



Article History
Received: 2026.07.18
Accepted: 2026.08.07
Published: 2026.09.11

Issue no: 01 | Vol no: 08 | September 2026: 68-79

Steel Tracks and Social Change: African and Asian Railway Workers, Racial Labour Hierarchies, and the Making of Colonial Kenya's Railway Towns, 1895–1963

Samson Moenga Omwoyo ⁽¹⁾ 

Kabarak University Kenya.

Author's email: samsonomwoyo3@gmail.com

Cite this article in APA

Omwoyo, S. M. (2026). Steel tracks and social change: African and Asian railway workers, racial labour hierarchies, and the making of colonial Kenya's railway towns, 1895–1963. *Editon consortium journal of arts, humanities and social studies*, 8(1), 68–79. <https://doi.org/10.51317/ecjahss.v8i1.769>

Abstract

This study examines how the construction and staffing of the Uganda Railway (1895–1901) institutionalised racial hierarchy in colonial Kenya's labour market and urban geography, while distinguishing the railway as infrastructure from the specific colonial policies that enabled African land alienation along its route. It draws on railway personnel files, wage registers and staff establishment lists, as catalogued and analysed in the historiographical literature, alongside published primary sources, including the 1904 and 1911 Anglo-Maasai agreements and the 1913 legal challenge, and secondary scholarship on European, Asian and African experiences of the railway. Because these records were compiled for administrative purposes, they provide unusually precise evidence of occupational grade, wages and race but offer limited and uneven insight into workers' experiences and displaced communities; this asymmetry is treated as a methodological constraint. The findings show that the staff establishment formalised a racial division of labour: Europeans occupied supervisory and technical grades; Asians held clerical, artisan and intermediate technical positions of considerable internal variation; and Africans were concentrated in unskilled and semi-skilled manual work. This hierarchy was reflected in wages, housing and promotion, although African and Asian workers exercised constrained forms of agency and occupational mobility. Railway towns, including Nairobi, Nakuru and Kisumu, reproduced these divisions through segregated residential geographies. Land alienation, particularly among the Maasai, resulted from specific agreements and administrative decisions that the railway facilitated rather than from the infrastructure itself. The study demonstrates the value of railway administrative records for integrating Kenya's labour, urban and land histories while identifying the need for further consultation of original archival series.

Key words: Colonial labour history, Indian indentured labourers, land alienation, racial hierarchy, Uganda Railway.



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INTRODUCTION

The Uganda Railway, completed between Mombasa and Lake Victoria in 1901, is one of the most heavily narrated episodes in the historiography of colonial East Africa. Yet, it is more often narrated as a story of engineering and imperial strategy than analysed as a social institution. Existing accounts, from Miller's (1971) popular history of "the lunatic line" to Hill's (1949) official history, establish the chronology of construction and its immediate strategic rationale, and more recent labour and economic histories (Mangat, 1969; Gregory, 1971; Cooper, 1987; Zeleza, 1993) address discrete dimensions of Indian migration, African labour, or regional economic change. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a study that treats the railway's own administrative records (personnel files, wage registers and staff establishment lists) as a coherent body of evidence for tracing how racial hierarchy was built into employment practice, how that hierarchy shaped the towns the railway produced, and how the infrastructure connects analytically to the specific colonial policy decisions that alienated African land.

This study asks three connected questions. First, how did the railway administration's employment practices institutionalise a racial hierarchy of wages, occupational grade, housing and promotion among African, Asian and European staff? Second, how did that same hierarchy reproduce itself in the settlement pattern of the towns including Nairobi, Nakuru and Kisumu that grew out of railway depots and sidings? Third, what is the precise relationship between the railway as infrastructure and the specific agreements, administrative decisions and, in one instance, military action through which Maasai, Kikuyu and Nandi communities lost land along its route? In addressing these questions, the study's objective is not to retell the construction narrative but to use the railway's administrative record as a lens onto colonial Kenya's labour market, urban formation and land politics.

Methodologically, the study reads published secondary scholarship on the railway alongside primary texts (the 1904 and 1911 Anglo-Masai agreements and the 1913 legal challenge to them) and historiographical literature describing the content and organisation of the railway's own personnel and correspondence files, rather than presenting new archival transcription. Section 2 sets out this evidentiary base in more detail, including its limitations. Throughout, the analysis distinguishes between claims attributable to a specific document or

dataset described in the literature and the study's own interpretation of what that evidence suggests, a distinction signalled explicitly in the text wherever it matters to the argument.

