CONSUMING CAPITALISM: FOOD, MIGRATION AND URBAN LIFE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY KENYA

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how capitalism, migration and urbanization changed the ways in which East Africans provisioned, prepared and consumed their food during the twentieth century. This study explores these themes through the experiences of Africans from the interior of the region who migrated to the coastal city of Mombasa, where they created a new, working-class food system. At the beginning of the twentieth century, these migrants came from rural food systems in which food was acquired within the kinship group, the labor being done primarily by women who agriculturally worked the land and who then cooked the meals consumed by their immediate and extended families. However, wage-labor migration precipitated the commercialization of these comestible practices. It replaced a system of gendered food labor visibly tied to the natural world with one in which food was commodified and its production mystified through less visible capitalist supply chains in which mostly male urban workers accessed their food with cash or through rations and, especially during the colonial period, prepared it themselves. Through the analysis of the experiences of these migrants, as well as of the men who worked as street-food vendors in the city, this study revises the scholarly assumption that food remained a domain of knowledge and practice marked nearly exclusively as feminine during the twentieth century in Africa.

This dissertation also offers a lens into a central point of tension in cities across Africa and the global south: the contradiction between the bio-medical and aesthetic visions of urban modernity promoted by development on the one hand, and the strategies that poor urban residents have used to survive in cities not otherwise built to include them on the other. I explore how the vendors who sold prepared food to Mombasa’s working classes, operating from roadside structures, in restaurants out of their homes and as itinerant hawkers, struggled in a political context
in which their livelihoods were rendered as “insanitary” and “ugly.” Especially since the 1950s when urban development became institutionalized in Mombasa, their businesses have been targeted for removal from the city’s landscape through harassment, prosecutions and demolitions. The final three chapters follow how these tactics of late-colonial urban governance survived decolonization, but also were challenged by vendors and hawkers in the city. I explore these themes by examining the gains made by vendors during the early-independence period, the reinvigoration of prosecutions and demolitions when cholera became endemic in East Africa during the 1970s, and the last chapter considers how the politics of multi-partyism during the late twentieth century provided both new opportunities and increasingly exposed vendors to state violence. I conclude my dissertation by reflecting on the present and future of food in Kenya and the world.
For my parents, Mom and Dad
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A project of this size and duration incurs many debts. My venture into African history began at Western Washington University where the courses and mentorship of Louis Truschel, first as an undergraduate and then as an MA student, and put me on my path to this dissertation. While at Western, Jonathan Miran, a historian of Africa and professor in the Department of Liberal Studies, was generous with his time both during an independent study and for hours of long, informal conversations in his office that crucially shaped my understanding of African studies and the practice and the profession of history, and he was also encouraging as I planned my first trip to East Africa. During that first trip to Kenya in 2010, I met and stayed with two amazing families, and gained enduring friendships through these experiences. In Mombasa, I was welcomed into the home of Mohamed Mchulla and Rukiya Abdulrehman, who introduced me both to their city as well as Swahili cuisine with the many amazing meals that came from their kitchen and were enjoyed around an always vibrant table of family and other guests. I also owe a special thanks to their son, Saidi, now grown, but who as a young teenager guided a then novice visitor around Mombasa with great humor and spirit. I always enjoy seeing Mohamed, Rukiya and their family on my return visits to the city, and am grateful for the kindness and sense of home they provide me every time I come back. On that first trip, I was also invited to spend a week with Ogutu Seth Okumu and Rachelle Maria Strawther and their two daughters in their home in Kisumu. Their openness to hosting a traveler they had not before met allowed me to see and think about a part of East Africa outside the coast that so fascinated me. There is probably some connection between that trip and my eventual interest to study the experiences of people who left regions like those around Lake Victoria and migrated to Mombasa. Years later, during my dissertation research, Seth again put me up in his home, this time for longer, which not only allowed me to interview migrants
who had returned to the region from Mombasa, but also let a weary researcher many months into being in Kenya to feel part of a family while living a long way from his own.

At the University of Illinois, I found an incredibly vibrant intellectual community that has provided me not only my scholarly foundation as a historian, but many lasting friendships and mentors. I was lucky to be part of a small, collegial incoming class of graduate students in 2011, and am grateful for the many conversations and debates, academic or otherwise, that I have shared over the ensuing years with Stefan Djordjevic, Stefan Kosovych, Deirdre Ruscitti Harshman, Michael Staudenmaiar and Megan White. I was the only Africanist in my small, incoming class of 2011, but T.J. Tallie and Zachary Poppel, ABD by the time I arrived, provided key advice during my early career at Illinois, and thereafter I was joined over the years by many newly arriving African history graduate students who provided both friendship and an Africanist cohort. I want to especially acknowledge Doug Jones, Robert Roushail, Beth Ann Williams, and Utathya Chattopadhyaya who, though a South Asianist, has had an interest in African history that has always made him someone with whom I have greatly enjoyed exchanging ideas. Additionally, though we rarely overlapped academically, I would be remiss if I did not mention my great friend from my years at Illinois, Beth Eby, herself a burgeoning scholar of indigenous sport history in North America, and whose support, kindness and humor have made Champaign such a special place.

My fellow graduate students were a source of great intellectual and collegial vibrancy, and so too were my professors. My advisor Jim Brennan combined an always appreciated availability and consistent attention to my queries with a sustained commitment to providing me with penetrating feedback on my scholarship. I am without question a better writer and more analytical thinker because of the many difficult and challenging questions Jim has asked about my work. I
owe him a great debt. I have also been fortunate at Illinois to have a group of professors in addition to my advisor who have shown great interest in my development as a historian. Antoinette Burton has many roles on Illinois’ campus and a schedule as full as anyone’s, but she always managed to answer my questions with a genuine concern and commitment that will not be forgotten. I also owe special thanks to Terri Barnes with whom I studied African intellectual history my first semester on campus, and who was also there in March 2017 when I defended this dissertation. She has provided both intellectual insight and advice about life over the years that I will take with me as I leave Illinois. Prita Meier and Kristin Hoganson also joined Jim, Antoinette and Terri on my dissertation committee, and I want to thank them for their interest in and perspectives on my research.

Illinois provided a large portion of my intellectual network while preparing for and then researching and writing this dissertation, but I have also been fortunate, during my time in Kenya, to meet and befriend a bevy of other researchers who have had an indelible impact on me. I met Caleb Owen and Samar al-Balushi while we were all studying Swahili in Mombasa in 2012. I seem to cross paths with them both nearly every time I am in Kenya, and I hope that continues for decades to come. I also want to recognize the other friends and researchers I have met in Kenya with whom history has only been one of the topics we have discussed across many conversations, including Dave Bresnahan, Ngala Chome, Tom Cunningham, Zeb Dingley, Wangui Kimari, Paul Abonyo Odhiambo, Emma Park and Erik Timmons. Additionally, I first met fellow Kenya researcher Sophia Balakian and her husband Michael Don while we were all doing coursework at Illinois, but my best memories of our friendship are of meals at Asmara Restaurant in Nairobi filled with light lager and conversation.
I was also extremely fortunate to be supported by two great research assistants while in Kenya, Onesmus Mutua in Mombasa and Mercy Nyambok in Nyanza. Both provided friendship, intellectual rigor and were instrumental in providing invaluable connections for interviews that have shaped this dissertation in meaningful ways. Thank you. I would like to thank the many interviewees as well who were generous with their time and agreed to share their experiences with me. I additionally want to express my gratitude to the archives and libraries and their staffs in Kenya, the United Kingdom and the United States that have provided much of the primary and secondary material upon which this dissertation is based. Richard Ambani at the Kenya National Archives in Nairobi deserves special thanks and recognition for the help he has provided me and many other researchers of Kenya’s history, as well as for his consistent role over the decades in working tirelessly to preserve the records of his country’s past. I would also like to thank the staffs of the McMillan Library, the Media Library at the Daily Nation and the Kenya National Archives in Mombasa. In the UK, a thank you is due to the staffs at the National Archives and the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, especially Lucy McCann at the latter who has been incredibly generous with her attention to my many questions. In the United States, the staff and resources of the University Library at the University of Illinois have been incredibly valuable to me in completing this dissertation, and more recently those of West Virginia University Libraries have been of great assistance as well.

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I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, and formed friendships there that remain strong today even as I have spent the past six years outside the region. Aaron, Andrew and Josh: all three of you have studied history at various points in your lives, and each in your own way have pushed me intellectually and are a part of the support system that has helped me throughout my life. I look forward to many debates and conversations about history and other topics in the future, whether we all end up living in the same place again or during the reunions we will have in lieu.

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For my parents, Doug and Irene, it seems almost trivial to confine to a few sentences the incredible sense of support that I have received from them over my 34 years of life. Their guidance and unconditional love is the reason I was able to be in a PhD program at Illinois in the first place, and then to make it through and complete the degree. I dedicate this dissertation to you both, Mom and Dad. Thank you.
The plan for this dissertation was that it would be deposited some time before April 10, 2017, the due date for my first child. As with many plans in life, this one had to be revised. Lucy joined us on March 31, 2017, 11 days early, and so my final edits have had to be balanced alongside diaper changes and late nights, but her birth has also made these last days of my dissertation all the more meaningful. I cannot wait to see where your own interests lead you, Lucy, but I also look forward to sharing the history, present and future Mombasa and East Africa with you as you grow.
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FREQUENTLY-REFERENCED SWAHILI TERMS

*chai*: tea
*haki*: rights
*hotel*: restaurant
*kibanda/vibanda*: roadside eatery, shed
*mahamri*: Swahili doughnut, often made with cardamom
*mwananchi/wananchi*: citizen(s)
*posho*: ration
*shamba*: farm
*ugali/sima*: staple dish made from boiled ground grain
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ABBREVIATIONS

CBD: Central Business District
DP: Democratic Party
KADU: Kenya African Democratic Union
KANU: Kenya African National Union
KURH: Kenya and Uganda Railway and Harbours
TOL: Temporary Occupation License
SDP: Social Democratic Party
INTRODUCTION

Between five and 6:30 a.m., workers in mid twentieth-century Mombasa would wake, and begin preparing for another day. The start of shifts varied throughout the city, but at the port, one of the centers of working life for Africans in Mombasa, the day commenced at 7 a.m. Some of these waged workers, almost all of them men, lived with their wives or other female kin, who would spend their early morning lighting the *jiko* (stove), burning precious, valuable wood fuel to cook the morning *chai* (tea). If the household budget that week allowed, the tea would be creamy and sweet from milk and sugar, but people often had to make do only with the flavor the leaves had imparted on the boiling water. Many workers, though, would have skipped such breakfasts in the crowded confines of shared rooms, readied themselves and walked quickly out onto Mombasa’s streets, which would have been cooler than usual during these early-morning hours, though the humidity of the coast was always present. At the same time or perhaps even earlier than these men had awaken, hundreds of male and female street-food vendors had already left their homes, taking their places in parks, on streets and other plots where they had established squatting rights or, if mobile hawkers, they would be walking their usual routes.¹ These vendors and hawkers filled Mombasa’s each morning not just with smells, but a cacophony of comestible noise. At vendors’ stalls, wood was cracked, stacked and burned to make smoldering coals. Pots boiled with escaping air-bubbles popping, cooking coffee, tea and *uji*, the porridge staple of the upcountry working-class that labored in coastal Kenya’s largest city. Coffee hawkers walked on Mombasa’s sidewalks and along its roads, pushing their carts and clicking their enamel cups in their pockets.

