to reside there. Those looking for work were allowed to stay in the town for not more than seven days (Van Zwanenberg 1972, 194-195, 198; Hake 1977, 42-43; Home 2012, 179).

However, driven by the desperate need for stricter control of Africans, the Nairobi Municipal Council, in May 1930, amended the Pass Act to reduce the period of the unemployed Africans' stay in Nairobi to a maximum of only thirty six hours. At the same time, the Vagrancy laws were tightened. A vagrant was defined as anyone "wandering about or without leave of the owner; ... lodging in any veranda, outhouse or shed, or unoccupied building or in cart, vehicle or other receptacle and not having any visible means of subsistence" (Van Zwanenberg 1972, 196). The new rules gave police wide powers, including arrest without a warrant and the conviction of African offenders (Kenya Colony and Protectorate AR 1939, 19; Van Zwanenberg 1972, 198; Hake 1977, 42-43).

The implementation of the by-laws in the next few years witnessed sustained police and Native Authorities' efforts to prevent the influx of Africans, both women and men, into the Nairobi municipality. Owing to the acute lack of housing, many Africans, including women traders residing in Nairobi or spending a night there, found themselves under the squalid conditions that made them victims of the vagrancy law (Kenya Colony and Protectorate AR 1939, 19; Van

Zwanenberg 1972, 198; Hake 1977, 42-43). Reporting as late as 1938, the District Commissioner Nairobi could state:

... (a) very large number of natives ... for lack of accommodation are unable to sleep in Pumwani. It is estimated that some 600 are on River Road and Canal Road alone living in indescribable squalor ... about 2000 are employed as casual labourers mainly in the quarries; the majority live in huts, sheds, cow houses near their work(*sic*) with a few or no sanitary facilities (District Commissioner Nairobi AR, 1938, 10 in KNA ARC (MAA) 2/3/1/VIA Central Province ARs 1938).

Still in the spirit of the Feetham Commission, the Nairobi Municipal Council in 1930 reintroduced hawker licensing under revised hawking rules. Licensing then became a double edged sword – for both raising revenue and preventing Africans from operating in the central business area where better paying European businesses predominated. As a result, the new hawking rules instituted a new high hawking fee of 20 Shillings per month for hawking in the central business area, while to hawk in the African locations a fee of only 1 Shilling per month was charged - a fee deemed low enough to contain African traders within African residential areas (Ngesa 2014, 75, 85). Thus licensing also became an effective tool to further segregate African trading activities to their already segregated living areas in Eastlands.

However, unlike the male hawkers whose segregation was solely based on racism, women had to face an additional level of discrimination on the basis of their gender. The dominantly male Local Advisory Councils, which recommended Africans to be issued with passes for visits to Nairobi, could hardly recommend women. The same councils were invested with the powers to give advice on prospective hawker license holders, and again they rarely recommended women (NCC/CR NAC Meeting 2/9/1948; Hake 1977, 54). Thus the few women who hawked goods in the town did so illegally. Besides, they had to make their presence in Nairobi as inconspicuous as possible, which meant avoiding the central area where police control efforts against illegal hawking concentrated. As a result, the street vending operations of women retreated to the African locations, where the male low wage economy had, over time, created a consumption pattern that depended on the relatively cheap goods women supplied in small quantities

(Kinyanjui 2013, 20, 154-155; O.Is, Pancrasio Wahinya, 8 /11/ 2015; Jacobo Maweu, 9/11/2015).

Patriarchal control further meant that African women were not even secure selling their goods in Eastlands. Determined to control female bodies, African male elders, both within and outside Nairobi, fought against women's presence in the town. Generally, they portrayed African women in the town as prostitutes and a liability to the town. They therefore collaborated with the colonial administration to repatriate women to their rural homes. The Local Native Councils (LNCs) of areas in the vicinity of Nairobi such as Kiambu, Murang'a and Nyeri made rigorous attempts to prohibit women from drifting to towns and townships. The Murang'a LNC, for instance, recommended extensive restraints on the unsanctioned movement of women. A 1932 LNC meeting observed that women visiting townships were often led astray and that Councillors needed to, as far as possible, prevent such visits of women unaccompanied by their husbands or other male relations from hawking and sleeping in Nairobi and Thika (Kanogo 2005, 34; Kinyanjui 2013, 154-155). The LNCs' desire to control women's travels to towns as in the case of the Murang'a LNC was complicated by the generation gap between elders and young men. Many young men migrated to work in towns such as Nairobi at least for a period. The Local Native Councils, predominantly comprised of elders, accused the young men of being responsible, through seduction, for the migration of young girls from rural areas to urban areas. The Murang'a LNC thus resolved that elders impose a fine of 150 shillings on such men as a deterrent against the practice (Kanogo 2005, 34). Blaming young men was a definite subordination of the women's agency to the young men, as it implied the women's inability to make sensible decisions.