Therefore, the study's contribution is threefold: it draws together the labour, urban and land-alienation dimensions of the railway's history within a single interpretive frame organised around the institution's own record-keeping; it foregrounds the forms of agency exercised by African and Asian workers within the constraints of an unequal labour market, rather than treating them solely as recruits; and it clarifies, more explicitly than the existing literature typically does, the causal distinction between the railway as an enabling infrastructure and the identifiable colonial decisions that converted that infrastructure into land dispossession. Section 3 begins by tracing the chronology of the line's construction between 1895 and 1901 that gives the rest of the analysis its temporal frame.

METHODOLOGY

This study draws on two categories of historical evidence, used in combination. The first is the railway's own administrative record, which has been catalogued and described in specialist historiographical and archival-science literature, rather than through original archival visitation for this study. N. Mnjama's (1994) doctoral research on the management of the Kenya Railways Corporation's records, and the historiographical survey of railway records as historical sources (Mnjama, 1993), describe personnel files, wage registers, staff establishment lists disaggregated by race, correspondence on recruitment, desertion and labour disputes, and operational reports produced continuously by the successive railway administrations (from the original Uganda Railway, through the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbours administration, to the East African Railways and Harbours Corporation) and held today chiefly at the Kenya National Archives, with related Colonial Office correspondence at the National Archives, Kew, within the CO 533 and CO 822 series (National Archives, Kew, n.d.). The study draws on the description of this material in the secondary literature rather than on original transcription of specific files; where a claim rests on this description rather than on the study's own reading of a document, this is indicated in the text. This is a deliberate limitation of the present study, one that further research consulting the original series directly should address, ideally with specific piece

references identified through the archives' own catalogues.

The second category is published primary material: the text of the 1904 and 1911 Anglo-Masai agreements (Anglo-Masai Treaty, 1904; Masai Mara National Reserve, 2017), press coverage of railway history (Oluoch, 2013), and institutional retrospectives on Asian railway workers (Vohra & Law, 2022). These are read alongside the substantial secondary literature on European settlement (Sorrenson, 1968; Mair, 1936; Kennedy, 1987), Asian settlement and labour migration (Mangat, 1969; Gregory, 1971; Tinker, 1993; Kumar, Carter, & Bates, 2017), African land and labour history (Muriuki, 1974; Kanogo, 1987; Cooper, 1987; Anderson, 2005; Hughes, 2006), the colonial state (Berman, 1990; Lonsdale & Berman, 1992), and the regional economy (Van Zwanenberg & King, 1975; Zeleza, 1993).

Limitations of the Study

Two limitations of this evidentiary base should be stated explicitly rather than left implicit. First, because the study works from the way these records have been described and used in existing scholarship, rather than from independent verification against the original files, quantitative claims (numbers of workers, mortality rates, costs) are reported here as they appear in that literature, with estimates flagged as such, and are not independently corroborated in this study. Second, and more fundamentally, the railway administration compiled the records for administrative purposes: to track establishment numbers, control wage expenditure, and manage discipline.

As N. Mnjama (1994) and the historiographical assessment of these sources both note, they must therefore be read 'against the grain.' They are unusually informative on formal occupational grade, wage rate and race, precisely because the administration recorded race as a standard employment category. Still, they say comparatively little about workers' own testimony, motivations, or family and community life away from the workplace. They are least informative of all on the communities displaced by the railway's land requirements, whose land losses are documented chiefly through the correspondence of the administration that alienated the land rather than through any record generated by the communities themselves. Where the study discusses African agency, mobility and resistance in section 4, and displacement in section 8, this

asymmetry in the archive, generated by and for the colonial administration rather than by the people most affected by its decisions, is treated as a substantive constraint on what can be established with confidence, and not merely as a caveat appended after the fact.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Building the Uganda Railway

No single infrastructural development shaped the social and economic map of East Africa more decisively than the railway line completed between Mombasa and Lake Victoria at the end of the nineteenth century. The line, known as the Uganda Railway, was designed by the British government as a strategic measure to secure the headwaters of the Nile and establish control over Uganda; it nonetheless became the most important single factor in the settlement, urbanisation, and labour organisation of what would become Kenya. Construction began in 1895, and by 1901, the tracks had reached Kisumu on Lake Victoria, built largely by tens of thousands of Indian indentured workers and African porters working in harsh and often hazardous conditions.

The railway was much more than a means of conveying goods and people: it founded new towns where none had existed, established a system of racial preference in employment and status that persisted beyond colonial rule, displaced pastoral and farming communities from land that colonial authorities deemed 'good' land, and transformed local and regional economies as transport costs fell and the interior was opened to cash crop cultivation and commercial trade. Placed in the general chronological perspective of Kenya's history (Ochieng, 1985), the railway is treated here not only as an engineering feat but as a social institution whose personnel records, correspondence and administrative files constitute a valuable, and still under-used, archive for reconstructing Kenya's social and economic history.

