A HISTORY OF AFRICAN WOMEN TRADERS IN NAIROBI, 1899-1952

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By

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DECLARATION

This thesis is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other University.

PAMELA O. NGESA

This thesis has been submitted for examination with my knowledge as University Supervisor.

For PROFESSOR A. WINKLER

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Rosebella Awuor Otieno.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AG.	-	Attorney General
KAU	-	Kenya African Union
KCA	-	Kikuyu Central Association
KNA	-	Kenya National Archives
LG	-	Local Government (Ministry)
MAA	-	Ministry of African Affairs
MAAO	-	Municipal African Affairs Officer
MNAO	-	Municipal Native Affairs Officer
MOH	-	Ministry of Health
NCC	-	Nairobi City Council
NCC-CR	-	Nairobi City Commission Central Registry (Archives)
NMC	-	Nairobi Municipal Council
O.I.	-	Oral Interview

A GLOSSARY OF SOME KISWAHILI, KIKUYU AND LUO WORDS USED IN THE TEXT

Ahoi	-	Landless people among the Kikuyu.
Ayah	-	Female house worker or children's nurse.
Barazas	-	Public meetings normally organized by a chief.
Chapati	-	An oriental food introduced to Kenya mainly by Asians. It is made by kneading wheat flour, dividing them into balls which are then rolled into flat round cakes and deep fried.
Githeri	-	A traditional Kikuyu food made from a stew of whole boiled maize kernels and beans.
Maendeleo ya Wanawake	-	Women's Progress.
Mandazi	-	Deep fried pastries made from sweet dough.
Njohi	-	A type of Kikuyu beer made by mixing sugarcane juice with honey and some herbs.
Nyoyo	-	A Luo snack of a boiled mixture of maize and beans.
Shamba	-	Plot of land.
Ugali	-	An African cake made by carefully mixing boiling water and maize/millet flour.
Uji	-	Porridge made from maize, millet, or finger millet flour, with sugar or honey added for sweetening. Sometimes it is left overnight to ferment slightly.

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ABSTRACT

The contribution of African women to the colonial urban economy in Kenya has received little attention. The convergence of African and colonial patriarchal systems prevented a focus on the activities of women. Consequently, female economic activities escaped the notice of policy makers, statistians and scholars. Equally, historiography dealing with Nairobi largely reduced African women to the unenviable job of prostitution, a conclusion which this study found wanting.

There has been a changing attitude towards the activities of women in recent years. The rise of the women's equal rights movement, spearheaded by the United Nations from 1975, was a major landmark in this development. During this period, many writers, among them sociologists, anthropologists, economists, population planners and historians, have researched women and society.

The focus of this study is on women as traders in Nairobi in the period between 1899 to 1952. It advances three main arguments. First, it postulates that colonialism brought immense change to African women. For example, women like men needed money to buy new imported goods introduced by the new race.

Secondly, it proposes that owing to gender biases, colonialism did not provide women with the means to be coopted into the new economy, as was the case with men

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY OF AFRICAN WOMEN TRADERS IN NAIROBI, 1899 - 1952

1.1 BACKGROUND AND DEFINITIONS

This study explores women's economic problems, solutions and achievements in the Nairobi urban economy from the turn of the century to the Mau Mau uprising. Specifically, it examines their struggles to incorporate themselves into the money economy. As women were largely rural dwellers, the thesis reviews possible causes of the migration of this exceptional group to the city, and attempts to demonstrate that colonial intrusion was largely responsible. Women in the vicinity of Nairobi wanted money, brought by the Europeans, to purchase the western goods introduced by colonialism. They travelled to the town to exchange their commodities. In the meantime, landlessness, a breakdown in the kinship networks in some communities, and the migration of men to Nairobi, led women to reside in the town. A combination of gender inequalities, and colonial racial biases forced some of these urban women residents likewise into the informal sector activities, such as trade.

According to Kivutha Kibwana, the informal sector is that sector which "comprises of activities usually, but not exclusively conducted in the open, or in temporary structures. Such activities which exist in urban ... areas are an offshoot of the formal sector, in that the informal sector arises at the point when the formal sector admits inability to provide jobs for the unemployed."[1] Characteristically, informal sector enterprises have few employees, and are sole proprietorships. The owner usually provides labour. The informal sector according to Obonyo Digolo is also "that sector which is a residual, including all the remaining enterprises in the urban economy...."[2] In this context, the sector includes all activities engaged in the production of goods and services, whether it employs one person or more, whether or not it uses fixed capital, whether or not it has fixed business location. Thus, women vegetable sellers, beer brewers, and eating-house keepers all constitute part of the informal sector.[3]

Colonial Nairobi gender inequities were evident in the distribution of employment opportunities. Employers mainly sought male labour at the exclusion of females. Some cultural setbacks, especially with regard to married women, reinforced this position. Yet women, even those living with working husbands, needed extra income, as male wages were too low to support even a bachelor, let alone a family. The persistent shortage of African housing added to the burden of the low paid workers, by making rents exorbitant, and accommodation unaffordable. A relatively comfortable family life was only possible if a wife brought in a supplementary income.

This study focuses on the trading activities of women. Trade in this context is defined as the sale of goods and services for a profit. Sometimes the thesis refers to African women as entrepreneurs. Arthur H. Cole, defines the term "entrepreneur" as "an individual or a group of individuals who undertake to initiate or aggrandize a profit oriented business for the production and/or distribution of goods and services."[4]

This thesis analyses the women's role as traders. It argues that even as entrepreneurs, women continued to be marginalized. For instance, they were excluded from obtaining official credit, and as part of the African mass, their activities were restricted in many aspects, especially in the 1940s. In this regard, the study also examines the impact of colonial Nairobi laws and regulations on the trading activities of women. Finally, the research attempts to assess the resilience of African women traders, and argues that in spite of colonial control, they grew in number, some flourished, and they made a significant impact on the economy.

For reasons of convenience, the traders are categorized into four groups. The first two groups consist of commuters and residents. Commuters are those women who travelled to Nairobi daily or occasionally to dispose of their goods. The residents are those who lived and conducted their enterprise in the city. The other two groups are hawkers and established traders.

The research adopts the definition of hawking and hawkers according to the City of Nairobi (Hawkers) By Laws 1963. Thus, hawking means "(whether as principal, agent or employee), carrying on trade by the sale or exchange of goods, wares, merchandise or refreshment" it also means "to carry on trade by sale or exchange or the offer, or exposing for sale or exchange of any goods, wares, merchandise, or refreshment, but does not include the seeking or taking of orders for subsequent delivery, or the delivery of goods, wares, merchandise or refreshment to premises for the purposes of resale". To be a hawker means "to place one's self in any street or public place, or unenclosed land (other than in shop premises approved as such by the Council)"[5]. Established traders were small scale entrepreneurs who may have started their activities as hawkers, but made a conscious decision to invest some of their profit back into business. They sought shops in the African estates, or stalls in various markets in the town, and operated from these premises. Among the commuters were hawkers and established traders. The residents had a similar composition.

This thesis attempts to throw light on the trading strategies of women in each of the four categories. It evinces that in spite of the differences, all women traders made responses and initiatives which enabled them to survive in business. The more ambitious women became established business owners, but the hawkers, largely disliked by the European authorities, faced increasing control. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, their situation was so precarious that many of them resorted to the Mau Mau violence to protest their impoverization.

This study therefore, hopes to provide a new perspective on the history of Nairobi, and indeed on the modern history of Kenya itself. It analyses a whole dimension of the economy that has previously been unstudied, and so attempts to enrich our knowledge of Kenyan history in the twentieth century.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Women studies have remained a backwater for a long time. Much of the existing historiography of the colonial period is mainly studies of the male roles in society. Men are the social, political and economic luminaries. The place of women is forgotten.

This lacuna is particularly evident in the writings on Nairobi. Most scholars are content with a mere mention or very brief explanations of what women did in Nairobi's colonial past. Most works, therefore, present an incomplete history of the economic development of Nairobi as women are left out of the study. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to assess the experiences of African women traders in Nairobi over the period 1899 to 1952.

In 1975 the United Nations declared the Women's World Decade[6] and this inspired a number of scholars to focus attention on women studies. A number of these scholars investigated the economic activities of women in Nairobi in the colonial period. The majority, however, concluded that women only earned a living as prostitutes. It would be more interesting to know what else women did apart from the sale of their sexuality.

A few other authors indicate that some women traded in Nairobi. But a detailed discussion of the operations of these women is lacking. It is not clear who they were, where they came from, what they exchanged and where, and the impact of their trading activities on their lives, and on the economy of the town in general. There is therefore, a need to answer these vital questions to provide the missing perspective of the economic history of Nairobi from the arrival of the Railway line to the Mau Mau revolt.

The main concern of this research is to find out how the colonial conditions and policies forced African women into the fringes of the Nairobi urban economy from which they could not be divorced. It delves into the women's survival strategies and tries to highlight the effect of social, political and economic hardships which they had to overcome. It particularly dwells on the case of hawkers, (who composed the majority of women traders), vis-a-vis the Council laws and regulations to state whether such laws impeded or assisted the trading activities of women.

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main aim of this study is to trace and examine the development of African women traders in Nairobi. By 1899 when the railway arrived in Nairobi, the area was just a field of thousands of wild animals, with few settlements in the nearby areas.[7] As the town grew, the colonial labour, wage and housing policies catered for men, but largely excluded African women from participating in the economy. In this light, it is necessary to find out why some women came to Nairobi, either daily or occasionally to trade, or to reside there. For those who took up residence in the town, the study goes further to investigate the factors behind their choice to trade. To do so, it attempts to examine the colonial wage, housing and taxation policies and explains the kinship ties which placed an added burden on the men's low wages.

This study also investigates how women's trading activities were financed. Commuters and many resident traders of the early years cultivated produce which fulfilled this need. For other residents, the research attempts to investigate other sources of finance.

Thirdly, the study aims to show the effect of the women's trading activities on their social and economic position, and on the well-being of their families. Thus, it assesses the impact of trade on the women's families and relatives. Equally, it attempts to examine the extent to which women contributed to the colonial economy. And finally, the research is an effort to make a contribution to the women studies.

1.4 LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on African women's economic activities in Nairobi in the colonial period are almost non-existent. A large number of works focus on the present day society. General works on Nairobi, such as Joseph Gugler and M.H. Ross, focus on the post-colonial era. The latter makes references to women, but pays negligible attention to their colonial economic activities[8]. Similarly, the researches of Nelson Nici, Veena Thadani, Kavetsa Adagala and Patricia Bifani, and Sandhu Sushani Datta, though focusing on women, concentrate on the post-independence era. Some of these works discuss the women's trade in the post-colonial years, but they provide little or no information on the colonial background to the business.[9] The present study endeavours to offer a background to these recent operations.

A number of works investigate Kenya's colonial past, but largely evade a discussion on women. Studies by Carl Rosberg and J. Nottingham and W.R. Ochieng are important sources on the prevailing political climate within which women operated. They also make useful references to the economy of Kenya, especially concerning the land issue and African agricultural production. The books also mention some trading activities which Africans conducted in Nairobi. For instance, Rosberg and Nottingham refer to the early African traders in Nairobi's Pangani African village in the early years of the town. The traders were hotel keepers, and brewers of home made beer. Equally, Tiyambe Zeleza has noted that as early as 1900, food surpluses were produced in Central Province for the Nairobi market.[10] The sources did not, however, include the identity of the traders, whether they were men or women and from where they operated. The present study hopes to discuss the role of women in the trade.

Economic studies of Kenya such as those of R.D. Wolf and E.A. Brett concentrate on the changes colonialism forced on African societies.[11] Though useful, they lack a focus on African women in Nairobi. Equally, R.M.A. Van Zwanenberg and Anne King provide a general review of the economic conditions in Kenya and Uganda throughout the colonial period. They also briefly discus small scale traders and their problems within the colonial set up.[12] This provides useful material, but the present study goes further to attempt to fit women within the history of this trade. It also tries to demonstrate how the small scale traders operated, not in Kenya as a whole, but at the micro-level in a place such as Nairobi.

Nicola Swainson is mainly concerned with company formation and the exportation of investment capital into Kenya by overseas countries. As a background to the economy of the colony between 1918 and 1939, she shows that Africans marketed considerable units of produce. By 1929, African subsistence agriculture accounted for 60 percent of the Gross National Product (GNP)[13]. But her research is disinterested in revealing who traded the produce and where. This study will try to highlight the role of women in this trade.

Peter Marris and Antony Somerset provide a lucid study on the development of trade and business, especially among the Kikuyu from pre-colonial times. The authors examine the social, economic and historical circumstances that enabled the businessmen to emerge. They also examine the organization of African traders and their successes and failures[14]. It was a useful reference for this study, but it mainly focuses on men. This study will provide a vital part of the missing dimension on women traders.

A number of works discussing Nairobi's colonial past were helpful. Herbert Werlin, Kenneth McVicar, and Andrew Hake, though largely concerned with the post-independence years, give invaluable information on the history of Nairobi. Werlin discusses the evolution of settler control in Nairobi and identifies the problem of lack of social amenities for Africans in Nairobi. The problem of having families in Nairobi is shown to be closely related to the lack of social amenities. Werlin also gives a brief background to the political history of Nairobi and provides a framework within which to fit women in the politics of the town, especially in the 1940s and 1950s. His research is one of the earliest attempts to give African hawkers a place in the history of Nairobi.[15]

McVicar and Hake provide important information about early women traders, especially hawkers. Hake also attempts to highlight the constraints the traders faced[16]. Nonetheless, the researches lack the details necessary in the proper understanding of women's enterprise in Nairobi.

Other works consulted were A.L.A. Olumulla Osaak and E. Van Zwanenberg which are concerned with African housing in colonial Nairobi. Some of their information was useful to this research, but women traders are not discussed.[17]

Mary Parker's work, undoubtedly a pioneer study of the history of Nairobi, concentrates on government in Nairobi. But it highlights the problem of racial inequalities in the town, and illustrates this by discussing the provision of housing, and access to economic opportunity. In doing so, she offers useful interpretations to council policies towards African petty trading, and occasionally mentions the plight of women.[18] A complete picture of the women's business undertakings is, however, missing.

Eric Onstad has definitely made the first attempt at a historical study of African traders in Nairobi. On the colonial period, however, it mainly focuses on wage labour vis-a-vis petty trading. It was, therefore, largely a study of the males, for whom both options were open.[19] Nonetheless, it makes isolated references to women which this research found useful. Arguments more peculiar to women's trading activities, and their successes and failures as women are, however, not clearly explained.

Two other studies, Janet Bujra and Luise White, focus on women in Nairobi. They are attempts to unveil the economic activities of African women in Nairobi in the colonial period. They conclude that attempts by women to survive by trading proved difficult, and the majority of women in Nairobi earned their living by prostitution. Yet White shows that the sale of beer, vegetables and other petty commodities co-existed with prostitution.[20] This means that trading could also provide a livelihood for women. The two scholars are however, not interested in pursuing this alternative. The possibilities of earning a living from commodity trade for women, is the central issue of this research.

1.5 JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

Research on women is a new field of academic endeavour. In the last two decades academic interest in the study of women has grown tremendously. There is increasing realization that women have made important contributions to African development in the past, and continue to do so in the present.

As seen from the literature review, few scholars have attempted an indepth study of women's participation in the economy of Nairobi in the years 1899 to 1952. Many authors have taken them for granted, while those who have tried to study them in detail see them only as prostitutes. It was necessary to find out what else women did apart from prostitution.

This research is interested in women commodity traders. The existing literature shows that this area of Nairobi history has been unjustly treated in the research field. There is no systematic study of the trading activities of women in Kenya, let alone Nairobi. This study will go a long way in filling this yawning gap, and in providing an important side to the picture of the economic activities of women in Nairobi.

The study period from 1899 to 1952 was chosen because the two end points mark significant moments in the history of Nairobi. In 1899 the Kenya - Uganda Railway arrived in Nairobi and this marked the begining of the growth of the town as an urban centre. Before the railway line the place was just an empty plain inhabited only by herds of game and birds[21]. The railway line led to the emergence of settlements, and in time, Nairobi became the centre of government in the East African Protectorate. Nairobi became a trading centre.

The year 1952 is a convenient stopping point because it marks the beginning of a period of decline which lasted a couple of years. The recession is significant because it came after over half a century of upward gowth disturbed only by the downturns of the early 1920s and early 1930s. But while a number of women survived the hardships of these economic regressions, those who survived the Mau Mau disturbances and government's counter - insurgency measures are too few and far between. Many women traders swelled the Mau Mau ranks and left business. Others were scared by the Mau Mau violence and also left trading. For many others especially belonging to the Kikuyu, Embu and Meru ethnic groups, the emergency regulations made movement extremely difficult. The women's trade and the Mau Mau uprising requires to be the subject of another study.

The study delves into the history of African women traders from the beginning of Nairobi to the Mau Mau disturbances. It examines the causes of the migration of women to Nairobi, the reasons for trade, the progress of trade, and its benefits and problems. On the whole, it is an appraisal of the enterprising abilities of African women in a hostile environment.

1.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was conducted under two frames of reference. One is the theory of continuity and change in African cultures, advanced by William R. Bascom and Melville D. Herskovits[22]. Culture according to these authors is defined as "the way of life of a people, their traditional behaviour in a broad sense, including their ideas, acts and artifacts... These ways of thinking and acting are patterned so that behaviour in any society is not haphazard or random. This does not mean that behaviour thereby becomes fixed or inflexible. It varies from individual to individual and from time to time within a range which is considered acceptable[23]".

This research views women traders in Nairobi as the result of a cultural revolution. The introduction of western culture led to changes in the life-styles of women. It brought the money economy and western goods which women aspired to purchase. In some communities it caused a breakdown in the African security networks, and forced some women to migrate to Nairobi in search of a livelihood.

These cultural changes did not, however, take account of the women's participation in the economy. The main reason for this was the convergence of western and African cultures, none of which held women, in high esteem. The colonizers' idea of women's role was influenced by the Victorian concept of a woman's place being at home where she was well protected and provided for by the husband. In African cultures a woman was her husband's worker.[24] But there were also values and norms defining women's roles as complementing or equivalent to those of men. These latter values were eroded, following the meeting of African and European cultures. The culture that became dominant defined the woman's place as a mother and a wife, leaving her little chance of being considered for formal employment.[25] At the same time the economy brought new constraints on men and made it difficult for them to support their wives. It was mainly for these reasons that women turned to trade to earn money to fulfil their new needs.

The continuity and change in cultures is also evident in the women's use of their proceeds from trade. Women purchased items, or sent cash to extended family members and also invested some of their returns in the home area rather than in Nairobi. This is a manifestation of the old kinship support networks and an attachment to areas of origin. Nonetheless, much of the profit went into the formal education of children, which was quite a departure from the old tradition of giving children informal education.

Secondly, the study was conducted under colonialism as a concrete historical frame of reference. Some of the proponents of this theory are Immanuel Wallerstein and E.A. Brett. Immanuel Wallerstein defines the colonial situation as one whereby "someone imposes in a given area, a new institution, the colonial administration, governed by outsiders who establish new rules which they enforce with a reasonable degree of success. It means that all those who work in the colony must take some account of the rules, and that indeed an increasing amount of each individual's action is oriented to this set of rules rather than to (say) ... the tribal rules to which he formerly paid full heed. The reason for this shift is very simple. Colonial administration meant that ultimate power lay with the new government, and this government tried systematically to inculcate in its subjects a feeling that the new power was legimate."[26]

Theorists of colonialism explain the changes that took place during colonization, bringing women to Nairobi to trade. Prior to colonization, the village was the traditional centre of African life. Customs and traditions governed the day-to-day activities. In the interior of Kenya, the economy of the community was to a large extent communal. Whatever trade women conducted was mainly with neighbouring ethnic groups, and was conducted by barter. Many women were born, bred and died in their local area. Colonialism introduced men and women to emigration outside the village.

Men migrated to European farms and to towns which became labour magnets. Nairobi, like many such towns, was also the creation of the colonial government and became an efficient centre of administration, production, trade and communication. As it was a centre of population concentration, it became an ideal market for various goods sold by African women.

The proponents of this theory also explain how colonial administrative procedures related to women. They particularly explicate why women came to Nairobi, why they became traders, what they traded in and where as well as some of the uses into which they put their profits. It is also within this framework that the women's use of modern transport is identified.

Colonial theorists also explicate the subordinate role that the African women played in the economy of Nairobi. Colonial empire was governed by a belief that decisions should be taken by men on the spot, who possessed first-hand knowledge of the facts. These men commonly believed that the colonized people were not capable of governing themselves in the difficult circumstances of the modern world.[27] Thus, the colonial ruling class went ahead to monopolize political, social and economic control. African participation as in Nairobi was meant to support these institutions. This necessitated the drawing up of a set of rules and regulations to control the movement of the indigenous population in Nairobi, such as rules which the city authorities used to segregate or harass African women traders in Nairobi. For many of the women traders, therefore, colonialism led to economic regression. The study will show that the women's search for a better economic status in the Mau Mau uprising resulted in a stagnation of their trade.

1.7 ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY

This study made a number of assumptions. First, during the colonial period African women largely remained in their rural homes, while the male population formed the majority of rural-urban migrants. Second, the women traders in Nairobi included others besides those who lived there. Third, most African women traders sold cheaper goods than the Asian and

European traders in Nairobi. Fourth, trading enabled women not only to be self employed but to provide employment for some of the jobless in Nairobi. Fifth, women faced many constraints in trade, but their responses and initiatives kept them going to the end of the period.

1.8 METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted in Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. Since this is a large city, the study area was limited to the boundaries of colonial Nairobi, which remained 32 square miles from 1928 to 1963. Since the town practised racial segregation limiting the movement of Africans particularly into the European areas, African women's trading activities in European areas are not considered in any great details. The study concentrates on the city centre, and African areas such as Kariokor, Pumwani and Shauri Moyo.

The research concentrated on women from a few ethnic groups, notably Kikuyu, Kamba, Nubi and Luo. There were a number of reasons why these groups were chosen. The first two were picked because of the proximity of their rural land units to Nairobi. Machakos District, a dominantly Kamba area, borders Nairobi to the South East. To the northern part of Nairobi lies the predominantly Kikuyu area of Central Province, consisting of Kiambu, the district nearest to Nairobi, Thika, Murang'a and Nyeri districts. For this reason the study will show that women traders in early Nairobi were mainly Kikuyu and Kamba.

The numerical factor was another reason for concentrating on the Kikuyu women. From the end of the First World War, the Kikuyu were the largest African element in Nairobi, By 1948, they constituted 42 per cent of Nairobi's total African population. Kikuyu women formed the majority African female population, numbering over 5500 out of 9,250 women[23].