All the foregoing actions kept the majority of women away from Nairobi. Thus as late as 1939, the ratio of African women to men in the metropolis was only approximately one to eight (Hake 1977, 51-52). Among these women were some who persevered to continue trading. Many others from the surrounding areas also disregarded the label of sex traders and continued to trade in Nairobi, mostly in the African market at Kariokor or as hawkers in Eastlands.

Besides, in the first half of the 1930s, a new enemy, the great economic depression, unleashed new constraints on the petty trading activities of women in colonial Nairobi. The period saw massive layoffs and wage drops. Employment on the Railway alone, where the majority of African labour in Nairobi was engaged, fell from 15,628 in 1930 to 12,000 in 1933, and many other firms were affected (Ngesa 1996, 80). The African population in Nairobi dropped from about 32,000 to 23,000, and many became unemployed (Ngesa 1996, 80). Among the employed, wages dropped drastically from about 19 Shillings per month to 15 Shillings per month on average for both skilled and semi-skilled workers (Ngesa 1996, 80). As a result, the purchasing power of African wage earners decreased significantly, leading to the dwindling of the women's sales. The situation broke down some women's resolve as their returns diminished amidst a combination of controls and an economic slump, so that they opted out of the streets (Ngesa 1996, 80).

Nevertheless, for another group of women traders, the reducing numbers of street vendors was an opportunity to capture the available market. They innovated strategies for survival in the economic doldrums. For example, some of them capitalised on the locations with predominantly bachelor residents, one of whose major needs was ready-made food because they despised cooking as a task for women. They made porridge and githeri³, which the men enjoyed in the evening after work, and which for many of the men sufficed as their evening meal (O.Is Stella Amodi, 6/7/2014; Daniel Ogindo, 16/3/2015; Pancrasio Wahinya, 8 /11/ 2015). Thus, in the face of a combined onslaught of the colonial administration, male patriarchs and the Great Depression, a small section of women demonstrated their agency and strong will to keep their cash earnings afloat.

The second half of the 1930s witnessed a gradual economic recovery from the depression, with an increase in construction work and more employment opportunities in other segments of the economy. As the Nairobi commerce improved, trade unionists succeeded in pressurising employers to raise the workers' salaries and wages. The prosperity spread to the African informal sector,

³Githeri is a Kikuyu word for a boiled mixture of maize and beans.

which also witnessed striking improvements in incomes, to the extent that a good African carpenter made up to 100 Shillings a month (Van Zwanenberg 1972, 199). These developments, alongside the continuing lure of economic opportunities in Nairobi, attracted a persistent inflow of Africans into the town. In time, police control measures were overwhelmed by the rising numbers of African migrants to Nairobi, and many Africans made residence in the town. By 1938, a large population of unemployed Africans, women included, was living in Nairobi (Van Zwanenberg 1972, 199).

The population increase in Nairobi, especially of Africans, meant a further rise in commercial opportunities in Eastlands, particularly for the petty traders among whom a sizeable number were women. Good weather, which resulted in abundant harvests in the African land units surrounding Nairobi, made it much easier for women traders to acquire agricultural produce for sale in the town, and many suburban women also made trips to the town to sell their goods (Ngesa 1996, 67-88). Nevertheless, women's hawking operations in Nairobi remained a challenge. Inasmuch as the police had constraints in controlling the migration of Africans into the town, the women, especially traders, were not spared. The African elders continued to push their agenda against women in Nairobi to the extent that a major proportion of criminal convictions women faced in colonial Nairobi were on the basis of illegal hawking (Sandhu 1979, 70). The viciousness of the colonial administration and their male African allies against women, especially against traders notwithstanding, a section of women did not relent in their struggle for space in the commerce of the town (O.Is Stella Amodi, 6/7/2014; Daniel Ogindo, 16/3/2015; Pancrasio Wahinya, 8 /11/ 2015).