¹ I use “street food” here and throughout to encompass both food and drink. In Kenya, as well as other parts of the world, beverages rich in calories are as much a part of what one “eats” for a meal as anything else, whether pastoralists who drink milk and blood from their livestock or others drinking sugary tea and coffee. For beverages as food, see Sidney Mintz’s classic examination of sugary tea consumption by the British working class in *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1986). Jon D. Holtzman draws on Mintz’s insights in his examination of Samburu tea consumption in his “In a Cup of Tea: Commodities and History among Samburu Pastoralists in Northern Kenya,” *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 1 (2003): 136-55.
to alert people out of sight that a hot, caffeinated beverage was available for a few cents. Elsewhere, inside their homes, Arab and Swahili women dropped fresh dough into boiling caldrons of oil, cooking and adding crispy textures to a wide variety of fried snacks, including the popular mahamri, a cardamom-infused doughnut. These were then delivered to duka shops and to hawkers who would sell them on the streets throughout the city. While the city’s workers walked to what was mostly likely a day of heavy labor under the humid heat of the East African coast, if they could afford it, they would buy a hot, caloric beverage and fried snacks from these street-food proprietors to fill them for the long morning that was ahead.²

By noontime, these breakfast eateries were joined by lunch vendors, termed vibanda in Swahili, which were run primarily by upcountry migrant women resident in Mombasa.³ As workers took their meal break, they would stream out to these eateries, some licensed and in municipal stalls, but most illicitly squatting on private and state land. The workers, many of them also migrants from upcountry, would hand over some change, and feast on starch-rich meals, trying to replace the calories lost during the morning.⁴ Lunch was the busiest period of the day for street-food vendors, with thousands of city residents away from their home kitchens but needing prepared food to sustain them through long shifts. After work, letting out at 4 p.m. on the docks, some leisure time was available to laborers, but appetites would soon require them to think of their dinner. This meant that, for the African women married to wage-earning men, their work day did not end at 4 p.m. as it did for their husbands. As one commentator observed at the time, “Married

² This general picture of Mombasa’s working-class food system at mid-century presented is constructed through an aggregation of research in Mombasa’s municipal minutes and labor reports held in the Kenya National Archives and The National Archives in the United Kingdom. For specific citations, see Chapter Three.
³ Kibanda (s./vibanda (p.) literally means shed, but this term is generally applied to many structures, among them roadside food eateries. They are also referred to as hoteli (hotel, restaurant) and kioski/vioski (kiosk), though I have never heard them referred to as mkahawa, the word for café/restaurant.
⁴ This general picture has been constructed through research in Mombasa’s municipal minutes and labor-survey reports in the Kenya National Archives. See footnotes below and throughout for more specific references to these documents.
men would expect their wives to prepare at least one good meal per day.” For these women, likely in addition to hawking work of their own during the day, they would then spend their late-afternoon and early evening preparing the staple, likely an ugali of maize-meal, and either meat, fish or vegetables as a relish to accompany it. However, many men did not live with wives, either because they were unmarried or their spouses lived on their rural shamba (farm). Many of these men lived in all-male households they shared with friends and relatives, and as a group they would take turns preparing the evening meal. Though cooking ugali was a near nightly affair, sometimes on the way home from work, people would purchase an already fried fish as the relish from a bevy of hawkers who sold them throughout the city. Few ever ate as much or in the variety they would have ultimately desired, but every day this urban social structure of food provision and preparation was mobilized and enacted to feed the tens of thousands of mostly poor African migrants who lived in Mombasa during the middle of the twentieth century.

**Food, Capitalism and the City**

This dissertation will examine the decades-long history that created this working-class food system of the mid-twentieth century, and how transformations during that time altered it in ways that have been lasting up to the present. Consequently, this dissertation is firmly rooted in the urban history a specific place, Mombasa, and its location as a port city on the coast of East Africa, but it also tells a story about the effects of processes that have been reordering the world in earnest since the eighteenth century. The core question of this dissertation is: how did the interrelated processes of industrial capitalism, migration and urbanization change the ways in which East

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6 Ugali, the ubiquitous staple in Kenya, is a dish made by boiling and stirring ground grain with water until the grains have cooked through and the mixture thickens. Part utensil, part filler, ugali is ideally accompanied by a relish of a multitude of varieties. Historically, many grains have been used for cooking ugali, including millet and cassava, but by mid-century maize meal had become the most common, especially in cities.
Africans provisioned, prepared and consumed their food during the twentieth century? The answer to this question requires a global history of the local. While global history can and should be concerned with the movement of peoples across continents, oceans and borders, we must also not lose sight of the reality that most people in world history did not travel such distances, and were often in the recent past constrained or incentivized to stay within colonies and nation-states, but were no less entangled in global processes. This dissertation is about one city in Eastern Africa, and the migrants who travelled relatively short distances to work there, but their societies were being remade by a system that is now the dominant form of economic and social organization around the world.

While historians of global capitalism have for some time recognized the need to incorporate the study of food systems into their analyses, in some ways the powerful insights of the initial work in this field has clustered those that have followed around a specific, and I would argue limited, set of questions. Sidney Mintz’s 1985 *Sweetness and Power* created the commodities school of food history, a study in which he showed how the production and consumption of sugar in the Atlantic world was both emblematic of and played a key generative role in the history of early-modern and then the transition to modern industrial capitalism. In the decades since, a bevy of important studies have extended this line of inquiry, showing how cod, bananas, maize and

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7 I refer to “industrial” capitalism here and throughout not in its literal sense of large industry but in the theoretical one. That is, an individual or corporation owning the means of production, whatever they may be, with workers adding value to commodities through their labor, and where, after wages are paid plus whatever transaction costs are entailed in selling the commodity, the surplus value thus generated in excess returns to the owner as profit. This mode of production is distinct to merchant capitalism in which the primary modes of value creation and accumulation are through the differentials created by unequal relationships of exchange. Consequently, within this understanding, in East Africa, the sisal plantation was every bit as much a space of industrial capitalist production as was the urban factory. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I* (New York: Penguin, [1867] 1990), throughout, but especially, 245-426.


9 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*. 
other such comestible commodities have been central to the creation and transformation of the world economy.\textsuperscript{10} However, as E.P. Thompson, following Karl Marx, has shown, the transition to industrial capitalism was not simply about the production and circulation of new goods cum commodities to new places, but it was also a social and cultural revolution, a profound reordering of society and the nature of labor.\textsuperscript{11}

The social and cultural history of capitalism that Thompson play a key part in inspiring has been far from an understudied field, but what is missing within it is far-reaching research across world history that would allow for a globally-comparative understanding of how these processes transformed the structures through which food has been provisioned and prepared for people moving from rural peasant societies into the cities and onto the plantations of industrial capitalism.\textsuperscript{12} We still require much more explanation for how people created new institutions and organized family and kin to structure the ways in which food was acquired, cooked and consumed as paternalism faded and the wage and cash generated through trade came to ever more

\textsuperscript{10} See, for example, John Soluri, \textit{Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), James C. McCann, \textit{Maize and Grace: Africa’s Encounter with a New World Crop} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), and Mark Kurlansky, \textit{Cod: A Biography of a Fish that Changed the World} (New York: Penguin, 1998). Kurlansky’s book, a work of popular history full of insights that academic historians would do well to consider, was a commercial success, and has inspired many more such books in the “commodities school” aimed at popular audiences.


fundamentally define social relations. Such a historiography is crucial, this dissertation argues, because food is the most important and consistent element of labor across cultures and time in world history. People work to eat, whether they grow, catch or slaughter the food themselves or perform other forms of labor in exchange for food in kind or as wages with which to purchase it. People cannot survive without food. The other basic provision gained through labor is shelter, but people can live, and often do if with difficulty, without it. The need for food is the basis of why those who work do so, even if some receive compensation and profits for their labor in excess of this subsistence that allows them to then accumulate other material and symbolic goods and resources. Therefore, if food is the fundamental basis of labor, and the transformation of labor in the productive process was the key to industrial capitalism, we must then know far more about how capitalism remade the relationship between labor and food.13

The relative absence of such a historiography of food grounded in a history of capitalism and labor comes not from a lack of attention to the study of food in the academy. A fast-growing field, “food history,” though its questions are not new, has solidified into a categorized genre of historical writing during the past 10 to 20 years.14 A field consistently in interdisciplinary conversation with anthropology and sociology, the new food history has detailed changes in the restaurants and dining practices of elites and middle classes, the cultural history of cuisines and how they have been shaped by migration, nation-making and environmental change, as well as the

13 There are, clearly, exceptions to this explanation of food and labor, such as people with inherited wealth who work only to acquire symbolic capital or to simply accumulate more wealth absent any relationship to subsistence, but these cases would be the extreme exceptions rather than the rule for the vast majority of people in world history. 14 In addition to older research into the history of global food commodities referenced above, food was a consistent area of interest for the scholars who made up the Annales school of European social history during the 1970s and 1980s, though the sorts of questions I raise in the previous paragraph were overshadowed by a focus on agricultural change, food supplies and cuisine. See Robert Forster and Orest Ranum, eds. Food and Drink in History: Selections from the Annales Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations. Trans. By Elborg Forster and Patricia Ranum (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1979). For an overview of the growth of the field of “food history” in recent decades, see Kyri W. Claflin and Peter Scholliers, “Introduction: Surveying World Food Historiography,” in Writing Food History: A Global Perspective, eds. Claflin and Scholliers (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 1-10.
ways in which the global consumption of comestible commodities has altered local and global ecologies. All of these sub-genres have deepened our knowledge of how food has been foundational to world history, but an analysis of how capitalism and the migrations and urbanizations it precipitated recreated the food systems of working people remains scattered in the literature.

While historians have only on occasion considered the questions at the base of this study, they have been asked with far more frequency by the journalists, activists and interdisciplinary scholars who make up the “food justice” movement. While many authors writing on food justice have, with good reason, focused their efforts on understanding corporate food-production systems in the agricultural, meat and fishing industries, a growing number are also concerned with how racialized and classed political economies of urban life, especially in the United States, have shaped the dietaries and consumptive practices of the poor. America’s urban (and in some places rural) poor have little time to cook because of the long hours their low wages require them to work and, even if they did, the impoverishment of their neighborhoods has led to the withdrawal of grocery stores seeking higher profits in suburbs, leaving marginalized city residents with few

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16 Much more is needed along the lines of Scholliers’ 1996 article-length study in which explains the relationship between short lunch breaks and the emergence of street-food industries around work sites in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, or the brief section in Steven Rockel’s cultural history of migratory caravan labor in nineteenth-century East Africa where he describes how new institutions and gendered relations for the provision and preparation of food had to be improvised during these periods in motion. Scholliers, “Workers’ Time,” and Steven Rockel, *Carriers of Culture: Labor on the Road in Nineteenth-Century East Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), 141-4.
options beyond small “convenience stores” that sell highly-caloric food with little nutritional benefit. When eating outside the home, the options are generally limited to fast-food restaurants with a selection that is as nutritionally dubious as those of the convenience stores. Within this literature, crucially and to its great insight, labor and exploitation are at the center of the analysis. Large, and often vertically-integrated, corporations control the production, preparation and supply of food in these communities. Poor consumers, with limited time or opportunity to do otherwise, eat processed food prepared by equally-impoverished workers, whether those who initially cooked it in rural factories or the part-time, minimum-wage laborers who heated it up and sold the food directly to the customer. Through this geographic and economic constellation, billions of dollars in profits leave these poor communities and are accumulated in centralized corporate headquarters. However, this iniquitous social configuration has not gone unchallenged, and labor and food-justice movements have responded and organized to struggle for better grocery access, more equitable wages in fast-food restaurants, theorized and practiced new forms of urban agriculture, and engaged in a variety of other strategies.\textsuperscript{17}

The vast majority of attention to such urban geographies of dietary inequality has been focused on American and European cities.\textsuperscript{18} However, in recent years, a group of Africanist scholars have tried to shift the approach in “food-security” studies on Africa from a primary

\textsuperscript{17} The food justice literature is vast and growing, but, for fast food, see Eric Schlosser, \textit{Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal} (New York: First Mariner Books, [2001] 2012). For an introduction to food justice and the issues being addressed by the movement and well as its strategies, see Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi, \textit{Food Justice} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). For the corporate food system creating the processed foods sold in convenience as well as grocery stores, see Michael Pollan’s classic \textit{The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals} (New York: Penguin, 2007). Additionally, labor organizing among fast-food employees, despite working in an industry designed quite specifically to combat class consciousness through corporate-engineering of a contingent and “disposable” labor force, has been nonetheless rising steadily in recent years, and been central to and linked with more general workers’ movements such as the “Fight for 15.” See the organization’s Website at <fightfor15.org>.

emphasis on available quantities of food to one in which spatial inequalities and regimes of labor and stratification are seen as, in fact, being far more decisive in determining food access for the urban poor. While studies of “food deserts” in North American and European cities have identified the withdrawal of diverse grocery access as key to these structural inequalities, Africanists have quite accurately pointed out that the premise of analyzing the location of stationary “supermarkets” in the study of urban African food systems borders on irrelevancy. Like marginalized Americans and Europeans, poor Africans struggle to find adequately nutritious food as a result of structural disadvantages, but the central problem is not one of a lack of access to supermarket grocery stores. Instead, their food insecurity comes from urban economies that do not provide them the income, to an extent even greater than their poor contemporaries in the West, to buy what they need. The urban poor in Africa tend to be quite mobile within the city during the day, often travelling long distances to their worksites, and passing by outdoor markets and supermarkets where they can purchase their staple grains in bulk perhaps once each month, while on a daily basis they buy produce and other food items from mobile hawkers who move throughout the city and go to where their customers are: worksites, transportation choke points, and public spaces in poor communities. When this system is operational, even poor Africans live or commute in closely proximity to areas where they can buy fresh produce from hawkers and vendors. Most of the time, therefore, the key question is whether they can actually afford nutritionally diverse diets, and often they cannot. However, despite the centrality of income as the most important factor, municipal authorities often exacerbate the situation by conducting “clear outs” of the hawkers and vendors who sell food throughout African cities, and in so doing temporarily sever critical linkages in the food-supply systems of the urban poor.  

