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SOME ASPECTS OF URBANISATION IN MACHAKOS TOWNSHIP

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Some Aspects of Urbanisation In Machakos Township

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I. In this paper I wish to discuss certain aspects of African urbanisation in Machakos Township, a medium sized town in the east of highland Kenya.

African urban labour forces are normally considered in terms of temporary migrance to the labour centre and a dichotomy between the rural and urban social settings, to both of which an African urban worker typically owes allegiance. African workers have been treated as either rural agricultural workers on their own land or urban wage earners at any given moment. Attempts to build models of urban areas have tended to involve increasing 'urbanisation' of Africans - that is, a growing commitment to the urban social setting and decreasing preoccupation with the rural, 'tribal' environment.

I wish to discuss the possibility of simultaneous rural and urban involvement and the relationship between urban employment and preoccupation with the land. Anthropologists are also concerned with the way in which a new arrival to town adjusts to an unfamiliar social milieu and with the nature of social organisation in a predominantly adult male and tribally heterogeneous population. These I will mention only in passing because Machakos being largely populated by Kamba, large groups of different tribes do not oppose one another politically or economically, and the new arrival can usually find kinsmen or neighbours from his home area who can care for him until he finds a job and acclimatizes to his new social surroundings.

I will also look briefly at the relationship between Machakos and the nearby metropolis of Nairobi.

II. Machakos is situated about 40 miles south-east of Nairobi, on the lowlands between the Mua and Iveti Hills. Originally founded as an administrative headquarters and commercial depot serving a hinterland rather than as a producing centre in its own right, the town retains much of this character today. The town is the district headquarters of Machakos District, the seat of Masaku County Council, a market centre for the surrounding agricultural area, and a service centre, having a large hospital and several private medical practitioners, two advocates' offices, garages, shops, banks, hotels, bars, a night club and numerous prostitutes. The town is also a busy road transport junction. There is no industry to speak of in Machakos. When the Uganda railway bypassed the town by twenty miles, so did Machakos' chances of getting into the competition to attract industrial investment. Added to this, the lack of a good water supply for many years, and even now the lack of a water supply adequate for industrial needs, has left Machakos without industry*.

*Kenya Orchards Ltd. has a canning factory but this is seven miles from the township.

The population today is around 6000 overnight residents, although the daily population, certainly on market days is probably double this figure. The population also fluctuates seasonally. Throughout most of the year a man's wife and children stay at home on the shamba, where the woman cultivates the soil and the children go to a nearby primary school. Particularly in the rainy seasons during March and November when land clearing and planting take place, the women are engaged in this essential work. Again, during harvesting the women are occupied on the shamba. In any case, as will be mentioned later, few African workers can afford the luxury of buying extra food in town for wives and children, for more than a very short period. Thus wives and children, if they visit the absent family head at all, do so for brief spells of up to about a month, and at certain agriculturally defined times, between planting and harvesting. During 1969 the difference this seasonal visiting made to the African adult male-female proportion was from 48 females to every 100 males during the rainy season to 68 females to every 100 males during the dry season.¹

The majority of African workers are the sort of migrants who typify African urban labour forces, coming to town or city for one or more spells of employment, and retaining links with the rural home, contributing substantial amounts of cash, with the intention of eventually returning there for good. In the case of Machakos a distinction can be drawn between those workers resident in town, however temporarily, and those whose rural homes are close to town to enable them to continue to sleep at home, merely travelling into their workplaces every day. These latter I will call 'commuters', reserving the more usual term 'migrants' for those who spend longer periods of time away from home.

African town dwellers who intend spending all their days in town, having either renounced their links with the country, or never having had any links with the country, are represented by a Muslim community. The core of this community are the descendants of the 'Swahili' porters, traders and railway employees who came up from the coast around the time of the European economic penetration at the end of the last century. To this core has been added a lot of Kamba through intermarriage, landlessness, and the desire of certain Kamba to escape the restrictions and obligations imposed by their kin.

A declining Asian population can be included among the permanent town dwellers in Machakos. Europeans are migrants, only one or two having no intention of returning to their own countries within the next two or three years.