The focus on Kikuyu and Kamba women was also necessitated by the fact that most colonial references to African trade in Nairobi pointed to their activities. From very early years, the Kamba brought fowls and ghee to Nairobi for sale, while the Kikuyu traded agricultural produce. As early as 1910, the Provincial Commissioner, Kenya Province, noted that the Kikuyu from Fort Hall (Muranga) mainly traded in Nairobi, preferring to walk 60-100 miles away in order to get a higher price for their produce[24]. In 1927 the Provincial Commissioner, Kikuyu Province referred to the Kikuyu as "keen money makers" regarding their efforts to grow food for sale.[25]

The Luo women were selected to represent the trading activities of women from areas far away from Nairobi. According to the 1948 census, they were also the second most numerous African women in Nairobi, totalling 2583. Sharon Stichter notes that many Luo women joined their husbands working in Nairobi because there was less risk of losing land rights in Nyanza by doing so[26].

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The last group on whom the study focused were the Sudanese women, popularly called the Nubi. These were permanent residents of Nairobi's Kibera area. They were families of the Sudanese, brought to Kenya by the British as members of the King's African Rifles early in the century. This uniqueness and proximity to Nairobi made them an important subject. Moreover, they were the originators of Nubian gin, a home made brew, which became so popular among Nairobi residents that the colonial Nairobi administration could not reduce it. The brew was still a major African drink after independence[32].

Research for this study was done by: first, the reading of library and archival materials; and second, conducting oral interviews. Library and archival materials consisted of primary and secondary sources. A primary source is the testimony of an eye witness, that is one who was present at the event of which he tells or records. A secondary source is the testimony of anyone who was not present at the event of which he tells. It is a reconstructed idea of the event with the author's interpretations.

The research started in November 1989, and lasted eight months. The first two months were spent in the Jomo Kenyatta Memorial Library (JKML), and its constituent libraries, the Institute of African Studies (IAS), and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) and the Kenyatta University Library. Books, theses and periodicals were consulted for existing literature on women's economic activities in Nairobi during the colonial period. The objective of the review was to find out the lacuna in the works on women's economic activities to fill the gap.

The next three months were spent in the Kenya National Archives and the Nairobi City Commission/Central Registry Archives. In the Kenya National Archives, the researcher obtained useful primary information from Provincial Annual Reports, District Annual Reports, Committee Reports and minutes of the Nairobi Municipal/City Council. Miscellaneous reports and Ministry of Labour, and Agriculture Annual reports, Ministry of African Affairs and Community Development reports were also used. The City Commission of Nairobi Archives provided minute books and correspondence between African women traders and the Council.[33]

The last three months were spent on oral interviews. The major arguments in this research owe their authenticity to this source as the area has been little documented or studied. The respondents were mainly women. The target group consisted of women who traded in Nairobi between 1899 and 1952, whether as commuters or residents. Most women respondents were, therefore, mainly those born in the 1920s and earlier. A few men in a similar age group were also interviewed to avoid subjective findings.

To identify the respondents, the researcher used three methods. First, she walked around the markets and shops in various parts of the town to identify the older women traders, and was lucky to find quite a number in this way. Second, once a woman was interviewed she gave the researcher three or four names of other women who had traded with her, and directed the researcher on how to reach the traders. This method enabled the researcher to trace women traders who had left Nairobi, or even ceased trading altogether. Third, the researcher sought more informants through friends, relatives and colleagues. Once identified, the researcher made an effort to reach the trader or ex-trader. In a few instances, the researcher found that the targeted respondent had died, but a close relative, friend or child had details of the deceased's trading activities. In such cases, the person with the knowledge was interviewed.

Once the respondent was found, the search for information was done by the researcher in person. An open-ended questionnaire was used during the interviews. This was preferred because of its flexibility which enabled the researcher to probe the informant further or limit her questions, depending on the response. For the women traders, their life history was an integral part of the questionnaire as it hinged on several issues, such as reasons for coming to Nairobi, the effects of colonialism, reasons for trade and the effects of trade. Interviews with the male respondents centred on more general questions concerning women and the colonial situation. For instance, men stated what in their opinion brought most women to Nairobi, and what these women did for a living. Where necessary, the researcher sought a specific example, and whatever details the respondent could remember.

Before embarking on the actual interview, the researcher established rapport with the informant. This was done by asking general questions, for example, about home, the climate, and the previous harvest. A general conversation would follow until the informant began talking about her business and life's experiences. In the process, the researcher also made it clear that she was not a journalist and that the given information would remain confidential. Once the stage was set, the researcher asked questions relating to the subject. This normally took hours as the researcher also encouraged humour to enliven the talk. In cases where the interview was conducted within the trading premises, she occasionally assisted the informant in selling her goods to clear the customers and settle down for the interview. This stand was taken after the researcher noticed disinterest in some informants in the process of the interview because it kept their customers waiting.

Once the questions on the subject were exhausted, the investigator asked for personal details such as names, education, religion, place and date of birth. This was because it was easier to get these details after some familiarity than before. A total of 44 informants were interviewed.

Recording of the information was done by note taking or tape recording. Note taking was used where an informant was unwilling to be recorded but in most interviews, the tape recorder was used both for convenience and accuracy. Normally, this was replayed for a respondent to listen to and it was quite an amusement for them to hear themselves talking. Later in the day, the researcher replayed the tape and recorded the information in writing. The accuracy of the evidence obtained from informants was verified by comparing the women's stories for a given period, and the extent of agreement was gauged. Comparison was a useful tool because the women interviewed were far apart and their chances of concurring to give biased information was almost nil. Where a woman gave a different opinion, the researcher delved deeper into the special circumstances of the trader and tried to corroborate this with available information in the records. The men's views were also useful in counter-checking the women's data because as observers, they were in a better position to give a more objective view. Using these methods, it was possible to bring out a clear picture of the trading activities of women in the period 1899 to 1952.

For purposes of dating, much of the data was corroborated with available library or archival information. This was done by asking informants to relate the event they were narrating to a significant historical event such as the world wars, a certain famine or epidemic. Sometimes circumcision years were used as most Bantu communities in Kenya practise this rite. As most of these events are well recorded, corroboration was a simple exercise.

Through oral interviews, the researcher got an insight into the causes, progress and effects of the trading activities of women in Nairobi, on the family, the community, and the Nairobi colonial economy. It was itself an exciting and meaningful learning exercise.

1.9 LIMITATIONS

The greatest constraint to this research was the researcher's ill health. Up to 1991, the researcher worked consistently on the project, and planned to complete the work in 1992. This was not to be. From late 1991, the researcher fell sick and research progress deteriorated. It was only after an operation in March 1995 that any reasonable progress was made.

Another constraining factor was insufficient funds. The research funds given by the University of Nairobi could not meet the costs of travel, accommodation, writing materials and typing. Consequently, the work was a great strain on the researcher's own finances.

Another major problem was time. Tracing informants outside Nairobi was particularly time-consuming. Many of the places where they were to be found, were unknown to the researcher and it took time to find them, sometimes after failing a couple of times. Even worse was the fact that sometimes the investigator reached the place, only to find that the prospective respondent was deceased, or too old to remember anything.

Time was also wasted with appointments and long interviews with women who were still in trade because the trader had to continue conducting her business as the interview proceeded. On many occasions, the researcher's appointment was put off by a trader because it was a busy trading day, or she had other matters to attend to. Sometimes an ongoing interview was interrupted because the informant had to attend to a pressing domestic or business problem. This meant making another appointment, and one person would, therefore, be interviewed two or three times, on different days. It was only through patience that some interviews were conducted or completed.

There was also the problem of obtaining hard quantitative data required by a study of this kind. Women's activities are little documented in the records. Much of what was available in the libraries and the archives were just pointers to the fact that women traded. The women themselves could not remember the statistics accurately. In many instances, therefore, the work had to do with mere approximations, referring for instance to the prices of goods at the time.

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33. From April, 1983 the Nairobi City Council was dissolved and the administrative affairs of the Town entrusted to a Commission appointed by the government. The Commission was a task force whose terms of reference included conducting investigations into the running of the city by the moribund Council. The City Administration was thereafter called the Nairobi City Commission. See minutes of the first meeting of the Nairobi City Commission 12th - 14th April, 1983 NCC minutes, 1983, NCC/CR Archives.

CHAPTER TWO

AFRICAN WOMEN TRADERS IN AN EMERGING TOWN, 1899-1918

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In precolonial times, Kenyan societies participated in local, regional, and long-distance trade. The Kamba for instance, traded with their neighbours and engaged in long-distance trade with the peoples of the Kenya Coast and northern Tanzania. Similarly, the Kikuyu traded with the Athi and the Maasai, and the Gusii exchanged a variety of items with their Luo neighbours.[1]

Women played a major role in this trade, especially at the local level. Among the Kamba, women who were normally past the age of child bearing served as the main traders in the intra-tribal markets, selling a special kind of beer, game meat, saliferous sand, foodstuffs, tobacco, beeswax and bark bags[2]. In the late 1880s in what is today Central Province, European travellers witnessed women traders exchanging commodities such as eleusine meal, tobacco and sugar cane. According to tradition Luo women made and sold pots in the Nile valley before settling in their present home-land[3], where they continued the trade. Long before Nairobi began, therefore, women were already conducting some trade in Kenya and especially in the surroundings of Nairobi's future site.

From 1899, Nairobi became a commercial centre. Many women from the surrounding areas were attracted by new commodities and the money economy and commuted to Nairobi to sell the produce of their farms. There were other reasons why women were drawn to the town. These included landlessness, famine, and epidemics. The affected women moved to Nairobi, to search for employment, or to join their wage earning husbands. Many of such women also became traders.

2.2 NAIROBI, HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING, AND THE EMERGENCE OF TRADERS

Nairobi Kenya's capital city, is about 100 miles south of the equator, and almost mid-way between the port of Mombasa on the Kenyan Coast and the port of Kisumu on Lake Victoria to the West of the country. Due to this centrality, Nairobi became a meeting point for various goods and cultures from various parts of the country.[4]

The present City of Nairobi started as a depot for storing railway equipment in 1896. In 1899, the railway reached Nairobi, which was immediately declared the headquarters of the new line.[5] The choice of Nairobi was mainly geographical. On the flat area of the Athi Plains, a comparatively easy stretch of country to traverse, Nairobi was a suitable halting point before the engineers embarked on their most difficult task of the ascent to the Kikuyu plateau and the deep descent into the Rift Valley. In addition, the climate, and the general terrain of Nairobi were suitable for European settlement.[6]

Apart from being a railway centre, Nairobi acquired other attributes. Provincial administration was moved from Machakos to Nairobi so as to be on the railway line in 1899. In 1907, Nairobi replaced Mombasa as the official capital of the East African Protectorate. To the Europeans, Nairobi was an ideal place because of the presence of a large African population which could provide labour and the absence of Arab and Muslim influence would facilitate the creation of a European city in East Africa.[7]

Initially, the township was administered by the Railway officials, but the transfer of the provincial and protectorate administration made it necessary for the British government to be involved. In 1901 a Municipal Committee was constituted with powers to run the town. The committee consisted of two Railway officials, one protectorate official, and three local merchants, with the sub-commissioner as Chairman.[8]

Before 1918 Nairobi's administrative structure had been changed many times. In 1904, the rules of the Township Ordinance reconstituted the committee so as to have the Collector as Chairman. Other committee members included one other protectorate official, two Railway officials, two European residents, and two resident Indian traders. In 1905 it consisted of one collector, three other protectorate officials, three Railway officials, four European residents and two Indian traders, with the Medical Officer of Health, and the Town Clerk as ex-officio members. The composition of the committee continued to vary during the First World War, when the ex-officio members were omitted. Throughout these changes however, the committee remained a purely advisory body. The real management of the township affairs was in the hands of the Protectorate Government.[9]

Nairobi's area, fixed at 16 square miles in 1900, did not change, but the population of the town rose from 8,000 in 1901, over 16,000 people in 1911, and to approximately 20,000 in 1914[10], and the Municipality was booming with commercial activity.

When the First World War broke out, Nairobi became a regional headquarters of the campaigns against the Germans in Tanganyika. Kenya African Rifles troops especially from Nyasaland, Nigeria and the Gold Coast, as well as the Protectorate, passed through Nairobi. The large body of troops stimulated trade since the soldiers had a lot of money to spend.[11]

Europeans, Asians and African traders engaged in different levels of business in Nairobi. As early as 1910 many enterprising Europeans had opened up businesses in the town. The Colonial Meat Company sold poultry and turkey. W.C. Judd on a farm in Fort Smith, and the Kirawa farm, situated seven miles from Nairobi and owned by Messrs H. Douglas, J.H. Gailey, and C.N.M. Harrison, grew vegetables for the Nairobi market.[12] Many Asians who had for a long time traded at the Coast, penetrated inland with the building of the Railway, and operated as merchants.[13] Other Europeans and Asians functioned as bakers, butchers, dhobies, chemists and restaurant owners. Although Asians formed the majority of traders in the town as early as 1910, Asian women conducting business were rare. According to Seidenberg Ombedho, who has done some research on Asian traders, in the early years of the century, there were fewer Asian women traders, than lions stalking the streets of Nairobi.[14] Africans were in small business, selling vegetables, beer, and grains.[15]

2.3 PIONEER AFRICAN WOMEN TRADERS, 1899-1918

2.3.1 Women Traders and Commerce Brought by the Railway, 1899-1902

Up to 1902 transport problems limited the number of women traders in Nairobi, and the volume of their trade remained small. The major means of transport was walking and people rarely travelled long distances. These commuter traders were, therefore, mainly drawn from areas surrounding Nairobi, from where they could walk to the town.[16] By 1902, Kikuyu women commuters sold vegetables in the Indian Bazaar, and in an open air market attached to it.[17]

A second group of women traders (referred to as resident traders) lived in Nairobi. Although the town was not officially segregated, the pattern of segregation was set.

On the west side of the Railway were high class houses which accommodated Europeans, while in the east and north east side, low income groups which included most Africans and Asians lived. Africans lived mainly in five villages, namely, Pangani, Mji wa Mombasa, Maskini, Kaburini and Kileleshwa which had spontaneously emerged with the town.[18] Other African settlements grew up on the periphery of the town, but with activities focused there. They included a Kikuyu settlement in the Municipal forest reserve in Parklands and a Sudanese settlement in Kibera. The Kikuyu settlement evolved following the arrival of the Railway. Kibera began in 1904 as a settlement assigned to Sudanese families (commonly referred to as Nubians), who had served as members of the King's African Rifles. In 1918, the land was gazetted as a military reserve and remained under their occupation.[19]

Many of the women residing in Nairobi were initially attracted there by the Railway camp during the building of the Kenya-Uganda Railway. Most of these were uprooted from their home areas by the misfortunes of the last decade of the 19th century, when calamities of disease and famine epidemics hit populations in more or less the whole of Kenya. Mortality estimates from various parts of the country ranged from 50 per cent to 95 per cent of the population.[20]

The misfortunes led to a temporary breakdown in the kinship security networks such as widow inheritance, and the most vulnerable in society, such as widowed women and orphaned children, lacked kinship support.[21] Consequently, a number of them left home to look for work at the Nairobi Railway camp, where they did odd jobs such as sweeping, washing clothes, and cleaning the houses of Europeans managing the camp. For instance, Priscilla Muthoni Kariuki a widow from Weithaga village in Muranga, and Wahu Kamau, a young orphan from Gatundu in Kiambu left home because of lack of food, and male support. They came to Nairobi where they worked for the railway. The daily pay at the camp was usually 2 annas (an anna is a unit of the rupee. 16 annas = RS1 A Rupee = Shs 2.00) a day and a little food. This was not sufficient for their survival, and Priscilla Muthoni Kariuki began cultivating fallow land in the area of today's University of Nairobi sports ground, and sold vegetables and beans to the camp residents. In exchange, she accepted money or items such as clothes and blankets mainly for her own use[22].

Other women living in Nairobi were married. Among them, were Maasai and non-Maasai couples who moved to Nairobi from Machakos following the change over in the administration headquarters.[23] One of these women was a Masaai named Neserian Naicho. Others mainly Kikuyu, joined husbands, who being <u>ahoi</u> readily took up employment in Nairobi[24]. They included Wainoi Kiragu from Kangema in Murang'a and Grace Mbuci Kariuki from Mukurweini in Nyeri. Once in Nairobi, they too became traders to supplement their husbands' low wages, which were considerably reduced by the tax.[25] Taxation of Africans was introduced in 1901 in the form hut tax. It required the payment of Rs 2 per head per household, per year.[26] Since even the ahoi had huts in their rural areas, they had to pay the tax.[27]

By 1902, Wainoi Kiragu was occasionally selling Njohi, a home- made Kikuyu beer, to Africans living in Pangani where she too lived. The tradition of social drinking practised in African societies was introduced in Nairobi by African males drawn there as labourers. Traditions governing beer drinking did not, however, apply, as the labourers came from various parts of the country where the traditions sometimes differed significantly. As a result, beer became a commodity to be bought and sold. Wainoi Kiragu also sold vegetables which she cultivated, with the permission of the owner, on land adjoining the Municipality[28].

Other women foraged firewood from the surrounding bushes and sold it to neighbouring village residents. Alternative fuel such as charcoal and paraffin were as yet unaffordable to the majority of Africans, who continued to rely on firewood. The Railway administration also relied on wood fuel to run the train engines, and also formed a viable market. Grace Mbuci Kariuki, living in Kileleshwa village, foraged the firewood nearby and sold it to location residents.[29] Profit accruing from these early trading activities was mainly for household consumption. These cases are nonetheless examples of African women's initial attempts to trade in Nairobi and to operate within the money economy.

2.3.2 **Women Commuters As Market Traders, 1902-1914**

In 1902 a plague broke out in the Indian Bazaar. The plague, which caused between 50 and 60 deaths was blamed on poor sanitation and overcrowding ostensibly caused by Africans.[30] Consequently, a vagrancy law was passed to control the flow of Africans into the town. The law allowed the police to pick up any one who appeared to be loitering on the street without work, and return him to his home in the rural areas. Owing to the frequent labour shortages, however, it was not sufficiently enforced.[31] Thus women commuters entering Nairobi were not hindered.

But as a result of the plague, the council authorities attempted to isolate African trading activities away from the rest of the population, so that they could provide for the needs of the town, but not "transmit disease". Thus, the market was separated from the Indian Bazaar, and relocated to the north side of Nairobi River, as an African market. It was built out of temporary materials in 1903, but was rebuilt in 1906 after it was destroyed by wind.[32] By then, the entry fee was one anna per stand per day.[33]

The market became a major trading ground for commuters bringing produce from their farms. Approximately 11,000 Kikuyu lost land to European settlers around Nairobi, especially in the Kiambu - Limuru area, some of whom became squatters, and cultivated produce for sale.[34] The commodities were sold to Indian traders, African servants of Europeans and Asians, and African women traders residing in the town.

Commuters traded mainly in order to get money to purchase imported goods. By 1909, blankets, beads, and wire imported from Germany and white cloth imported from the United States of America and Bombay were already popular among Africans. By 1915, Africans bought other items like hoes, slashers, umbrellas, sugar, salt, flour and rice.[35]

The women's trade was facilitated by improved production in the African land units as a result of the favourable climate at the turn of the 20th century. Owing to a glut in rural produce, little local trade took place in the rural areas. Commuter traders therefore targeted the urban population of Nairobi which depended on produce from the surrounding cultivators.[36] Sophia Wanjiku, for instance, traded in order to purchase blankets, beads and salt. She brought bananas and sweet potatoes from her home in Gikambura in Kikuyu to sell in Nairobi, because the items were produced by the majority of cultivators in the area and buyers were few. She sold the items at alternating times, mainly to Africans living in Nairobi. A big basket of potatoes earned 3 to 5 annas, depending on the season. A bundle of bananas fetched up to 6 annas. Rose Nzisa from Machakos wanted a blanket and a hoe. She brought homemade ghee and similarly sold it to Africans in Nairobi. A small gourd fetched 6 annas.[37]

A few commuter traders continued to hawk their goods in various parts of the town especially because; up to 1904, they did not pay a fee to trade there. In 1904, a hawking fee of Rs 3 was introduced to boost the Council revenue. In 1908, the fee was increased to RS 10, with the same objective, and to deter Africans from hawking in the area. But effective machinery to ensure all operating hawkers were licensed was wanting.[38] By 1913, Africans were still hawking illegally in various parts of the town to obtain higher profits than the African market offered. Mbatha Nzinga from Kangundo in Machakos hawked chicken and eggs in the Hill area to European housewives. A big hen was 10 annas, and an egg was an anna. Elisiba Wacuka from Kiambu, Ndumberi, sold vegetables and fruits in the Indian Bazaar and received up to 6 annas per basket.[39]

Generally, commuter trade was target oriented. Women came to trade at irregular intervals, to fulfil the needs of the moment. Otherwise they spent much of their time doing small-scale cultivation to produce for family consumption. They also attended to other social roles such as doing domestic work and caring for children. The roles of trader, farmer.and housewife were all combined.

In their trading activities, barter and monetary trade went side by side. This was especially due to the subsistence orientation of their business. The two modes were particularly used by the hawkers, who accepted second hand clothing, blankets, umbrellas, or hoes in exchange for their goods instead of cash[41].

2.3.3 Women Residents As Hawkers, 1902-1914

In the period 1902-1914, additional women came to reside in Nairobi. Many were removed from their rural homes by the problem of landlessness, resulting from land alienation for European settlement[42]. They moved to Nairobi mainly to join their kin relations already living there. For instance, Julia Wanjiku from Limuru joined a brother employed by B.E.A. Sawmills, one of the early European enterprises in Nairobi. They lived in Pangani. Margaret Wambui from the Dagoretti area, joined an aunt married in the area close to the present day Norfolk Hotel. For both women, Nairobi proved a suitable destination because of the imagined existence of ample employment opportunities. When these turned out to be rare for women, they too ended up in trade,[43] where an older group of women already worked.

Some of the resident women traders still cultivated land within, or near the town, to get produce for trade. For example, Priscilla Muthoni still grew beans and vegetables for sale, on today's University of Nairobi sports ground. Similarly, Margaret Wambui cultivated a small section of her aunt's plot, and sold the produce. The harvest, unfortunately, was never sufficient for their trading needs, as they solely depended on trade. They, therefore, obtained supplies from the African market, thereby operating as "middlewomen" between the farmers, and the consumers. Hawking for them was more profitable than reselling the goods at the market. Being town residents, they also had more time to move from house to house, or to station themselves at strategic points for most of the day, selling their wares. By 1914, Priscilla Muthoni Kariuki was buying vegetables at the African market and selling to her neighbours at the settlement in City Park. Julia Wanjiku, who started trading around 1907, sold firewood to the railway administration up to around 1910. She then used a rupee saved from the proceeds of the trade, to start the sale of vegetables from door to door in Parklands. The daily net returns of these women ranged between 4 and 5 annas.[44]

Other resident traders, operated indoors, for example, selling homemade beer and herbal medicines. Wainoi Kiragu, for instance, was still selling Njohi by the beginning of the war, and earned a net profit of Rs 1 in a day. Neserian Naicho, living in Kaburini, and Zena Juma, a Nubi woman in Kibera, sold herbal medicines in their houses. The latter also sold Nubian Gin, a kind of traditional beer introduced in Nairobi by the Nubians[45]. Juma's beer profits varied from day to day, but occasionally reached Rs 2, especially during the last days of the month when wages were paid. The sales of herbal medicines also produced cash or bartered goods[46].