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19 This new scholarship is bundled together in the June 2014 special issue of Urban Forum, and forms an important scholarly baseline, though their focus is primarily on Southern Africa. See, especially, the introductory essay by
This study will build from the insights of these scholars considering the relationship between income, urban policy and the food systems of the poor in present-day African cities, but also push it in new directions. In particular, in addition to applying such questions to history that have been to date posed primarily in studies of contemporary societies, I will also examine the ways in which working-class eateries in urban Africa have figured into the food systems of the African poor. The new Africanist scholarship on food deserts commits considerable attention to the supply of foodstuffs to households where they will be cooked, but little acknowledgement or theoretical elaboration is made of the reality that Africans, not to mention poor communities across the global south, have in fact also been heavily reliant on inexpensive street food as a central component of their diets. As with hawkers of foodstuffs, the existence of these mobile vendors, who sell freshly-prepared food at prices made cheap by their low overhead costs and oft avoidance of licensing fees, makes any direct comparison to their sociological equivalent in the United States, the fast-food industry, difficult to sustain. Instead, Mombasa’s street-food vendors generally have been independent operations that provide opportunities for the poor to generate income either similar to or even in excess of what they would make working for wages. Rather than extracting surplus value from the consumption of poor communities, as in the American fast-food model, the economic accumulation of these small-scale proprietors tends to stay within the working-class neighborhoods of Mombasa, with perhaps a portion sent back to family on a small, rural farm if the vendor is a migrant. Moreover, while the doughnuts and tea of the mornings, as well the bulk of the maize-based ugli served during the afternoon and evenings may be of some nutritional

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*20* Ibid., and, for the ubiquity of street-food in urban India’s past and present, though not framed within the food-studies questions posed in this section, see Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, The Slow Boil: Street Food, Rights and Public Space in Mumbai (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).
concern, the overall variety and freshness of the additional relishes that include beans, meat, fish and greens makes the “fast-food” of Mombasa a categorically different institution than that found in the United States. The issue, though, as with purchasing foodstuffs, is whether people can afford them and if the eateries are available at all, given that they often have not been throughout the twentieth century when municipal authorities have arrested street-food vendors and demolished their structures.

This dissertation, therefore, emerges from food-studies literature, but less that written by historians and more from the interdisciplinary scholarship concerned with food justice. While the questions animating this study have only occasionally been posed by historians in general, those working in African history have only approached them obliquely, if at all. Moreover, I see my approach as one quite different than that recently proposed by James C. McCann in his survey of African food history. McCann, in introducing the subject, writes that two approaches exist for studying the history of food in Africa, the first which examines “the daily struggle for sustenance, whether in the African origins of humankind or, in modern times, in the famines that have devastated regions of Africa such as Ethiopia, Niger, and Sudan,” a perspective he sees as having its importance but that also “emphasizes struggle and heartbreak at the expense of recognizing Africa’s fundamental energy and creativity in the history of its cooking and solutions to life’s problems.” McCann, instead, suggests a different approach, one in which historians examine “cooking and cuisine as a creative composition at the heart of all cultural expressions of ourselves as humans” and explores “cuisine in Africa as something conceived, cooked and consumed, first around home fires, cooking pots, griddles, and spits, and later in market stalls and restaurants and
at political events where food expressed power.”

This approach, and the binaries its rests upon, are antithetical to a food-justice approach to African history. First, to equate “the daily struggle for sustenance” only with human origins and famines sidesteps the undeniable reality that the majority of people who struggled with food insecurity in twentieth-century Africa did not do so because of famines, but rather because of the political economies of deprivation that colonial capitalism and the world economy of decolonization imposed on millions and now billions of not only urban but also rural Africans. More theoretically, McCann’s dividing of one approach that examines “daily struggles” from another that celebrates “energy and creativity” fails to recognize that the incredible and indeed inspiring ingenuity of the impoverished Africans who are at the center of this dissertation was embedded in the daily struggle for survival in a city wracked by limited economic opportunity and a violently-coercive government.

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21 James C. McCann, *Stirring the Pot: A History of African Cuisine* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009), 2. Food history remains an understudied topic in African history, but is built upon earlier work and has been growing with an increasing number of recent studies. However, African food history remains almost entirely focused on rural Africa. The two exceptions include Jane Guyer’s 1987 edited volume, which asks crucial questions about capitalism, food and urbanization, but is mostly concerned with food supply rather than how workers’ food was actually being acquired and prepared in cities. More recent research on the history of rural food systems, other than those by colonial nutrition science, academic interest in the subject began with Audrey Richards’ *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe* (London: Routledge, 1932) 2009. More recent research on the history of rural food systems in this broader sub-region of Africa include Elias C. Mandala, *The End of Chidyerano: A History of Food and Everyday Life in Malawi, 1860–2004* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004), as well as the restudy of Richard’s *Hunger and Work* by Henrietta L. Moore and Megan Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition, and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890–1990* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1994), as well as Kathryn de Luna’s much needed work on pre-colonial African food history, *Collecting Food, Cultivating People: Subsistence and Society in Central Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). Much more research is needed outside the now relatively well-studied areas of Central-Southern Africa. Holtzman’s above cited work is among the few that explicitly study rural “food history” outside Central and Southern Africa.
Therefore, the historiographical antecedents to this study in African history come not from those researching food *per se*, but instead the historians who have examined the interrelated histories of capitalism, urbanization and labor. However, by taking this approach, this dissertation can bring these literatures together to create a new subfield within the historiography of food in Africa, one that examines how capitalism, migration and urbanization changed consumptive practices and the labor of food. More specifically, my most direct scholarly debt in African history comes from the feminist historians who combined gender analysis with historical materialism to rewrite the economic and social history of urban Africa through the experiences of African women. These scholars made clear that, despite the general trend that labor migration to African cities was for many decades predominantly male, women also lived lives of labor, struggle and even accumulation in the cities of twentieth-century Africa. *While in rural areas, love and labor were structured through kinship-based patriarchies in which men accessed food, sex and other aspects of what Luise White calls the “comforts of home”; in cities, women, excluded from wage labor, were able to earn income through commercializing and selling these labors, goods and services to migratory men. These scholars, and especially Claire Robertson and Gracia Clark, have shown how women created food systems for the working classes in twentieth-century African cities, selling foodstuffs as hawkers and starting a variety of small-scale eateries.*

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23 White, *Comforts of Home*, and Robertson’s *Sharing the Same Bowl?,* 106-12, and *Trouble Showed the Way*. 
working-classes that were in motion throughout the day, while additional research into prostitution and concubinage has also shown that women would also at times combine sex, shelter, and prepared food for men away from their rural homes in Africa’s cities. Together, these studies have demonstrated that, as the migration that industrial capitalism engendered in Africa forced men to seek food outside their kin group, African women used these new social and economic conditions to build urban economies of food provision and preparation, earning income that allowed them to survive in the city.

African cities, this historiography makes clear, have been socially structured through struggles within a racialized political economy that was also gendered. My own methodology in researching the history of Mombasa is grounded in this insight, but also draws from more recent research in African history that has incorporated the study of masculinity more fully into the analysis, and I see as creating an approach to gender studies closer to what Joan Scott meant when she wrote that “gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes,” and “is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.” In the case of twentieth-century urban Africa, and Mombasa in particular, this dissertation will examine the extent and historically-contingent nature of how migration, urbanization and the commercialization of society re-gendered how food fit into the region’s regimes of labor and its economic relations.

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24 White’s work on prostitution is the best known, but previous work by Burja and Strobel was also crucial in centering these women and those who were concubines in Kenya’s urban labor history. White, *Comforts of Home*, Burja, “Women ‘Entrepreneurs,’” and Strobel, *Muslim Women*.

In considering how these processes affected East Africa’s socio-economic structures, one of the more radical changes in the region during the twentieth century was that, while living as migrants in the city, men cooked. While McCann is in a certain way right to point out that food was gendered as a nearly exclusively female domain of knowledge and practice in Africa, this only holds when referring to the pre-colonial past. However, when examining the relationship between food and gender historically, rather than representing it as a functionalist reality, we can see that the twentieth century significantly complicated the ways in which the labor of food was gendered. At the end of the nineteenth century, most of the food in the interior of East Africa was produced and prepared within the kinship group, and this was primarily done by the labor of women who agriculturally worked the land and then cooked the meals eaten by their immediate and extended families. Men fished and tended livestock, but, as most cuisines were in the main vegetarian and composed of foods grown and cooked by women, comestible culture and its relation to the natural world were domains rendered in rural ideologies as feminine. However, the materiality of migration to colonial plantations and cities made the performance of these gendered social structures nearly impossible for most. Especially during the early decades of colonialism, almost all the wage-labor migrants were men. In these circumstances, African men created a migratory masculinity in which it became permissible for them to cook, for themselves and each other while not living with women who were kin. However, in such situations, the kinship structures that had mediated access to food in rural areas did not simply dissolve under the weight of capitalist modernity, but instead were remade to fit new circumstances. In migrant households, generation often replaced gender, with young male relatives and friends cooking for older, more established men in exchange for free or cheaper rent and food. In other migratory homes without

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26 McCann, *Stirring the Pot*, 9-10.
an elder patron, African men shared cooking responsibilities as co-equals, taking turns preparing
the evening meal.27

These migratory changes caused by wage-labor migration were a radical break from
previous understandings of the relationship between gender and the labor of food, but they were
also elastic. Migration stretched the everyday social structures of rural Africa out into new forms
when forced by the demographic realities of the city or plantation, but, when the opportunity arose,
migratory families were again reconstituted with the aim to more closely align them with the
expectations of rural patriarchies. From the 1940s, more and more women increasingly came to
Mombasa and lived with husbands or other men and, once they were in these homes, kitchen labor
again became gendered as feminine. However, as in the way a rubber-band never truly returns to
its original shape once stretched, so too the reconstructed urban forms of feminized kitchen labor
were never quite the mirror of those in rural societies.28 For example, some women did not earn
cash income, but instead lived in housing paid for with their husbands’ wages, or that was provided
through work, and they prepared food purchased by him or acquired as rations from his employer.

27 To support his argument that food and food knowledge have been nearly exclusively gendered as feminine in
African history, McCann dismisses the domestic cooking practices of men in cities in his introduction and thereafter
does not return to their history. He argues that: “In African societies bachelors do cook—but not creatively and
rarely well.” Creativity and food quality are deeply cultural and contextual concepts, and I would suggest that
neither McCann nor I are in a position to ascertain how such “bachelor” food was perceived by those who cooked
and ate it in the past, but, more fundamentally, that tens of thousands of men in Mombasa alone, not to mention
millions more across the continent, cooked and ate their own food during the twentieth century while in migration,
suggests to me that we should reconsider the rather functionalist and ahistorical position that food was only a
“feminine” domain. McCann, Stirring the African Pot, 9.