The second half of the 1930s also saw the arrival of some women from hundreds of kilometres away, attracted by the fame of Nairobi, and desiring to join their husbands working in the town. Among the newcomers were the Luo of Nyanza and the Luyia of Western Kenya. Their transport was facilitated by the Railway and lorries that had become common means of transport for people and goods across the country. For personal reasons, these women went against the colonisers' mentality which depicted women as rural dwellers whose duty was to secure the up-country homes and lands for their husbands while they were away at

work in towns or white farms, and followed their husbands to the municipality. In Nairobi, however, they came face to face with the reality of poor wages which their husbands earned in the racially segregated wage structure. The average African earnings in Nairobi in 1939 was Kenya shillings 23.57 a month, against an estimated cost of living of Kenya Shillings 20.75 for a bachelor and 38.25 for a family with two children (Ngesa 1996, 94-99). The insufficiency of the wages was exacerbated by the men's cultural responsibilities, many of which, in the new economy, required cash. Some women, especially those with the ambition to lead a good life, sought alternative income from trade. Already living in the segregated African locations in Eastlands, they joined their predecessors in conducting petty trading, although within the precincts of their living quarters. In doing so, they made money while performing domestic chores and minding their children (Ngesa 1996, 94-99).

However, unlike those without spouses, these women faced a different form of prejudice: fellow women in their neighbourhoods ridiculed their trade and teased them for coming to Nairobi ostensibly to relax and be supported by their husbands, only to spend their energies on selling goods. The scoffers claimed that trading, as these women did, portrayed their husbands as irresponsible or unloving or both. Other men also ridiculed the traders' husbands for shaming men in general. The matter caused much friction in the families of the women vendors, with some men urging their wives to cease trading to restore their honour (Ngesa 1996, 94-99; O.I., Buoga Obuya, 8/9/2015). Nonetheless, those women were among a few of their time who disregarded their 'dishonour' as they sought an independent income and a form of control over their labour.

Nairobi: An Attractive Business Hub in the 1940s

During the Second World War (1939-1945), Nairobi became the nerve centre of the Allied Command, and the main station for East African armed forces for military operations in Ethiopia, the Middle East and Asia. Consequently, the town witnessed a tremendous population growth. The number of Africans alone reached a peak of 70,000 in 1941 (Ngesa 1996, 111). The war also accelerated developments in secondary industry. Until its outbreak, British colonies such as Kenya were little more than markets for British manufactured goods, with the

limited manufacturing done in the colonies concentrating on processing European farm produce for local consumption. During hostilities, risks of attack in the high seas escalated, and the British responded by launching import substitution industries in the colonies to fulfil domestic demand, and Kenya was no exception. The newly installed local industries processed foods, footwear, cardboard, plywood, garments, iron and brass articles, soap, ceramics and bricks. By virtue of its role as a settler town and Kenya's principal administrative centre, Nairobi accommodated most of the industries (Van Zwanenberg 1972, 171). In the face of a combination of military and industrial labour needs, the number of employed in the town almost doubled from 23,000 in 1939 to 45,000 in 1945 (Ngesa 1996, 112-113). In 1943-44, owing to a drought in Central Province and a subsequent poor harvest resulting in food shortage, the government imposed a partial embargo on employment in Nairobi, especially of the domestic type, to reserve available food for the military. Even so, the number of African males in employment remained steady between 38,000 and 40,000 (Ngesa 1996, 112-113).

While in the second half of the 1940s Nairobi retained the war fortune, the economy got a further boost from a variety of sources. One of these was the arrival of a new lot of European settlers whose total number rose from an estimated 9,631 in 1943 to about 11,000 in January 1948 (KNA PC/CP 4/4/2 Central Province ARs 1941-1945; Nairobi District AR 1943, 2; KNA Kenya Population Census 1948). Among the newcomers were many Second World War veterans loaded with finances to expend in the municipality. Moreover, the period saw a further expansion in industries, the main focus of which was light and secondary manufacturing such as processing and packaging. Beer and light drinks, gas, metal cans, canned goods, packaged biscuits, and soaps and perfumery among others were produced in Nairobi and its hinterland (K.D.M. 24/11/1952; Van Zwanenberg and King 1977, 126; Swainson 1980, 131-132; Zeleza 1980, 161; Kiruthu 2006, 130). A boom in building and construction works to secure office, residential and other spaces for various facilities including a number of European and Indian primary and secondary schools as well as a European housing estate in Woodley, added to the prosperity (K.D.M. 31/1/1947; 28/5/1948, 5; 29/2/1949; 28/4/1949; 19/8/49).

In addition, between 1945 and 1947, the construction of African housing estates such as Marurani (temporary), Bondeni and Kaloleni was finalised. By the late 1940s, work on Bahati and Gorofani African estates had also begun. A remarkable development in the city centre was the rise of storied office blocks such as Mansion House and Saddler House (K.D.M. 15/2/1951, 1; Hake 1977, 56).