Unlike the commuters, the residents traded daily. Many of them were either married or had children, and hence combined trading and domestic duties. For this reason, a number of them, such as Wainoi Kirágu, Zena Juma, and Neserian Naicho, began their traditing activities at mid-morning. As a result, their trading activities remained small in scale, catering mainly for subsistence. For a number of these women, the heavy subsistence demands of the family further reduced their ability to save, keeping them at the small-scale trading level.[47]

2.3.4 The First World War and the Emergence of Accumulators

During the First World War, there were new demands for African produce and prices went up. As the trading sector became more attractive, more women income seekers moved in to trade. Many of the new traders were women whose husbands were recruited into the war, forcing them to assume the roles of heads of families.[48]

Ethnic groups mostly affected by conscription were Kikuyu, Luo and Kamba. By 1917, 160,000 men - thousands of them Kikuyu - had been largely compulsorily enlisted. In Machakos District, approximately 77 per cent of the male able-bodied population was recruited.[49] Employers' need for male rather than female workers was already apparent and women assuming the roles of heads of families took to trading to meet their ever-rising demand for imported commodities.[50]

Most of the new commuters were still Kikuyu and Kamba women living in the vicinities of the town. They sold mainly fresh food items such as vegetables, fruits, bananas, potatoes, chicken and eggs. Their major area of trade continued to be the African market. For example, Alice Nduta Wainaina from Kiganjo in Gatundu, Kiambu, sold vegetables in Nairobi from 1916, when her husband, who had periodically worked on settler farms to earn some little money for family use, was recruited into service. She sold the vegetables in the African market mainly to Indian grocers, who resold them in their shops in the town centre. As before, however, a few were hawkers. Rachael Njambi, from Mutuini Kiambu was married to Permenas Ndegwa, who up to 1914 was a chicken seller in Nairobi, buying his supplies from markets around his home area. When departing for service, he gave his wife Rs 3 to continue the trade in chicken and support the family. By the end of the war, she was selling an average of 20 chicken in a week, and earning an average of Rs 3 in net returns, which she used for the family upkeep.[51]

For many old traders, opportunities brought by the war created a new spirit of enterprise. Many commuters took up full-time trading as an occupation. They no longer depended only on the surplus produce of their farms, but bought much of their stock from other rural producers, and their role as traders became more distinct.[52]

Their operations were further aided by the coming of the push-cart, a popular means of transporting goods during the war. Since these were owned by a few individuals, women traders hired them on particular days. Sophia Wanjiku for example, hired a neighbour's push-cart, and transported more bananas or potatoes to Nairobi, at least three times in a week. Her net returns reached RS 5 in a week by 1917.[53] She accumulated some cash and put it to other uses. For instance, she purchased two chairs, a table and a bed. She also used the cash to accumulate livestock, then seen by the Kikuyu as a symbol of wealth.[54] By the end of the war, she had 4 goats and 2 sheep. A fat goat or sheep cost Rs 8 to 9.[55] She is an example of a successful commuting and trading woman.

There were similarly successful old resident traders. Wainoi Kiragu for instance became a full time Njohi seller, with most clients coming from the military camps. On a good day, she made up to Rs 3 net profit. By the end of the war she had furnished her house with folding chairs, a lamp and a few dishes, and accumulated Rs 51 for future use.[56] Julia Wanjiku, dealing in vegetables, saved Rs 13 by 1916 which she used to open a "hotel" in Pangani in the same year. She sold tea, bread, porridge, Githeri (a mixture of maize and beans), and soup from goats' and sheep's heads which she purchased from a slaughterhouse near the Carrier Corps Camp (Kariokor).[57]

She learnt how to make tea from a woman neighbour who had learnt the skill from a European boyfriend. A cup of tea and toast, or a bowl of porridge and a dish of maize and beans, cost 3 annas. Serving an average of twenty customers a day, her net profit averaged Rs 2. As she was unmarried and had no children, she was able to accumulate a cash sum of Rs 67 by the end of the war.[58]

Many other older traders, commuters and residents alike, continued to follow their old trading and expenditure patterns. For example, Mbatha Nzinga from Kangundo was still an occasional chicken hawker. Neserian Naicho still relied on the occasional sale of traditional medicine for cash.[59] Like the majority of Africans, they had not grasped the intricacies of the money economy, and the need to save in cash, or to invest for future contingencies. Fulfilling the needs of the moment remained their goal.

2.4 CONCLUSION

By the end of the First World War, Nairobi was already an important commercial centre, and African women traders played their part in the town's commerce. These traders consisted mainly of Kikuyu and Kamba women commuting to Nairobi daily, or occasionally, to exchange the produce of their farms and purchase imported goods. But there were also women, again mainly from the same communities, who resided and traded in Nairobi to earn a living. With the coming of greater prosperity during the First World War, some women accumulated cash, which they kept for future use. A small group of the accumulators went further to invest in livestock or in a more profitable, though still small-scale, business. By 1918, therefore, the foundation for women's trading activities in Nairobi was in place.

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CHAPTER THREE

WOMEN TRADERS IN NAIROBI AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR, 1919 - 1929

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The expansion in trade sparked by the First World War continued up to 1920. In 1920, a slump set in, which caused serious drawbacks to trade. Between 1923 and 1929, however, there was a remarkable economic upswing. More women from the neighbourhood of Nairobi joined the older and more experienced traders, consequently increasing the number of women traders in Nairobi. The women's trade spread out into the new official African location of Pumwani, and its benefits trickled down to some rural areas nearby.

3.2 AFRICAN WOMEN TRADERS FROM THE END OF THE WAR TO THE DEPRESSION, 1919-1922

The first two years after the First World War witnessed an increase in both the European and African population in Nairobi. The increase consisted of demobilized European soldiers and members of the Carrier Corps, who brought with them earnings from war services, with which to buy goods and pay for their labour needs.[1]

In the African land units, an interplay of factors forced men to come to Nairobi. First, rural populations were still suffering from the consequences of war, famine and epidemics. Secondly, with the introduction of a system of labour registration in 1918, and the 1919 increases in hut and poll taxes, men found it difficult to avoid wage labour. As Nairobi employment paid relatively well, and was comparatively free from the disciplinary abuses characteristic of agricultural labour, it was preferred. The increase in labour led to further demands for goods and Nairobi enjoyed a trading boom.[2] Many women commuters continued to satisfy their need for imported items through trade. For example, Sophia Wanjiku, a long- serving commuter trader, continued to ferry bananas and sweet potatoes to Nairobi's African market. She was able to accumulate more cash, with which she accumulated more livestock.[3] Other commuter fresh-food sellers, such as Alice Nduta and Rachel Njambi, joined the list of cash accumulators.[4] Residents such as Wainoi Kiragu and Zena Juma in the beer trade also increased their sales and saved cash.[5]

The misfortunes in the rural areas also up-rooted more women who were consequently attracted to Nairobi.[6] In 1919 Wayua Kiteti from Endau in Kitui left home because of a serious food shortage. She worked briefly as an ayah for an Indian in Machakos and obtained money to start the sale of snuff. She obtained the goods from Kitui and sold them in Nairobi. Owing to transport difficulties, she only sold the goods a few times a month. Using her profits, she later established herself as a "middle-woman" trader. For example, she obtained goods from commuters from up-country and sold them to Nairobi African residents. Her net profits of 10 to 15 florins a month enabled her to improve her trade, and to provide for her basic needs.[7].

Another woman, Jedida Njoki, a widow from Muranga near Thika, left home in 1920 due to landlessness, and lack of support from her kin relations. She worked on the Thika sisal plantation for a few months, and left because of what she termed "too hard labour".[8] With a saving of 2 florins from her wage, she followed a brother-in-law working in Nairobi as a house-servant for a European in the Hill area. The township rules did not allow servants residing on their employers' compound to accommodate relatives. Hence Njoki went to live with a woman relative in Maskini Village. A florin from her savings bought sweet potatoes from the African market, and she began selling them to the local residents.[9]

Between 1920 and 1922, women traders faced serious economic hardships. From 1920 Kenya was hit by a slump, and Nairobi's economic vitality of the war years steadily deteriorated. By March 1921 the Provincial Commissioner of Ukamba Province commented that "Money was extremely scarce, trade was abnormally bad, and there was practically no market for East African Produce".[10] There were reductions in African wages generally of 33 per cent throughout the colony, and the demand for African labour was reduced.[11] The prices of most African commodities in Nairobi fell below previous levels.[12]

The currency fluctuations and changes in 1920-22 made the African situation worse, as they lost money in the process of exchange. Many did not obtain the exchange equivalent of the rupees they held, and wages were also lowered.[13] Sophia Wanjiku, a continuing commuter trader recalled the difficulties of the years. She commented that,

> In those days, you would sit with your goods in the market for hours before a buyer came along. When one appeared, he only bought if you were ready to sell at a throw-away price. The number of women traders dropped."[14]

Women who survived in the trade were enterprising traders such as Sophia Wanjiku. As a number of resident traders failed owing to lack of good profits in their middle role, women like Sophia Wanjiku, went out of the market to search for buyers in the estates. In doing so, they made some profits, though lower than in the previous years.[15]

Women traders of poultry and eggs however, were more fortunate. The demand for these goods remained high among Europeans, and the traders increased their sales. Rachel Njambi (who had become a squatter on her own land in Kiambu, after the war), sold up to 40 chicken in a week, twice the number she sold during the war. By 1922 she spent less time looking for the goods, as chicken keepers in the vicinity of her home, wishing to dispose them, sold them to her in exchange for cash.[16]

3.3 WOMEN TRADERS IN THE AFRICAN LOCATIONS WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO PUMWANI, 1923-1929

Events leading to the establishment of the official African location and hence a new trading ground for business-women in Nairobi can be traced back to 1907. In that year, the Bransby Williams Report first raised the idea of segregating Africans to an African location, following a series of plague outbreaks in Nairobi. It was hoped that such separation would ensure "the control of diseases each race inherently had and would by residential proximity transmit"[17]. In 1911, 1912 and 1913, other plague outbreaks occurred in Nairobi, and in 1913, Professor Simpson was sent from Britain to report on urban problems of Nairobi, and present solutions. He also insisted on segregation as the only way to maintain proper sanitation, and public health, especially for the European community. He further recommended the removal of Africans to an African location. But war came and the implementation of the idea was delayed.[18]

The end of the war enabled the Nairobi administration to focus more attention on the issue of establishing an African living area. But there were also a number of political factors which facilitated decision making. In 1919, the Nairobi Township committee was dissolved and replaced by a Municipal Council with a Municipal Corporation. In the same year, a new Municipal Ordinance put the responsibility of running the affairs of the town in the hands of Councillors in

Office. The number of Councillors would be determined by the Governor from time to time.[19] In 1920, this number was fixed at 16, with the Indian representatives holding four seats, the rest going to European members. In protest against settler domination of the Council, the Indians boycotted it until 1924[20].

In 1920, Kenya also officially became a colony with official sanction of settler domination.[21] This power was manifested in the system of local government in Nairobi. In spite of the appearance in 1923 of a White Paper that came to be known as the Devonshire Declaration, stating that African interests were paramount in Kenya, the Colonial Office remained more sympathetic to the European settlers[22].

This political strength enabled the settlers to carry out their long-standing wish of settling Africans in an official location. In 1919 preparation of the site began. In 1921, the first residents of the new location moved in from the unofficial African locations of Mombasa, Maskini and Kaburini. In 1925, residents of Kileleshwa also moved to the location.[23] The residents named the location Pumwani, a Swahili word which means "relax".[24] In Pumwani, African women found a new trading area.

The year 1923 marks the actual beginning of the women's trade in Pumwani. During the period 1923 to 1929, Nairobi experienced a new upswing phase in its economy. The town enjoyed a construction boom, so that by the end of 1925, the

Municipality had spent £116,000 on capital works, and the demand for lowly-paid employees was great. In 1927, the total African population in Nairobi was estimated at 25,000, and not less than 20,000 were male employees. By 1929, the total African population in Nairobi was approximately 32,000 and many were newly-employed.[25]

The increase in the number of African labourers led to an increase in the demand for accommodation. In response to the need, a new class of African women entrepreneurs emerged. These were women who had accumulated a substantial amount of money with which they embarked on putting up rental houses. For instance, Grace Mbuci Kariuki and Margaret Wambui were those among the first group to build rental houses in Pumwani.[26] In trade as in life, adversity often became the mother of success. Grace Mbuci Kariuki who formerly lived in Kilelelshwa and sold firewood, became a successful trader and "landlady". After losing her husband to the war effort, she devoted herself to trade, her livelihood depending entirely on its profits. She moved to Pumwani in 1923 and started selling vegetables from a rough shelter next to her house. By 1926, she had accumulated Shs. 71.00 with which she built a two-room wattle-and-daub house in Pumwani. She rented out the rooms at Shs. 6.00 each a month. Besides this, she also continued to conduct some trade. By 1926 she was selling vegetables to the Pumwani residents from a rough shelter next to her house.[27]

Owing to the boom in Nairobi, more profits accrued to women selling cooked food and beer. Some of these women also invested their savings in houses for rent. The main factor facilitating the cooked food trade was the fact that most male migrants were single men. In the African tradition, men were not supposed to cook. While many adjusted to the new life of cooking for themselves, a corresponding number preferred to buy cheap, already prepared-food. The work on construction sites created additional demands for cooked food, as even those who prepared their own meals in the evening had to be served at lunch time at their places of work.[28]

Earnings from cooked food were higher than from fresh food, as the case of Jedida Njoki exemplifies. Formerly a resident of Maskini village, Jedida Njoki moved to Pumwani in 1923. Many buildings were under construction and the people needed food. Initially, she sold raw sweet potatoes, getting Shs. 2.00 to 2.50 per basket, depending on the season. From the end of 1923, she began selling the potatoes cooked, and a basket sold for at least Shs. 4.00. She used her profits to improve her trade, by also dealing in <u>githeri</u> and porridge. Her net profits reached Shs. 8.00 per trading day. In 1926, when building in Pumwani had declined, she moved to the Quarry Road building site selling the same goods. By 1929 she had saved Shs. 300.00 with which she acquired a plot and built a house in Pumwani.[29] From the rent paid to these women, they paid Shs. 5.00 per plot to the Municipality in return for which conservancy services were rendered to the Pumwani residents.[30] Thus women traders directly contributed to the running of the town.

Other traders in cooked food became employers of labour, and were bread-winners of their families. For example, Julia Wanjiku's "hotel", started in Pangani during the war, was so popular by the 1920s, that it was frequented by a larger number of Africans. Wanjiku therefore employed two men whom she paid Shs 13.00 each a month. This still left her with net returns as high as Shs. 20.00 a day. She was able to meet most of the needs of her parents, who were squatters in Limuru and to educate her younger brother.[31]

The success of these women made them reference models to be imitated by new entrants in Nairobi who had no definite source of livelihood. Wajuma wa Mwangi, born in Muranga, ran away from her parents at the age of fifteen after disagreeing with them over getting pregnant outside wedlock. She came to Nairobi in pursuit of the boy-friend who later rejected her after she delivered a still-born child. Encouraged by Grace Mbuci Kariuki's success, she took Shs. 4.00 from the man's trouser pocket and began selling vegetables in Pumwani.[32]

The building of Pumwani also enabled more women to live by the sale of home made brews. As one of the social amenities, the Nairobi Municipal Council set up a Municipal Brewery in Pumwani in 1921 for the legal preparation and sale of the hitherto illegal beer to Africans all over the town.

The brewery was meant to prevent the sale of the illegitimate brews by Africans, a fact which was reinforced the same year by passing a law forbidding the sale of such beers.[33] These, however did not deter women from conducting the trade. Referring to Pumwani, in 1926, the Provincial Commissioner of Ukamba Province stated that "The settlement gives little trouble, though there is and excess amount of illegal brewing taking place"[34]

There are many reasons why women continued the sale of illicit brews in spite of the brewery and the by-law. The African Brewery was not able to serve the whole African population residing in Nairobi. Many still lived in Pangani, while others lived in their employers' residential areas, where their movements were restricted. It was not always easy for them to travel to Pumwani for a drink as they would also risk losing their jobs. The illegal women beer sellers carried the goods to them.[35]

Second, consumption of beer at the brewery had to take place within the premises, as it was illegal to carry beer and consume it elsewhere. It was however during the 1920s that Africans began to feel the economic hardships brought by colonization such as land alienation, forced labour, and an increasing tax burden. There was rising political consciousness, especially among the African workers in Nairobi.[36] Under these circumstances, the brewery did not provide them with the atmosphere where they could discuss freely their grievances against the colonial government. The illegal corners were freer and more private, and were, therefore, preferred by a larger section of the clientele. These were often rooms rented in Pumwani or Pangani by the women brewers and sellers of beer.[37]

As sellers of their own commodities, the female illegal beer sellers had a more enticing business language compared to the people employed at the brewery. They also sold brands which did not exist at the brewery. Most important to the African with meagre means, the women were willing to sell on credit. Many Africans therefore were attracted to them, as the atmosphere there provided both a sense of belonging and an opportunity to consume a favourite drink.[38]

In the case of women, it was the need for survival and the high profits in beer that kept them in the trade. A gallon of "gin", fetched as much as Shs. 12.00 in the late 1920s, and a woman would sell an average of two gallons in a day. Beer sellers therefore made more money compared to the best remunerated African wage workers, such as supervisors and clerks, whose monthly salaries ranged between Shs. 26.00 and 46.00 in the period 1924-1929.[39]

One of the beer sellers, Zena Juma, was in a class above many African clerks of the time. She used a primus stove to cook, and had furnished her house with chairs, beds, and tables and kept her clothes in boxes. She also ran a small provisions shop in Kibera where she lived.[40]

An important development during the period was the transition from women commuters to residents dominating trade at the African market. In 1924 the African market was moved to Kariokor near the old carrier corps camp, because its earlier site was within an area designated for Asian residence. The new site was close to the African locations.[41] By 1926, Kariokor was a major centre for African trade, attracting buyers from all over the town. The stands in the market were rented at a daily fee of 15 cents. As the commuters traded for only a few hours a day, this rent was costly, and many of them preferred to sell their goods just outside the market. The residents who were able to spend much of the day trading emerged as stand owners.[42]

Most resident traders selling at the market preferred the new location because many customers converged there from all over the town. One of these traders was Priscilla Muthoni Kariuki, a pioneer resident trader, who initially traded in the Municipal Forest Reserve where she resided in a Kikuyu settlement. In 1923, the reserve was renamed City Park, declared a recreation centre, and the residents moved to Pumwani.[43] For a while Muthoni sold vegetables and beans in the location, but the turnover was low and so she moved to the market. As she normally acquired her goods from commuters outside the market, her move was also a saving on the transport costs she used to travel to Pumwani. At the market she made Shs. 3.00 a day on average, at the beginning, but continuously ploughed back some cash into the business. By 1929, she was making up to Shs. 5.00 a day. Her profits expanded her business, and also educated her children.[44]

3.4 WOMEN COMMUTERS IN WHOLESALING AND HAWKING BUSINESS, 1923-1929

By the 1920s trading had become a popular activity for women commuters. The money economy and missionary education had revolutionized women's lives. In the rural areas, some were already living in brick houses and had wooden beds and mattresses, pictures, cupboards, kitchen cutlery, bibles and other books and leather handbags for travel.[45] The changes in dress were more radical. European employers, especially missionaries, insisted on keeping well dressed and neat employees. The accepted dress was the European type. Africans who were baptized, and embraced Christianity, had to abandon the traditional attire.[46] By 1927 African lifestyles had changed so much that Edward Denham, the Colonial Secretary, had the following to say:

> The demand for every kind of European clothing can not at present be met. The sales of second-hand European clothing have become weekly fares in Nairobi at which natives congregate in very large numbers. One auctioneer of such clothes states that in 1925 he sold approximately 4000 shillings worth of clothing, and in 1927 the sales amounted to about 6000 shillings

> Kiambu and Dagoretti Indian shopkeepers report increases in sales during the last two years of 50 per cent in European clothing ... 75 per cent in coloured handkerchiefs and an approximate increase in sales of clothing in four years of 80 per cent...[47]

Women commuters traded to purchase these commodities. At the same time increasing demands for imported goods provided them with new commodities to deal in, which some women carried home to the rural areas on their return journey.