The African male workforce (as opposed to the resident population) is overwhelmingly Kamba, comprising 88% of the total. The remainder is composed of Kikuyu, 'Swahili', Baluhya and other tribes.² The close relationship between the labour force and the near hinterland of Machakos

1. For explanation of statistics, see appendix . 2. See appendix.

is demonstrated by the fact that 43% of the labour force was born within 10 miles of town, and 70% within 30 miles.² Nearly 24% of the male labour force are routine clerical workers, the biggest employers of these being the district administration, the county council, with smaller offices, like the two bank branches, also employing a significant number of clerks. Skilled and semi-skilled workers include tailors, carpenters, drivers, policemen, etc., and are 21% of the labour force. Unskilled workers (13%) are employed mainly by the county council and urban council as labourers, sweepers and by building contractors as general labourers. The relatively small size of this category can be attributed to the absence of industry, the usual employers of large numbers of unskilled labourers. The largest category of workers is that of shopworkers (42%) and these would seem to take the place of industry in employing those with little education or occupational skill. In Machakos there are 82 shops selling food as the principal item, not to mention over forty clothing shops and thirty hotel/bars. To work in one of these places, whether serving behind a counter or pouring beer, requires very little expertise beyond the ability to give change correctly, and in many cases this responsibility is reserved by the owner of the concern himself. Machakos obviously serves as a retail centre for a much larger population than that living in the township. 'Shops' range from what are little more than stalls, run by one man and barely making a profit, to highly organised entrepreneurial enterprises employing up to fifty men, with a large profit and involving considerable capital investment. Under the government policy on non-citizen traders, an increasing number of small businesses are becoming Africanised. Of 39 African owned businesses, only nine have been under the present ownership for more than six years. 70% of business premises are African owned and this should increase to 75% by the end of this year.

In addition to shop workers there is a number of petty traders, mostly concentrated in the market dealing in agricultural produce, but some hawking cheap plastic durables and clothing in the bus station.

Higher clerical workers, those with supervisory positions, work mainly for government and the banks.

Both the Machakos advocates are Asian and the majority of secondary school teachers are European. In Machakos School, of a teaching staff of twenty-five, only six are African.

III. Why do Africans who have land take up employment in urban areas? There is the universal necessity to raise cash, to pay school fees, taxes, bridewealth, and to buy clothes, soap and other consumer durables. It is obviously possible to have some degree of involvement or interest in an occupation which acts as added inducement to taking employment. It is

2. See appendix

also a fact that occupations give differing degrees of prestige to their holders and that this prestige is a force not only in town but also in the country, and that to hold a prestigious occupation may be an end in itself. Occupations which confer prestige on their holders are those which require training, a high standard of education and experience, all of which are acquired only in town. To certain workers, therefore, a period in town offers, besides cash, chances of attaining more prestigious positions which increase the longer the period spent in town. Most semi-skilled and unskilled workers however seem less concerned with reaching positions of responsibility and prestige than with achieving some balance between job security and maximum wage power.

It is possible in most cases to raise a certain amount of money from the sale of shamba produce, but normally even if there is a surplus to permit sale this does not come near covering the needs of all those living on the piece of land. Hence the need to seek wage employment and the greatest market for this is in urban areas.

This does not mean that the worker will return to the shamba when a specific sum has been raised. The idea of the 'target worker', the migrant who comes to town to earn a specific sum of money for a specific end, such as bridewealth or school fees, is barely applicable to Machakos.³ The need for cash is so omnipresent that if a man's shamba cannot provide him with such a specific sum of money then he is going to find himself extending his period of urban wage earning again and again as one specific need is replaced by another as the circumstances of his life cycle dictate. A Kamba may come to town in the first instance to save money to build a house for himself, then to raise bridewealth, and no sooner is he married than he will require school fees, if not yet for his own children then for those of his relatives, who have discovered their kinsman's ability to raise cash. The concept of target earning is useful only if retained for the very broad goal of a higher standard of living, which people are conscious that wage earning can bring.

It must be remembered that wages are not a substitute for whatever may be produced on the shamba. Even if the shamba produces only a few basic foodstuffs such as maize and beans, this can still be regarded as income. Whatever the shamba does not provide, cash must provide, depleting the value of urban wage employment. This dual income is the very basis of this circulatory labour system.