In view of the industrial, commercial and building and construction works in and around Nairobi, it remained a centre of labour. Nevertheless, workers' wages continued to lag behind the cost of living, as the impact of inflation on commodity prices was always higher than the rate of wage and salary increases. Between 1939 and 1948, the minimum wage in Nairobi Municipality only increased from Kenya shillings 23.57 per month to Kenya shillings 40 per month, both figures inclusive of house allowance (Ngesa 1996, 140-141; Labour Department AR 1947, Appendix 10). During the period 1939 to 1947, the Statistical Department revealed that the rise in the cost of living index of African retail prices in Nairobi was 196.5 for food; 160.7 for fuel and soap; clothing went up 256.9 points, and household articles 312.3 (Ngesa 1996, 140-141; Labour Department AR 1947, Appendix 10). In the face of this rapid inflation, the women's inexpensive goods became necessities for the workers' survival in Nairobi. The town's attraction to the women petty traders endured. The African residential areas in Eastlands teemed with business, especially in the evenings when workers returned from work (O.I. Buoga Obuya, 8/9/2015).

The 1940s boom in Nairobi coincided with complementary developments in the rural areas around the town. These included good weather conditions in Central Province up to the year 1942, which stimulated the production of surplus food, much of which found a market in Nairobi. During that year, 900 tons of vegetables from Kiambu were sold in Nairobi monthly (Ngesa 1996, 113). By 1943, Kiambu supplied large amounts of Nairobi's needs of firewood, charcoal, vegetables, eggs and other produce. Between 1944 and 1945, Nairobi was the single largest consumer of eggs from Central Province, the number of which more than doubled from 3,226,379 to 8,276,106 during the period (Ngesa 1996, 113-114). In 1948, agricultural exports from Muranga, consisting largely of maize, potatoes, bananas, pulses, fruits, tobacco, firewood, eggs and poultry fed Nairobi.

Transport was organised and a depot arranged in the town for producers to take regular supplies (Fort Hall AR 1948, 23). For African women, participation in this thriving commerce met oppression from the authorities, so that only the very resilient survived.

Repression, Susceptibility and Resilience: Women Street Traders in Hostile Nairobi in the 1940s

As already noted, the rising commercial opportunities in Nairobi made it a magnet to the surrounding African communities. Commenting on street vendors in Nairobi in 1941, T.C. Colchester, the Nairobi Municipal African Affairs Officer, confirmed that a large number of the traders originated from the peripheries of Nairobi. He noted that “the besetting sin of the Kikuyu is to seek a living by trade.” He went on to state that “Many of them [the Kikuyu] travelled from as far as 60-70 miles away from the town” (quoted in Ngesa 1996, 120). The suburbanites, who included a number of women, sold their wares mostly to fellow Africans in Eastlands, where much of the African women’s trade had been relegated since earlier years (O.Is Stella Amodi, 6/7/2014; Pancrasio Wahinya, 8 /11/ 2015).

The resident African population of Nairobi was also growing. The majority of the newcomers, both female and male were, as before, drawn from rural areas neighbouring the town. Among the reasons for their migration to towns such as Nairobi were problems of rising poverty and landlessness. In the nascent metropolis, they, like others before them, hoped to get employment. However, the policies governing the presence of African women in Nairobi, as well as the male patriarchs’ attitudes towards their being in the town, had not changed. As their presence in Nairobi continued to be contested, the unavailability of employment opportunities for them persisted. Inspired by fellow women street hawkers, a number of them joined the sector, adding to the already burgeoning numbers (Ngesa 1996, 113-114). Thus, a major feature of the streets of Nairobi, especially those in Eastlands throughout the 1940s, was the presence of hawkers, many of them women, selling mainly agricultural produce and a few other goods such as charcoal and handicrafts.

By 1943, the cumulative effect of petty trading so overwhelmed the authorities that the Licensing Inspector, A.E. Holmes, petitioned his seniors for assistance. He cautioned:

[Hawking] will be very much worse, and we will have no control whatsoever. It is impossible for myself and two native assistants with our other duties to control the hawkers ... in Nairobi (Ngesa 1996, 121).

Holmes' plea came against the backdrop of the general feeling among Europeans that Africans, women and men alike, doing street vending in Nairobi, were not only an affront to the dignity of the town, but also a pretext for jobless Africans to hung around the municipality. To avert the possibility of this presence of Africans spilling over into European areas, which they feared might cause them security and health risks, the European residents resolved to use whatever means possible to reverse the trend of growing numbers of unemployed Africans, in particular street traders, whether male or female, in Nairobi (KDM 5/12/1947; EAS, 12/7/1951; Hake 1977, 58-59; Werlin 1974, 49).