The economic conditions of 1923-1929 facilitated trade. In Nairobi, commodity demands were rising, and prices were buoyant. At the same time, food production in the African land units increased. The produce consisted mainly of crops such as maize, beans and potatoes.[48] The expansion in production was accompanied by increasing involvement in trade in the rural areas, where administrators had set aside exchange markets, and identified particular days as market days. Most of the traders at the markets sold their own produce, and some women less engaged in commercial production became itinerant traders, buying and selling produce. Many such women came from Kiambu, Muranga and Machakos districts to sell in Nairobi.[49]

For many women traders, the arrival of the automobile went unnoticed. In 1902 the first car arrived in Nairobi, but its impact was not felt by most women traders until the 1920s. The roads in the rural areas were few and poor and the vehicles were also few. By 1927 there were only 81 motor buses moving into and out of Nairobi, to various destinations in the reserves. Women, moreover lacked the cash to pay for the bus fares, while many also did not trust the automobile. Many women therefore continued to walk to the town, or to use mechanical ox-drawn transport or bicycles to ferry their commodities to Nairobi.[50]

Sophia Wanjiku's case illustrates that women traders continued travelling to Nairobi by means other than the automobile, and that in their trading activities they responded to the rural populations' needs for imported goods closer at home. Throughout the 1920s, Sophia Wanjiku used the ox-drawn cart to transport her bananas and potatoes to Nairobi for sale. Most of her customers were traders, Indian and African, and normally purchased in bulk. By noon, she had disposed off all the goods and was ready to return.[51]

Her profit was quite high, ranging between Shs. 8.00 and 10.00 on a single trading day. This enabled her to save on a constant basis. By 1928 she had Shs. 260.00. The closest trading centre to Wanjiku's home area was today's Kikuyu town, which was quite a distance away. She therefore started a small shop in her house at home. On her return from selling produce in Nairobi, she carried items such as salt, sugar, tea, rice, soap and occasionally a few blankets and hoes to her shop. Returns from the shop averaged Shs. 2.00 a day. Through her success as a business woman Wanjiku raised her standard of living. She was one of the first women to own a bicycle in her home area. Her trade also enabled the people around her home to buy a number of imported goods closer at home. It created rural employment as well. As Wanjiku was mainly engaged in the sale of produce in Nairobi, she lacked time to operate the shop and employed her nephew at a salary of Shs. 8.00 per month to run the shop.[52]

For a number of other women, the motor car considerably, reduced the distance between Nairobi and their rural areas, and enabled them to sell more goods than previously. The increase in trade arising from vehicular transport was already observed by the Provincial Commissioner, Kikuyu Province, who in 1924 reported that "one sign of increasing trade (among Africans) is the increased number of motor-lorries now on the road carrying produce"[53]

Traders such as Mbatha Nzinga from Kangundo brought more poultry and eggs to Nairobi than before, and accumulated more cash. So affluent had she become by 1928 that part of her business proceeds could be spent on cementing the floor of her house.[54]

Meanwhile, political developments in the 1920s encouraged more commuters to become hawkers. Basically, the 1923 Devonshire Declaration which declared the "paramountcy" of African interests, was a strategy to counteract Asian agitation for equal power with Europeans in the Protectorate.[55] Ostensibly in the spirit of the White Paper, the Nairobi

Municipal Council authorities passed a new by-law in 1923 allowing Africans to sell their own produce such as foods, charcoal and snuff without a hawker's license.[56] Although of dubious benefit to the majority, a number of traders were able to take advantage of the new by-law. Most of them continued to walk to the town owing to lack of bus fare. Alice Nduta, for example, ceased selling her vegetables at the African market, preferring to hawk them in the Asian area of River Road. By 1929 she made a shilling a day on average, and had saved Shs. 35.00 by 1929.[57]

3.5 CONCLUSION

Generally, the period 1919-1929 saw an increase in the trading activities of women. As more women sought an income in the town, they became traders. In the rural areas close to the town, the increasing appetite for western goods continued to push women into the Nairobi trade which promised better profits. This trade to some extent was boosted by the arrival of the automobile. The period also witnessed some changes in the women's trading areas. Up to the end of the First World War, commuter traders dominated the African market. In the 1920s, however, the residents took over this trade, consequently pushing the commuters outside the market. Many others became hawkers in various parts of the town. The major means of exchange for most of these women was minted currency. By 1929, many women traders had accumulated cash profits, and/or invested in property, or other business, or in social progress such as children's education. Some traders also emerged as employers. Through women's trading activities which contributed to the prosperity of Nairobi, increasing numbers of shops were set up in outlying areas to the benefit of rural people. Through their trading activities, such as setting up shops, rural areas also benefitted from the prosperity in Nairobi.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE YEARS OF DEPRESSION AND RECOVERY, 1930-1939

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the 1930s, a number of contrasting developments occurred. During the first several years, the Great Depression led to a decline in the commercial viability of Nairobi. The enactment of new laws governing African trade imposed further limitations on the trading activities of women. Consequently the trading vibrancy, which typified the last half of the 1920s, declined. In the period that followed, commercial prospects rose, and trade revived. The number of women traders was increased by women from as far as Nyanza and Western Kenya.

The recovery enabled women to make further strides in trade. By 1939, more women commuters had used part of their trading proceeds to put up shops in their rural market places. Among the residents, some traders had emerged as "middle-women" wholesalers of agricultural produce or beer.

4.2 WOMEN TRADERS AND THE DEPRESSION YEARS, 1930-1935

In 1930, Kenya was hit by the worldwide depression which began in the West in 1929. There was a drop in world commodity prices, especially of agricultural produce, and it affected Kenya. By 1931 the price of maize, wheat, and sisal had dropped by 50 per cent and coffee by 40 per cent from their 1929 values.[1] There was a fall in rural and urban employment. Employment on the Railway fell from 15,628 in 1930 to 12,000 in 1933. Demand for coffee pickers virtually ceased between 1931 and 1933. Employment on tea estates fell from about 10,000 to 8,000 in the same period, and many sisal estates were closed down.[2] Consequently, many Africans who were formerly engaged as labourers were laid off. As more farm hands returned to the African land units, production there increased significantly.[3] The capacity of the Nairobi environs to provide food to its residents increased.

Nairobi's economy, however, was devastated by the depression. Population estimates fell from a peak in 1930 of 49,000 to 41,000 in 1933. The African population alone dropped from an estimated 32,000 to 23,000. African labourers' economic power dropped tremendously. Many of Nairobi's inhabitants had no employment. Of those still employed, wages fell drastically from an average of Shs. 19.00 a month to 15.00 for skilled and semi-skilled labourers while unskilled labourers' wages fell to as low as Shs. 8.00 a month from Shs. 14.00.[4] In spite of the fall in wages, taxation remained Shs. 12.00 per month. Additional revenue was also collected from Africans as customs and exercise duties.[5]

Similarly, the European purchasing power declined. As the prices of commodities fell, some settlers abandoned their farms, and they and their European employees became jobless. Between 1932 and 1933 alone, the number of Europeans employed on agricultural holdings decreased by 425 to 2364.[6]

The resultant effect was the lowering of commodity prices in Nairobi. The table below shows the estimated drop in the prices of some commodities sold in Nairobi.[7]

Table 4.1: Estimated Drop in the Prices of Selected Commodities in Nairobi 1928/29 - 1932/33

Commodity	Price in 1928/29		Price in 1932/33	
	Shs.	Cts.	Shs.	Cts.
Beans per Lb	0	13	0	09
Cabbages per Lb	0	11	0	07
Potatoes per Lb	0	08	0	03
Milk per pint	0	40	0	25
Ghee per Bottle	0	70	0	40

Source: Tabitha Kanogo, "Kenya and the Depression, 1929-1939" p. 116, and Luise White, "A History of Prostitution in Nairobi," pp. 96; Kenya Blue Books, 1933, 1934; Oral Interviews, Samuel Meri Githehu; Sophia Wanjiku.

New administrative measures posed further constraints to African women traders in Nairobi. In 1928, the Report of the Feetham Commission granted the white community its long-desired official political supremacy in Kenya, by increasing European representation in the Legislative Council from six to nine, and of Asians from five to six.[8] This meant a defeat of Asian agitation for equal representation. This adversely affected Africans living in Nairobi. For example benefits, such as unlicensed hawking accruing to them under the pretext of "paramountcy", were no longer necessary. The council authorities, therefore, promulgated new rules in 1929 reintroducing hawking fees. In the central business area where Europeans spent most of their working hours, the new fee was Shs. 20.00 per month. The aim of this high fee was to prohibit Africans from operating in the area. Outside the central business area, the fee was Sh. 1.00 a month, cheap enough to attract Africans to trade there.[9]

The licensing requirement forced some women out of business. Although there was still no body charged with enforcing the Municipal by-laws, regular police on patrol harassed illegal hawkers. Some traders who failed to acquire licenses, either for lack of cash or because they found it unnecessary in the already deteriorating economic situation, were pushed out of business on technical reasons. Hence, Alice Nduta and Elisiba Wacuka, both commuter traders, and Jedida Njoki, a resident trader, ceased trading in Nairobi. The commuters concentrated on cultivating their land and selling their surplus produce on the roadside in their home areas.[10] Sophia Wanjiku, another commuter trader, ceased trading in Nairobi because of poor profits. Instead she concentrated her efforts on running the small shop she had started in the 1920s at home in Gikambura and tending her livestock, which by the 1930s had greatly multiplied.[11]

Some hawkers however, adopted strategies which enabled them to continue operating. Grace Mbuci Kariuki continued selling vegetables in the rough shelter next to her house in Pumwani, prefering to acquire her commodities from Dagoretti market rather than at Kariokor. In this way, she acquired her goods at a cheaper price, and was able to make some profit.[12] Commuters such as Rachael Njambi and Mbatha Nzinga, both dealing in chicken and eggs, sold their commodities in the central area, where the population was more concentrated during the day, and found a relatively better market and higher profits. To avoid confrontation with police, they moved from office to office, and took circuitous routes whenever they saw police from a distance. Profits were meagre, however, and satisfied only subsistence needs.[13]

Some women market traders not only endured the Depression but were even able to accumulate some profit. The African market at Kariokor, for example, had evolved a reputation for lower prices in commodities as compared to the rest of the town. Owing to this reputation, customers continued to converge at the market during this period to make the best use of the little money they had.[14] Unlike the African market, trade in the Municipal market was poor. The market built in 1932 was meant to serve mainly the upper class European and Asian population in Nairobi. The retailers were chiefly Indians. In the backyard of the market, Africans had rented stalls as well as a wholesale place where they could dispose off produce brought from up-country.[15] For the next few years, however, the trade at the market remained poor. By 1934, many traders sought a reduction in their stall rents owing to poor trade,[16] suggesting the extent to which the African market had become popular with the town residents. Traders at the Kariokor market therefore fared better than those elsewhere.

Individual success at the market depended on a particular trader's entrepreneurial skills. In her continuing trade in vegetables and beans, Priscilla Muthoni thus had accumulated loyal customers over the years. During the Depression, however, buyers for lack of cash, sought the cheapest market. To keep her regular customers, Muthoni gave good bargains and provided credit. This pulled more customers to her stand. She was thus able to maintain a profit level of Shs. 5.00 per day. By 1935 she had accumulated Shs. 125.00 at a time when most women traders had little or no cash in their savings.[17]

The women dealing in home-made beer were less affected by the depression. The social, political and economic problems leading African workers to prefer home made-beer were heightened while the economic advantages accruing to the sellers became even more pronounced. Drinking on credit was sought by more Africans than before, owing to lack of cash. African grievances, over land in particular became increasingly widespread as disenchantment with the colonial government deepened. The need for safer places for political discussions made the beer dens increasingly appealing. For women dealers, especially of gin, profits were higher than before.[18] By 1934 the gin trade was so profitable that a gallon sold for as high as Shs. 24.00.[19]

The municipal authorities and the police however continued to harass the beer traders, especially as generally they attributed the problem of African "laziness" to the drinking of home-made beer. The police were charged with conducting frequent raids to arrest the brewers in African areas, particularly Kibera and Pumwani. In May 1933, for example, a number of women residing in Kibera were arrested and convicted for selling gin and each sentenced to four months imprisonment.[20] In 1932 a policy of evicting residents found in possession of gin was adopted.[21] Consequently a number of women found selling gin were served with quit notices. In 1935, women such as Adea Ambari, and Lemun Razgala were issued with two-months notices to vacate their houses in Kibera.[22]

Police harassment had two consequences on the gin trade in Kibera. First, some women adopted strategies which made detection extremely difficult. Writing in September 1935, the Nairobi District Commissioner noted that "the distilling and concealment of liquor is frequently carried out in the heart of the cultivated area where detection is well 'nigh impossible'".[23] The good cover also provided shelter for drinking parties, and storage facilities for the beer owners.[24]

Second, instead of the police eradicating the trade, they were out-witted by the traders. Women in Kibera for example found new ways of continuing their work still avoiding the police. They concealed the beer under vegetables, or other produce in baskets, and sold it in various parts of the town. In this way old traders such as Zena Juma, and new ones, such as Hadija Abdulahi who started the trade in 1934, were able to sell as much as two gallons a day.[25] Referring to Kibera in 1935, the District Commissioner, Nairobi noted:

> This area has for many years proved a menace to good order and discipline in the vicinity of Nairobi, in view of the propensity of the "natives" there distilling enormous quantities of gin for retail sale, both in the area of Kibera and outside, by peddling it by means of native women...[26]

In spite of possible penalties, the women's trade in beer remained unchecked and many continued to derive a livelihood from the enterprise.

4.3 Women Traders in the Period of Recovery, 1936-1939

The late 1930s saw a gradual economic upturn from the harsh conditions of the Depression. In Nairobi, construction work increased. Andrew Hake, one-time official in the Nairobi City Council, described the new developments:

> ... in Nairobi, the wood and iron premises of the bazaar were finally replaced by stone buildings. New facades appeared on the main streets. A new secretariat block and Law Courts were built in City Square.[27]

Employment opportunities also increased. In 1937, the number of men with jobs was 20,000; by 1939, the number had reached an estimated figure of 25,886.[28]

The development of trade unionism during the period helped to raise the wages of some Africans above those of the 1920s. The improved wage beneficiaries were mainly mission-educated Africans, most of whom worked with the Railway and the Civil Service as clerks, teachers and interpreters.[29] Other beneficiaries were men with technical skills, such as carpenters, and masons. In 1937 , a good African carpenter in Nairobi could earn from Shs. 80.00 to 100.00 a month. In the big stone quarries, some 1,000 to 1,500 Africans worked as stone cutters and dressers (masons). Many of these were also small employers, working as sub-contractors for Indians, and hiring their own cutters, dressers and skilled quarry hands.[30] In 1938 the Municipal African Affairs Officer, E.R.St.A. Davies reported that 1,927 African employees were earning Shs. 40.00 and above.[31]

The improvement in employment and wages increased the purchasing power of Africans in Nairobi and hence boosted trade. In the rural areas, Africans responded to market forces by further increasing production tremendously. The bulk of this production was in the category of food crops such as maize, beans, potatoes, and vegetables.[32]

4.3.1 Women Commuter Traders, 1936-1939

During the Depression, the colonial administration evolved a new policy towards the sale of African produce. The central part of this policy was the attempt to reorganize the marketing of African maize produce, (and later other goods), and to bring it under the effective control of the administration. The need for control was prompted by the low maize prices in the world market, which made it difficult for settlers to make a decent profit. The African maize, produced at lower costs, would bridge the deficit in the export market.[33]

A step towards this control was the introduction in 1935 of commodity inspection in Central and Nyanza Provinces. The Kenya Farmers Association, the settler marketing body registered in 1932, was to control the inspection centres, enforce high standards and high prices, and assure the settlers of a profit.[34]

Throughout 1935, inspection remained a voluntary service, but towards the end of the year, legislative measures made it compulsory. The Central Province produce to undergo inspection, in addition to wattlebark (whose inspection was made compulsory much earlier), included maize, beans, and potatoes.[35] Yet the expected control was not achieved, because other outlets for the sale of produce remained open, and prices there compared favourably with the inspection centres. Moreover in the rural markets all produce regardless of quality would sell. The same was not true with the inspection centres, which emphasized good quality for export.[36]

Additionally, inspection was only limited to a few items, and other commodities such as vegetables, bananas, sweet potatoes, poultry and eggs were still exchanged freely in the African areas. As late as 1938, Africans selling produce in the "reserves" were numerous, and were still increasing.[37] The commuter traders were still able therefore to purchase produce in the reserves and transport it to Nairobi for sale. Traders such as Alice Nduta and Mbatha Nzinga, dealers of vegetables and poultry, re-embarked on trade with their own produce. By 1938 they were "middle-women" using the motor lorries which had become familiar means of transport, in the trade between Nairobi and the surrounding areas. By the outbreak of the war in 1939, the two traders' net profits per day were averaging Shs. 4.00 and 5.00 respectively. Some women used their trading proceeds to establish business in their local markets, to be close to their homes. For example, Mbatha Nzinga built a wooden store in Tala market where she sold provisions and rented out part of the building to a teacher in a nearby school.[38]

For some Christian women, trading provided a measure of economic independence and therefore power to break away from African traditions considered repulsive to the faith. Rachel Njambi's husband died in 1936, but she refused to be inherited by her in-law, as was the practice. As her trading profits enabled her to purchase most necessities, an inheritor, whose main role traditionally was to provide support to the widow, was unnecessary.[39]

Trading also enabled some women to discharge certain roles specifically meant for males at the time. In 1938, Wayua Kiteti from Endau in Kitui, who had sold ghee in Nairobi since the 1920s, was able to purchase enough livestock for her son's dowry, as her old husband had no resources to do so.[40]

4.3.2 Women Resident Traders, 1936-1939

The period 1936-39 also witnessed continued efforts by Council authorities to control African trading activities in Nairobi. The Shs. 20.00 hawking fee introduced in 1929 was, however, affordable by a number of Africans, and failed to eliminate them from trading in the area. In addition, council opinion held that the presence of the few licensed hawkers provided cover for many unlicenced operators. In 1935, hawking by Africans in the central business area was completely forbidden.[41]

Problems with the enforcement machinery persisted. In 1935, Council officials agreed in principle to appoint a municipal inspector to enforce the new by-laws especially those related to illegal hawking.[42] By 1939 however this had still not been done and illegal hawking continued. Jedida Njoki, an old Pumwani resident was again selling cooked sweet potatoes at various construction sites in the city centre to support her family.[43]

4.3.3 Resident Traders and The Evolution of Women Groups, 1936-1939

A notable development in women's economic activities in Nairobi was the emergence of women's informal thrift societies, as a response to lack of capital available to them. The male labourers' low wages posed a severe limit on their ability to save. Most of them thus were unable to avail credit to fellow non-working Africans. Africans were also denied institutional credit. Under the Credit to Natives Ordinance 1903, no credit of more than £10 could be given to an African trader unless approved by a district officer. But the Ordinance was almost inoperative.[44] In 1935 the Ordinance was revived, and amended so that only provincial commissioners would exempt individuals from the provisions of the ordinance.[45] Two factors however, prevented women from enjoying the minimal loan facility. One was their lack of education which kept them unaware of the vital information. The other was the fact that they lacked collateral. They had only use-rights to land, not ownership.[46]

By 1939 there were at least two women's thrift societies in Nairobi. One of these belonged to women residents from Kiambu. The initiators of this society were mainly mission-educated women. Among them were Josephine Wangu and Anne Njeri, both former pupils of the Church of Scotland Mission School, Kikuyu. On getting married immediately after leaving school, the women could not take up formal employment.[47]

According to the conventional wisdom at the time, women in independent employment were classified as prostitutes as many women in Nairobi sold their sexuality. This made it difficult for an African girl to work normally among the exclusively male African employees. It was even more difficult for a married woman, and husbands hardly allowed their wives to work.[48]

Because of such restrictions, the women channelled their education into trade. At school, they learned needlework, cookery and hygiene. Josephine Wangu, used her needlework knowledge to start a small business of knitting and selling children's sweaters. Her start-up capital was Shs. 10.00 begged from her former Mission School, Kikuyu. The experience inspired her to play a leading role in the formation of the Kiambu Women's Thrift Society, whose initial membership consisted of seven women. Thereafter, membership was open to all women married in Kiambu and residing in Nairobi.[49]

The objective of the Society was to save cash which could be lent out to members, who would then start generating their own incomes or boost on-going enterprises. The cash could also be used in unforseen contingencies, such as transporting the body of a member's child home for burial, when no other source of cash was available. The members contributed Shs. 5.00 each per year towards the savings, but there was also a rotating credit of Sh. 1.00 per week. Unschooled women members enjoyed the added advantage of learning new skills from the better educated lot. They learned for example how to return the appropriate cash balance to a buyer and how to knit sweaters.[50]

Another thrift society was formed by the Nubi women of Kibera. The idea was hatched by a group of widows and wives of retired soldiers. As the retired soldiers had no pension, their wives, like the widows, had no one to look to for support.[51] Association members included Nafisa Rehan, Fatima Salim, and Rehema Mohamed. Some of these women had previously survived through the sale of beer, but with increased police raids, they abandoned the business. They settled on the sale of handicraft items, such as mats and baskets, and saved through collective effort to uplift their standards of living. They modeled their group along the lines of the traditional women's farm work, whereby, different women's farms were cultivated on a rotational basis. Thus the group members wove two baskets and mats weekly to be given to one member to sell. The woman used the rest of the proceeds but spared Shs. 2.00 for the group's savings pool maintained by a treasurer. Members were allowed to borrow from the pool in turns to pay school fees, or for solving a pressing problem. The money was paid back without interest.[52]

Some women traders reaped good benefits from these thrift societies. In 1938 Margaret Wambui, formerly a hawker of vegetables, became a member of the Kiambu Women's Thrift Society. She borrowed Shs. 20.00 from the society and embarked on the sale of second-hand clothes outside Kariokor market. At the end of the month when business was at its peak, she obtained a net return as high as Shs. 7.00 a day.[53] Thus, women's groups played an important role in enabling women to trade non-agricultural items which they could not do without ready cash.[54]

4.3.4 Women from Beyond the Nairobi Vicinities Join Trade

In the late 1930s women from as far away as Western Kenya, residing in Nairobi also joined trade. Their late arrival in the women's trade in Nairobi may be explained by two reasons. Up to the 1930s, few of them visited Nairobi because of the distance involved. Moreover, Nairobi was known as a white man's city, and women less sought after for labour had no business going there. By the 1930s, however, reports about urban Nairobi inspired increasing numbers of women to visit the town especially wives of the wage workers there.[55] Apart from the train which was a familiar mode of transport by the 1930s, there were a few motor lorries on the road from Kisumu to Nairobi transporting passengers and goods.[56]

But there were obstacles to overcome. Women, according to Luo and Luhya traditions, were cultivators. This was to be their sole source of income in the money economy. Due to the widespread practice of polygamy, however, women were the actual heads of their families. Domestic demand, therefore, limited the availability of surpluses for sale. Besides, the people's customs did not allow women to own and operate business on their own. Business was considered men's work. The woman's place was in the home, where she did domestic chores and nurtured children. Women themselves preferred not to interfere in this male area. Additionally, many feared loosing money in business transactions or getting cheated. Others feared being conspicuous as a special type of woman. Many women in Western Kenya therefore remained behind in modern trade. Many who traded continued the age old itinerant barter trade only when certain goods were needed for sustenance.[57]

As the women joined husbands in Nairobi, unbearable conditions forced them into trade. The majority of Africans continued to receive below-subsistence wages and the burden of supporting the family increasingly fell on women. In 1938, a time when African wages had considerably risen above those of the previous depression years, the Municipal Native Affairs Officer, E.R. St. A. Davies, reported that for many labourers, wages were insufficient to support even a single man let alone a family. Davies inquiry revealed the following wage brackets for African workers.[58]

Table 4.2: African Wages and Number of Employees Per Wage Group.

Shillings per month	Number of employees
11-10	1786 (including 1506 under 16 years)
10-20	15661
21-40	9069
41-80	1727
81-120	189

Source: Kenya Colony and Protectorate Annual Report on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Kenya Colony and Protectorate. 1939, p. 18; Andrew Hake, African Metropolis, Nairobi's Self Help City, p. 52.

The figures show an average wage of Shs. 23.57 a month. The cost of living for the same period was estimated at Sh 20.75 per month for a single man and 38.25 for a married man and two children. A total of 16,000 employees did not, therefore, meet even the Shs. 20.75 minimum survival requirement for bachelors.[59]

Lack of housing, leading to high rents, added to the labourers' woes. As late as 1938, the Municipal Native Affairs Department report noted that 600 Africans unable to find accommodation in Pumwani lived on River Road and Canal Road in "indescribable squalor". Another 200 casuals employed at the quarries had their majority living in "huts, sheds, cow houses and goat pens near their places of work with few or no sanitary facilities."[60] As fairly decent houses were hard to get, rents were high. By 1939, a room for a couple in Quarry Road (Kariokor) and Starehe Government housing cost at least

Shs. 9.00 a month. This took 40-45 per cent of a man's monthly wage.[61] To counteract the high rents, men shared rooms, but once a man was joined by his wife, he needed privacy and ceased sharing accommodation. To make ends meet, some women became traders.

One of these women was Salome Mtula.[62] Mtula was born in Siaya District, Nyanza Province around 1914. She got married in 1930. Her husband left home for Nairobi the following year, and secured a job as a messenger with the East African Railways and Harbours Corporation, at one of its workshops.