28 The nature of food labor in rural societies was changing too, though less in gendered terms. Over the course of the
twentieth century, purchased and processed food became part of rural diets, especially sugar, maize meal and soda.
However, the overwhelming conclusion from my oral interviews was that the labor of preparing food remained the
task of women, and that most families still grew the majority of the food they ate. The provisioning and preparation
of food in rural areas had changed, but not nearly to the extent as in the commercialized contours of cities like
Mombasa. Detailed studies of such rural histories of food are rare in East Africa, and especially for the societies
central to this study, the Kikuyu, Kamba, Luo and Luhya, but Holtzman’s ethno-history of food amongst the
Samburu is exemplary, and more like it are needed. Holtzman, Uncertain Tastes. My conclusions about the nature of
change in rural food systems outside the Samburu’s comes from aggregates of oral interviews with migrants in
Mombasa from November 2014 to January 2015 and with returnees in Nyanza Province near Lake Victoria during
February 2015.
In these homes, male wages purchasing the food of the house new not only for the way it commercialized the acquisition of food, but also because in rural areas it was women, through their agricultural labor, who provisioned food supplies for their kin. The political economy of a stratified wage system, though, meant that few African families could be constituted as such, and so most women continued to provision at least part of their families’ food. The difference, though, was that now instead of growing it, they acquired the food through purchase with the cash they earned through trade.

While history revealed migratory men cooking in their own homes to be a practice of necessity rather than a long-term change in views about how domestic food should be gendered in households with both men and women, a different form of cooking has had a more enduring impact on masculinity and food labor in Mombasa. The writing thus far on street-food vending in African history is centered on women in the trade, probably in large part because most of the histories in which they have appeared were engaged in the important task of recovering the experiences of urban women in Africa. However, in Mombasa, from as early as the 1930s, and with certainty from the 1950s, men also became central participants in the street-food industry. The roots of women and men cooking and selling food on Mombasa’s streets are found in the city’s political economy as, from the 1930s up to the present, endemic unemployment has narrowed opportunities for wage labor and, given the stratified nature of the urban economy, even those who had such jobs often did not earn enough to maintain a basic level of subsistence. As a result, men, alongside

29 The most thorough scholarship on women street-food vendors in Africa is on Ghana, with a study by Robertson on Accra and another by Clark on Kumasi, but even in these works they are a minor focus with Robertson interested in urban women broadly and Clark on a large variety of market women. Robertson, *Sharing the Same Bowl?*, 106-12, and Clark, *Onions are my Husband*. For Kenya, we have only fragmentary mention of street-food vendors in larger studies. The brief appearances of street-food vendors in Kenyan historiography can be found in Strobel, *Muslim Women*, 129, 135, Willis, *Mombasa, the Swahili and the Making of the Mijikenda* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 197, and Robertson’s 1998 book on Nairobi markets, which includes prepared food sellers throughout, but her primary focus is on women selling foodstuffs, rather than cooked food. Robertson, *Trouble Showed the Way*. 
the women who were already de facto excluded from wage labor, looked to trade as a way to generate income in the city, and many became operators of working-class eateries. The written records are clear on this, and oral history supports them. For example, men were so predominant in the street-food industry during the second half of the twentieth century that many oral informants could not actually remember any women working as food vendors from the 1960s to the 1980s. Archival evidence clearly shows that women were a significant part of the street-food industry during those decades, but such memories are indicative of the large presence of men cooking and selling food on Mombasa’s urban landscape. During the twentieth century, therefore, the gendered ideology of food labor that emerged through the material struggles of urban life was one in which men avoided domestic kitchen labor except if forced while on their own, but, if cooking for profit, they saw no incompatibility between their masculinity and preparing food for the working men and women of the city.

During the first half of the twentieth century, these street-food vendors and their clients created an urban food system that allowed them to mutually survive in Mombasa despite the constraints imposed on them by a gendered racial capitalism. Laborers and other poor residents needed access to prepared food while they were away from their home kitchens for work because they were unable to afford the meals sold in the more expensive restaurants of the middle and upper classes. The cheaply-priced tea, coffee, doughnuts, *ugali* and the bevy of meat and vegetable relishes that vendors sold allowed the working poor to purchase prepared food in the city. For the proprietors, cooked food vending offered a trade with low capital start-up and operating costs. The hawking of cloths and other household goods required both significant capital and connections to wholesalers, as well as the financial ability to have capital extended for significant periods of time in order to maintain an adequate stock of goods to attract customers. Alternatively, a food vendor’s
start-up costs included a jiko stove and crockery. A person could decide to provide a table and build a make-shift structure, but these amenities were optional. Moreover, while an eatery’s start-up capital remained invested for the duration of the business, daily inputs in the form of maize meal, wheat flour, sugar and fresh ingredients would, theoretically if business was good, be converted that day into profits. Robertson’s study of Accra showed that the retail trade of hawking cloths and other household goods presented the opportunity to make higher profits in the long-run than in the prepared-food industry, but nonetheless, in places like Mombasa, the low risks and capital requirements of street-food vending made it an attractive way for poor men and women to establish themselves in the city.\(^{30}\) Street-food was an institution of survival, for the customers who otherwise could not afford meals while at work and for the vendors who had few other opportunities to earn a living in the stratified and stagnant economy of Kenya’s largest coastal city.

The mid-twentieth century, though, was a time of transition and transformation not only for how food labor in homes and eateries was re-gendered, but also for the relationship between the state and the people living in Mombasa and cities throughout the British Empire. During a period that John Lonsdale and D.A. Low have called the “second colonial occupation” and Frederick Cooper later showed was the moment when “development” as a form of governance first emerged, British officials were imagining a new kind of colonial city.\(^{31}\) The plans for urban development that crystalized during this period, Cooper has argued, were a response to an imperial crisis in which African workers organized and rose against the appalling conditions of labor that

\(^{30}\) For Robertson’s analysis of household goods versus the street-food trade, see Sharing the Same Bowl?, 110.

colonial capitalism imposed on them. Starting during the 1930s and continuing until decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s, across Africa and the wider British Empire workers were striking and making demands for improved material conditions, and Mombasa was a key node in this wider global movement of colonized labor. With strikes during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, workers in this East African port town showed that they had the incredible power to grind a significant portion of imperial commerce to a halt, since Mombasa was a major choke point through which goods arrived and left the region. In response, the British theorized and sometimes implemented a wide array of “stabilization” plans to turn Africans from a perceived inchoate mass into individuated and legible “modern workers,” better paid, with improved housing and, indeed, a diversified and nutritious diet. This, theorists of development thought, would make workers more upright, invested in colonial society, efficient, and easier to control.32

Cooper’s work is foundational to the historiography of development in Africa, and to this dissertation. However, this study is also part of a growing field of research examining what Cooper’s specific focus on changing British colonial ideas about labor, urban life and African society could not: the actual social history of the effects of these policies.33 I will show how the constructions of family and food that the state intended to socially engineer in Mombasa only loosely correlated, if at all, to the ways Africans in the 1940s and 1950s distributed kitchen labor in their changing forms of family and kinship at mid-century. The effects of development were uneven for waged workers, as some people did receive small increases in their real wages during the 1950s, but, since they were starting from a baseline of poverty, it is unclear just how much this

32 Cooper, On the African Waterfront, and his Decolonization and African Society.
33 The literature on the social history of development in Africa includes Lisa A. Lindsay, Working with Gender: Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), and Caleb Edwin Owen, “Lands of Leisure: Recreation, Space, and the Struggle for Urban Kenya, 1900-2000,” (PhD Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2016). The dissertation in progress of Robert Rouphail, also at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, considers the social and cultural history of how cyclones shaped development in colonial Mauritius.
slightly higher spending power improved their material conditions.\textsuperscript{34} These workers in some analyses could be seen as a “labor aristocracy,” but, as Cooper points out, more detailed study of this category of supposedly advantaged workers has revealed them to be “often not so well off after all.”\textsuperscript{35} If the effects of development on household incomes and resources to commit to food were ambiguous at best for waged workers, for street-food vendors, the plan for a new Mombasa presented an existential threat. From the late 1940s until the end of colonialism, the proprietors who sold prepared food and drink to Mombasa’s working classes had to suddenly confront a municipal government that was imagining a future for the city in which they did not exist.

Development is both a generative and destructive process. It seeks to create a new world, but in so doing it must also destroy the old. In the ordered, developed city, food would be prepared in licensed businesses and institutions that followed strict sanitation guidelines. Street-food was the old world, rendered an anachronism that needed to be disposed of to create the new.\textsuperscript{36} Theoretically, at least some of the old street-food vendors were to have a place in the newly-developed, prepared-food system, but following the state’s vision for the industry was a near impossibility for many proprietors, as licenses and rents would add capital requirements they could not afford and the limits the state wanted to place on their mobility would negate the advantage of being able to move adaptively as consumer markets in the city shifted location.\textsuperscript{37} As a result, street-food vendors continued their trade illicitly and the state created, in response, what would be a lasting form for how municipal authorities administered the people selling prepared food and

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\textsuperscript{34} For wages and working-class purchasing power in relation to food in 1940s and 1950s Mombasa, see Table 8 and Table 9 at the end of Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{35} Cooper, \textit{On the African Waterfront}, 276.


\textsuperscript{37} This was especially important for street-food vendors who sold food to workers on construction sites, which created temporary spaces of working-class consumption across the city.
\end{flushright}
drinks in the city. Throughout the 1950s, the government began conducting raids and clear-outs in which they arrested, prosecuted, and fined vendors and, if they had a structure, it was demolished. This violent expansion and exercise of state power was not limited to either Mombasa or street-food vendors, but was a generalized attack on the trading activities of the poor in urban Kenya. In her study of Nairobi, Robertson refers to this same period in the capital city as the “First Hawkers War.”38 Independence, for these traders, marked both a rupture but at the same time also revealed that these colonial practices of urban governance would be lasting ones. African hawkers and vendors, in their independent republic, were able to mobilize news discourses of citizenship and rights that were circulating globally and used their power as voting constituencies to shape urban policy in ways that had been impossible under the racial authoritarianism of colonialism. However, the institutions of urban administration built during the 1950s, and the ideas about the aesthetic, sanitary and licensing structure of the city that was implicit within them, have endured and, as a consequence, so too has the reality that selling food and drink on Mombasa’s streets has meant risking arrest, prosecution and having one’s business demolished.