Before the railway, trade from the interior of East Africa to the coast depended on caravan portage, which was slow and expensive and limited trade largely to high-value goods such as ivory. Transport costs, as reconstructed in the economic history literature, were estimated at between one hundred and thirty and three hundred pounds sterling per tonne of freight moved between Kampala and the coast, making the export of bulk agricultural produce effectively uneconomic (Van Zwanenberg & King, 1975; Hill, 1949). The British government's interest in a railway from Mombasa to the

interior was driven primarily by the strategic aim of securing the Nile headwaters in Uganda. However, the project was publicly advertised as a way to end the slave trade and encourage 'legitimate' commerce.

Construction proved arduous. Engineers and labourers faced difficult terrain and disease and, most famously, the man-eating lions of Tsavo, recorded by engineer John Henry Patterson in his 1907 account and retold for a popular audience by Miller (1971). Local recruitment for railway construction was limited, both because of resistance and because subsistence agriculture and

pastoralism already placed heavy demands on local labour, so the railway administration turned to indentured labour recruited on contract from British India; this decision permanently altered East Africa's demographic and social structure. By the time the line reached Kisumu in 1901, it had cost the British government a little over five million pounds and had employed tens of thousands of African and Asian workers (Hill, 1949).



Figure 1. Timeline of the Uganda Railway and its Social Consequences, 1895 to 1963

African Railway Workers

African participation in the railway took several overlapping forms across the period under study. During construction, communities along the route, including the Kikuyu, Kamba, Luo and Nandi, were recruited as porters and unskilled labourers, though in numbers lower than colonial officials would have liked, which helped explain why imported Indian labour became increasingly necessary during the initial building phase. Scholarship on forced labour and waterfront work in British East Africa (Cooper, 1987) shows that the labour regimes of the colonial administrations that followed the railway's completion combined taxation, specifically the hut tax, with direct coercion to recruit African men for paid work on infrastructure projects.

After the formal abolition of forced labour for private employers, a modified form of the system, under which adult men were conscripted for a limited number of days each year for public works such as road and railway construction or portering, persisted into the 1920s. Once

the line was open, railway work expanded to include maintenance gangs, station labour, and fuel and water supply work, and eventually, over the following decades, semi-skilled positions such as firemen and shunters, although supervisory and technical posts remained overwhelmingly closed to African employees throughout the colonial period. African railway labour was consistently the lowest paid, and African workers, like their Indian counterparts, suffered heavy loss of life and health during construction from disease, accident and animal attack. The railway also shaped African economic life indirectly: the hut and poll taxes that colonial administrations used to compel men into wage labour increased the numbers entering not only railway employment but also the squatter labour system on settler farms studied by Kanogo (1987), and the towns growing up along the line.

A purely structural account of recruitment, however, risks presenting African workers only as objects of colonial labour policy rather than as historical actors who

shaped, and were shaped by, their engagement with the railway. Read against the grain, the same administrative record that documents low initial recruitment numbers also documents a degree of African choice in the labour market: communities with viable alternatives in pastoralism, subsistence agriculture or petty trade were, on the evidence summarised by Cooper (1987), reluctant to supply labour at the wages and under the conditions the railway administration initially offered, which is one reason colonial officials turned first to coercive measures and then to indentured Indian labour rather than relying on voluntary African recruitment. Desertion, recorded in the personnel files as an administrative problem to be managed, can equally be read as a form of individual resistance to conditions of service. The labour disputes referenced in railway correspondence indicate that African workers could make collective, not only individual, assertions of interest, even within a labour market that gave them little formal bargaining power.

Occupational mobility, though narrow, was not absent: workers who began as porters or unskilled labourers during construction moved, over the following decades, into the semi-skilled grades that opened up once the line was operating, such as firemen, shunters and maintenance gang leaders, and some of the men who settled permanently in the towns that grew up along the route became part of a distinct urban African working class rather than returning to rural homesteads. These forms of agency operated within, and were sharply constrained by, a labour market structured for the benefit of the colonial administration and settler economy; they are not treated here as evidence that the system was any less coercive, but as evidence that African workers were active participants in, rather than merely subjects of, the making of Kenya's railway economy.