Still at home, Mtula sought to satisfy her need for items such as salt, sugar and kerosene from trade. As a girl, she had learned to brew traditional beer, called busaa, from her mother. Now she brewed and sold the beer. She also cultivated her husband's piece of land and sold a little surplus produce.[63] By the time Mtula came to Nairobi to join her husband in 1933, she already had some experience in trading. She left home believing that the two children she had given birth to had died from witchcraft. In Nairobi, the lives of her future children were safeguarded as the suspected witch remained at home. The family lived in a slum area called Mukuru, then outside the Municipality, but close enough to the Railway workshops.[64]

Mtula's husband earned a salary of Shs. 19.00 a month. By 1936, they had two more children. They were also living with two of her husbands unemployed relatives. Additionally, the man was expected to meet his parents' needs, such as buying them clothes. He was also expected to pay his fathers' and uncles' taxes to the government. It was imperative therefore for Mtula to bring in additional income. Besides her experience in trade, she was encouraged to pursue it by the large number of Kikuyu women who eked out a living from the activity.[66]

In 1936, she launched her trade in vegetables with the support of a Kikuyu woman named Wangui Waweru. The woman hawked vegetables in Mukuru, and Mtula became acquainted with her as a customer. She sought her advice on how to become a trader, and the woman, who had a vegetable garden nearby, gave her half a sack on credit to sell. This put Mtula on her trading path. Her daily net profit was between 70 Cts and Sh. 1.00.[67]

Mtula was ambitious. By early 1938 she had saved Shs. 30.00 through thriftiness, and embarked on the sale of fish as well. She joined the company of two other Luo women, Leonida Oyuecho and Yuanita Ogoye, who had traded in fish for some time. Together, they travelled to Mavoko in Athi River to purchase their stock. Her children remained under the care of a young girl, a relative of hers that she had brought from home.[68]

Mtula's fish were slightly bigger than the fingerlings. The price was ten cents per bowl (equivalent to the fruit salad bowl) at the river. She first took twenty bowls, but gradually increased her stock as her market widened. By the outbreak of the Second World War, Mtula's daily net returns were Shs. 1.50 and 4.00 from vegetables and fish respectively. The family could afford the rent of a better house, and moved to the newly-built Shauri Moyo Estate in 1939. They paid a rent of Shs. 9.00 a month.[69]

4.3.5 Retail Traders Turned Wholesalers

The period 1936-39 also witnessed a change from retail to wholesale trade among stand holders at the African market and among beer brewers and sellers, especially in Kibera. For example, Priscilla Muthoni Kariuki, a long-serving trader of produce at the African market, moved to the wholesale trade because "selling this way was easier, and there were quick returns". She also reduced theft by employees who hid money paid for small quantities. She continued dealing in agricultural produce such as beans, green gram, cow-peas, and groundnuts, which she acquired from commuter wholesalers bringing the commodities from up-country.[70] Muthoni's customers were mainly retailers at the same market and in the African locations. Some Asian grocers also bought from her. By the outbreak of the Second World War, Muthoni's average net profit was Shs. 150.00 per month, surpassing the salaries of the best paid African employees, who earned Shs. 120.00 per month.[71]

Some women beer traders moved into the wholesale business in their attempts to evade police harassment. By 1936 the trade was so entrenched in Kibera that the administration established a police station there, with the sole object of eliminating the gin trade. Consequently, police raids increased, netting 207, and 218 liquor offenders in 1936 and 1937, respectively.[72]

Nonetheless, the trade continued to spread to other parts of the town. For example, already by 1936 the brew was sold in Muthaiga, the neighbourhood of Karura Forest and as far as Kabete outside Nairobi. Women such as Zena Juma became suppliers of gin to other traders. In this way she sold her stock fast enough to avoid police detection. By 1939, her returns were as high as Shs. 200.00 a month. The skill of producing the liquor also spread to other women besides the Nubi. Many Kikuyu women became brewers of the beer to the extent that they were almost exchanging positions with the Sudanese and entertaining Sudanese clients.[73]

One Kikuyu woman who acquired and used the skill was Dorcas Ngima. She was born in Gakindu in Nyeri around 1916, but spent most of her life in Nairobi. As a youth, she lived with her parents in Pangani, while her father worked with Unga Limited as a loader. In 1935, she got married to a man named Kariuki, a seller of tea at Kariokor market. She continued to live in Pangani after marriage. She had her first child in 1936, but her husband was a drunkard and hardly cared for the child. A friend of Ngima, named Njeri, already brewing in Pumwani, taught her the skill, while her mother who was a seller of produce gave her Shs. 10.00 to start the trade.[75]

Ngima was a hard worker, who sometimes stayed up all night brewing her beer, to avoid police harassment. There were, however, informers in Pangani who tipped the police on the houses where brewing was done, and all gin dealers ran the risk of arrest.[76] For this reason, women gin sellers in Pangani created a network of friends who acted as security. On seeing the police, they quickly spread word around for friends to conceal the liquor. If a friend was arrested, the others contributed towards the fine imposed on her. In this way, Ngima continued to survive from the sale of beer.[77]

4.3.6 Women Traders and the Demolition of Pangani, 1938-1939

The demolition of Pangani in 1938 interfered with the trading activities of some women residents in Nairobi. Pangani was destroyed to make room for Asian housing. According to Council planning, all former residents of Pangani were to move to the New Pumwani African location constructed in 1938. Many Swahili Muslims however, formerly resident in Pangani, refused to move to the new location because of its closeness to Pumwani, whose residents they considered as bad as heathens. As a result of this rejection of New Pumwani and the compulsory removal from Pangani, the residents of the area called it "Shauri Moyo", loosely translated as "take it or leave it". Owing to the refusal of many former Pangani residents to move to Shauri Moyo, business did not pick up until the outbreak of the Second World War, when the location was slowly filled up by people who had never lived in Pangani.[78] The trading activities of women such as Julia Wanjiku and Dorcas Ngima were temporarily halted.[79]

4.4 CONCLUSION

In the first half of the 1930s, the general decline in the Kenyan economy, and that of Nairobi in particular, affected women's trading activities. The produce traders, whose commodity prices fell, were most affected. New Municipal Council policies caused further constraints to women trading in Nairobi, and a number temporarily ceased trading there. Others, however, were more innovative enabling them not only to survive in trade, but to accumulate some cash as well. The Depression had no serious effects on the beer trade, but new measures instituted to control the trade had far-reaching consequences. Although, police often raided the locations for brewers, and dealers and offenders were punished, increasing demand and high profits made the trade hard to eradicate. Dealers, especially in the core area Kibera, went underground.

In the last half of the decade, improved economic conditions encouraged trade, and the number of women traders increased. Among many residents, new women traders from the Luo and Luhya ethnic groups, who had not featured prominently in the previous years, actively participated. Women also made further strides in business. By the end of the period, some commuter traders had put up shop buildings in market centres close to them, and operated shop business there. Among the residents, women were moving from retailing into the capital intensive wholesale businesses.

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CHAPTER FIVE

AFRICAN WOMEN TRADERS DURING THE WAR AND POST WAR YEARS, 1939 - 1945

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 brought greater prosperity to Nairobi. More labour was necessary to meet military demands and bolster the nascent manufacturing sector. The influx of job-seekers to the town, however, surpassed the number of available jobs and the ranks of the unemployed Africans in Nairobi swelled. As many of the employed earned little, the demand for cheap commodities, such as those sold by women, especially hawkers, increased.

The women traders consisted of continuing participants and new arrivals. The new traders were, as before, pushed into Nairobi by a complex series of factors, particularly landlessness, arising especially from the new squatter regulations. In Nairobi, continued scarcity of employment opportunities, particularly for women, pushed them into trade.

By the end of the war, more women formed trading groups while others traded individually. Some trading groups went beyond business interests to provide social support for members. Some individual traders, especially the long-serving ones, expanded their realms in the produce trade, while others stepped up production in their land units on the periphery of the town to satisfy the city's demands.

A large majority of the sole operators remained hawkers. As their activities were associated with the many "evils" in Nairobi, they were suppressed by the administration. Arrests, convictions, and/or fines characterized their daily lives. Consequently, many became staunch supporters of the radical political movements of the time.

5.2 AFRICAN WOMEN TRADERS AND THE SECOND WORLD WAR, 1939 - 1945.

During the Second World War, Nairobi became an important focus for the Allied Command. It was the Headquarters of the East African forces and the base for East African troops for the campaigns in Ethiopia, the Middle East, and Asia. As a result, between 1939 and 1944 the town's population rose tremendously, estimated as follows:[1]

Table 5.1: Nairobi Population Figures, 1939-1944

	1939	1941	1944
Africans	41,000	70,000	66,590*
Asians	17,700	22,000	31,877
Europeans	6,800	8,000	10,431

* The fall in African population in Nairobi in 1944 was partly caused by the government's eviction of about 10,000 unemployed in 1943, owing to the food shortage.

Source: Luise White "A History of Prostitution in Nairobi, p. 195; Antony Clayton and Donald Savage, Government and Labour in Kenya, 1895-1963, p. 244; Tiyambe Zeleza, "Kenya and the Second World War, 1939-1950, p. 153.

As the troops were well-paid[2], their presence stimulated a rise in the wages of some Nairobi workers. The Municipal Native Affairs Officer, T.C. Colchester reported in 1941 that:

> As the military, especially the Ordinance Corps and Engineers, were in constant need of casual labour for short periods of ten days to one month, and since they could never afford to wait for labour, and also because they rarely provided housing, paid higher wages than market rates. Secondly, in Nairobi, about one third of the employed natives (were) in domestic service, and here an increase in the number of employers by several hundred percent ... introduced disequilibrium. It was no uncommon thing to see a native's registration certificate reflecting a rise in eighteen months from <u>shamba</u> boy at Shs. 15.00 per month, to wash boy, at Shs. 25.00 per month, and on to batman at Shs. 30.00 per month plus allowances. Working for soldiers meant little work, interesting safaris and the picking up of many "inconsidered trifles". There was an unsettling of values by the tipping of Europeans strange to the country. A boy in a hostel at a wage of Shs. 25.00, might pick up Shs. 2.00 a day in tips. Carrying bags, doing odd jobs by hotels, similarly upset wage levels. ... some rise was necessary for the general public welfare ... The Municipal Council set an example to employers by increasing its wage levels generally by 5 per cent ...[3]

The war also marked an important phase in the development of secondary industry in Kenya. Prior to the war, this sector was small, and was mainly limited to the basic processing of food produced by European farmers for local consumption[4]. Apart from these products, Kenya, like other British colonies was a market for British manufactured goods and capital.

During the war, however, importation of goods from overseas became difficult, as ships faced the risk of attack[5]. In 1940/41, the Kenya Industrial Management Board was set up to encourage local manufacture of substitute products. Foods, footwear, cardboard, plywood, garments, iron and brass articles, soap, ceramics and bricks were produced locally[6]. Many of the industries were located in Nairobi, and job opportunities increased. The rise in the number of men employed in Nairobi from 23,000 in 1939 to 45,000 in 1943 may partly be explained by the new opportunities in industries and the military. In 1943-1944 the government placed limitations on employment, especially of the domestic type, because of the food shortage. Between 1944-1946 therefore, registered African male wage earners were stable at 38,00 to 40,000[7]. Nonetheless, the increases revitalized the commercial viability of Nairobi.

In response to demand in Nairobi, production in some African land units increased significantly. In the Kiambu District, for instance, more vegetables were grown by 1942. While in 1938, the value of vegetable sales from the District just exceeded £6,000, in 1942, 900 tons of vegetables were delivered to Nairobi monthly, bringing an estimated return of £120,000 to growers by the end of the year. By 1943 a large proportion of firewood, charcoal, vegetables, eggs and other produce was supplied to Nairobi from Kiambu. Other areas in Central Province also increased production. Between 1944 and

1945, the total number of eggs sold from the province rose from 3,226, 379 to 8,276,106. Many of these were marketed in Nairobi[8].

Women played an important role in the Nairobi trade during this period. A small section of the traders were residents of the town, where up to 1939, the ratio of the male to female African population was as high as 8:1[9]. The majority were, however, commuters, mainly from the vicinity of the town[10]. Some women, especially among the town residents, operated loose socio-economic organizations, but many others ran individual businesses.

5.2.1 Women Groups as Socio-Economic Organizations, 1939-1945

The war years witnessed new developments in women's groups' trading and social activities. In 1942 the Kiambu Women's Thrift Society, with a total savings of Shs. 205.00, ventured into the sale of eggs and handicraft items. The eggs were bought mainly from poultry keepers in nearby areas such as Kiambu and Machakos, while handicraft materials, mainly mats, trays and baskets, were purchased chiefly from Kikuyu and Kamba women who hawked them in the town from upcountry. The items were sold from a stand in Kariokor Market. The stand was acquired under the name of the chairperson, Josephine Wangu. The sales were done by all members, who followed a weekly duty roster to ensure the participation of each member, and at the same time guard against the possibility of fraud by any one member. By the end of the year, the organization's profit from the stand ranged between Shs. 15.00 to 20.00 a day. Some of the money went to members as a dividend every week.[11]

Up to 1943 the association sold bulk egg orders to Asian and African restaurants such as Duwachand Singh Hotel on River Road and the Pumwani Hotel, Pumwani. A monthly net profit of up to Shs. 100.00 accrued to the association from such sales[12]. In 1943/44 a countrywide food shortage, however, struck Kenya. The settlers blamed the shortage on lack of incentives of European farmers, lack of machinery and spare parts, and the failure of the short rains in 1942. But these seem to have been further from the truth. Arguments put forward by Africans were apparently more substantial. They explicated that the crisis was the result of the drain of manpower from the rural land units. Young male labour migrated to the towns to seek employment, or were concripted into the military. The remaining population consisting mainly of old men, women and children were unable to maintain sufficient levels of food production. Additionally the low prices paid for African produce especially maize also discouraged them from cultivating the crop, and concentration on cash crop production reduced the acreage under food crops.[13] Whatever the case, the shortage was a crisis which adversely affected the trading activities of women in Nairobi. The Kikuyu

Women's Organization's egg trade dwindled. As the handicraft turnover was low, its general met returns diminished. Nonetheless, by 1945, their total savings was Shs 950.00 which could be lent out to members during emergencies.[14]

More important during this period was the interest the group increasingly adopted towards the social well-being of its members. Illiterate members, whose husbands were away at war, were assisted in reading letters from and writing letters to their spouses. The educated also passed on some of the knowledge gained at school, to those without formal education. The uneducated were taught to make western foods such as tea, rice, and cakes. They were also educated about primary healthcare, especially of the infant, and emphasis was placed on living in hygienic surroundings. Consequently, member's families suffered less from diseases related to poor hygiene[15].

The Nubi Women's Association also witnessed a number of social and economic developments. In 1944 the group established a shop in Kibera where various members sold their handicraft items. This was a move away from the rotating sales in individual houses, as done in the previous years. The new method created room for individual effort and profits differed from woman to woman. Nevertheless, members continued to contribute to the savings pool at the rate of Shs 3.00 per month, the total of which was Shs. 326.00 minus outstanding borrowings in 1945. The money was in the custody of the treasurer, Nafisa Rehan[16].

The Nubi Women's group's activities also included a social dimension, which put emphasis on religious living and charity. The women gathered once every week to pray for their relatives at war and for one another, especially in times of need or discomfort. They extended charity to other unfortunate members of the community, such as fellow widows and orphans. Suleiman Oyolochumbe, a carpenter in Kibera in the 1940s, was an orphan whose apprentice training was financed by the group[17].

Following in the footsteps of the Kikuyu and Nubi women groups was the formation of new associations during the war. The factors leading to the rise of some of the groups were more social than economic. With time, the latter objective took centre stage, as women advised one another to be independent. In 1941 Luo women from Alego location in Siaya district formed a group to support one another in the absence of their husbands conscripted into the war. The men, all former employees of different organizations in Nairobi and living with their wives, enrolled for war duties after a rumour spread of attractive pay for the servicemen. The women were Salome Mtula, a trader, Margarita Agunda, a housewife, and Yuanita Ogoye, a traditional midwife and trader[18].

By the end of the year, the husbands' remittances were negligible, and a dependant such Margaret Agunda was becoming desperate. Taking the advice of her two colleagues, she had her husband's ram at home sold for Shs. 12.00, and the money was sent to her to start business. She sold grains, such as beans, and green gram, purchasing supplies from those coming from the countryside. By 1943, her net profits reached Shs. 30.00 a month. Her livelihood with the family depended on this income.[19]

The Nairobi Alego Women's Group expanded its membership in the following years and focused more attention on the well-being of the members. By 1944 membership was thirteen, and the women formed a thrift society, similar to that of the Kiambu women. Members contributed Shs. 4.00 per month. The group also assumed a more authoritative role on the behaviour of its members. New members, especially those recently arrived in Nairobi, were educated about the difficulties of town life. For example they were briefed on the racial laws, the inability of women to get jobs, and problems with accommodation. They were also cautioned against prostitution, which was allegedly common among city women. Members found to have even secret extra-marital affairs were publicly humiliated as a warning to others.[20] Thus, by the end of the war, women groups were important socio-economic institutions. As kinship networks were weakened by town life, women's associations filled the gap. This was particularly true as women from a particular geographical rural area, often came together in Nairobi.

5.2.2 Hawker Frustrations and the Nationalist Politics, 1939-1945

The war years witnessed the growing incidence of landlessness, especially in Central Province[21]. In the 1940s the problem was aggravated by a number of factors. One of these was the emergence of a group of better farmers, who accumulated more land by purchase from small land owners to grow cash crops, the demands for which increased during the war[22].

The main cause of landlessness, however, was population increase, arising from natural population growth and the influx of squatters from European farms[23]. In 1937 the Resident Labourers Ordinance was passed to resolve a long standing question regarding the relationship of the squatters to the European farmers. The Ordinance reduced the squatters from their former position of tenants to labourers. It required the squatter to work for the farmer for 180 days a year. It also empowered the European farmers to limit squatter stock and the acreage permitted for squatter cultivation. In many areas, however, the Second World War delayed the implementation of the ordinance, but in some areas such as Naivasha and Nakuru, settlers demanded new contracts, and those who rejected the new conditions were evicted[24].

By 1945 there was gross over-population in the Kikuyu land units. The situation is illustrated by the results of a survey conducted in the portion of Kikuyuland, then known as

South Nyeri, in 1944/45 by the Senior Agricultural Officer, Norman Humphrey. The district, with approximately 307 square miles in area had a population of 166,440, or 542 persons per square mile. The estimated land area per family was therefore 6.71 acres, but this was reduced by the broken country, which left only half of the land for arable purposes. On this assumption, the area available per family for crops and grass leys in 1944 was only about 3.35 acres[25].

Many landless Africans turned to trading for a livelihood. During the 1943-44 food shortage, many Kikuyu smuggled agricultural produce to the more badly-hit areas in Ukambani, in spite of government restrictions. In 1944, D.L. Morgan, the Provincial Commissioner, Central Province, noted a rapid increase in the number of petty traders, and more organized marketing in the Province[26]. Many of the traders operated in Nairobi, attracted by the more abundant trading opportunities. In 1941 the Nairobi Municipal African Affairs Officer, T.C. Colchester, wrote that "the besetting sin of the Kikuyu is to seek a living by trade". They formed the majority of hawkers, many of whom came from as far as 60-70 miles away from the town[27]. By 1943 their numbers had so increased that the Licencing Inspector A.E. Holmes, desperately sought help from his superiors: He commented that:

> [Hawking] will get 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[28].

To stem the tide of hawking, the Municipal council took a number of steps. In 1940, a Municipal police force was created to enforce the Municipal by-laws. Attempts to establish the police force dated back to the early years of Nairobi. Between 1912 and 1923, the Council hired a licence inspector, but the responsibilities of that position were not defined. In 1934, a council committee recommended forming a Municipal police force, but no action was taken. The government police department remained in charge of enforcing the Municipality by-laws. But it was inefficient and had to be constantly reminded to enforce the hawking regulations. The formation of the council police force was aimed at higher efficiency. In 1944 a City Inspectorate Department was established with four inspectors and a supervisor[29].

New by-laws were also passed to make the presence of unemployed Africans in Nairobi illegal. In 1942 the Control of 'Natives' By-Laws were passed. The laws, which were popularly known as the "spivs"laws, defined a spiv as a person who eked out a living by dishonest means[30]. Under these regulations, any unregistered employees, even the self-employed, were spivs, and illegal hawkers were no exception[31].

Lastly, the Council also changed the motive behind the licencing of hawkers in order to reduce the number of legal operators. Prior to 1941 the licencing of hawkers was basically a revenue-generating measure. In 1941, this changed to a control measure, and the ceiling for hawker licences fell from 500 to 300 in 1941[32].

One of the women adversely affected by the new squatter ordinance and the Nairobi hawker regulations was Ruth Wangari. Up to 1942, Wangari was a squatter with her husband and family, on the farm of a European called Johnson, near the present Egerton University. In that year, they were evicted for refusing to dispose of some of their livestock and do more work on the European farm. They failed to compromise with the European because there was no increase in salary, and survival without the livestock and their own cultivated produce would be difficult[33]. Indeed, in 1945 the Commissioner for Labour, Wyn Harris, calculated that by November of that year, a squatter was making about Shs. 80.00 per month. Of this, Shs. 50.00 came from the sale of stock, and Shs. 30.00 from the sale of produce[34]. By eliminating stock and reducing land under squatter cultivation, a major source of squatter income was removed. Proper compensation for this loss demanded at least a ten times increase in the wages. Any such move, however, was vehemently opposed by the settlers, and squatter wages remained low. In Nakuru District, squatter labour and that of the family earned a wage of only Shs. 136.00 per year[35].

Following the eviction order, Wangari's husband, Mwangi Mbugua, sold his animals and received Shs. 190.00. They travelled back to his home near Lari in Limuru, but found no land to settle on, as most of the land was alienated for European farming. They joined a brother of Mwangi, who did casual work with Kenya Breweries in Nairobi, and lived in a slum in Ruaraka[36]. In 1943 Mwangi was conscripted into the military and sent to South East Asia, but Wangari, still living with her brother-in-law, was already selling porridge and Githeri in the town centre, where many poorly paid Africans, such as shop assistants, porters and messengers, needed a cheap mid-day meal[37].

But the central business area was a white preserve, and African business was only allowed to the extent that it served European interests. In 1941 the Council ruled out any hawking in the area except for the sale of newspapers. In 1942 the allowance was extended to flowers and curios, but Wangari's sale of porridge remained illegal[38].

The Municipal Inspectors made a concerted effort to deal with illegal hawkers, especially in the central business area. By October 1941, 12 had been arrested, of whom 9 were fined.[39] Wangari was arrested two times, once in 1942 and again in 1945 and her goods were confiscated. She was also proved guilty of trading illegally and trespassing, and fined Shs. 60.00 in

1942 and Shs. 85.00 in 1945. She paid both fines from her savings, but it meant great deprivation, as her lifeline depended on trade. Her bitterness with the council authorities increased[40].