Since independence in 1963, much has changed in Mombasa, but what has remained constant has been a political economy unable to pay workers enough to spend more on their food and that does not provide many income-generating alternatives for the people selling meals to their fellow poor urban residents. Irrespective of the many debates that have emerged in the post-colonial city over the aesthetics and sanitation of its street-food vendors, the reality is that they are necessary. This relationship between an asymmetrical political economy of impoverishment and the crucial place of street food in the social structure of the city has been neither historically, nor

38 The extent of this urban development-based repression seems to have actually been even greater in Nairobi, as the “First Hawkers War” overlapped and was in many ways a targeted extension to traders of the British state’s coercive and violent tactics during the Mau Mau war, which was focused, in terms of urban areas, on Nairobi. Robertson, Trouble Showed the Way, 104, 130-45.
is presently, unique to Mombasa.\(^{39}\) As such, the experiences of these street-food vendors in this coastal East African city fit into the much wider and global study of what has been referred to as “informality,” a corpus of housing and trading practices that, seemingly, occur outside the “formal” sphere of state-sanctioned activities. While historians have only haphazardly incorporated the urban residents defined as “informal” into their analyses, in part because of the bias towards trade unionism and waged workers as the subjects of labor and economic history, an interdisciplinary scholarship primarily concerned with the contemporary societies of the Global South has been for some time studying these trading and housing practices, and arguing over the usefulness of the category of “informality” itself.\(^{40}\) Without rehearsing what has been an extended debate, the important point take from these scholarly discussions is that the formal/informal divide fails almost entirely to describe what have in fact been far more complex social and economic systems, and the history of street food presented in this dissertation provides further evidence for this conclusion. In Mombasa, neither households nor people could generally be described as existing in either the formal or informal sector, but they have instead, according to the logic of the binary, lived in a duality that challenges the saliency of maintaining such an analytical divide. Many men worked for wages, but these being insufficient they also took up a trade to supplement that income. Moreover, women who lived with a male partner with a salary often could not survive

\(^{39}\) In Africa, see Robertson, *Sharing the Same Bowl?*, 106-12, Clark, *Onions are My Husband*, and for South Asia, Anjaria, *The Slow Boil*.

on that alone, and so they too would engage in trade to increase the income of the household. Additionally, the cheap food that informal vendors sold to poor workers allowed the formal wage system to function. Particularly during the post-colonial period, these very trading activities that were rendered as informal were in various ways formalized by the state, but often through quasi-legal, patrimonial relationships of bribery, dependence and obligation that linked together vendors, police and officials that allowed street-food to continue to provide income and feed the urban poor. Therefore, the “informal” sector, in Mombasa, has been intrinsically part of the “formal” one. They have been, in short, inseparable. Rather than painfully trying to sort through which socio-economic practices were “formal” or “informal,” the far more crucial task is to analyze how these various micro-economies and social relationships have created an urban system in which some aesthetics and forms of trade and survival have been deemed legitimate, and others not.

The formal/informal binary thus fails as a tool for understanding a complex urban web of socio-economic networks and structures, but it does actually tell us quite a bit about how elites have sought to define the city politically. Consequently, the formal/informal divide is far more usefully understood in political, rather than economic, terms. Urban authorities and other elites in Mombasa have often leaned on this binary as well as other categorical languages of duality such as sanitary/insanitary, licensed/unlicensed or beautiful/ugly as a way to read urban landscapes and structure their political arguments. These are discursive, cultural binaries, ideas about the city, but ones that have had real material consequences for those deemed informal, insanitary, unlicensed or ugly. Being marked as such has meant exposure to harassment, arrest, prosecution and the demolishing of whatever business or home a person had managed to build. This struggle over the meaning of the formal or informal in Mombasa has been, in effect, a conflict over who has a right to be in the city, whose existence is “legitimate.” The dividing line has not been stationary, but
constantly moving and shifting because of the struggles of hawkers and vendors to expand the parameters of “legitimacy” in the city. Despite their many gains, street-food vendors have continuously and consistently had to exist within a political context guided by an attitude towards their livelihoods aptly described by columnist David Makali in 2002: “Woe unto you if you are poor, ugly and, therefore, undesirable. The message is violently clear: Kenya’s urban centres are not for you.”

This is a dissertation about a revolutionary rupture in East African food systems. Before the twentieth century, the vast majority of people living in the region acquired their food outside commercialized systems of exchange. By the end of the century, living in one of the regions now many cities meant that food was a fundamentally commercial experience. One first acquired cash as wages or through trade, and only then could it be converted into food. This is a story of capitalism in the twentieth century, and as such it is one deeply embedded in a racialized, gendered and classed political economy. During the colonial period, to be black was almost certainly to be poor, and to be a black woman was to be excluded from even the few opportunities that black men had. After independence, occasions for advancement did increase for black Africans, but fewer for women and most people remained poor. These structural asymmetries shaped the cultures and family structures that Africans were able to create in commercialized Mombasa to provision and prepare their food. Since food is the most basic social and biological resource, the study of the food systems of the poor seems inevitably to be an examination of depravation and struggle and, in a sense, it is. However, this history also shows us the incredible ingenuity and creativity of the poor who have made Mombasa their home. Many people living on below-subsistence wages or earnings managed to survive and street-food vendors, despite a half century of a state trying to

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expel them through violence and coercion, have remained a central part of Mombasa’s social and economic life. Such recognition of the perseverance of these communities, though, should not be taken as acceptance of their condition. The poor of Mombasa, and everywhere, deserve better, and during the years of research and writing for this dissertation the parts of Kenya that fall within the thematic expertise of this author seem to be on the verge of another transformation, the consequences of which portend little that will actually help to improve the lives of everyday people. I hope this dissertation will be of interest to other scholars, but more crucially that it reveals something about how Kenya’s urban food systems work so they can be better formulated in the future to nourish everyone who lives in the city and provide income to those who need it without the threat of state violence. In my conclusion, I will consider what Mombasa’s, and the world’s, past tells us about the present and future of Kenya’s food systems.

**Scope of the Study and Chapter Outline**

Food systems are vast structures. Early in this research project, I had designs of researching and writing a comprehensive study linking production to the practices of preparation and consumption in twentieth-century Kenya. However, I quickly realized that an examination of that scope would be well beyond what one dissertation could accomplish, and that a tightly-focused study of the history of a particular set of structures and processes within Kenya’s food system would produce better quality research. As such, this is not a dissertation about how the entirety of Kenya’s or even Mombasa’s food systems changed during the twentieth century, but rather quite specifically an analysis of how capitalism transformed the ways in which migrants from the interior of East Africa provisioned, prepared and consumed their food while in Mombasa during the twentieth century.

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42 I am currently, in a separate project, researching the production side of East Africa’s food systems through a history of how capitalism and the modern state have changed fishing in the region.
I chose these parameters for a variety of reasons that require brief explanation. First, though African food history in general is lacking, the detailed study of how capitalism changed the practices of preparation and consumption is almost entirely absent, especially in regard to the eateries of the working classes. Food production is where almost all the scholarship has been focused. The history of agricultural change in Africa is as well studied as any topic, livestock have had their historians, and fishing is increasingly emerging as a subject of inquiry. However, the transformations in how Africans prepared and ate their food in cities remains understudied even after this dissertation, and much more comparative work in East Africa and the rest of the continent is needed. Second, I chose Mombasa because, despite being a central node in the East African and Indian Ocean economy, the city has received relatively little attention from urban historians in recent years. The period from the 1970s to the early 1990s produced a rich variety of research on the city, but it has faded somewhat from scholarly view over the past two decades as Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar have gained the bulk of the attention from urban historians interested in the East African coast. Before Prita Meier’s just-published history of architecture in Mombasa (and

43 Again, the only sustained histories of working-class eateries are in the separate studies by Robertson and Clark, and for both of them these institutions are only a minor focus in their work. Robertson’s most detailed analysis is of those in Accra in *Sharing the Same Bowl?*, 106-12, and of passing mention of especially *uji* (porridge) sellers in Nairobi in her *Trouble Showed the Way*. Clark studies prepared-food vendors as part of her wider study of market women in *Onions are My Husband*.

44 The history of agriculture in Africa is too vast to cite in any meaningfully representative way, though, despite my above exceptions taken with McCann’s *Stirring the Pot*, his book on the history of maize in Africa is an exemplary example of the agricultural history of food. McCann, *Maize and Grace*. For cattle, while it is true that their place as currency has held an important place in history and anthropology, much more could be known about how ideas and practices changed as beef consumption became more prominent in African societies during the twentieth century. In Kenya, for cattle as currency, see Gavin Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petit Bourgeoisie* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 200-40, and for changing practices of consumption, especially around dairy, see Holtzman, *Uncertain Tastes*. For fishing, see David M. Gordon, *Nachituti’s Gift: Economy, Society, and Environment in Central Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), and my own research on fishing in East Africa that will be published in the coming years.

Zanzibar), the only recent and sustained monographs on the city have been Kai Kresse’s philosophical ethnography of the city and Dillon Mahoney’s study of craft traders, but both were primarily focused on the present. As such, part of my goal in this dissertation is to contribute to a much-need, multivalent twentieth-century history of Mombasa through the lens of its food systems. Finally, I chose to study the experiences of “upcountry” migrants in Mombasa because, despite the fact that they have been the majority population of the city for nearly a century, their experiences have remained mostly secondary in the academic study of the Kenyan coast. While I share the fascination of other scholars who have researched the intricacies of the histories of the three most-studied groups, Arabs, the Swahili, and the Mijikenda, we nonetheless need to know far more about the social, cultural and economic lives of the people who made up the majority of the city’s population for most of the twentieth century.
This dissertation contains an introduction, a conclusion, and six researched-based chapters. Chapter One examines the initial period of large-scale, wage-labor migration to the Kenyan coast, and in it I argue that migrant food systems during the early-colonial period were shaped by a labor-compensation structure that emerged dialectically between the legal context of the British Empire and the need to adapt colonial conditions of employment to turn of the century East African economic and social structures. For much of this period, employers paid their workers a wage, but, as required by the Masters and Servants Ordinance, they also supplied them with housing, medical care and a food ration (posho). In providing posho, colonial employers followed a legal structure built out of centuries of negotiation between employer classes and workers in Britain and throughout the Empire, but in this chapter I will also consider how Africans would have understood and translated these new conditions of compensation, wage plus a ration, as both an extension of familiar forms of dependency and obligation and, in other ways, a radical new system for (unequally) distributing social resources.

Chapter Two examines how the Great Depression led to a further deterioration of the diets and nutrition of workers living in Mombasa, and how this changing economic context precipitated transformations in public eating culture and in the gendering of cooking in East Africa. I examine wage data and draw inferences from other available evidence to argue that African workers were paid below subsistence wages and how, paired with more limited access to food rations by the 1930s, this meant that many struggled to access food that was either nutritious or even adequate in quantity. This chapter also considers the ways this political economy of racialized wage labor transformed the gendered nature of food preparation, creating a migratory masculinity in which men were cooking their own food in shared, all-male households. I also examine how these poor laborers created a new consumer class in Mombasa that needed to buy prepared food while at work.
and away from their home kitchens, and that other urban residents responded by operating businesses as hawkers selling tea, coffee and snacks, and roadside and in-home restaurants offering full meals. During this time, the prepared food industry was worked mostly by women, but I argue that men were also increasingly starting to join, and so began the incorporation of cooking commercially in public into the masculinity of African men in Mombasa.

Chapter Three is the hinge upon which the remainder of the dissertation turns. I examine how the 1940s and 1950s were decades of major transformation in Mombasa’s food systems. During this period, more and more women came to Mombasa which precipitated another change in how food preparation was gendered in the city as, when women lived with men, it was now presumed they would return to the kitchen, reflecting the patriarchal gendered norms of the rural societies in the interior. However, I also argue that gender in Mombasa was elastic, and that as these patriarchies became reconstituted in the city, they were similar to their rural counterparts, but crucially different in certain respects. This chapter explores these themes during a period when “development” became the new form of colonial governance in Kenya, part of which meant the state wanted to create “modern workers” with households in which men earned wages that supported wives and children. However, this chapter argues that such configurations of family were formed by only a select few, and more common were households in which women worked as traders to supplement male incomes and so, as a consequence, most women were provisioning, as well as preparing, much of the food that their households consumed.

This chapter also shows how the period from the late 1940s through to the 1950s utterly transformed the relationship of street-food vendors with the state. Urban development entailed not only reworking the households of African workers, but changing the legal, aesthetic and biomedical landscapes of the city. During these decades, the formal/informal divide emerged as
political categories of urban life, and the municipal government set out on targeted campaigns to prohibit trading of any kind that occurred outside the licensed purview of the state. With these clear-outs, the state created a bundle of tactics—arrests, prosecutions, and demolitions—that became institutionalized as a form of municipal administration. Nonetheless, despite the intensity of the attacks on their livelihoods, many street-food vendors survived this period with their businesses still operational, and they remained central to the city’s social system.