During the 1940s, therefore, the municipal council administration intensified its efforts in dealing with hawkers to clean up Nairobi. In 1941, it introduced major changes in the hawking policy: whereas hitherto the basis of hawker licensing was to generate revenue for the Council, the main objective of issuing hawker licenses was henceforth to reduce African hawking activities in the town. The Council therefore dropped the ceiling of licenses for hawkers from 500 to 300 (Ngesa 1996, 122). Information on the gender categories of the 300 license holders is lacking. However, given that the process of licensing was to a large extent influenced by African patriarchs, women's chances were slim. The African Advisory Council (an all-male outfit) and the Municipal African Affairs Officer did the initial approval of applications, purportedly to prevent the licensing of criminals who might conduct nefarious activities in the municipality. Only applications endorsed by them went to the licensing office (Hake 1977, 54; NCC/CR NAC Meeting 2/9/1948). Nevertheless, guided by the belief that males were the family bread winners, the African Advisory Council rarely recommended women (Robertson 1997, 108; O. Is. Viginia Wathoni, 1/8/2014; Stella Amodi, 6/7/2014).

Yet beneath the facade of prioritising males because of their bread winning roles lay the continued African male elders' and Council's mind-set that African women's work in Nairobi, whether as residents or commuters, was prostitution. Women without spouses (single, widowed or divorced living on their own), or married women making daily or occasional return journeys to Nairobi unaccompanied by their male guardians or partners, were condemned as candidates for prostitution and the spread of disease. For this reason, the elders felt duty bound to impose stricter surveillance over such women's entry and/or stay in Nairobi - a fact which made it unlikely for women to feature prominently among the petty traders issued with licenses as in the case of 1941 mentioned above.

The war years also saw the Municipal Council, working in cahoots with the African patriarchs, create stricter law enforcement agencies to take charge of the control of Africans in Nairobi generally, but in particular illegal petty traders, many of them women. One of these institutions, the Municipal Police Force, was formed in 1940 to reinforce the work of the police department in implementing the council by-laws. Later in 1944, a Municipal Inspectorate Department was created, with four inspectors and a supervisor. The Inspectorate, under whose responsibility the Municipal Police now fell, was mandated to ensure that Nairobi residents, Africans in particular, complied with the by-laws (NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, Finance Committee Meeting 21/5/1940; Smart 1950, 75; Onstad 1990, 126-127). The Council also enacted new tougher hawking regulations that were to be similarly strictly enforced. Alongside the earlier laws such as the vagrancy and pass laws, the Council, in 1942, passed the Control of "Natives" by-laws which came to be notoriously characterised as the "spivs laws". For purposes of the by-laws, a spiv was defined as "a person who eked out a living by dishonest means" (Onstad 1990, 132). Many illegal vendors in the town, particularly women, were arrested under the vagrancy and spivs laws and repatriated to their rural areas (O.Is Daniel Ogindo, 16/3/2015; Jacobo Maweu, 9/11/2015).

Moreover, since the 1930s, the African elders had also spearheaded the formation of ethnically-based organisations, one of whose objectives was to repatriate women in Nairobi to their up-country dwellings and to prevent them, generally,

from drifting to the town (Kanogo 2005, 7-9). Among these associations were the Luo Union, officially recognised by the government in 1940, the Kikuyu General Union (KGU) and the Kalenjin Union (Parker 1948, 47; White 1990, 191). The KGU, for instance, allowed only legally married women living with husbands or registered domestic servants or old prostitutes who knew no other means of earning a livelihood to reside in Nairobi. All other women outside these categories were to be returned home purportedly for their own welfare and dignity (White 1990, 192-193). It was usually through the spying activities of older Kikuyu women on the payroll of KGU that potential repatriates were identified (White 1990, 192-193). The Luo Union was more radical in its removal methods: Luo women suspected of prostitution were dressed in clothing cut out of an old sack with a gaping hole in front and back without panties. They were then taken through a humiliating walk down the street in public prior to their forced repatriation (Okuro 2006 cited in Kinyanjui 2013, 155; White 1990, 193-194). Women travelling to Nairobi daily or occasionally to trade, or residing in the town and eking livelihoods from the sale of commodities, were usually among such suspects. Thus with the combined surveillance of the Municipal Council and ethnically-based organisations, the lives of women living in and/or conducting petty trading in Nairobi were increasingly coming under siege.