Wangari's feelings, like those of other women in illegal hawking, found expression in the growing nationalist politics of those years. She was a staunch supporter of the politics of the Kikuyu Central Association (KCA)[41]. Formed in 1924, the KCA expressed many Kikuyu grievances against the colonial government. It demanded increased educational facilities of a practical nature and election of African representatives to the Legislative Council. Its central theme, however, was the land question. Prior to the recommendations of the Kenya Land Commission (1933) it demanded an assurance of the security of the tribal lands[42]. However, the Commission created the "White Highlands" where Africans were excluded by legislation. Nonetheless, Africans, particularly the Kikuyu, refused to accept the commission's decision as a final solution to the land problems, and the issue of land became the pivotal point on which nationalism turned[43].

In the late 1930s the KCA, like many African political associations, opposed government measures and policies affecting land issues, and this endeared the party to increasing numbers of Kikuyu, particularly the dispossessed squatters[44]. In 1940 the KCA was banned, allegedly for conducting subversive activities against the administration.

Even so, it continued a shadowy underground existence up to the end of the war, when the Kenya African Union (KAU) took centre stage[45].

5.2.3 Established Women Traders and the War Boom, 1939-1945

While the hawkers were harassed on the streets of Nairobi, a few African women claimed a stake in the commercial boom of Nairobi. The Municipal Native Affairs Officer, T.C. Colchester, stated in his 1945 report that, "demands from Africans for shops, stalls, lorries, increased steadily, and were almost embarrassing at the end of the year ...". Africans were more and more coming to the opinion that Nairobi was as much their commercial capital as that of Europeans[46]. There were licenced women hawkers, dealing in items such as vegetables and porridge. There were also women trading from market stalls in Kariokor and the Municipal market[47].

Many women trading in the Kariokor African market were the same ones who had operated there for years. Some of them had accumulated profits and were able to acquire other premises, thereby expanding their trade within the city. Priscilla Muthoni continued to sell the dry produce in her stand at Kariokor. By 1944, she had savings of Shs. 1125.00 in the Post Office. She used Shs. 550.00 to acquire and stock a provisions shop in the partly built Ziwani Estate. Her children ran the stall, while she operated the shop. By the end of the war, Muthoni's total net earnings were as high as Shs. 250.00 per month. This was a lot of money, corresponding with the salaries of the best paid Africans, such as the Nairobi Kenya Bus Company Inspectors who earned Shs. 300.00 per month by 1944[48].

Muthoni's lifestyle changed. Her diet consisted of many western foods, such as tea with buttered bread or cakes and rice with beef or chicken stew. She also enjoyed the comfort of driving in a taxi whenever she went out with her family. Up to 1944, journeys to places in the outskirts of Nairobi such as Thika, Machakos, and Kiambu, cost only between Shs. 1.00 to 2.50[49].

Some women commuter traders with access to land in the periphery of the town went into a kind of commercial farming to supply the needs of Nairobi. Some of these women also acquired premises in Nairobi from where they sold their farm products. One of these women was Eunice Wanjiru, born in the area of the present Norfolk Hotel in 1922. In 1939, she was married in the Ruiru area of Kiambu, but her husband, a police constable, worked and lived in Nairobi. She cultivated her husband's farm of about two acres to get food, but sold the surplus to get money for other subsistence needs[50].

Wanjiru obtained four years' education, and this introduced her to "good" living. Her great dream was to live in a stone house, but her husband's salary was too little to satisfy the family, let alone to save. Imitating some

European farmers in the area, she divided her farm into three small sections in 1941. The different portions were for flowers, chicken, and beans and vegetables. She sold the produce at the wholesale market in Nairobi[51].

In 1945 she acquired a stall in the African section of the Municipal market to sell the produce, because "retail prices were better than wholesale". To get the stall, she wrote an application to the Municipal Council accompanied by a medical certificate indicating she was fit to handle food for use by the public. The applications were screened by the Public Health Committee, and a recommendation made to the Council to issue premises[52]. By the end of the year, Wanjiru was purchasing more vegetables and flowers from other African growers in Kabete to sell in her stall. She was also supplying orders of food items such as beans, eggs and vegetables to Asian and African food houses in areas such as River Road and the African locations. Her average net profit was between Shs. 120.00 and 130.00 a month. Her expenditures averaged Shs. 90.00, and she saved the rest[53]. Thus trade in Nairobi facilitated development in women's agricultural activities in the surrounding areas, and enabled women to enjoy a more comfortable life.

5.3 CONCLUSION

The period of the Second world War was a time of economic prosperity in Nairobi. The well paid troops enriched the town with money. The war generated industries also increased labour needs, and the number of employed in Nairobi increased. The demand in Nairobi for many goods traded by women rose. Rural producers, especially in the vicinity of Nairobi, stepped up the production of items such as vegetables, eggs, charcoal and firewood, and a number of women sold these in Nairobi.

Some of these women conducted group enterprises and saved money to provide loans to members for welfare purposes. Other groups were more social in character, but provided advice to members on matters concerning trade. Such groups also evolved into thrift societies with members normally trading on their own account, but contributing to a loans fund. The funds were borrowed by members for social and economic advancement. By the end of the war, some of the groups extended charity to the less fortunate.

The groups were also forums for education and social and cultural rehabilitation. They enabled illiterate women to communicate to husbands away at war. They also advised women on the social life of Nairobi, and on the importance maintaining their cultural heritage.

Many other women conducted individual enterprises. Some of these belonged to the older category of women traders who had operated since the 1930s. By the end of the war, a number of them owned stalls in the markets of the town. A few others possessed shops in the newly built African estates such as

Ziwani. Some of these women made high monthly net profits, sometimes above the salary of the best-paid Africans in employment at the time. This enabled them increasingly to adopt western lifestyles.

The majority of the individual women traders were hawkers. Many of them were dispossessed squatters who found no land in their original areas of descent, and hence migrated to Nairobi to seek an alternative form of survival. A number of them became hawkers, but their activities were despised by the Municipal Council authorities who argued that they made the town unsightly. Consequently, there was constant friction between the hawkers and the administrators. The authorities enacted new laws and established a new body, the Municipal Inspectorate, to eradicate hawking. Women hawkers were arrested and fined under the new laws. This caused additional hardships especially to the already landless squatters. By the end of the war many of these women supported political organizations such as KCA to express their dissatisfaction with the Nairobi administration.

END NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

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43. Ibid. pp. 158-160.

44. Ibid. pp. 185 and 251; M.P.K. Sorrenson, Land Reform, op. cit., p. 49.

45. Carl G. Rosberg and John Nottingham, The Myth of `Mau Mau', op. cit., pp. 185-187; M.P.K. Sorrenson, Land Reform, op. cit., p. 88.

46. Municipal Native Affairs Department, Nairobi, Annual Report, 1945, p. 8, Quoted in Mary Parker, "The Development of Municipal Government" op. cit., p. 21.

47. Andrew Hake, African Metropolis, op. cit., p. 54; O.I., Wahu Kamau, op. cit.; Mary Ndubi, Feb. 8, 1990 and Feb. 15, 1990; Salome Mtula, op. cit.

48. O.I., Wahu Kamau op. cit; Rachel Njambi, op. cit; Elisiba Washuka, op. cit.; The Construction of Ziwani Estate started in 1942 and it was completed in 1945. See Appendices to the Report on the Control and Management of the Nairobi City Councils' African Housing Rental Estates, Prepared and submitted Jointly by Organizations and Methods Officers of the Government of Kenya and the Nairobi City Council. April 11, 1958, KNA, K 365.5 KEN. Appendix B; For the salaries of some of the best paid Africans, see Report on Economic and Social survey of the Sudanese Settlement at Kibera July 31, 1944, by the Municipal Native Affairs Officer and the Social Welfare Officer, p. 16 in Reorganization, KNA, JW 2/7.

49. O.I. Wahu Kamau; op. cit.; T.C. Colchester, Municipal Native Affairs Officer, Nairobi, March 7, 1944, to the Town Clerk in African Social Welfare in Nairobi, 1942-1944, KNA, ARC MAA 2/1/45 VOL. II.

50. O.I., Eunice Wanjiru, City Market, Dec. 21, 1989 and 30 Jan., 1990; Olive Kairu, Wangige, Jan 23, 1990;, Elizabeth Nyambura, Riruta, Jan. 19, 1990.

51. Department of Agriculture Annual Reports, 1942, KNA, p. 4; 1945 p. 14; O.I., Eunice Wanjiru op. cit.; Municipal Native Affairs Department, Nairobi Annual Report, 1941, p. 22 in KNA, ARC MAA 2/3/8 Vol. III.

52. Public Health Committee Meeting, July 10, 1951, CCN Minutes, NCC/CR Archives.

53. O.I. Eunice Wanjiru op. cit.; Africans owned hotels in River Road as early as the 1920s, see Carl Rosberg and John Nottingham, The Myth of `Mau Mau', op. cit., p. 96.

CHAPTER SIX

WOMEN TRADERS IN THE POST WAR YEARS, 1946-1952

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The years following the war saw continuing prosperity in Nairobi. Returning ex-soldiers and new European settlers arrived in Nairobi. More industries were established, and larger numbers of job-seekers flowed into the town. But industries required mainly skilled and semi-skilled labour, and this requirement excluded a large mass of the Africans from the wage sector. At the same time, most of the employed continued to earn a bachelor's wage and their purchasing power continued to be low.

Women sold many inexpensive commodities and services which sustained the economy. The introduction of women's courses at the Jeanes School, Kabete, in 1950, went a long way in providing new knowledge and fields for trade. By 1952 women sold spun and woven cloth, and increased their income by training other women. There were also women launderers in the African locations using simple equipment. The work of the Jeanes School led to the formation of "Maendeleo Ya Wanawake" in 1952. Other women claimed a stake in the town's restaurant business and in the City Market stalls where they faced many challenges.

Nonetheless, the hawker majority persisted. Many were new, having come from European farms where their squatter families were evicted. In Nairobi, they took to hawking for lack of alternative means of survival. As their numbers increased, avenues for obtaining a licence to operate legitimately were tightened. As their frustrations deepened, they found expression in the radical politics of Mau Mau. The onset of Mau Mau led to a decline in the trading activities of women. Mau Mau supporters had no time for trade. They also took Mau Mau orders not to do so. Non-supporters were harassed by Mau Mau adherents and could hardly continue. Police brutality in Nairobi and new conditions for the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru ethnic groups entering Nairobi led to a further decline. The majority of women left trade, at least temporarily.

6.2 AFRICAN WOMEN TRADERS BETWEEN THE WAR AND THE MAU MAU UPRISING, 1946-1952

After the Second World War the population of Nairobi remained more or less stable. Many ex-soldiers and other servicemen settled in the town to find new opportunities. Other European settlers also arrived from Britain and South Africa and settled in the town[1].

Concomitantly, the rate of industrial growth accelerated, owing to a number of forces internal and external to Nairobi. One of these was the change in Britain's economic policy towards the colonies. Up to 1945, Britain pursued a free market economy in the colonies. During the war, however, it suffered heavy material loss and was greatly aided by the United States of America. The aid continued after the war, and Britain's financial position declined from a net creditor of $21.6 billion before the war to a net debtor of $2.6 billion in 1945. The ability of British firms to compete in the world market, therefore, declined. On the other hand, the U.S. was on the ascendancy, politically, economically and militarily. As it sought investment opportunities in the colonies, it threatened weak colonial masters like Britain, which inevitably found it necessary to secure its traditional markets[2]. In 1945, the assets of the Kenya Industrial Management Board were bought by East Africa Industries Limited, a firm which was financed by the British government and by Unilever, one of the international manufacturing complexes. East Africa Industries initially produced Kimbo cooking fat, Blue Band Margarine, and soaps. The British Government also set up special investment banks, such as the Commonwealth Development Corporation, whose aim was to provide- government backed cash loans to private firms like Uniliver[3].

In the years that followed, more money was pumped into industry in East Africa. In 1948 alone, £23 million was invested in new private and public companies, and nine-tenths of this money went into industry. Between 1945 and 1949, at least £54 million was invested in the equity of new companies in Kenya[4].

Industrialization in Kenya was hastened by cheaper labour costs there than in Britain. Labour costs in Britain were 400 per cent higher than those in East Africa. The cheap labour was an essential part of Britain's recovery measures after the war. The corollary to this was the availability of a large market for the goods. The war period generated a higher demand for industrial goods, and the increasing number of Africans drawn into the monetary economy provided a large potential market for the new products. Such markets extended to the whole of East Africa since the formation of the East African Customs Union in 1924, which established a more or less 'free trade zone' between the three countries of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania[5]. Such development was also encouraged by the takeover in 1945 of power by the Labour Party. This government, with its socialist leanings, favoured industrialization in the colonies to uplift the welfare of the colonized peoples[6].

The location of the industries in Kenya, particularly in Nairobi, was the result of internal factors within East Africa,. By 1945, Kenya had the largest number of Europeans and Asians, the main consumers of industrial commodities[7]. Nairobi was favoured because of its geographical position and sound infrastructure. Its central position on the railway made it the link between the rich agricultural hinter land,

and the outside world. It was also the collecting centre and distribution point for the colonial import and export trade. By 1945, it was a European economic centre and a service city, with several industries. These prepared the ground for investment by multinational complexes in the post-war period[8].

The new industries consisted of light and secondary manufacturing such as processing and packaging. Items produced included beer and light drinks, gas, metal cans, canned goods, packaged biscuits, and soaps and perfumery.[9] In 1948 a city planner zoned Nairobi's industrial area south of the city, with light road-served plants in one section, heavy rail factories in another, and noxious or dangerous industries further segregated to the South East[10].

The post-war years also witnessed considerable expansion in the building industry. Municipal Council African estates, such as Marurani (Temporary), and Bondeni and Kaloleni, were constructed in between 1945 and 1947, and the construction of Bahati and Gorofani started in the late 1940s and early 1950s[11]. Building in the city centre enjoyed a more remarkable growth, as Andrew Hake, the author of a major work on the History of Nairobi observed:

> Between 1945 and 1950 it [Nairobi] was to cross the threshold from town to city. Land values in the central business area rose, and the permitted building heights were set at 100 feet in city square and 50 feet in other parts of the commercial area. Seven storeyed office blocks such as Mansion House and Saddler House,

> became an economic investment, and the city's architects were able to sharpen their pencils for the second really sustained period of construction; flat roofs and reinforced concrete structures rose above the skyline...[12].

Industrial growth and building construction accelerated the demand for wage labour, and Nairobi became a labour magnet. The influx of job-seekers intensified, causing a major rise in the African population of the town. According to the 1948 census of the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, Nairobi Municipality had a population of 118,976 people with 10,830 Europeans, 43,749 Indians and Arabs, and 64,397 Africans[13]. By 1947, 40 per cent of the private non-agricultural African labour force, employed in the colony, was engaged in Nairobi and Mombasa alone[14].

The better-remunerated Europeans and Asians provided a good market for the relatively expensive commodities such as those retailed in the Municipal market but the large mass of Africans continued to depend on cheaper items sold by women, especially hawkers, because the upward tendency in African wages failed to correspond with the rising cost of living. Between 1944 and 1952 the minimum wage in Nairobi Municipality rose from Shs. 28.00 to Shs. 35.00 plus Shs 5.00 housing allowance in 1948, to Shs. 50.00 plus 6.50 housing allowance in August 1952[15]. Minimum wages after the war were set by the government, following the enactment of the Minimum Wage

Ordinance (1946), which applied to Nairobi and Mombasa Island. Even so, the wage rates were based on inadequately calculated cost of living indexes, and the needs of a single worker, excluding his family[16]. The 1954 Carpenter Report concluded that:

> approximately one half of the urban workers in private industry and approximately one quarter of those in the public services are in receipt of wages insufficient to provide for their basic essential needs ... as single men under urban conditions ... 'If we take into account not only the workers needs, but also those of his wife and children, the picture becomes grim indeed[17].

It was one thing to enact minimum wages, and yet another to implement them. As late as 1952 no more than 10 or 11 per cent of the workers in Nairobi earned the barest statutory minimum. At the same time, substantial increases in commodity prices reduced the real value of wages. Between 1944 and 1952 prices of major items in the African diet more than doubled. Bread increased by 63 per cent kerosene and charcoal by nearly 70 per cent and 50 per cent respectively.[18]

Shortages of housing made accommodation as expensive as ever, causing a further strain on wages. The government and the railways provided some accommodation for their employees, but they only scratched the surface of the housing problem. Of the 80,000 Africans estimated to be in Nairobi in 1949, about 25,000 had no fixed abode[19]. The effect of this was not only over-crowding, but extremely high rents even outside the town. Mary Parker noted in her exhaustive investigation into Nairobi's Municipal Government:

> The whole housing policy has led, not merely to overcrowding in the town itself, but to a serious problem of peri-urban settlements where rents are not lower... Rents in council houses may be as low as 4/= - 6/= per head per room ... but at Dagoretti Corner, where residence involved expenditure of effort or money to reach the town, rents were at least as high for the same size of room. In Pumwani a room 10x10 might cost 20/=, and at Kariobangi, again outside the town, the same rental was charged. In Eastleigh, where Africans live only with passes from the Municipal African Affairs Officer, 60/= - 100/= per room per month was charged. Large numbers live there because this officer can not refuse passes, when accommodation is so short. Consequently, African labourers have to compete for housing with Indians...[22]

Results of a 1950 survey of Nairobi African workers confirmed the hardships. The average African spent 18 per cent above his wage, deriving the extra spendings from kin, or credit from retailers. For labourers with resident families and job-seekers, the proportion was greater[23]. It is not surprising that The Report of the East African Statistical Department, 1951 stated:

> For many of the Africans, it appeared to be acceptable policy to give more than half of their wages to their creditors immediately after receipt of their wages; thus they had to borrow again by the middle of the month to balance their budgets to the next pay day[24].

For the same reasons outlined above, married women residing with husbands in Nairobi were compelled to subsidize husband's salaries. For women living independently in the town, gender inequality in the distribution of formal sector jobs gave them little chance of obtaining one. Out of a total adult female population of 9,250 in 1948, only 712 were wage earners and trading was the alternative means of survival for many. For women coming from the rural areas, the belief in better profits in Nairobi persisted[23].

6.2.1 Women Groups' Activities and the Formation of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, 1945 to 1952

In the post-war era, Britain contributed on a large scale to African welfare in Kenya for the first time. This was in response to the United States' pressure to decolonise and to the demands of a group of liberals, humanitarians and socialists in Britain. It was also an answer to the rising nationalist demands of the time[24].

The chief tool for implementing the welfare policies was the Colonial Development and Welfare Act (CD&W) of 1940. During the war, funds from this Act were mainly spent on education, health services and housing. After the war a stronger emphasis was placed on improving the standards of skills and education among the colonized. From this stream of events rose the concern for women's welfare and education, which culminated in the formation in 1952 of a major women's organization in Kenya, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake a Kiswahili expression which, literally translated means women's progress.

The establishment whose formation was spearheaded by white women aimed at coordinating the activities of African Women[25].

Up to 1949 African welfare in Nairobi was of little significance to the administration. In any case, the Africans were regarded as merely temporary residents of the town, leaving their families in rural areas to which they periodically returned[26]. In the 1920s, growing African agitation led to the creation of the position of the Municipal Native Affairs Officer (MNAO). The idea was first proposed after the 1922 Thuku riots to control African behaviour in the city and to act as their mouthpiece to prevent similar occurrences in the future[27]. In 1928 the Feetham Commission recommended the proposal and a Municipal Native Affairs Officer was seconded to the Council from the Central government[28]. In 1949 the Municipal Council set up its own African Affairs Department and appointed its own officer. Earlier in 1946 the title changed from MNAO to Municipal African Affairs Officer (MAAO). The latter officer had broader duties than his predecessor. In addition to overseeing policy affecting Africans, he approved their trade licences and was in charge of their welfare[29].

Following the establishment of the African Affairs Department, a social welfare section was set up, under the social welfare worker, who was answerable to the MAAO[30]. Within the same year, the section started an African women's home industries school in Pumwani. The school aimed at providing women with skills to use in earning an income. The courses included sewing, spinning and weaving, and craftwork such as crocheting, knitting and beadwork. A fee of Shs. 3.00 per session was paid for instruction and potential pupils were reached through personal contact and through the medium of exhibitions and shows[31].

In 1950, at the initiative of white women, African women's courses were also started at the Jeanes School, Kabete. The school, started in 1925, was initially a training centre for African teachers that aimed to teach simple techniques in agriculture, health and crafts in rural schools. Apparently, this idea did not achieve much success, as in 1938 it was abandoned. The school became a training centre for civil servants, particularly chiefs and community development specialists. The new course for women sought first to create a sense of self- awareness, as many were, until 1950, largely uneducated. The cultural male dominance in African societies excluded women from public gatherings such as government barazas, where the public were educated on various issues such as agricultural reforms, and other important matters. In addition, few attended formal school. As late as 1950, the number of females compared to males attending schools was small. Of that number, the majority dropped out in the lower classes, leaving a tiny minority to achieve good education. The figures for 1949 and 1950[32] in table 6.1 illustrate the point.

The school administrators also aimed at training women community leaders to spearhead women's development. Finally, the staff hoped to provide women with skills to enable them earn an independent income, for their own use, and to supplement their husband's low wage[33].

The school enrolled 35 students in its first year, most of them married women who attended the course with their children. The curriculum consisted of cookery, housewifery, laundry-work, hygiene, childcare, firstaid, home-nursing, needlework, handwork, games and civics, literacy and agriculture. Simple accounts, club organization and management were also introduced. The course lasted nine months, with a six-week recess[34].

A number of subjects taught at the institutions provided women with new fields of trade. Mary Luise Wanjiku Wanyee, born in the Dagoretti area in the early 1920s, took a course in spinning and weaving at Pumwani in 1949. Later she not only supported herself from the trade, but trained other women as well. She offered the service at half the fee charged at Pumwani. By the end of 1952, two of her ex-students were also selling spun and woven cloth for a living. Hence knowledge was trickling down to members of the community[35].