Asian Railway Workers

The railway administration recruited the great majority of its indentured workforce from British India. Kumar, Carter and Bates (2017) situate this recruitment within the broader system of Indian indentured migration across the empire; on the Uganda Railway specifically, the workforce was drawn predominantly from Punjab, with Punjabi Muslim and Sikh labourers recruited in the largest numbers alongside a smaller cohort of Sikh artisans and former soldiers, under the terms of the Indian Emigration Act of 1896. By the time the line reached Lake Victoria in 1901, approximately thirty-five thousand seven hundred Indian indentured workers had

been recruited for the project, together with just over a thousand subordinate officers, making it one of the largest single instances of Indian labour migration to Africa. Company records characterised the conditions of service, which included free rations, a small cash wage, and a personal identification number through which grievances could be lodged, as an improvement on some other indentured labour schemes within the empire. This claim should be read as the administration's own characterisation rather than as an independent assessment of workers' experience. Estimates of mortality among Indian workers on the line range between roughly seven and twelve per cent of all Indian contract labourers; Tinker (1993) puts the figure at around seven per cent, attributing most deaths to disease and accident, with a smaller number to lion predation.

Most of the original indentured labourers returned to India once their contracts ended, but a substantial minority, estimated in the literature at several thousand, chose to remain in East Africa. These men formed the core of a permanent Asian community that grew considerably over subsequent decades through further voluntary migration, much of it driven by economic hardship linked to British land policy in India, as Mangat (1969) documents in detail and Gregory (1971) situates within the empire-wide politics of race relations. It was this combination of former indentured labourers and later voluntary migrants that produced Kenya's Asian merchant and artisan class, dukawallas (shopkeepers), traders and skilled artisans, alongside railway clerks and technical staff, who were instrumental in building colonial Kenya's towns. This contribution has been the subject of institutional and popular retrospectives on Ugandan Asian railway workers (Vohra & Law, 2022) and of press coverage marking the line's legacy (Oluoch, 2013). By 1921, for example, roughly a third of Nairobi's population was Asian, further illustrating how far the railway had transformed the demographic character of the towns it created.

It is important not to treat 'Asian railway workers' as a single, undifferentiated category, since the label conceals substantial internal variation in origin, occupation and trajectory. The indentured labourers who built the line were overwhelmingly Punjabi, recruited specifically for manual construction work; the smaller cohort of Sikh artisans and ex-soldiers who accompanied them were recruited for skilled trades and supervisory functions within the construction workforce and occupied a distinct

position from the outset. This early construction-era population was, in turn, occupationally and socially distinct from the later, largely voluntary wave of migration described by Mangat (1969), which included Gujarati and Kutchi traders and financiers, many operating as dukawallas, who arrived independently of the railway's own recruitment and built the commercial networks that supplied both the settler economy and the growing towns. Within the railway administration itself, staff establishment lists distinguished a range of Asian occupational grades, from unskilled and semi-skilled workshop labour, through skilled artisan trades such as fitters, carpenters and masons, to clerical and junior technical and supervisory posts, each carrying its own wage scale and terms of service, so that the intermediate position Asian staff occupied in the railway's racial hierarchy was itself internally stratified rather than uniform. Treating Asian railway workers as differentiated by occupation, origin and period of arrival is necessary to avoid collapsing a genuinely varied set of experiences into a single composite figure of 'the Indian labourer.'

Racial Labour Hierarchies and the Colonial Social Order

The railway was not simply a workplace where people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds happened to labour side by side; it was an institution that embodied a hierarchy of race in employment, wages, and status, and in doing so provided something of a model for colonial Kenyan society at large. The railway administration's staff records and establishment lists show that Europeans filled senior administrative, engineering, and supervisory posts; Asians filled clerical, artisan, and intermediate technical and supervisory posts; and Africans performed unskilled and semi-skilled manual work. This division of labour carried through into segmented wage rates, housing arrangements and promotion opportunities, producing a stratified workforce that, like settler society more broadly, was organised not primarily on skill or seniority but on race.

This hierarchy operated through several identifiable institutional mechanisms rather than through informal custom alone. Wage scales were fixed by occupational grade, and grade was itself allocated along racial lines, so that a European in a supervisory post and an African in a manual post were paid from entirely separate scales even where their work overlapped in practice; Asian staff occupied intermediate scales that varied considerably by

trade and seniority, reflecting the internal stratification described in section 5. Housing followed the same principle: railway administrations built and allocated staff quarters in racially designated sections of depots and towns that grew up around them. This pattern reproduced itself in the residential geography discussed in section 7. Promotion was structurally capped by race, in the sense that the most senior grades, engineering, administrative and higher supervisory posts, were, as a matter of establishment policy rather than individual decision, reserved for Europeans, which meant that even long-serving and capable Asian or African staff could not advance beyond the ceiling set for their racial category regardless of demonstrated competence. Access to railway-provided social services, medical facilities, schooling for staff children, and welfare provision followed the same logic, with separate and unequally resourced facilities provided for European, Asian and African staff. N. Mnjama's (1994) account of the content of the surviving personnel files indicates that these distinctions were recorded as routine administrative categories rather than as exceptional practice, which is precisely what makes the railway's records unusually valuable evidence for tracing how racial differentiation was institutionalised in practice, rather than merely articulated in policy statements or settler opinion.