For the majority of women who had no male relations to be their security in Nairobi, the new measures instilled fear and kept them away from the city. The controls also forced some women already living in the town, among them petty traders, to leave the town. In particular, in view of the draconian methods used by Luo elders, only a small minority of Luo women from the rural Western Kenya, usually married, carried out hawking activities in Nairobi. Those without spouses who persisted as petty traders were renounced as hopeless and given derogatory nicknames. They were also disparaged through songs (O.Is. Stella Amodi, 6/7/2014; Daniel Ogindo, 16/3/15; Buoga Obuya, 8/9/2015). Inevitably, the unrelenting efforts of the male elders and their Council collaborators to systematically squeeze out women from Nairobi saw a measure of success.

Nonetheless, the success of the repressive measures was only partial. A number of Africans, women included, persevered as illegal hawkers, determined to reap the

good commodity prices that Nairobi offered. Operating mainly in the familiar streets of Eastlands, their activities were facilitated by a number of factors. The area was less policed than the town centre where the law enforcement body tried to more effectively keep out “spivs”, “drones” and “loafers” (illegal hawkers were usually classified as part of these groups) from interfering with the European and Indian economic activities (Hake 1977, 58; Stichter 1982, 130; Onstad 1990, 119).

Moreover, a series of events in the 1940s stimulated a rise in the influx of Africans into Nairobi. Overcrowding in rural areas such as those in the Central Province meant that many squatter returnees, men and women, could not be resettled. In places such as the Kikuyu reserve, the landless already comprised half of the population (Zezeza 1989, 160-161). Furthermore, unbearable squatter regulations were put in place, entailing the decimation of their livestock and the requirement that each male squatter provide up to 180 days a year to the settler farmer on whose land he and his family lived. As a result, a large number of squatters fled the Rift Valley (Stichter 1982, 130-131). Yet they could not return to their original rural homes in Kikuyuland as the region was under the strain of population pressure. Besides, among the Africans who returned to their ethnic regions, whether from the troubled settler areas or from the towns, including Nairobi, there was always a strong attraction to the capital out of a popular feeling that it was where the money was (Stichter 1982, 130-131; Hake 1977, 59). It is no wonder that Werlin (1974, 60), referring to those repatriated from the town, wrote that “the faster these Africans were repatriated, the faster they flocked back to Nairobi”, and, “In the two or three years before the Emergency, approximately 10,000 Africans who had been repatriated were back to the town.” Many of these Africans survived by petty trading (Hake 1977, 58; Werlin 1974, 60).

At the same time, the skyrocketing cost of living constantly generated a growing demand for the cheap goods sold by hawkers, especially women hawkers. Hawking activities not only defied the authorities’ mitigation measures, but spread. In 1947, a worried Municipal Licensing Officer could still condemn the increase in illegal petty trade in the metropolis, noting that “unlicensed vendors, numbering about 2000, were initiating petty ventures nearly everywhere in the municipality, within and outside the town centre” (NCC/CR Archives, GPC

Committee Meeting, 17/2/1947). Blaming the limitations imposed on him by a skeleton staff as the main constraint in achieving adequate control of hawkers, he urged immediate intervention from his superiors if the situation was to be contained (NCC/CR Archives, GPC Committee Meeting, 17/2/1947). The illegal vendors, women and men, positioned themselves in the vicinity of markets such as Shauri Moyo (Burma)⁴ and Kariokor, as well as near shopping areas in African estates and intercepted customers heading to such destinations. Established traders and licensed hawkers decried their loss of business owing to unfair competition from illegal operators, and appealed to the Municipal Council to tame them. The Council denounced the illegal hawkers for rising crime and unrest in Nairobi, and dismissed the illegal food sellers among them as a menace to public health (NCC/CR Archives, CCN Minutes, NAC Meeting, 9/8/1946; GPC Meeting, 20/1/1947 and 17/2/1947; PHC Meeting, 13/5/1952; Parker 1949, 21; Werlin 1974, 266). The accusations notwithstanding, the illegal street vendors were unmoved.