Table 6.1: Number of African Male and Female Pupils by Years at School 1949 and 1950

1949

No. of Years at School	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Males	85,547	46,381	32,104	23,275	19,250	11,189	6,223	3,803	1,565	794	259	156	116	83
Females	36,282	19,605	10,800	5,922	3,922	1,738	928	588	198	67	17	17	12	6
Total	121,829	65,986	42,904	29,204	23,172	12,927	7,151	4,391	1.763	861	276	173	128	89

1950

No. of Years at School	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Males	89,630	49,915	37,736	28,279	23,302	13,786	7,162	5,749	1,677	523	168	78	28	6
Females	37,657	20,498	12,300	8,273	4,787	3,286	1,537	918	230	70	22			
Total	127,287	70,413	50,036	36,552	28,089	17,072	8,699	6,667	1,907	593	190	78	28	6

Source: Education Department Annual Report, 1950

The Jeanes School went beyond training women to earn a living to strengthening and/or encouraging the formation of progress clubs. Outgoing students were advised to start women's clubs in their homes or villages to pass on the knowledge to other women. European women volunteers or those on part-time paid service organised follow-up activities for the ex-students.[36] Josephine Wangu, chairperson and founder member of the Kiambu Women's Association in Nairobi was among the first group of students at the school. She was later instrumental in turning her group into a Maendeleo Club. From mid-1951, she met the members weekly to teach them various subjects. Needlework was popular and many women made a little money from knitting sweaters, crocheting or patching clothes. However, a few women were interested in more challenging areas. Sophia Mumbi, a member of the group since 1946, borrowed Shs. 90.00 from the association in 1952, to start a laundry business, which she conducted outside her house in Bondeni, near the present Gikomba market. The estate was centrally located for the service, and a number of male workers living in Pumwani, Shauri Moyo, Starehe and Ziwani, cleaned their good clothes at Mumbi's. Before the end of the year, she was making up to Shs 6.00 a day, enough to purchase the family meals, and save at least Shs. 1.00[37].

Already by 1952, many ex-students of the Jeanes School operated clubs' in districts outside Nairobi, and a total of 10 women's clubs existed in Kenya by the end of the year. Sewing dominated the activities of most clubs, but hygiene and childcare were also assuming importance. Out of the clubs operations there arose the need to coordinate their activities. Such coordination was done by the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization[38]

The outbreak of the Mau Mau uprising in 1952, and the subsequent declaration of a state of Emergency affected the activities of the Jeanes school and Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. In the Jeanes School, the security of some European staff was threatened by Mau Mau activists, and they sought jobs outside Kenya. Many other personnel at the school were redeployed to oversee the implementation of emergency measures, and the school suffered a shortage of staff to the extent that the administration suggested a reduction in the number of courses offered per year.[39] In the women's homecraft section, selection of students was done more carefully, particularly with regard to the Kikuyu, Meru and Embu. The number of women admitted to the school remained constant, though, owing to high demand. In 1953, the principal of the School, J.L. Porter, reported that the school admitted about 80 women every year. In that year a total of 72 were in the Homecraft School alone.[40]

The activities of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake especially in Nairobi and many parts of Kikuyuland were more adversely affected by the Mau Mau revolt. Activities of womens clubs in Nyeri, Muranga and Kiambu declined. In Nairobi the formation of more Maendeleo groups more or less halted, and activities in operation were retarded[41]. In 1953 Josephine Wangu, the leader of the Kiambu Kikuyu Women's Association was arrested, allegedly for being a Mau Mau activist and detained. As a result of lack of leadership, and constant harassment of the Kikuyu by the government, the group disintegrated[42].

6.2.2 Illegal Versus Lawful Traders and the Colonial Interventionist Policies, 1946-1952

The post-war period marked an important step in the incorporation of Africans into the colonial political system. Until 1944 African interests in the Legislative Council were represented by a missionary, a retired official, and the Chief Native Commissioner. In October 1944, Africans for the first time gained their long-time demand for direct representation into the Legislative Council, through the nomination of Eliud Mathu. His membership was in addition to the existing Council of eleven elected European members, five Asian members and twenty nominated officials[43].

After the war more Africans were nominated to the Council. By 1948 a total of four African representatives were in the Legislative Council. However, this increase was more apparent than real. European and Asian representations in the Council were increased at the same time, and the official element was strengthened. In the final analysis, it was motions supporting British interests that were passed. Matters affecting Africans, but contradicting European views, were inevitably lost[44].

During these years, therefore, the long attempt to constrict squatter rights over land reached its peak. While settler farming expanded to provide the hungry post-war world with food and materials, the conditions under which squatters lived on farms were hardened to make them total farm labourers, or remove them. For example, settlers adopted forced destocking measures and land for squatter cultivation was greatly limited. The legal minimum number of working days for squatters was increased. In Naivasha District, squatters were allowed to cultivate only two acres of land and by 1946 squatter working days per year were increased to 270. In Nakuru, squatter cultivation was limited to a mere 1.5 acres, down from 2.5. The already harsh measures were enforced with calculated cruelty. Forced seizure of squatter stock was common. Squatters who rejected the new terms were evicted before they harvested their crop and old squatters were removed from land where they had lived all their lives, to return home to the 'reserves' they had never seen. By 1952 squatting had ceased to be an attractive economic option to the land-hungry Africans[45].

The evicted squatters, mainly Kikuyu, found no respite in the Kikuyu land units, where population was already reaching the bursting point. In 1948, a population of 745,000 resided in the area. Kiambu District had a population of 420 persons per square mile, Fort Hall 411 persons per square mile and Nyeri 272. The situation was worsened by continued land buying and selling, as land accumulated in the hands of a few people. By 1948 an estimated 40 per cent of the population in Kiambu had no land. By the turn of the 1950s the landless in Kikuyuland made up approximately 50 per cent of the population[46].

The colonial officials and legislators closed their ears to the Kikuyu land problems. But criticisms continued. In 1951 Eliud Mathu attacked the Kenya Land Commission Report (1934) and called for a new land commission with African representation to reconsider the African land claims. In November the same year, two nationalists, Mbiyu Koinange and Achieng Oneko, went to Europe under KAU sponsorship to present a further petition on land directly to the British members of Parliament and the Economic and Social Councils of the United Nations in Paris. In both cases the claims were dismissed by the legislators and the government respectively as irresponsible attempts to reverse established economic policies[47].

Migration to towns remained one solution to the land problems, particularly among the Kikuyu. In 1948, there were 28,889 Kikuyu living within the Municipality of Nairobi, 45 per cent of the total African population in the town. By 1951 the African population in Nairobi was approximately 80,000 with roughly 80 per cent male, and 20 per cent female. By 1952, the estimated African population in Nairobi stood at 95,000 persons[48].

Earlier in 1946 two Africans, Muchohi Gikonyo and Francis J. Khamisi, were nominated to the Nairobi Municipal

Council to represent African interests. As in the Legislative Council, however, this was accompanied by an increase of five more European Councillors, and real power in the Council continued to be vested in Europeans[49]. The following memorandum of the two African councillors in 1948 expressed their frustration:

> At the moment, being only two against an overwhelming majority of Europeans and Indians, our views have little influence, and more particularly as we do not have the sympathy of the European councillors and Aldermen, who have far the greatest influence on council matters. It is our experience that unless we have increased representation, present representation may be of little effect. For this reason, we are convinced that it is essential in the constitutional development in urban affairs, to consider most seriously the question of increased African members on the town council. African population is rapidly increasing, and with it more problems affecting them. To solve these problems, African opinion must not be ignored[50].

In 1950 Nairobi was granted city status by a royal charter, and settler power remained supreme[51].

In Nairobi, therefore, African problems were unattended and multiplied with time. Unemployment figures continued to soar. Between 1945 and 1953, the number of African wage earners grew from 38,000 to 50,000. The majority of Africans, who were unskilled labourers, were unable to find work in industries which mainly required skilled and semi-skilled labourers. Such skills were unobtainable for most Africans, owing to the migrant labour system resulting from poor housing and low wages. As late as 1952, most employees sought work for periods hardly exceeding six months. Consequently, they were unable to obtain sufficient experience and skill[52]. Gender discrimination did not change, and opportunities for women were as scarce as ever. By 1951 only a few were employed, either to do sorting work in industry, or as children's nurses. Trading, already the occupation of a number of women, attracted many more in the post war years[53].

African entry into Nairobi's legal business, however, was strictly controlled. In the city centre, their trading place was restricted to the backyard of the Municipal Market, where they sold wholesale produce and retailed goods from specified stalls. From 1949, they also sold goods from a market on Duke Street (Ronald Ngala Street), close to the present Kenya Bus Station. Otherwise, their trade was generally restricted to the locations where by 1946 they operated from 180 estate shops and two markets. The markets were the old one at Kariokor and the new one in Shauri Moyo, opened in 1946. There were 464 stalls in the two markets[54]. This isolation of African traders was meant to prevent them from posing "unfair" competition to established European and Asian traders in the town[55]. It would also keep away "undesirable" elements such as `spivs', `drones' and `loafers' who posed as hawkers, from spilling over into better class areas[56]. Whatever the case, these measures, reduced women's opportunities in trade.

From 1946, procedures for acquiring trading premises further limited the possibilities of women entering legal business. Applications were first endorsed by the African Advisory Council and the Municipal African Affairs Officer, ostensibly to prevent the licencing of criminals who might conduct nefarious activities in the city[57]. Many members of the Advisory Council were, however, established traders and shopkeepers whose priority was to guard their economic interests. Applicants who threatened these interests were not favourably endorsed for premises or hawker's licences. The campaign of the members of the Council in 1949 and 1950 for a limitation of hawker licences and shops and even for a total halt in their issue, on grounds of a saturation of the market, may be seen in this light[58].

The Advisory Council was an African male-dominated institution, with little regard for women as potential achievers in trade. As such, it rarely positively endorsed their applications[59]. In 1945, allegedly to prevent women from falling into immoral behaviour, the Municipal Council, acting on the advice of the Advisory Council, ceased issuing licences to women sellers of porridge. The ban was lifted a week later, when the Town Clerk received a protest letter from the women. However, only women resident in Nairobi and depending on hawking for a livelihood would receive the licences[60]. In 1947, the first time a classification of hawker licences is given in the records; 700 were issued, but only 100 for women selling porridge were allocated. On the trading premises, men dominated the shops, and possessed a disproportionate number of the market stalls, allowing only a minority of women to operate there[61].

The few women who did operate from the premises used other means to get them. Some acquired the places in their husbands' names[62]. Others, who obtained them in their own names went through influential persons to succeed. One of these women was Salome Mtula. A trader in Nairobi since the 1930s, she unsuccessfully applied for premises three times between 1946 and 1949. In 1948, she came to know the late Mzee Jomo Kenyatta as a KAU activist and it was through his influence in 1951 that she obtained her trading premises, number CCN6, in Shauri Moyo Estate[63].

By 1946 Salome Mtula had a total saving of Shs. 1200.00. She used Shs 900/= to launch the food business in her Shauri Moyo trading premises. It was a great opportunity, as the area accommodated many demobilized soldiers and men seeking work, most of whom were bachelors. As accommodation was short leading to persistent overcrowding, many men lacked cooking equipment and preferred to eat out[64].

Mtula's menu was tailor made to fit many African "pockets" and food varieties. It consisted of the following foods and prices[65]

Table 6.2:

Food	Price Shs.	Cts.
Tea per cup	00	10
Porridge per cup	00	05
1 Mandazi	00	15
1 Chapati	00	25
1 Sweet potatoe (big)	00	09
1 sweet potatoe (medium)	00	07
1 sweet potatoe (small)	00	05
1 cassava (piece)	00	04
Meat stew (plate) about 5 small pieces	00	50
'Ugali' per plate	00	15
'Nyovo' (a mixture of maize and beans boiled)	00	20
1 fish (tilapia)	00	40
1 slice of bread (buttered)	00	10
Chicken per plate	00	80

Source: Oral Interview, Salome Mtula; The Pattern of Income, Expenditure and Consumption of African Labourers in Nairobi, October - November 1950, Appendix III.

Mtula's business, like those of many other women, brought benefits to the community at large. By the time of the declaration of the Mau Mau Emergency in October 1952, she had saved enough to buy musical instruments for her son Silla Gwada, who had already distinguished himself as a good musician and composer. The man occasionally played music at the food house and attracted many clients. He also travelled home in Alego in Siaya District, where his music thrilled crowds paying a fee of only 50 cts on entry. Mtula was very popular with her kin relatives, to whom she sent occasional gifts such as a hat, a headscarf, a blanket, or an underdress. She also employed two relatives who earned their living from the food house[66].

For many other women in established business, obtaining the legal status was just one of the many problems they encountered. Mary Ndubi Gichangi, faced additional difficulties of racial loyalties between customers and traders, and competition from illegal hawkers. Mary Ndubi was born in 1926 in Kirinyaga. Her parents were Christians, and this enabled her, unlike many girls of her age, to go to school. She obtained eight years education and was employed as a teacher in 1945. On getting married in 1946, she resigned her teaching job at her husband's request and became a housewife[67].

In 1949 she had two children, and the husband, a teacher, could not satisfactorily finance the family budget. She crocheted sweaters and made and sold cakes using the knowledge she gained in school. By early 1951, she had Shs. 130.00 in her savings in the house. Through the help of Dedan Githegi, then Assistant Municipal African Affairs Officer, she acquired stall number 49 in the main Municipal market building to sell poultry and eggs. The business name was Embu Poultry and Egg Dealers. This made Ndubi the first African woman to run a business in the main Municipal Market building. She paid a stall rent of Shs 120.00 per month[68].

Ndubi's neighbours and competitors at the market were mainly Asians. This brought many challenges which she overcame through the improvement of her skills. Most customers at the market were Europeans and Asians who naturally preferred to purchase their requirements from Asian traders[69]. To win customers, she excelled in neatness and in the quality of produce. She washed her eggs and kept her chickens neatly in a transparent glass. Her stall was in the balcony and she wrote an advertisement for it at the entrance, which attracted many buyers. Her knowledge of English enabled her to communicate with ease. After a year in business, her net profit rose to Shs 150.00 per month. Apart from family commitments, she contributed Shs 20.00 to the church every month, for charitable and missionary work[70]. Even so, Ndubi's profits were below her expectations.

The limitation of the premises and hawker licences forced a large number of unemployed Africans to trade illegitimately. For instance, in 1947 the number of unlicenced street traders was estimated at 2000 and they were still opening businesses in every backstreet and open space within and outside the commercial area[71]. Many stationed themselves in the vicinity of markets and shops to intercept customers destined for these places. Others took up positions in Asian and European residential areas and trespassed into private property. As a result they were a "nuisance", and presented "unfair competition" to the more respected shopkeepers and licenced hawkers, who provided council with revenue. Besides, Council associated crime and unrest in Nairobi with their activities and illegal food sellers were branded a menace to public health[72].

Thus, Council authorities felt duty-bound to create order and alleviate illegitimate competition from illegal traders. The assignments were executed through the enactment of a host of new Municipal by-laws and a strengthening of the inspectorate. In 1946 the Undesirable Natives' (Temporary) Ordinance was passed on the basis of the previous pass laws to remove Africans without regular employment from Nairobi[73]. In 1947, on the recommendation of the African Advisory Council, Africans who remained in the town for more than three months without employment were guilty of an offence[74].

In May 1949 the Legislative Council passed a Vagrancy (Amendment) Bill empowering the Member for Law and Order to repatriate vagrants, who after three months in Nairobi were still unemployed, back to their rural homes. Later the same year, the Voluntary Unemployed Persons (Provision of Employment) Ordinance was passed and became effective in January 1950. In the period from March to September that year, 754 persons were registered and reported to the Labour Exchange Committee in Nairobi. A further 280 were arrested by the police and many were repatriated. But many of those returned came back to Nairobi. In the two or three years before the emergency, it was estimated that about 10,000 Africans who had been repatriated were back in the town.[75]

Nairobi authorities became apprehensive about losing control over hawkers. In 1947 a revised and stricter set of hawking by-laws was drawn to govern hawking in Nairobi. A hawker was, for the first time, defined to mean "any person, who, whether as principal, agent, or employee, carries on the business of offering, or exposing goods for sale, barter, or exchange, elsewhere, rather than at a fixed place." The by-laws also forbade the sale of meat and poultry by hawkers[76]. In 1948 an additional set of by-laws further emphasised the seriousness of vending without a licence[77].

The means of enforcing the by-laws was the Municipal police force. For the sake of better efficiency, the number of inspectors by 1952 was eight, two times the number in 1944[78]. The hawkers, some of them licenced, became harassed "criminals" in Nairobi. Licenced women hawkers were charged for selling goods while seated at specific places, without moving from place to place, a requirement too difficult for many of them to meet, as they traded with young children, or were pregnant[79].

The majority were arrested and charged for illegal hawking. Ruth Wangari whose husband died at war, continued to support the family through illegal hawking. In 1950, however, she was again arrested, and taken to court. On conviction, she was jailed for three months after failing to pay a prohibitive fine of Shs 160.00. Wangari's imprisonment meant great suffering for her children, who were eventually evicted from the slum house that they had occupied in Ruaraka since 1948, when they moved out of the house of Wangari's brother-in-law[80].

As more women were arrested for illegal trading, an atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity reigned among them. Pregnant women, and others with young babies struggled to escape at the mere sight of a police officer, and injuries during such stampedes were not uncommon. There was a rising wave of discontent and despondency which created fertile grounds for politicization among the illegal traders[81].

From 1945 onwards the build-up of the nationalist movement in Nairobi was rapid. The First World War and missionary education had led to the first steps at agitational politics in the 1920s[82]. Experiences during the Second World War awakened Africans to the need for political representation, land reform, improved economic opportunities and the abolition of the registration system[83]. In Nairobi the demands were articulated by two bodies, the Kenya African Union (KAU) and the trade union movement. The KAU was formed in 1944 as the Kenya African Study Union, by educated Africans from various backgrounds. It was renamed KAU in 1946, and in 1947, it came under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta who had just returned from England[84]. The trade union movement was spearheaded by the East African Trade Union Congress (EATUC), headed by President Fred Kubai and Secretary Makhan Singh. These organizations used the press and public meetings to heighten public agitation[85].

The two groups used different approaches to achieve their goals. The KAU politicians were moderates who demanded change through constitutional means. The trade unionists were more militant in their demands. By 1950, public faith in the possibility of constitutional reform was declining and the radical trade unionists gained strength. They seized control of the KAU Nairobi branch, and demanded independence in three years. They organized secret oaths administered by a secret society called Mau Mau, and organized the public to use selective political violence and disobey the laws and institutions of the government. They planned and ensured effective organization of urban strikes and demonstrations which paralysed the city, the worst of which came in 1950. The strike lasted for eight days and involved 100,000 workers. It also spread to many surrounding areas[86].

By 1951 the radicals were organizing mass oathings in and around Nairobi. By 1952, Nairobi was the headquarters of the Mau Mau movement. It was an arms depot, a recruiting base, a source of the supply of medicine and money, and, as Andrew Hake, concludes "the control tower of the movement"[87]. Squatters dispossessed of their privileges and harassed as illegal hawkers on the streets of Nairobi swelled the ranks of Mau Mau activists. Many of them, like Ruth Wangari, left trading to dedicate their service to the Mau Mau cause[88].

By mid 1952 Mau Mau unrest was causing a deterioration in trade. Disgruntled squatters and peasants in the rural areas sabotaged settler crops and farm machinery and refused to transport food to Nairobi. In Nairobi and the surrounding areas anarchy reigned. Market vicinities became centres of lawlessness, and the police were occasionally called to restore order, sometimes around the Municipal market[89]. There were threats, murders, and theft of property in many areas. On 7 October, 1952, Senior Chief Waruhiu, the leading government spokesman in Kikuyu and one of the most prominent Christian leaders in Kiambu, was assassinated just outside Nairobi. The disturbances led to a decline in the flow of goods from the countryside to the town[90].

On 20 October 1952, the new Governor, Sir Everlyn Baring, declared a state of Emergency in all areas affected by the insurgency, and arrested Jomo Kenyatta, Achieng Oneko, Fred Kubai, Paul Ngei, and Bildad Kaggia, all in connection with the Mau Mau[91]. The Mau Mau militancy and the emergency measures accelerated the fall off in business. On 27 November, 1952, the radicals murdered a Nairobi councillor, Tom Mbotela, allegedly for collaborating with the government. Subsequently police raided Shauri Moyo market and all petty traders were held for interrogation. Police suspected Kikuyu traders, the majority at the market, of providing a storage for Mau Mau guns and being behind the murder of Mbotela. The raid and the subsequent arrests were desperate efforts by the police to unearth the killers and the guns. Hours after the raid, fire broke out at the market and razed it to the ground. The government exonerated the police from the blame of setting the market on fire, but previous events strongly suggest that the police may have been responsible[92].

The government took further security measures. In 1953 it closed a number of African markets in Central Province and produce-buying centres became short[93]. It also introduced security operations against the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru ethnic groups believed to compose the majority of Mau Mau adherents. During the operations, suspected activists were arrested and imprisoned or detained. A number of women traders were arrested in the course of their business on suspicion of carrying guns, food or information to the dissidents. Subsequently their trading activities ceased[94]. In 1953, the government introduced a pass book to control the movement of Kikuyu, Embu and Meru. Only proved loyalists would enter Nairobi. Many commuter traders were thus shut out from the city[95].

The majority of the remaining women traders ceased their activities because of harassment from the remaining Mau Mau supporters. Women were beaten and could even be molested ostensibly for supporting the white government. In 1953 young Mau Mau adherents confronted and thoroughly beat up Mary Ndubi near the present city centre Kenya Bus Service Station. She later joined her husband in Embu[96].

6.3 CONCLUSION

In the post-war years, the war-generated boom was maintained. More European settlers and ex-soldiers arrived in Nairobi loaded with cash. There was accelerated industrial growth and building contruction and more men secured wage employment. Nairobi's commodity demands remained high.

Britain's post-war focus on the social welfare of the colonized peoples brought new benefits to African women traders. As part of the social welfare program, women's courses were introduced at the Jeanes School, Kabete, to train them in community leadership and to provide them with new skills to use in earning an independent income. They learned subjects like cookery, laundry-work and needlework. The formation of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake enabled ex-students of the Jeanes School to spread their knowledge and skills to other women. Many members of the women's groups such as the Kiambu women's Association gained the new skills from the Jeanes School graduates. By 1952 a number of them earned a living from knitting, crocheting and laundry-work.

The majority of women traders continued to work individually. The larger number in hawking persisted. After the war, eviction of squatters from European farms gathered momentum, and more landless women poured into Nairobi. In the absence of other openings, they turned to hawking for a livelihood. But the Municipal Council authorities found their activities indecent, and their increasing numbers alarming. They tightened licensing procedures and enacted laws to prevent the illegal hawking activities in the Municipality.

A few aggressive women hawkers moved into established business. They provided employment for other Africans and sent some help to members of their extended families in the rural areas. But their operations faced competition from many Africans including women, still conducting illegal hawking. Many other women shop owners, dealing in produce, obtained lower net returns than they expected owing to the competition.

The impact of the hawking "menace" was felt by European and Asian traders as well, and it interfered with the privacy of Europeans in their residential areas. The Council administration stepped in to restore order. More laws were passed, under which more women were arrested for conducting illegal trade or for trespassing into private property. Such women were imprisoned or fined, and were embittered by the loss of money they had saved over a long time. Many who were already landless were threatened with destitution. By 1952, hawkers' disenchantment with the Nairobi colonial administration was high. Many became supporters of the Mau Mau uprising. As the insurrection gained ground, and government counter-insurgency measures took shape, the climate became less conducive to trade. After 1952, therefore, women's trading activities in Nairobi slackened.

END NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX

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CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

This research focuses on the trading activities of African women in Nairobi in the period from 1899 to 1952. It presents a number of conclusions that broaden our view of the Kenyan history.

First, the majority of women traders were Kikuyu. This was due to the proximity of their rural land holdings to Nairobi and because they were the most affected by the colonial land alienation. Having Europeans in their neighbourhoods also led to a more rapid change in their lifestyles as they rapidly acquired western values. These brought them into the money economy earlier than other ethnic groups. Nonetheless, the socio-economic trends of these years also brought women from other ethnic groups, such as the Kamba, Nubi, and Luo, to Nairobi. Some of these women came to Nairobi to trade during the day and returned home in the evenings.

Second, the work shows that, for women who lived in Nairobi, the question of gender disparity was a major factor behind the women's decision to trade. Urban conditions meant purchasing every item used by the household. As men's wages were low, even married women had to contribute to the survival of the family. But employment in Nairobi was mainly available for males alone. This inequality was the result of a complex web of factors, ranging from the employers' preference for male workers to cultural practices which were particularly restricting to married women.

Many women therefore, sought income by trade, which appealed to them because of two reasons. It had a long history, dating back to the pre-colonial period, which made it more acceptable to the society. Also, it was easy for women to become traders once they had produce or a little cash, and it was possible to combine such activities with the demands of domestic work which it was their social obligation to perform.

Third, the research has assessed the impact of colonialism and its accompanying racial policies on women traders. It demonstrates that they were sidelined by the colonial economy. Being Africans, the privilege of obtaining formal credit eluded the women. Consequently, their business-starting capital was always meagre. In fact, most women traders in Nairobi possessed no liquid cash when they began business, and mostly used their farm produce.

The racial laws also affected the women's trading operations. Up to 1928 the existing legislation, such as the pass and vagrancy laws which sought to regulate the migration of Africans into Nairobi, had little impact. There was a constant shortage of African labour in the town, and the problem of controlling the jobless was not pressing. This made serious enforcement of the laws unnecessary. The Indian pressure for shared political power in the Nairobi Municipal Council also occupied the minds of the European authorities. In fact, to divert Indian attention from the power struggle, the Council authorities offered limited gains to Africans under the pretext of the paramountcy of African interests, advanced by the Devonshire White Paper of 1923. One of these concessions was the removal of the licensing requirement for African hawkers.

These factors enabled African women to conduct their business with little hindrance, at least for a while. As early as the end of the First World War, some of them had emerged as cash accumulators, and the use of imported goods was familiar to many. By the mid 1920s, some of these women owned rental wattle-and-daub houses in Pumwani, from which they earned a steady income. Others extended their business to the rural areas by providing imported goods that they purchased in Nairobi to the rural folk.

The impact of the racial laws began to be felt by the women traders in 1929. In 1928, the Feetham Commission rejected the Indian lobby which sought equal power-sharing with the Europeans. Consequently, the white settlers emerged as the unquestionable authority in the town's affairs. It was no longer necessary to pretend that African interests were paramount. Hence, the council administration introduced restrictions on hawkers and tightened control on brewers of home made beer. The police tried to apprehend the illegal traders, but they were ineffective and even more women joined business. Some of these obtained their trading capital as loans from the thrift societies formed in the 1930s in response to the lack of formal credit.

These women derived their livelihood from trade. For example, trading enabled some Christian women to attain a measure of economic independence, and to break away from unChristian practices such as widow inheritance. Others acquired livestock which their sons used for dowry payment for a wives, where the boys' fathers failed to perform this predominantly male role. A number of other women obtained money to provide education for their children, as this increasingly became the ladder for social mobility. Another group joined the list of cash accumulators.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, the impact of the worsening racial policies, and the ability of women to remain buoyant is discussed. It is shown that colonial control of the women's enterprises became entrenched. The issuing of trading licences became restricted and more laws were passed to regulate hawking. Nonetheless, many women defied the laws and continued to hawk goods in the town. Income from business not only provided for family needs, but continued to provide money for their children's education or support for the extended family relatives. Some women continued to save cash, and the more aggressive ones obtained premises and increased the volume of their business. By the outbreak of the Mau Mau rebellion in 1952, a number of women were trading from market stalls in the town, and some ran businesses on premises in the African locations, where they provided employment for other

Africans. Some of the older women traders patronized new ones and had them enrolled into the thrift societies. These societies provided them with social support as well as loans to start business.

There were many other new traders apart from society members, but most of them came from the rural areas where the constantly deteriorating conditions led to migration. They joined itinerant trading where the majority of women already eked out a living. In the post-war years, the numbers of these street traders had increased to the extent that the authorities were appalled by their activities. They considered them unsightly and accused them of posing unfair competition to the established traders who generated revenue for the Council.

The Council swung into action. It enacted more laws, and a larger number of women, including some licenced hawkers, were declared illegal traders if they did not move from place to place as stipulated in the council's definition of a hawker. Arrests, convictions, imprisonments or fines consistently eroded the economic ability of the majority of the African women traders.

But the traders were undeterred. Many remained in the streets, and continued to hawk their commodities. They would take off at the sight of the Municipal inspectors or police, normally with the officers in pursuit. But a short time afterwards they would be selling again. By the early 1950s, however, control had tightened further and hawking was an unreliable source of income. Some women chose to leave the streets only temporarily to join the Mau Mau revolt in the hope of carving out a niche for themselves as vendors in Nairobi once the colonial masters were defeated. But in the midst of the Mau Mau violence and government's counter emergency measures, the business of the remaining women was crippled, and the trading vibrancy of the 1940s was replaced by a precipitate decline.

In the post-emergency years many women resumed business. Some of them have made significant economic achievements in the post-independence era. By the early 1990s, when many of them were interviewed, some were still doing business in Nairobi. A number of them ran well-stocked curio stalls in City Market, others had restaurants and yet others butcheries. Many of these women were also "landladies" owning houses in various middle class estates such as Umoja, Buru Buru and South "B". Others shifted from Nairobi to seize opportunities in the smaller markets or towns near their rural home areas. One of these women constructed what the rural folk in her home area consider a massive building. It houses three shops, a post office and four one-bedroom rental accommodations.

The women did not ignore their social well-being. Many of them owned decent rural houses. Some women also installed or constructed water tanks to supply their domestic water needs. Their greatest achievement, however, is in education that they have given to their children. Many of them have children in prominent professions such as medicine, engineering, law and teaching. The sons and daughters have in their turn continued to develop the home, and in some cases their mothers' enterprise. To their mothers, they are a living symbol of the productive investment of the income obtained from trade.

This study, therefore, examines issues pertinent to current research. It provides a new outlook on the modern history of Kenya and of Nairobi, in particular. It tackles a new area of study - that is women and the economy - which until now has been little understood. Its treatment of the salient features of the women's trade is, hopefully, a boost to our knowledge of the Kenyan history in the twentieth century.

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Research for this study started in 1989 and was completed in 1996. The sources of information were oral interviews, archival and secondary records.

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Below is a list of the respondents. In the majority of cases, baptism names come first, followed by other names. Other informants without baptism names have their own names shown first, then father's or husband's name. The names are followed by the date of interview, place of interview, and the district. The age of the respondents is shown last in brackets.

1. Alice Nduta Wainaina, September 4th, 1989, Kangemi, Nairobi. (96)

2. Anne Njeri, November 8th, 1990, Kikuyu Town, Kiambu, (81)

3. Cosmas Mutisya, Gikomba Market, December 13th, 1993, Nairobi, (94)

4. Dorcas Ngima, December 5th, 1992, Ziwani, Nairobi, (82)

5. Elisiba Wacuka, December 14th, 1989, Ndumberi, Kiambu, (93)

6. Elizabeth Nyambura, January 1st, 1990, Riruta, Nairobi, (69).

7. Eunice Njoroge, January 16th, 1990, Bahati, Nairobi, (66).

8. Eunice Wanjiru, December 21st, 1989 and January 30th, 1990, City Market, Nairobi, (65).

9. Fatima Salim, April 6th, 1990, Kibera, Nairobi, (71)

10. Hadija Abdullahi, November 21st, 1990, Kibera, Nairobi (79).

11. Hellen Osoro, October 25th, 1990, Ruaraka, Nairobi. (68)

12. Jason Anyim, March 9th, 1991, Kaloleni, Nairobi.

13. Jedida Njoki, December 12th, 1989, Kariobangi, Nairobi, (86).

14. Jemima Wangari, December 21st, 1989, City Market, Nairobi, (74).

15. John Kariuki, November 6th, 1989, Kariobangi, Nairobi, (78).

16. Josephine Wangu, August 11th, 1990, Kikuyu town, Kiambu, (82).

17. Julia Wanjiku, November 9th, 1989, Kawangware, Nairobi, (96).

18. Kiruti Sankale, April 3rd, 1992, Narok, Kajiado, (98).

19. Margaret Wambui, November 9th, 1989, Huruma, Nairobi (97).

20. Margarita Agunda, January 3rd, 1990, Gikomba Market, Nairobi (65).

21. Mary Loise Wanjiku Wanyee, February 2nd, 1990, Dagoretti, Nairobi, (65).

22. Mary Ndubi Gichangi, February 8th and 15th 1990, City Market, Nairobi, (60).

23. Mbatha Nzinga, January 4th, 1990, Kariokor, Nairobi, (92).

24. Nafisa Rehan, April 4th, 1990, Kibera, Nairobi, (76).

25. Obonyo Ohowa, July 7th, 1991, Siaya town, Siaya, (90).

26. Olive Kairu, January 23rd, 1990, Wangige, Kiambu, (70).

27. Onesmas Kiragu, January 11th, 1989, Kangema, Muranga, (91).

28. Parmenus Ndegwa, April 3rd, 1992, Kabete, Nairobi, (83).

29. Priscilla Mukami, May 19th, 1992, Dandora Phase II, Nairobi (72).

30. Rachel Njambi, January 3rd, 1990, Mutuini, Kiambu, (89).

31. Rhoda Munee, December 1st, 1990, Machakos Town, Machakos, (85).

32. Rose Nzisa, June 16th, 1990, Pumwani, Nairobi, (87).

33. Ruth Wangari, February 14th, 1989, Wakulima Market,Nairobi, (74).

34. Salome Mtula, December 28th, 1989, January 4th and October 11th, 1990, Shauri Moyo, Nairobi, (83).

35. Samuel Meri Githehi, June 27th, 1992, Kirinyaga Road, Nairobi, (86).

36. Sarah Wambui, October 13th, 1992, Karura, Kiambu (87).

37. Sophia Wanjiku, September 12th, 1989, Gikambura, Kiambu, (96).

38. Stella Anyango, January 12th, 1990, Kaloleni, Nairobi, (77).

39. Wahu Kamau, January 3rd, 1989, Korogocho, Nairobi, (94).

40. Wajuma Wamwangi, December 18th, 1990, Ngomongo, Nairobi (88).

41. Wangeci Njoroge, January 11th, 1990, Nderi Shopping Centre, Nairobi. (73)

42. Wanjiku Kinyari, October 11th, 1991, Burma Market, Nairobi, (76).

43. Wayua Kiteti, September 1st, 1992, Dandora, Nairobi, (89).

44. Zena Juma, February 7th, 1990, Kibera, Nairobi (91).

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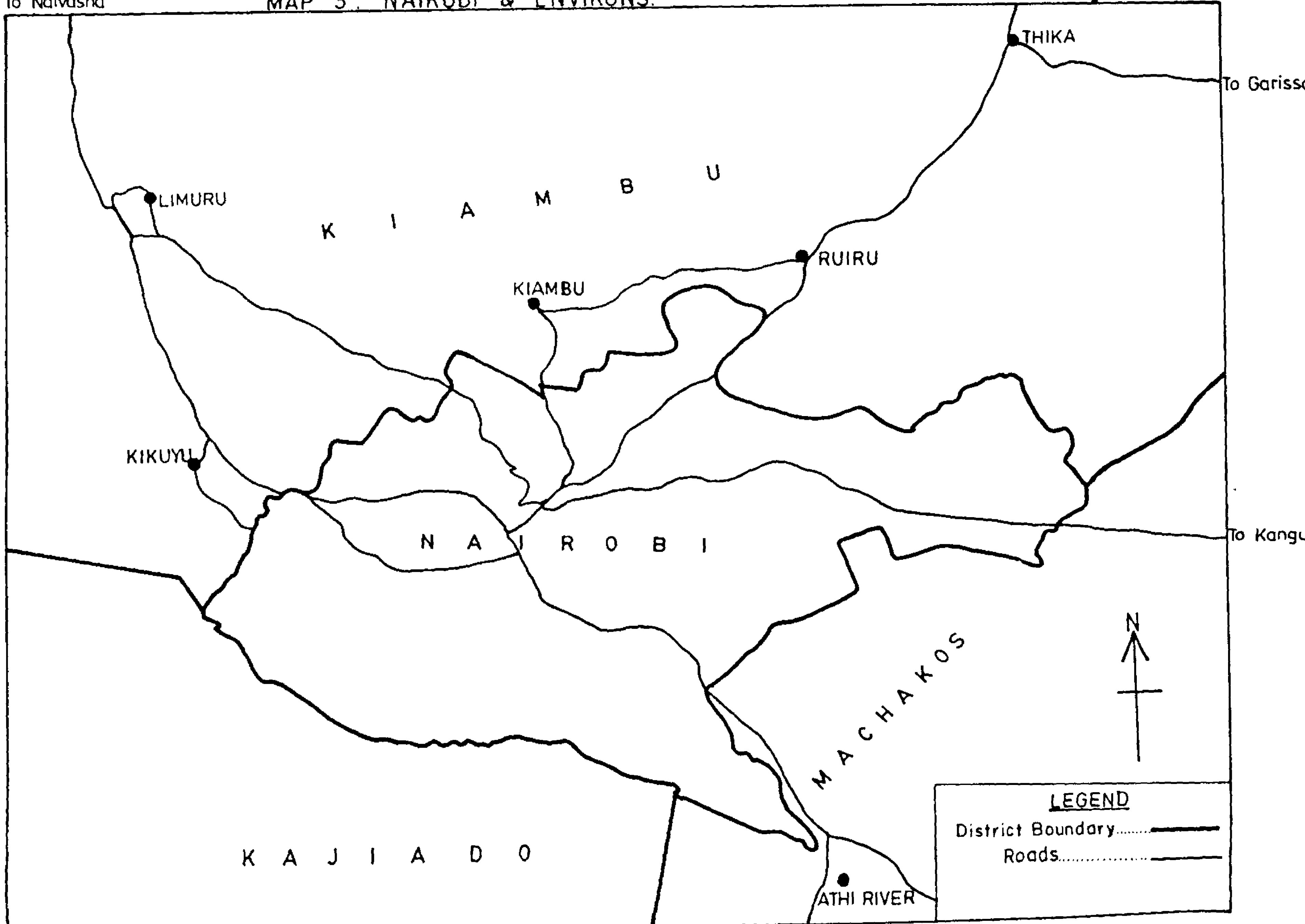
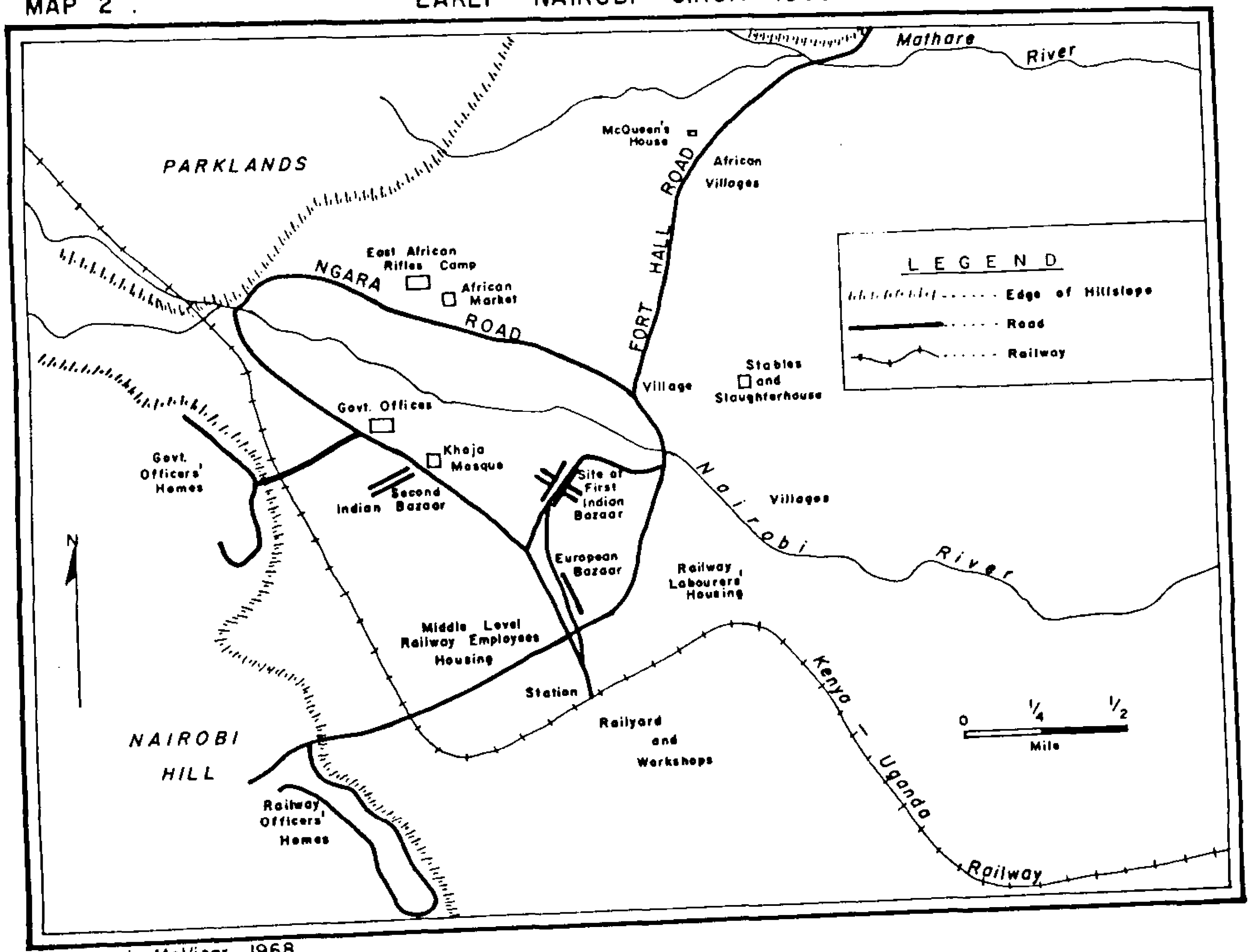
MAP I : NAIROBI PROVINCE IN THE NATIONAL CONTEXT (1990).

MAP 3: NAIROBI & ENVIRONS.



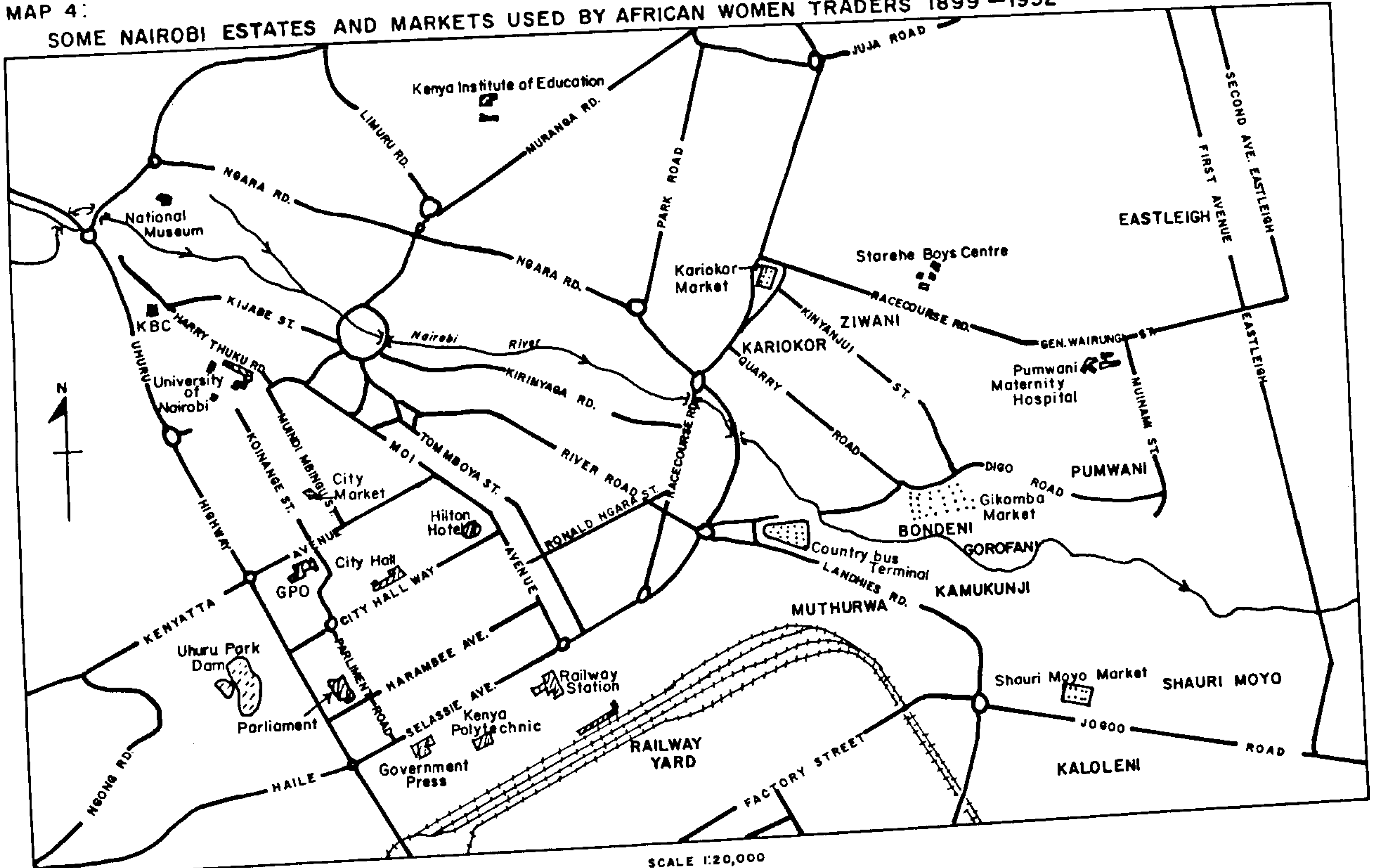
Source: Survey of Kenya
SCALE 1:200,000

MAP 2 : EARLY NAIROBI CIRCA 1903.



Source : McVicar 1968.

MAP 4:
SOME NAIROBI ESTATES AND MARKETS USED BY AFRICAN WOMEN TRADERS 1899 – 1952



Source: Survey of Kenya