The depth to which this hierarchy was embedded in settler racial ideology is evident in contemporary attitudes. The settler Lady Delamere, for example, on being told that an Indian labourer was living next door, remarked: "That is very disagreeable, for we are depending on the Indian coolies to work out here: they built the railway on which we live" (Mair, 1936). Asian residents occupied an intermediate and often precarious position: they had more commercial opportunity than Africans, but they were denied the political representation and access to the best agricultural land accorded to Europeans, and were routinely subject to social discrimination. Africans, dispossessed of much of the land the railway had opened for settlement, occupied the bottom of the hierarchy, contributing the bulk of the manual labour that kept the line and the colonial economy running while receiving the smallest share of its rewards, an arrangement that Berman (1990) and Lonsdale and Berman (1992) trace to the dual imperatives of accumulation and control that structured the colonial state as a whole.

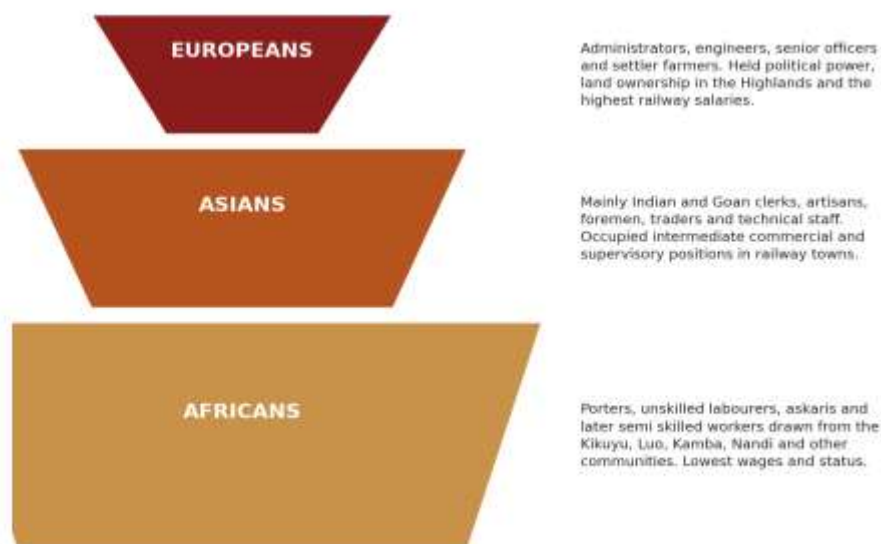


Figure 2. Schematic Representation of the Racial Labour Hierarchy on the Uganda Railway Based on Staff Establishment Patterns Described in the Railway and Colonial Administrative Literature

This hierarchy persisted over the long term. The working lives recorded in colonial employment sources, especially those generated by the railway, are particularly valuable to historians because, unlike many other colonial records, they treat race as a standard administrative category alongside grade and pay. This gives historians a more precise, quantifiable window into how racial stratification operated over decades of colonial rule than settler memoirs or official reports (Mnjama, 1993).

The Emergence of Railway Towns

The railway's urban legacy may be its most visible. Before construction, the site of present-day Nairobi was swamp grassland where Maasai pastoralists grazed cattle, and Kikuyu farmers cultivated the surrounding higher ground, an area known to the Maasai as Enkare Nairobi, 'place of cool waters' (Muriuki, 1974). In 1899 the railway's chief engineer chose this location for a depot because of its central position between the coast and the interior, its relatively cool climate, and its water supply (Hill, 1949). Within a few years, the tents, workshops and sidings established there had grown into a substantial town, and by 1905 Nairobi had replaced Mombasa as administrative capital of the East Africa Protectorate. A similar, though smaller-scale, trajectory occurred at other points along the line: Nakuru grew from a Rift Valley siding into a substantial trading and settler town as Europeans established farms in the surrounding

highlands. At the same time, Kisumu developed around the railway's lake terminus and became the principal port for trade with Uganda across Lake Victoria. In each case, the initial development followed a common pattern: a depot or siding laid out for operational reasons connected to construction or freight handling attracted traders, workers and administrators, who together produced a racially segmented urban geography in which Europeans, Asians and Africans lived in separate residential quarters, whether formally zoned or informally segregated in practice.