Consequently, in the period after the Second World War, the municipal council introduced additional controls. In 1947, the term hawker was for the first time defined as “any person, who, whether as principal, agent or employee, carries on the business of offering, or exposing of goods for sale, barter, or exchange, elsewhere than at a fixed place” (NCC/CR Archives, CCN Minutes, GPC Meeting, 17/2/47; KNA LG 2/125 Municipalities and Local Government: Nairobi Municipal Council By-Laws 1948, 60). In 1948, a fresh set of by-laws was passed which stressed on the seriousness of conducting itinerant trade without a license. Concomitantly, the council police force, in operation since the war years, was strengthened by doubling the number of inspectors from four in 1944 to eight in 1952 (KNA LG 2/125 Municipalities and Local Government: Nairobi Municipal Council By-Laws 1948, 60; Onstad 1990, 127). Additional laws were legislated by the Nairobi Municipal Council and the Legislative Council in the years 1948 to

⁴ Having established itself after the Second World War, partly through the remittances of returning soldiers who were refused business licences by the government, the market was named Burma after the war of Burma” (Myanmar). Hyde, David. 2002. “The Nairobi General Strike [1950]: From Protest to Insurgency.” *Azania*, Volume 37 [2002], Journal of the British Institute in Eastern Africa: 242.

1950, which aimed at controlling the influx of Africans, especially women, into Nairobi. Among the new municipality by-laws passed in 1948 were 211 which stated that “No person, shall, without reasonable excuse loiter in any public place within the Municipality”, and 212 which stipulated that “No person shall be within the Municipality unless: he has reasonably regular employment and sufficient means of maintaining himself or; he is in possession of a valid resident’s permit ... issued by the Town Clerk or by a person duly authorised in writing by him to issue such permit” (KNA MAA Deposit 7/426: The Nairobi Municipality Amendment By-Laws 1948).

In May 1949, a Vagrancy (Amendment) Bill was enacted by the Legislative Council empowering the Member for Law and Order to repatriate vagrants for whom employment had not been found after three months in a house of detention⁵ to their ethnic reserves. Similarly, the Voluntarily Unemployed Persons (Provision of Employment) Ordinance, 1949, was passed and became operational in 1950. Consequently, a Labour Exchange Committee was set up to deal with the cases of the unemployed. By September 1950, a report to the Legislative Council on the operation of the Ordinance revealed that 754 people had registered as unemployed, and a further 280 had been arrested by police and brought before the Committee. Out of the 1034 cases, 264 were permitted to engage in formal employment, 148 were repatriated, 62 chose to return home by themselves, 23 received certificates of exemption from employment, and 367 failed to report and their cases were referred to the police. In 87 cases, the report order was withdrawn, 10 absconded from the reception centre, and 73 cases were pending (Hake 1977, 59). It is not clear how many women, especially hawkers, were among these offenders. However, without formal employment, Africans in Nairobi, especially women, felt insecure on the streets, and settling down to a life of trade where their operations were usually illegal was becoming more and more difficult (Hake 1977, 59; O.I. Jemsi Orao 12/2/2016). The success of the efforts to

⁵ Depending on a case by case analysis by the authorities, arrested vagrants in Nairobi could either elect to return to their rural homes or be offered employment. Those who opted for the latter were put in a house of detention for a maximum of three months within which period the authorities, in liaison with the Labour Exchange, sought employment for them. If at the end of the period they were still unemployed, they were repatriated to their rural home. See Andrew Hake (1977). *African Metropolis: Nairobi's Self-Help City*, Sussex University Press, p.59.

keep women out of Nairobi is demonstrated by the 1948 census records, according to which out of a total African adult population of 54,844 in the town, only 9,250 women lived there (KNA 312.8 Geographical and Tribal Studies, Kenya Colony and Protectorate, African Population 1948, 7).

The possibilities of women making a living by selling goods in the municipality were further constricted by the council officers, who, as usual, worked in tandem with African male elders to exercise their powers arbitrarily in cracking down on African women petty traders. For instance, in 1945, a letter from the Nairobi District Commissioner to the Town Clerk directed him not to issue hawkers' licenses to women. In the same year, allegedly to prevent women from falling into immoral behaviour, the Municipal Council, acting on the advice of the Advisory Council, ceased issuing licenses to women sellers of porridge. Even though a protest letter from the women prompted the Town Clerk to lift the ban a week later, only women resident in Nairobi and depending on hawking for a livelihood would henceforth receive the licenses (NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, NAC Meeting 11/2/1946; Hake 1977, 54; Onstad 1990, 86; Ngesa 1996, 158). Even then, the issuance of such licenses was largely influenced by nepotism, usually by male civil servants who used their official connections to have their wives licensed (Kiruthu 2006, 135). Later in 1949, in a letter to the Nairobi Municipal Council, the Kiambu District Commissioner communicated a request by the Kiambu Local Native Council to cease issuing women with hawker licenses (NCC/CR NAC Meeting, 6/1/1949; Kiruthu 2006, 137). No wonder that a classification of hawker licenses, availed in the records for the first time in 1947, showed that out of a total of 730 that were issued, only 100 went to women selling porridge, a pointer to the discrimination women had to endure (NCC/CR Archives CCN Minutes, NAC Meetings 8/9/1947 and 1/12/1947). It was an all-out war against women's residence and petty trading in Nairobi.