IV. To live in town is an expensive business. Rent must be paid, anything between Shs. 25/- and Shs.60/- per month, and food and fuel bought, and there are all sorts of temptations to spending money on other things, beer and women being the most frequently mentioned. The frugality of the lives of many workers is impressive. So that as much money as

3. See, for instance, Matejko, A. 'The Social Upgrading of Working Africans after Independence.' Unpublished paper, Makerere, 1969.

possible can be sent home men seem to exist with the barest minimum of comforts, and when not actually working do nothing but remain in their rooms. The idea often put forward of town as an attraction by virtue of its bright lights, good life and adventure would be lost on these men. Because living in town is so expensive, and makes such a hole in a wage packet, whenever possible a man will continue to live on his shamba while holding a job in town. By doing this, not only does he save a lot of money, but he can also devote more personal attention to his shamba and to his domestic affairs. The proportion of the labour force engaged in this commuting is substantial - over 20%.⁴ It is held that the greater amount of work put into the shamba actually increases earnings because of greater productivity of the land.

One often mentioned drawback of living in town is the difficulty of knowing what is going on at home. Machakos being a predominantly Kamba town and most of these Kamba being drawn a fairly well defined hinterland very close to the town⁴ means that there is quite good communication between town and country through the coming and going both of workers visiting home and neighbours and kin from home visiting town. Nevertheless, there is always a degree of uncertainty as to how the family at home is getting along. A common cause of divorce seems to be a wife misbehaving while her husband is away working in town. In one case known to me, a tailor working in Machakos was informed by his half-brother that his wife was entertaining other men in his own home. The tailor hurried home to find out what was going on and the result was that he threw the wife out of the house. Alternatively, women complain that their men do not pay sufficient attention to them, or send them enough money, or that their husbands squander too much money on the delights of town.

The possibility of commuting to work is an important factor to be considered when seeking work or thinking of changing employment. Men have a good idea of what the difference would be to their net income if they were to move to a job which necessitated living away from the shamba. One shop worker told me that he would not consider taking a job in Nairobi unless it offered an increase in his monthly wage of at least Shs.100/-. This sort of feeling is not confined to non-clerical workers. A trade union clerk who had worked in Mombasa, Nakuru, and had even spent three months on a course in Czechoslovakia was doubtful about giving up his commuter status and taking work in Nairobi. He was able to reel off a whole list of rents for various types of housing in Nairobi, from Shs.102/- for a City Council house, the cheapest and so the most desirable, to Shs.150/- for a non-City Council-owned single room, to Shs.600/- for a privately owned house, plus the cost of electricity, water and food. He said he could be poor in Nairobi even on £75 per month. Even if he were offered promotion he still was unsure about moving to Nairobi. The cost of urban living can thus in some cases be

4. See appendix

said to have a dampening effect on personal ambition.

Commuters travel to work every morning either on foot, by bicycle, bus, or private car. A bicycle often carries two people, and a private car may be bursting at the seams, the car owner bringing relatives and neighbours also working in town. These passengers often make contributions to disburse the cost of petrol. The distance commuters live from town can be anything up to ten miles⁵ and people will walk up to eight miles to work every morning and back again in the evening. Workers living within ten miles of town may be unable to live on the shamba. Of those in the sample whose rural homes are within ten miles of town, half live in town.⁵ The fact that such a large proportion of people live in town when it is recognized as socially and economically more desirable to live on the shamba is found in practical logistic terms and in the demand of particular occupations on the employee. Out of thirty-six men born within ten miles of town but living in town, twelve come from the sub-locations of Kaewa and Kombu and the area known as Kyambuko. These are on the far side of the Iveti Hills from town and the eight mile journey on the hills would be extremely taxing, particularly on the way home. A bicycle would be useless and a car of little value. Buses do not go into the hills. Eight of the thirty-six town dwellers work in bars, serving beer until 11 p.m. and not finishing work until 11.30 p.m. At this hour a journey home is quite impractical. Five men own shops and sleep, as it were, 'over the shop'. They pay rent for the premises in any case so have no need to pay rent for another room to sleep in. And any time spent in travelling to town is valuable time wasted, when the shop could be open to customers. Shopowners also like to have someone on the premises overnight to discourage thieves. One domestic servant of the thirty-six has rent free accommodation behind his employer's house, where he begins work very early. The remainder of the workers who live in town though having nearby rural birth places give what might be termed social reasons for remaining in town. Two men's families had sold their nearby land and moved to a settlement area farther away. One man said he wanted to get away from his wife and another had two wives who did not get on so he left one wife to look after the shamba and lived with the other in town. The rest simply preferred town life, the escape from hard manual work on the shamba and the extra personal freedom. By contrast, of those living out of town, there are no bar workers, only two shopowners, both of whom live less than one mile from town, and only two live at Kyambuko, a difficult place to reach from town. Both of them were in their first job and both have been at it less than six months.