For the remaining three chapters of the dissertation, we leave the household and focus primarily on how people were acquiring their food while outside their homes, and the businesses that provided these services. This is for two reasons. First, the archival record has left behind an incredibly rich source of granular-level information about the history of street-food in Kenya, making possible a detailed understanding of how the industry changed through shifting regimes of state enforcement in post-colonial Mombasa. With this available evidence, I strategically decided to narrow my focus to these eateries, and through this provide the most comprehensive history to date of street food in Africanist historiography. Second, by writing a history of street food, this dissertation is still also analyzing the history of how migrant communities ate their food, as they were very much dependent upon these vendors for a large portion of the food they ate. Therefore, the final three chapters are a history of how, where and to what extent street-food proprietors operated their businesses in Mombasa, and so consequently also is a story of the ways poor Africans in the city were able to acquire their food in the unequal political economy of urban capitalism.

Following this approach, Chapter Four, then, examines how independence changed the context in which street-food vendors struggled for their place in Mombasa. I show how, during the 1960s and 1970s, the advent of Kenya as a republic opened new possibilities for how the city’s
comestible landscape would be constituted. During the colonial period, everyday Africans had almost no direct political representation. However, once a republic, poor Africans were able to organize themselves into political constituencies and, in the case of prepared-food vendors, were able to pressure officials into creating new, legalized licensing categories allowing the sale of food on Mombasa’s streets. Pushing back against the notion that the end of colonialism merely signaled “flag independence,” this chapter argues that the 1960s and early 1970s were years of contradiction in which radical new possibilities for vendors in Mombasa were interspersed with the reality that colonial ideas about urban planning and the view that street food was incompatible with the city’s “modernity” remained part of the municipal council’s agenda.

Chapter Five is concerned with how, after securing new legal statuses during the 1960s and early 1970s, vendors had to re-accommodate themselves to everyday state violence as they became wrapped up in the global ecology of cholera, as the Seventh Pandemic struck Kenya in 1972. During “cholera campaigns,” street-food became identified as the most visible vector of the disease, and vendors had their businesses again outlawed for extended periods, and demolitions and prosecutions again became a central part of how municipal authorities governed the city. Since cholera is often spread through the consumption of food contaminated with the bacterium, the chapter concedes that certainly some people were most likely infected by eating street food. Nonetheless, rather than the existence of people selling prepared food on the street, the much more fundamental reason Mombasa was vulnerable to cholera outbreaks was because the state had been unable to maintain and expand sanitary water and sewerage infrastructures in the city to keep pace with the rapid increase in its population. However, the expense and time of such projects meant the far easier way for officials to show that they were concerned and working to alleviate the risks of cholera in the city was to shut down street food, and engage in public and spectacle-generating
arrests and prosecutions of vendors and the demolition of their structures if they disobeyed the order.

The sixth and final chapter of my dissertation examines how Mombasa’s street-food vendors became entangled in the shifting political terrain of multi-partyism in late twentieth- and early twenty-first century Kenya. This was another period of political contradiction for street-food vendors in that it was both a time in which they had unprecedented access to “legitimate” status within the city, while also being increasingly vulnerable to violent attacks from the state. Poor communities, street-food vendors among them, were able to build patrimonial dependencies with officials who wanted their support in Kenya’s increasingly competitive multi-party elections, but President Daniel arap Moi’s ruling party also used the long-standing techniques of demolitions to “cleanse” urban geographies of potential opposition voters. Situating vendors in this political context, this chapter examines both how they built patrimonial relationships with officials to secure their position in Mombasa during the final years of the twentieth century, but then concludes by examining what may have been the largest intervention into urban life in Kenya since Operation Anvil during the Mau Mau war. From December 2001 to February 2002, MP Shariff Nassir, a close ally of Moi and part of the ruling party, engaged in a desperate and violent attempt to clear opposition supporters from Mombasa by trying to demolish all trading structures in the city, destroying the businesses of thousands of the city’s poor. However, despite this devastation, I conclude by showing that Nassir had not destroyed the political economy that incentivized people to work in the street-food industry. Vendors began re-building almost immediately, and within the year they were once more a prominent feature of Mombasa’s landscape.

49 Operation Anvil being the exercise in which the British expelled tens of thousands of Kikuyu, Embu and Meru from Nairobi in 1954 and then imprisoned many of them in concentration camps.
The conclusion to this dissertation reflects on what this history tells us about the present and future of Mombasa’s and Kenya’s food systems.

**A Note on Sources and Method**

I came to a surprising realization early in my research for this project. I initially thought that I would include middle-class and elite consumptive cultures alongside those of the working classes in my analysis. However, after a brief survey of the archival evidence, I was startled to find, contrary to common perception, that it was the experiences of the poor rather than the advantaged that were prevalent in state records. In retrospect, this should not have been surprising. The Kenya state, both during the colonial and post-colonial period, was interested in documenting the populations it wanted to control. Elites were assumed to live respectable social lives, but the ruling classes were suspicious of the institutions and cultures of the poor, a view of society far from unique to Kenya. As a consequence, throughout the twentieth century the Kenyan state has been meticulously documenting the households and cultural lives of African workers, less for posterity and as a resource for social historians, but as a means of executing various governing agendas. Upon realization of the trove of documentation available for a working-class history of food in Mombasa, I decided to leave the history of elite and middle-class food systems either for my own future projects or those of other historians.⁵⁰

The forms of documentation one finds in the archive on working-class food systems change over time with the shifting concerns of the state. The first chapter relies heavily on labor inspection reports of plantation and urban workers that had extensive information on the food rations

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⁵⁰ Despite the prominence of documentation of working-class food systems, evidence remains for research into more elite ones, but the source base would look quite different. Little is available in the archives, with few restaurant licenses, no apparent sociological studies or and few correspondences that deal with how elite cooking and comestible consumptive practices changed. However, oral interviews are one avenue, and another are the bevy of published materials available with relevant information in the form of novels, memoires, cookbooks and even restaurant guides.
provided. These inspection reports were produced in large volumes because the state, anxious to maintain the small African work force they had in a period of labor scarcity, wanted to be sure that at least minimum standards were enforced so that employers could retain enough of a reputation to recruit workers. As labor scarcity turned to over-saturation, the state seemed content to withdraw its inspectors, and these reports fade away during the 1920s. Therefore, the second chapter relies not on these inspections, but instead on evidence derived from over 300 pages of interviews with managers, owners and workers that were conducted in support of a labor report done to study the 1939 general strike in Mombasa. The third chapter is partially concerned with placing food and development into a wider imperial context, and so partially draws from studies and correspondences about nutrition concerning the United Kingdom and other parts of Africa, but, as the focus returns to social history in the chapter, I then use evidence from sociological studies done on workers and their families in Mombasa during the 1940s and 1950s. For my examination of street-food, I also use these labor studies, but additionally incorporate the records of the Mombasa municipal government, as its councilors and officials were the ones primarily responsible for sanitation and business licensing in the city, and so street-food came under their purview. The remainder of the dissertation, with its shift in focus towards street-food, is based for the most part on the minutes and correspondences of the Mombasa Municipal Council.

I also make use of oral interviews. From November 2014 to February 2015, I conducted over seventy interviews in Mombasa and Nyanza Province near Lake Victoria with the help of two research assistants, Onesmus Mutua (Mombasa) and Mercy Nyambok (Nyanza). These interviews were conducted primarily in English and Swahili. I did most of the interviewing in both languages, but my research assistants would help with translation on occasion when needed. Additionally, small portions of a few of the Mombasa interviews were done in Kamba, which Mutua translated,
and in Nyanza some interviews were done entirely in Dulo, which Nyambok translated. In
general, I have used these interviews to create aggregate pictures of social structures and how they
changed over time, asking similar questions of people of various ages about how food was prepared
and consumed both in their rural homes and while in Mombasa. I interviewed migrants, as well as
street-food vendors about their businesses, and often these were the same people. In general, this
is a history based on archives, but one infused by key information from interviews in which people
explained how their food lives changed as they left their rural homes and came to Mombasa.
CHAPTER ONE

PREPARING THE POSHO: AFRICAN WORKERS, FOOD RATIONS AND CAPITALISM ON THE EARLY-COLONIAL KENYAN COAST

The nature of labor and the economy changed radically on the Kenyan coast during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Slavery was abolished in 1907, weakening the power of Arab and Swahili planters to control the working lives of the now ex-slaves.¹ During the same period, tens of thousands of African migrants from upcountry arrived on the coast as wage laborers, some working on plantations, and others in urban jobs in the port city of Mombasa.² Simultaneously, legal regimes both in rural and urban areas unevenly shifted from usufruct to freehold title. These processes, fostered and promoted by the colonial state, set in motion the rapid restructuring of the East African coast along capitalist lines.³ However, as decades of scholarship have now made clear, simply recognizing the broad contours of an emerging capitalist society in East Africa tells a fundamentally incomplete story about how the economies and social structures of Africa changed during the early years of colonialism. Jonathon Glassman, in the final pages of his social and cultural history of conflict on the Swahili coast during the nineteenth century, looks ahead to the colonial period and observes that “Conquest was not a single transforming moment, but a protracted, drawn-out process.”⁴ European colonial administrators and employers wanted to create an economy and labor system based on alienated private property and a proletarianized working class, but their ambitions never matched their capacity to enact change.⁵

³ Cooper, From Slaves to Squatters and Janmohamed, “A History of Mombasa.”
⁵ Cooper, From Slaves to Squatters, 18.
For many Africanists interested in the form that colonial capitalism took on the African continent, the English working class that E.P. Thompson so carefully documented has dominated their scholarly models of class formation and capitalist development. However, the economic and social lives of English workers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not emerge out of the predictable machinations of capitalist formation, but instead through conditions specific to England and as the outcome of contingent struggles between labor and capital. The uneven integration of capitalism into African societies was no less contingently created. As Frederick Cooper has argued, the insight of Thompson’s study about the making of the English working class lies not as a roadmap explaining class formation and how capitalism has affected the cultures of all working people around the world, but rather as evidence that only deep empirical studies of actual productive processes and relations of labor over time can reveal glimpses into the unevenness and unpredictability of how capitalism has spread globally.⁶

The trajectories of such economic and social processes are tied to the nature and extent of the asymmetries between competing groups, as well as the ideologies that inform their actions. In the case of coastal East Africa, colonial officials desired a racially-inflected capitalist economy, but those they tried to incorporate into it had their own ideas of how society was to be organized. As Glassman suggests, the languages and concepts “of generosity and patronage, patriarchy and community” that structured debate and perceptions of the social order during the nineteenth century endured through colonial conquest, and were repurposed during the twentieth in “a new phase in the ongoing struggles of ordinary men and women to gain more meaningful control over

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their lives.” However, while social histories of colonialism and capitalist transformation have been central pillars of Africanist research since the late 1970s, the ways in which these processes remade the mechanisms through which Africans acquired and consumed food has been largely absent. This is a conspicuous omission since food, fundamental to social and physical reproduction, is intrinsically tied to the processes of production and exchange in any society, capitalist or otherwise. From the turn of the twentieth century, Africans in increasing numbers left rural social structures in which food was produced, prepared and consumed through political economies predicated on relations of gender, generation and kinship. On plantations and in cities, they had to enter into new relationships to acquire food, which at times were overtly commercial, but other times not. By studying how African labor migrants acquired and consumed food on the Kenyan coast during the early decades of colonial capitalism, we can further, to borrow Cooper’s phrase, “strip away some of the layers of mystification that surround many discussions of ‘development’ and ‘modernization’ as well as of ‘underdevelopment’ and ‘proletarianization.’”

Colonial capitalism was a radical project of social engineering by the state and private employers. However, their desire to enact it had to be accommodated to the economic, political, cultural and physical geographies of the African societies they wanted to control. Relationships between Europeans and Africans in the colonial period were asymmetrical, but they were not unidirectional. Africans who migrated to the early-colonial coast had to negotiate new relationships in order to acquire food, and though this often meant entering into commercialized transactions, these new forms of exchange were also refracted through the precolonial ideologies “of generosity and patronage, patriarchy and community.” These ideas had real consequences for the ways in which Africans interpreted their conditions of labor, how and for what they struggled,

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7 Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*, 270.
8 Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, 18-19.
and, in turn, the ways the colonial state and other employers had to reorient their expectations over what kind of economy and society could be made in East Africa.