The mechanisms behind this segregated settlement pattern can be specified more precisely for Nairobi, where the urban historical literature is most developed. As the town grew from railway depot to protectorate capital, municipal authorities progressively formalised what had begun as informal racial clustering into zoned residential areas, restricting African settlement to designated locations on the town's periphery, Pumwani among them, while European residential areas occupied the higher, cooler ground away from the railway yards. Asian traders and staff were concentrated around the commercial and workshop districts closer to the line itself, an arrangement that left a lasting imprint on Nairobi's urban geography well beyond the colonial period. Nakuru's growth followed a comparable logic on a smaller scale, with the town functioning simultaneously as a railway operating point and as the commercial

service centre for the surrounding European settler farms, so that its labour market and residential pattern were shaped jointly by the railway's own staffing needs and by the demand for labour and services generated by settler agriculture. Kisumu's trajectory differed in one respect worth noting explicitly: because its principal economic function was as a lake port linking the railway to steamer traffic on Lake Victoria and onward to Uganda, its commercial life depended more heavily on regional and cross-border trade than on settler agriculture, which gave its Asian trading community a particularly prominent role in the town's early commercial development. In all three towns, racial segregation in housing was reinforced

rather than counteracted by commercial activity, since Asian traders' shops and residences were typically co-located in bazaar-style commercial quarters that were themselves racially distinct from both European and African residential areas, embedding the railway's occupational hierarchy directly into the built environment of the towns it created. The railway gave rise to many of Kenya's main towns, and it is no overstatement to describe it as the single most important factor in urbanisation during the colonial era.

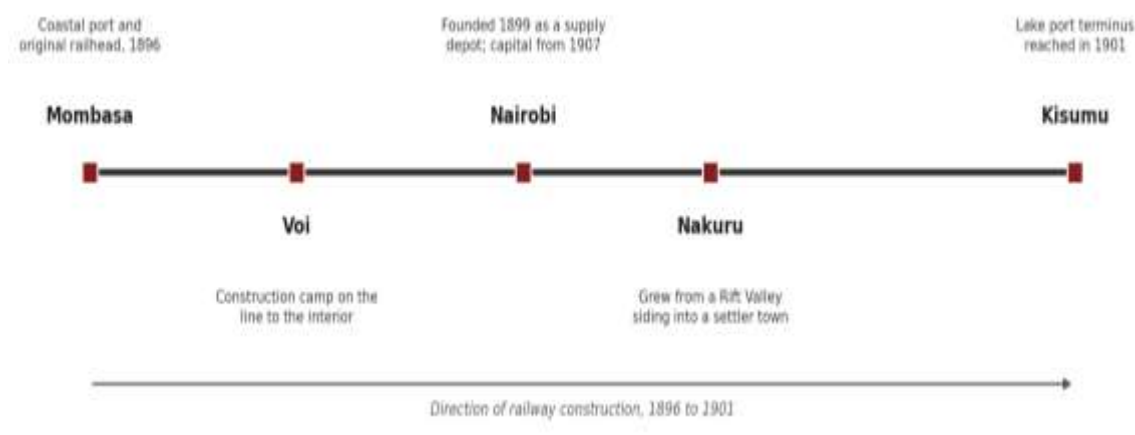


Figure 3. Emergence of Railway Towns along the Mombasa to Kisumu Line

Displacement and Land Alienation

The railway's construction and the European settlement it made commercially viable came at a direct cost to the communities who had inhabited the land the line traversed. It is important, however, to distinguish two analytically separate claims that general accounts of this period often run together: that the railway, as infrastructure, made European agricultural settlement of the highlands commercially attractive by lowering transport costs and opening the interior to export markets; and that specific colonial policies, agreements, administrative decisions and, in one documented instance, military action were the actual instruments through which African communities were dispossessed of land. The railway created the economic conditions under which land alienation became profitable for the colonial state and for incoming settlers; it did not, by itself, alienate any land. Separate legal and administrative acts accomplished that, most fully documented for the Maasai.