For Elkan, in his study of the labour force of Kampala, commuters comprised an emergent stable proletariat of town workers.⁶ These commuters

5. See appendix.

6. Elkan, W. Migrants and Proletarians. London, 1960.

supply Kampala with people to fill the skilled and supervisory posts, reaching these positions through long experience in the town. In Machakos, however, commuters tend to fill unskilled posts for relatively long periods, which would seem to reflect a dependence on Machakos, by people without a command of more highly paid jobs elsewhere, for a steady supply of cash, which could never increase to supplant shamba income entirely. The Kampala commuters are fortunate in having land holdings close to a large and important urban area, so that there is no necessity for gambling a job seeking trip elsewhere in order to increase income.

V. Town is, by and large, considered to be an immoral place, full of drunkards, thieves and prostitutes, which can have an adverse effect on a person exposed to its influences. This is often cited as a reason for rural life being preferable to urban life. In addition, wage earning is said to make men lazy and spoil them for hard shamba work. People without much education or occupational specialisation would much rather live completely off their shambas. Town life is, to such people, a necessary evil, distracting a man's attention from the shamba and the family, which should be his primary concern. The shortage of land in Ukambani, or rather the small size of shambas in relation to a large number male heirs, is acutely felt and a common motive for saving money is to buy land elsewhere. In the township are families who expect to live there for the rest of their days for the express reason that there was not enough land for them. The land is till uppermost in the minds of urban workers of lower occupational categories and very, very few would conceive of abandoning it voluntarily for an exclusively urban life. It is only as educational qualifications and occupational specialisation increase that dependence on the land decreases. The most apparent reasons for this are increasing salaries and job security. As a man's salary increases, he is less dependent on income from his shamba to supplement what he earns in town. (In fact, the less qualified the worker the lower his wages and the more likely he is to consider urban income a supplement to shamba income). And as a man's qualification and specialisation increase so he becomes more indispensable to the urban economy. A replacement of similar qualifications is less likely to be found to replace him; he is less likely to lose his job and have to fall back on shamba income alone.

Ironically, those urban workers least dependent on their shamba incomes are those most able to improve their shambas, by more land and employ agricultural labourers. Urban workers with even professional qualifications retain interest in their rural holdings and in maximizing production. Complaints can be heard of officials taking too many days away from town to visit their land.

Attempts have been made by anthropologists at measuring the degree of 'urbanisation' by comparing commitment to urban employment with commitment to affairs rural and tribal. The hypothesis is that the longer a person spends in town and the higher his occupational status and educational qualifications (both part of the 'Urban' system) the less preoccupied he will be with rural life. This, clearly, does not hold up. African urban workers with a rural holding remain very strongly attached to this and to the entire rural 'tribal' system in a manner which cannot be explained away as mere insurance for unemployment, old age or illness. No matter how long a man may spend in town he still looks to the land, no matter how secure his urban job or well paid, he still cares for a piece of land to which he will retire when his days of working in town are over.

VI. It has been suggested that movement of workers from rural areas to large metropolitan areas does not take place in a single migration.⁷ Thus, rather than moving straight from shamba to city, a man will move first to a small town then possibly to a larger town before finding his way to employment in the big city. However, this assumes in large measure that he has a fairly free choice over where he will work. In Kenya, as in most developing countries, the proportion of unemployed work seekers is very high. Of the Machakos labour force sample, 30% did not take work immediately they reached the age when young men usually look for work (around fifteen years old or after leaving school if they were still in school at fifteen years old). 35% found work in Machakos, 16% in another town and 12% in either Nairobi or Mombasa. A young Kamba with little education looking for work is faced normally with a choice between Nairobi and Machakos, because these are the only places within easy reach where there are likely to be vacancies. Of these, Machakos is the more likely choice because the busfare to Machakos is considerably lower, and in Machakos there are more likely to be kinsmen or neighbours from home in whose room to sleep while looking for work and to ask for food and pocket money. These residents also have a good knowledge of the local labour market. For those within walking distance, the town is the obvious choice because no extra cost need be incurred while job seeking. Looking for work in Nairobi is a different matter. The plight of the unemployed in Nairobi is well known -- the endless trek in search of work and the boredom and despair relieved by the public library and possibly petty thieving.⁸ Without friends or kin in Nairobi to give him food and shelter, a youth knows the search for work in Nairobi is a bitter contemplation. To give up a job in Machakos to go to Nairobi to look for work is a