In fact, in the wake of the post-Second World War controls, troubles pervaded petty traders in Nairobi. Some licensed women hawkers, even with pregnancies or babies strapped on their backs, unable to move from place to place, were charged for selling goods while seated at specific places without regard to their condition. It was common for such women to try to flee at the mere sight of the Council

police (Ngesa 1996, 161). Many other women were arrested for hawking illegally. In 1948, for instance, among a number of illegal traders in Kariobangi convicted of trading without licenses and fined an exorbitant 400 Shillings each, were several married women whose husbands were labourers in Nairobi (KNA PC/CP 4/4/3 AR Nairobi 1948, 5). Guy Hunter vividly captures the picture of the times when he observes:

If one of the happier pictures of colonial Africa is that of the District Officer and local chief proudly surveying a cotton crop or a new village well, the most gloomy was that of the police of East Africa harrying the vegetable sellers, usually women, on a periodic round up of unauthorised markets in an urban estate (Cited in Werlin 1974, 57).

Yet Hunter's observation is also a confirmation that despite the persecution, the Council and the elders did not totally break the women's will to reap the benefits of Nairobi's commerce. Instead, the women had become aware of their situation, and in their own small way had learnt to deal with their problems.

Over time, however, the policy of arresting the unemployed and finding work for them or repatriating them to the 'native reserves' also became too costly. Consequently, many men and women ejected from the town navigated their way back, and in the absence of formal employment, settled down to a livelihood of hawking (Stichter 1982, 132; White 1990, 193). The colonial government had to come to terms with the illegal street trade in Nairobi by African women, for among other things, it had denied women opportunities in the new money economy while introducing new consumption patterns, alienated them from their land thus causing poverty in rural areas, employed their husbands at wages below the cost of living, and denied the women licenses for petty trading in Nairobi. In spite of adopting a series of measures not only to prevent them from trading in Nairobi but also to completely keep them out of the town, the women's resilience and fortitude proved unassailable.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have highlighted a number of issues concerning colonialism and repression of African women street traders in Nairobi in the 1940s. We have observed that prior to the emergence of colonial Nairobi, the site had functioned

as a market for women from the surrounding communities who came to exchange a variety of goods. After the establishment of the town, women from its peripheries continued to travel to it to sell their commodities. Nevertheless, from its embryonic years, the white settler population in Nairobi was determined to make it a white-people-only town. The presence of Africans in Nairobi was therefore acceptable only in as far as they provided the labour needs of the European population, otherwise the upmarket European areas were out of bounds to them. Because they were not expected to reside in Nairobi, residential areas for Africans remained informal until after the First World War, when, owing to labour needs, Pumwani was established as their official location.

However, the European labour needs focused on men rather than women. Yet women in and around Nairobi also needed to be incorporated into the money economy so as to afford the newly introduced cheap imported goods. Marginalised in employment, they sought alternative sources of income, and a number of them took up petty trading. Nevertheless, influenced by the patriarchal attitudes of African male elders that the only work women did in Nairobi was prostitution and thus spread disease, the Municipal Council, throughout the 1940s, tried various means to keep African women out of the town. One of the main strategies was to deny them hawker licenses. However, constantly pushed by their need for cash in the modern economy, the women responded by hawking illegally. Thus, despite the council's enactment of a raft of regulations to control their entry into Nairobi and to prevent their hawking activities, some women navigated their way round the system. Nonetheless, through the legislations and a series of implementing bodies, the colonial Nairobi administration largely confined the women's vending activities to the Eastlands parts of Nairobi where their sales were sustained by the demands of the lowly paid African workers.

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Key Informants (Approximate age in parentheses)

- Buoga Obuya (82) Siaya Town, 8/9/2015
Daniel Ogindo (87) 16/3/15, Usenge, Bondo Sub County
Jemsi Orao (90) 12/2/2016, Ugunja Township, Siaya County.
Jacobso Maweu (91) 9/11/2015, Kasaini, Machakos County
Pancrasio Wahinya (87) 8 /11/ 2015, Karai, Naivasha
Stella Amodi (89) 6/7/2014 Ndere, Siaya County.
Viginia Wathoni (90) O.I. 1/8/2014, Lucky Summer, Nairobi

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