The Crown Lands Ordinance, which from 1902 declared land not under identifiable individual occupation to be Crown land available for alienation to settlers, provided the legal framework within which colonial officials identified Maasai grazing land in the central Rift Valley as suitable for European agriculture once the railway had made the highlands commercially accessible (Sorenson, 1968). Under this framework, the first Anglo-Maasai agreement of 1904 (Anglo-Maasai Treaty, 1904) induced Maasai leaders to cede the central Rift Valley in exchange for what was described as permanent and exclusive occupation of two reserves: one at Laikipia north of the line and the other around Kajiado and Narok to the south. A second agreement in 1911 (Masai Mara National Reserve, 2017) required the northern Laikipia reserve to be surrendered and its occupants moved south to join the Kajiado–Narok reserve, reversing the 'permanent' terms of the 1904 settlement. Maasai plaintiffs challenged the legality of the 1911 agreement in the case generally known as *Ol Le Njogo and Others v. Attorney-General*, brought before the East Africa

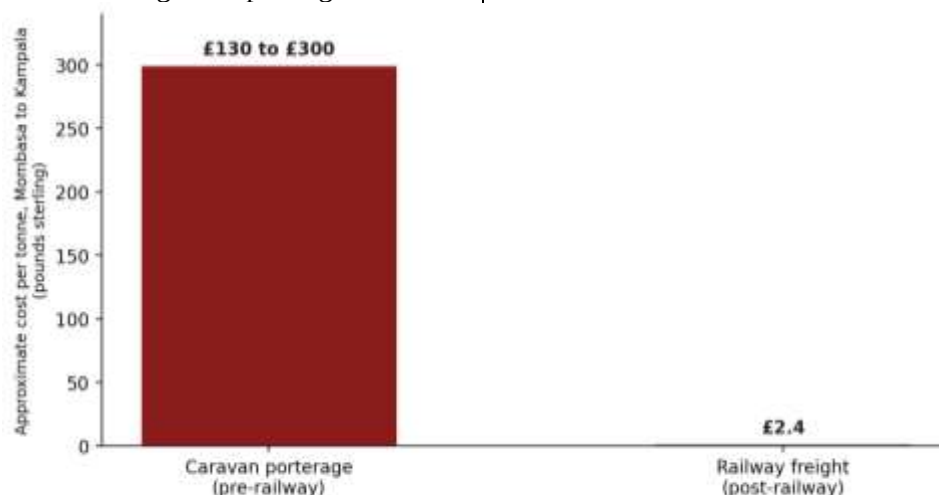
Protectorate court in 1913; the court dismissed the case because an agreement between the Crown and a native community was an act of state and therefore not justiciable in a municipal court, a ruling that left the 1911 removal in effect (Hughes, 2006). This sequence, an enabling legal framework, two specific negotiated agreements, and a failed legal challenge to the second of them, illustrates concretely how the railway's economic effects were converted into land dispossession through identifiable colonial decisions rather than through the infrastructure itself.

A comparable, though less extensively documented, process of alienation affected the Kikuyu as European settlers used the railway-opened highlands to expand cultivation onto land bordering Kikuyu settlement, generally through the same Crown Lands framework rather than through a negotiated agreement like that reached with the Maasai. The Nandi, in western Kenya, experienced a more directly coercive process. When settlers sought land along the route of the railway's extension toward Uasin Gishu, Nandi resistance to alienation was met with punitive military expeditions that forced affected communities onto reduced reserve land (Muriuki, 1974). In Nairobi specifically, the establishment of the railway depot as a permanent township displaced the Maasai and Kikuyu communities who had used the surrounding swamp and grassland for

grazing and cultivation; because these groups' occupation of the land had not been formally registered under colonial land law, their claims received no legal recognition when the township was established. Across all three cases, displacement was not an incidental side effect of railway building but a deliberate feature of the settlement economy the railway enabled, and Anderson (2005) traces the long-term consequences of this pattern of dispossession for rural land grievance and conflict through to the mid-twentieth century.

Economic Effects on Local Economies

The railway's most immediate economic effect was a dramatic reduction in the cost of moving goods between the interior and the coast. Railway freight cut costs from an estimated one hundred and thirty to three hundred pounds sterling per tonne under caravan portage between Kampala and the coast to a small fraction of that figure. It reduced the expected journey time from roughly three months to under a week (Van Zwanenberg & King, 1975). This transformation made profitable, for the first time, the large-scale cultivation of bulk export crops such as coffee, tea, cotton and sisal, and made competitive export to world markets possible, underwriting the settler agricultural economy that developed in the Kenyan highlands after 1902.



Illustrative figures drawn from contemporary estimates cited in railway economic history literature.