**Antecedents: Slavery, Wage Labor and Posho in Nineteenth-Century East Africa**

Writing in 1980, Frederick Cooper observed that despite the vast corpus of meta-theories of capitalist expansion in colonial Africa, little had been written about the African workplace itself, “the question of how workers work.”

Similarly neglected at that time was the question of how workers lived; how they remade anew rural social systems as wage laborers, or how they innovated new ones in the cities, labor compounds and on plantations in colonial Africa.

More than three decades of scholarship since have begun to fill this gap, but still only murkily understood are the types of institutional structures that were necessitated in order to feed the hundreds of thousands of Africans who went to work for a wage during the nineteenth, and even more so, twentieth centuries.

On the coast of Kenya, the British did not need to create afresh a system for feeding laborers, but instead only to modify and expand the one that already existed in the region. This was because wage labor was not new to colonial East Africa, and pre-colonial patrons, employers and workers had already developed, through struggle, a system for provisioning food. Wage labor,

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9 Ibid., 9.
done by both the enslaved and free, developed alongside the expansion of commerce in East Africa that came with the intensification of slave-based plantation agriculture, producing mostly cloves in Zanzibar and Pemba, and coconuts and grain to the north around Mombasa and Malindi. These activities fed caravan transport between the coast and interior, bringing manufactured and other commodities to upcountry areas, and slaves and ivory back to the coast. Enslaved Africans, primarily taken from the interior near Lake Nyasa and further north in Nyamwezi, predominantly worked on plantations, but also formed part of a motley urban and regionally itinerant workforce. Slaves were “lent out” as wage laborers, which meant they earned income, but also had to pay their master a fixed sum from their wages or a percentage, often 50 percent of more, and then kept the remainder. Coastal Africans tended to not to be wage laborers, but these “upcountry” enslaved Africans did work alongside other free workers, mostly ex-slaves, Comorians and Hadrami Arabs.12

These workers, free and unfree, were embedded within the dependencies of a coastal society in which the patriarchal patron extracted labor from slaves and other dependents, but was also responsible for their maintenance and protection, and this included one’s daily food. Slaves on plantations were often responsible for provisioning their own meals, made from food grown on farms (mashamba) allocated to them from their owner’s land. However, the food that slaves working off the plantations received depended on their location within the geography and political economy of the coast and wider East African region. To be enslaved was not a uniform, singular experience, as slaves were differentiated among one another, which in turn mediated the obligations owed. Mahamali port laborers held one of the highest slave statuses. Their work was

the hard manual labor of loading and unloading *dhow* boats in the harbors of East Africa, but they also articulated an identity of superiority over other slaves. Their separation was marked by the regularity of their work as dockhands, that they received better food as maintenance than other slaves, and that they sometimes lived and ate their meals with their owner. The other way slaves worked for wages was as *vibarua*, or casual workers. *Vibarua* slaves ranged from day-laborers doing the odd jobs of a port town, to highly skilled artisans who could accumulate enough from their earning to sometimes purchase property. Hired mostly out to Europeans and South Asians who could not legally own slaves, they were paid directly and only sometimes provided food by their owners depending on the arrangement. Rationed food meant they had to relinquish higher percentages of their cash earnings, but this may have been a strategy when foodstuffs were scarce from famines or hard to obtain for other reasons.\textsuperscript{13}

These wages and rations were tied to labor, but labor in nineteenth-century East Africa was inexplicable outside the power structures of family, kinship and community. *Posho* (food rations), or for plantation slaves, land from which one could grow food, were owed to all dependents within the household, and this included not only *mahamali* and *vibarua* slaves working for wages, but also domestic slaves, wives, children, and soldiers, both slave and free.\textsuperscript{14} They all owed the patron deference and service to varying degrees, but his, and sometimes her, power rested on doling out maintenance to these dependents, with the possibility of desertion or conflict if unable to do so.\textsuperscript{15}


\textsuperscript{14} Bi Kaje, Published Interview, in *Three Swahili Women*, 31-2, and Ludwig Krapf, *A Dictionary of the Swahili Language* (London: Trubner, 1882), 308.

\textsuperscript{15} Jonathon Glassman details the conflicts between patrons and their dependents when debts and increasingly elaborate feasting made it more difficult for obligations to be fulfilled during the second half of the nineteenth century. Glassman, *Feasts and Riot*.
During the second half of the nineteenth century, the geography of obligation expanded as it followed the caravan trade in to the interior, and temporarily proletarianized porters, some enslaved and others free, needed to be provisioned as they traveled sometimes as far as Lake Victoria and even eastern Congo. By the 1890s, the obligation of posho expanded to include, and was more centered around, porters and sailors, who were the mobile laborers of the transport economy. During this period, the verb form of posho meant “to give a ration to, to maintain, to habitually feed someone,” but also, more specifically, the noun posho indicated that it was food given “to porters and sailors … a road ration.”\textsuperscript{16} By the final decades of the nineteenth century, Arab and Swahili caravans were joined by European missionaries and explorers who organized some of the largest expeditions in the region, but they were as bounded as coastal patrons were to the obligation to provision their porters with food.\textsuperscript{17} This embeddedness of European employers in coastal political economies of dependence was something that these missionaries and explorers would share with the plantation owners and other colonial employers who would follow them.

Whether provisioned by Europeans or coastal patrons, these road rations became structured into the workday. As Stephen Rockel details in his social and cultural history of porterage in nineteenth-century East Africa, porters would receive their ration when they camped at the end of a day’s march. They received a ration of one kibaba (1.5 pounds) of grain, which was varyingly sorghum, millet or maize. This was most often cooked into the staple porridge ugali, though coastal porters were provisioned with rice. Depending on where they stopped, these grain rations would be supplemented with the purchase of vegetables and meats from locals who lived near the

\textsuperscript{16} These are sections translated from a Swahili-French dictionary. The above quoted pieces were originally written in French as “Donner la ration à, entretenir, nourrir habituellement qqu,” and “ration des porteurs et des matelots,” and “ration de route.” For full definitions and words with related roots, see C.S. Sacleux, \textit{Dictionnaire Swahili-Français} (Paris: Institut d’Ethnologie, [1891] 1939), 759.

\textsuperscript{17} Cooper, \textit{Plantation Slavery}, 187.
campsites. Though predominantly male, some wives of the porters were also in the caravan. In these situations, rural gender norms would be reproduced, with women cooking, but most porters were grouped into all-male *kambi*, and through this structure of temporary kinship, they would take turns cooking, stop-by-stop. These male African porters, improvising new temporary bonds of kinship and friendship while on the move, and stepping outside normative gendered boundaries of cooking, were anticipating the migratory realities to which many African men would have to accommodate themselves during the twentieth century.\(^\text{18}\)

**Wage Labor, Abolition and Food in the Early-Colonial Coastal Economy**

If the caravans commissioned by European missionaries and explorers were the antecedents to the coming colonial wage-labor system, then the building of the Uganda Railway can be seen as signaling its beginning. The railway itself, once built, set the foundation for an export economy that would funnel coffee, tea, sisal, grain and other commodities out of Kenya to be sold on the global market. However, to construct the railway, the state had to embark on a massive project of not only technical, but also social, engineering. The railway required a large, mobile labor force, but the British looked towards the labor system of its older, rather than newest, colonies. The majority of the construction labor was done by South Asian indentured workers, a system of unfree labor that was reinvigorated after abolition when the British replaced enslaved with indentured workers. However, East Africans were also engaged locally as the railway snaked throughout the region, and this included its beginning in the port-town of Mombasa. As people along the coast entered into new labor relationships with European employers, both in constructing the railway and in other positions as the early decades of colonialism unfolded, the novelty of

\(^{18}\) Stephen Rockel, *Carriers of Culture*, 141-49.
colonial wage labor was tempered by its embeddedness in an older system of work, one with deep roots in East Africa.

As with slaves, wives, children and other dependents during the nineteenth century, the East Africans who worked on the Uganda Railway were provisioned with rations. Rations were not provided in addition to a subsistence wage, but were given in the place of higher pay. Like *vibarua* slaves, waged workers received food, but it cut into their cash earnings.\(^{19}\) Speaking with historian Margaret Strobel during the 1970s, Kaje wa Mwemye Matano remembered her uncle, Muhamadi bu Rashidi, taking a post as an overseer during the construction of the railway during its Mombasa phase. In remembering his compensation, Bi Kaje recalled that he was more concerned with the food than the pay. “They were paid in lots of rations and small wages” and, though the money was not much, there was “lots of food.” However, though Bi Kaje remembered her uncle being content with this arrangement, Bu Rashidi’s satisfaction with the rations as payment may have been more a reflection of his high status. His perspective was most likely not shared by those who worked below him, particularly since Bu Rashidi received a comparative bounty of rations. Bi Kaje recalled that her family was “given half a sack of rice and half a sack of flour, or one frasila of flour and a half sack of rice, and half a frasila of sugar, and a quarter frasila of lentils, and shark, spices for sauce, salt, pepper, all spices and wheat flour too, and ghee—a tin for two people.”\(^{20}\) If the *posho* for the laborers who worked below Bu Rashidi was anything like that provisioned to African workers in later decades for which we have better sources—maize meal, salt, and limited supplemental vegetables—they likely were not as happy as their overseer to have their wages suppressed in exchange for meagre rations.

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\(^{19}\) For *vibarua* slaves, see the discussion in the above section, and the corresponding citations from Frederick Cooper’s *Planation Slavery*.

\(^{20}\) Bi Kaje, Published Interview, *Three Swahili Women*, 41.
The Uganda Railway was finished in 1902, but this was only the start of state infrastructure projects across Kenya. The colonial government wanted Africans to build its colony, and this was paired with a more general and growing desire for African labor on plantations, and as dock hands, domestics and manual laborers in Mombasa. However, the state and other private employers failed spectacularly to convince coastal Africans to work for wages. After abolition in 1907, former slaves generally chose to not replace one master with another who now paid them a wage. Instead, most ex-plantation slaves moved onto land that former slaveholders could not tend now that they had lost their control over labor. Former slaves would occasionally do waged work for brief periods, in down agricultural seasons or if cash was needed, but these brief forays into the labor market did not satisfy British designs to create a landless working class. At the same time, the Giriama, Digo and other rural coastal peasants also preferred to work for a wage for limited durations, maintaining their autonomy by keeping their farms and working for an employer only when necessary.  

By the 1910s, the colonial state, frustrated by its failure, looked to “upcountry” Africans as potential laborers. Coastal Africans had access to enough land to avoid dependence on wages, but the high levels of settler expropriation of rich farm land in upcountry areas, paired with the heavy taxes all Africans faced as well as aggressive recruiting practices, “induced” many more upcountry Africans into wage labor. Some of these workers were escaping rural patriarchs and wanted money to purchase consumer goods or fund bride-wealth payments, but many were also engaged as forced labor, while others had their options narrowed to the point that the only choice

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remaining was to work for a wage. These migrants who went to Mombasa and the wider coast were a polyglot group made up of Kikuyus from central Kenya, Luo and Luhya from Nyanza along Lake Victoria, and the Kamba from the semi-arid savannah between the coast and central province.  