7 Pons, VG. 'The Growth of Stanleyville' in Forde (ed.) Social Implications of Urbanisation South of the Sahara. UNESCO 1956

8 see also Gutkind, P.C.W. 'The Energy of Despair: Social Organisation of the Unemployed in Two African Cities: Lagos and Nairobi.' Civilizations, Vol. 17, 1967.

great risk which few will take. But if a Kamba in Nairobi loses his job and cannot find another he can return to his shamba and then search for work in Machakos, where he has the advantages of proximity to home and the presence of a denser network of kin and friends to call on for help. Here the town acts as a sort of insurance in much the same way that the shamba is said to act in times of unemployment. The worker (or potential worker) sets himself down in times of need where his network of kin and friends is densest.

For those with better educational qualifications things are a little different. Expectations having been raised by the possession of a school certificate, a secondary school leaver is more likely to rush off straight to Nairobi and disappointment. The result is the same -- eventual return to Machakos to look for work nearer home.

Small urban areas on the scale of Machakos exhibit considerable fluidity between town and country. 'Town' does not stop dead at a Municipal or township boundary marked by a line on a map, beyond this line being 'country'. A study of social aspects of town life must, in contrasting urban social organisation with rural social, take account of this 'meshing' effect between town and country. The effect on individuals is a simultaneous involvement in both sorts of social organisation - with an employer in an impersonal economic relationship on the one hand, and with kin and rural neighbours on a personal, affective level on the other. The close relationship between town and country in Machakos means, in fact, that a man's employer will often be a kinsman or neighbour from home. The contrast between a large metropolitan urban area like Nairobi and a smaller, more 'parochial' town like Machakos becomes clear when local Kamba express relief at coming back to their 'home town', with its familiar faces, the certainty of meeting friends on the streets, and the comforting presence of the shamba just a short distance away.

Statistical Appendix

The statistics mentioned in the text were obtained from two sources. During September 1969 an 8% simple random sample was taken of dwelling places in Machakos and questionnaires administered to the occupants to obtain general demographic data for the resident population. To obtain data on the labour force, which includes many non-resident workers, different types of work places were quota on a roughly one in seven basis, and as many workers as possible interviewed at each place. The interviewing for this sample, of the Machakos labour force, took place during January 1970. Some of the results appear below.

Table 1. Resident African Population by Tribe. (%)

(Wet season figure)

	Adults		Children		Total
	M	F	M	F	
Kamba	28.3	14.0	7.8	6.5	56.6
Kikuyu	4.3	4.3	2.4	5.1	16.1
'Swahili'	1.6	2.7	1.9	4.6	10.8
Baluhya	1.9	1.3	2.9	2.4	8.5
Luo	0.8	0.5	0.3	-	1.6
Other	1.6	0.8	2.4	1.9	6.7
Total	38.5	23.6	17.7	20.5	100.3

n = 373.

Table 111. Occupational category by place of residence (Africans only) %.

Occupational category	Resident within township	Resident outside township	Total
professional	1.3	-	1.3
supervisory clerical	1.1	0.5	1.6
routine clerical	17.3	2.6	19.9
Shopworkers	36.1	6.8	42.9
domestic servants	2.7	0.5	3.1
skilled/semi-skilled labour	14.5	6.8	21.4
Unskilled labour	6.2	3.7	9.9
Total	79.2	20.9	100.1

n = 191.

Table 11. Labour Force by Tribe. (%) (Africans only)

	M	F	Total
Kamba	74.9	13.6	88.5
Kikuyu	3.1	1.1	4.2
'Swahili'	1.6	1.1	2.7
Balunya	2.1	-	2.1
Luo	1.6	-	1.6
Other	1.1	-	1.1
Total	84.4	15.8	100.2

n = 191