Figure 4. Estimated fall in Freight Transport Cost Following Completion of the Railway, Based on Contemporary Cost Estimates Discussed in the Economic History Literature

The effects on African economies were considerably more mixed than this settler-focused account suggests,

and they varied significantly by region and over time. In the years immediately following construction, the

railway and the taxation policies that accompanied it drew a growing number of African men into wage labour, and, over the following decades, into cash crop production on their own account where colonial policy permitted it, contributing to a gradual, uneven shift from subsistence to cash-based household economies. For much of the colonial period, however, policy actively restricted African access to the most valuable export crops (coffee growing, in particular, was largely reserved for European settlers), both to protect settler markets and to preserve a supply of low-cost African labour; this meant that the economic gains from the railway's transport revolution accrued disproportionately to European farmers and to the Asian trading class that supplied and financed them (Zezeza, 1993).

These effects were not uniform across the colony: communities close to the line and to the emerging settler estates in the highlands were drawn earliest and most fully into wage labour and, later, into commodity production, while communities in more distant labour-supplying regions, such as much of Nyanza, experienced the railway chiefly through labour migration rather than through direct participation in the export economy it made possible, so that the benefits of falling transport costs and rising trade volumes were felt unevenly across the territory the railway served. On the consumption side, falling transport costs also brought manufactured goods from the coast into the interior more cheaply, expanding the retail networks, many run by the Asian dukawallas discussed in section 5, through which these goods reached rural and urban African consumers, so that the railway's economic effects extended beyond production and wage labour into everyday patterns of trade and consumption.

The railway also disrupted the regional trade routes that had previously linked the interior to the coast by caravan, replacing them with a transport system that connected the interior firmly to an imperial and global economy organised around the export of raw agricultural commodities, a reorientation whose benefits, as the preceding discussion suggests, were distributed very unevenly between European, Asian and African participants in the colonial economy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study asked how the Uganda Railway's employment practices institutionalised a racial hierarchy in colonial Kenya's labour market, how that hierarchy

was reproduced in the towns the railway produced, and how the railway as infrastructure should be distinguished from the specific colonial decisions that converted its economic effects into land dispossession.

Addressing these questions through the railway administration's own record-keeping shows that the line built between Mombasa and Lake Victoria between 1895 and 1901 was the bedrock infrastructure of colonial Kenya in a more precise sense than a general narrative of imperial engineering conveys: it imported tens of thousands of Indian indentured labourers and African workers into a joint but sharply unequal colonial labour market, structured by racial grades in wages, housing and promotion that this study has traced through the surviving staff establishment record; it produced towns including Nairobi, Nakuru and Kisumu, whose segregated residential geography reproduced the same racial hierarchy in built form; and it created, without itself directly causing, the economic conditions under which specific agreements, administrative decisions and, in the Nandi case, military action displaced Maasai, Kikuyu and Nandi communities from land the settler economy required. Within this structure, African and Asian workers were neither undifferentiated categories nor purely passive recruits: the available evidence, even read through an archive generated by and for the colonial administration, indicates identifiable forms of agency, internal differentiation, and constrained occupational mobility that a purely structural account of colonial labour recruitment would miss.

Recommendations: The study contributes to scholarship by demonstrating that labour hierarchy, urban formation, and land alienation can be examined together through the Uganda Railway's administrative records rather than as separate historical themes. However, its reliance on existing descriptions of archival materials, rather than direct consultation of the original records, limits the certainty of some quantitative and institutional claims. Future research should therefore undertake systematic analysis of personnel files, wage registers, and correspondence to refine estimates of labour, mortality, and costs and to recover workers' experiences that administrative records often obscure. Despite the railway's declining physical presence in contemporary Kenya, its surviving archives remain valuable for understanding how colonial society, labour, and urban life were organised.

Therefore, the study recommends further direct and systematic examination of the Uganda Railway's original personnel files, wage registers, staff establishment lists, and administrative correspondence to refine existing estimates of labour, wages, mortality, promotion, and occupational mobility. Future research should also integrate labour, urban, and land histories to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how railway infrastructure shaped colonial Kenya. Similarly, greater attention should be given to recovering the experiences and agency of African and Indian workers through oral histories, community archives, newspapers, and personal records, thereby complementing the predominantly administrative colonial archive. Comparative studies of railway towns such as Nairobi, Nakuru, and Kisumu are also recommended to further examine the development

of racial segregation in employment, housing, and access to urban services. Researchers should carefully distinguish the railway's economic and spatial effects from the specific treaties, administrative decisions, settler policies, and military actions that resulted in land dispossession. Finally, Kenyan archival and heritage institutions should prioritise the preservation, cataloguing, and digitisation of railway records and promote interpretations of the Uganda Railway that recognise not only its engineering significance but also its role in shaping colonial labour relations, urban segregation, and land politics.

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