The upcountry migrants who came to Mombasa were leaving rural societies in which access to food was mediated less by monetary transactions and more by structures of gender, generation and kinship. These food systems were diversely constituted, but they also contained commonalities. During the first half of the twentieth century, women across rural East Africa were the primary producers and preparers of food. As has been detailed, African women have historically been the primary farmers across the continent, with few exceptions. What they produced, they also prepared. As James C. McCann has argued for Africa more broadly, the acquisition and combinations of ingredients and preparation techniques were forms of knowledge over which women had control, and passed down generationally. This was largely true in pre-colonial and rural Africa during the twentieth century, though at times generation would take the place of gender when idiosyncratic situations called for it. Childhood was the first formative period during which the techniques of cooking were learned and performed across rural East Africa. Before each meal, young girls gathered firewood to heat the pot and would slowly, day-by-day, learn the fundamentals of preparation as they watched and assisted their mothers. Young boys usually avoided this labor, except if there were no girls in the family, or if their sisters had already left the household to marry. In those situations, young boys would perform the comestible labor that had been gendered as female. The second and final phase of comestible training came as part

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of the process of marriage, which, in particular for the Luo, was less a single event than a series of rituals playing out over many months. Among other requirements for Luo marriage, women were trained in cooking by their mothers-in-law. Though they now had their own home, new wives would cook for about five months in their mother-in-law’s kitchen. After this was complete, the newly married woman cooked in her own home, but only for herself for four more days, while her husband continued to eat his mother’s food. After the four days were finished, the husband would come with other village men, consume a feast she had cooked, and thereafter the marriage was sealed (in Dholuo, oriso chwore).\textsuperscript{24}

The cuisines these migrants ate before they left for the coast varied, but nearly all of it was prepared from ingredients produced within the kinship group by gendered labor, with women farming and men tending stock animals. Agriculturalists and pastoralists did trade their respective foodstuffs, especially during times of shortages, and the Luo along Lake Victoria would trade dried fish regionally as far as central Kenya. However, the majority of the food one ate was grown, slaughtered or caught a short distance from home.\textsuperscript{25}

The Kikuyu were predominantly vegetarians, with two main dishes, irio and ucuru. In central Kenya, the production and preparation of food was gendered, and so too was the food itself. Both men and women ate irio, but men consumed a porridge made of maize, beans and plantains, while women had the same but with leafy greens usually added to theirs. Ucuru, similarly, was a gruel made from millet flour and water, though women would receive salt in their portions.

\textsuperscript{24} These conclusions are drawn from oral histories conducted in Mombasa, Kenya. November 2014-January, 2015, and Nyanza Province, 2015, and from H. Hartmann, “Some Customs of the Luwo (Or Nilotic Kavirondo) Living in South Kavirondo,” \textit{Anthropos} 23, 1/2 (1928): 263-275.

\textsuperscript{25} These aggregated generalities have been drawn from many dozens of interviews with labor migrants in Mombasa and migration returnees back in Nyanza Province who remembered back to their childhoods and how food was produced and prepared. Oral Interviews, Mombasa, Kenya and Nyanza Province, Kenya, November 2014-January 2015. For foodstuff trading patterns in colonial Nyanza, see Margaret J. Hay, “Economic Change in Luoland: Kowe, 1890-1945,” PhD Dissertation (University of Wisconsin at Madison, 1972).
Women, obligated to do, but also controlling, production and preparation, had fit more nutritious and flavorful ingredients into their staples. In addition to these main dishes, Kikuyu would often supplement them with grilled maize, yams, sweet potatoes and plantains. Like the Kikuyu, the Kamba were also primarily vegetarians. Their staples were composed of maize, millet and beans, and they ate bananas and sugar cane, though less frequently. Meat was consumed, but more out of happenstance or for ceremony. The Kamba did practice pastoralism more intensely than the Kikuyu, but their goats and cattle were valued more as currency than food. The Luo, and to a lesser extent, the Luhya, ventured furthest and most regularly outside of plant-based diets. The Luo especially, located on the shores of Lake Victoria, consumed large amounts of fish, in particular ngege (tilapia) and ningu (a small, fingerling fish). Luhya also consumed fish, but primarily of the dried variety acquired from the Luo in exchange for agricultural foodstuffs. The men who left their homes to migrate to Mombasa had been consumers of food in these rural areas of East Africa, eating that which their wives, mothers and other female relatives produced and prepared for them.

Such is a useful outline of rural African food practices during the first half of the twentieth century, but until we have a larger collection of micro-regional food histories of rural East Africa, which is well out of the scope of this chapter and dissertation, these findings must remain at a frustratingly general level. However, in general terms, we can provide some provisional themes for thinking about how rural food systems were changing during the colonial period. Maduka shops

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28 Drawn from my article manuscript in progress, “Fishing Nets and Fertile Waters: Social Conflict, Rural Authority and Ecological Change in Colonial Kenya’s Nyanza Province,” and Hay, “Economic Change.”
29 More is needed along the lines of Jon Holtzman’s historically-rich ethnography of food and comestible practices among the Samburu in his *Uncertain Tastes: Memory, Ambivalence, and the Politics of Eating* (Berkeley: University of California, 2009).
run by South Asians became common throughout rural East Africa during the colonial period, and so mass-produced foodstuffs became increasingly available.\textsuperscript{30} People purchased and incorporated tea, processed sugar and salt, and bottled soda into their diets, while processed grains were also available, if more expensive than growing them oneself. Additionally, environmental and agricultural changes shaped surpluses and shortages of ingredients. In Ukambani, bio-veterinary medicine during colonialism drastically expanded the cattle population, but this also in turn bottomed-out cattle prices and contributed to soil erosion.\textsuperscript{31} A scarcity of productive agricultural land and a surplus of cattle likely led to higher meat consumption in Kamba diets. In the reverse, for Nyanza, the increasingly commercialized fisheries of Lake Victoria devastated fish stocks during the first half of the twentieth century, which created scarcity from what had only recently been abundance, limiting peoples’ access to both \textit{ngege} and \textit{ningu}.\textsuperscript{32} However, these changes were also marked by continuities. Oral interviewees generally agreed that at mid-century, women continued to cook nearly all the food in rural households, female children did the related chores, and most of the ingredients in the meals they ate were usually grown or caught within a short distance of the pot in which they were prepared.\textsuperscript{33}

The African migrants who arrived on the Kenyan coast as laborers during the 1910s found themselves within a new capitalist labor regime that was in many ways markedly similar to the paternalist system of dependency and obligation that had preceded it. The Masters and Servants

\textsuperscript{30} The rural, South Asian \textit{duka} owner, though mostly in a post-colonial context, is a central figure as the character “Abdullah” in Ngugi wa Thiongo’s classic novel of decolonization in Central Province, \textit{Petals of Blood} (New York: Penguin, 1977). The remembrance of a nearby \textit{duka} was common across the memories of oral informants. Oral Interviews, Mombasa, Kenya and Nyanza, Kenya, November 2014-February 2015.

\textsuperscript{31} See the Veterinary Department Annual Reports, 1920s-1930s. McMillan Library, Nairobi. Also available in the African and Commonwealth Collections, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

\textsuperscript{32} Drawn from my “Fishing Nets and Fertile Waters.”

\textsuperscript{33} Aggregated from oral Interviews in Mombasa and Nyanza Province in Kenya, November 2014-February 2015.
Ordinance, a labor code that had roots both in metropolitan Britain and its Empire, was designed to create a capitalism that was still tempered by a paternalist ethos.\textsuperscript{34} In Kenya, if workers were hired more than a day’s journey from their home, the employer was obligated to provide housing, medical care, and, indeed, food. Workers would be paid a wage, but they also were dependents, and needed maintenance.

As upcountry migrants arrived on the coast in increasing numbers during the 1910s, they had to acquire food outside the rural structures that had previously provided it. Theoretically, following from the Masters and Servants Ordinance, they would all receive \textit{posho} rations. From a rural cuisine marked by variety and freshness that a gendered political economy had prepared for them, male migrant workers had to confront dietary monotony, and their own lack of training in cooking. Even colonial officials who were otherwise not particularly sympathetic to African social needs regretted the comestible situation in which African laborers found themselves. W.J. Simpson, a medical doctor and the architect of racial segregation in Mombasa, observed in 1915 that back in their homes upcountry Africans had “a varied diet, which is well cooked,” but on the coast “they are brought close together in large numbers” and “are without their wives; and the food is of a different kind, monotonous, and for them not always properly cooked.”\textsuperscript{35}

Despite such generalities, the situations in which labor migrants found themselves, and the ways such changes necessitated a reworking of comestible practices, varied greatly and was tied to the geography of their workplace, as well as the particularities of their individual employers. During the 1910s, most upcountry Africans worked on plantations, rather than in Mombasa. In the long term, the European plantation sector on the Kenyan coast, with the exception of sisal, was a

\textsuperscript{34} Douglas Hay and Paul Craven, eds. \textit{Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562-1955} (Chapel Hill: North Carolina, 2014). See, especially, the chapter on Kenya by David Anderson.

failure, but during the 1910s it was still sputtering along and for thousands of Africans their experience of labor migration was mediated through these colonial institutions. Frederick Cooper notes how former slaves and other coastal peasants, if they were to work for a wage, avoided these European plantations because they preferred the flexibility on Arab and Swahili ones, even though they paid lower wages. Europeans plantations, Cooper argues, “kept labor under contract and severe discipline” and, so exacting was the work, that it bore “a remarkable similarity to the customary work rules of Malindi’s slaveowners in the nineteenth century.”

Cooper’s comparison of European plantations to those of the slaveholders during the nineteenth century is apt, but he fails to push the analogy far enough. The central strength of Cooper’s work on labor in coastal East Africa, whether of slaves or squatters, is the way he demonstrates that structures of domination and control did not exist in functional timelessness, but rather as points of conflict. The dynamism of slaves, ex-slaves, and coastal peasants who reworked as best they could the inequities of slavery and then colonial capitalism is adeptly analyzed. However, in Cooper’s narrative, upcountry migrants during the 1910s seem stuck and motionless under the domination of European planation capital.

European managers on plantations did mirror the slaveholders of the nineteenth century in their exacting demands and efforts at tight discipline, but they also shared being exposed to the initiative of African workers over whom they had only precarious control. Like the slaveholders of the nineteenth century, many European estate managers lived and tried to supervise African workers in relatively remote areas, far from the nexus of colonial control on the coast, Mombasa. Cooper notes how Arab and Swahili planters during the nineteenth century had to enter into negotiated dependencies with myriad obligations to slaves in order to control them in a political

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36 Cooper, From Slaves to Squatters, 187.
context in which state power was minimal at best, and often absent entirely. While colonial policing even during the 1910s was more pervasive than that of the Sultanate the previous century, the state’s ability to predictably and consistently apply force in rural areas was spotty and haphazard. Plantation workers were exploited and lived in desperate circumstances, but they were also able to shape the trajectory of labor and life on European plantations, and at times even resorted to violence to do so. Upcountry workers were in the majority on isolated plantations and, adding to this the overall shortage of labor on the coast, plantation workers did have significant bargaining power.

The composition of the monotonous posho rations Africans received was one space over which these workers directed their struggle. Like wage-working vibarua and mahamali slaves in the nineteenth century and those who worked on the Uganda railway at the turn of the twentieth, posho was provisioned as part of the payment structure for upcountry plantation workers during the 1910s. The composition of posho varied, but along the coast it was approximately 1.5 lbs. of either rice or mealie meal (maize flour), along with salt. Workers’ posho was issued daily, but wages were more sporadic. Plantation wages tended to be paid based upon a 30-day punch-card that had to be completed before payment and, therefore, wages were in effect withheld until 30 days of work had been recorded. Some plantations actually did not pay workers until their contracts were finished, for three and even sometimes up to six months. Consequently, posho was the more immediate, and daily, form of compensation workers received for their labor. So ubiquitous was the reality and idea of the posho ration that Archibald Church, in writing his colonial memoire

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38 Such as the revolt by Somali workers at Powysland Plantation in Kilifi, a town north of Mombasa. Their revolt was partially inspired by anger over rations being withheld and not having enough time to prepare them. Detailed in (PC/Coast/1/9/12), Kenya National Archives (KNA), and the subject of a future article I will write.
39 Aggregated from labor inspection files in PC/Coast/1/9, KNA.
40 Inspection of Labour Camp, East African Estates, Ltd. Kinonde. 19 October, 1915. (PC/Coast/1/9/38), KNA, and Labour Inspection, Gogeni Estates, c. 1916 (PC/Coast/1/9/38), KNA.
during the 1920s, quipped of the standardized monotony of the “two pounds of posho and salt” (quotes around the phrase in his text) that workers received each day.41

The immediacy of *posho*, and the temporal distance of the wage, meant struggles over food became a central location of daily conflict on coastal plantations. To escape the monotony of starch and salt, workers grew their own vegetable gardens (*shamba*) both to supplement their *posho* with a greater diversity of ingredients, and to produce surpluses they could sell for cash.42 At Gazi-Gogoni Estate, south of Mombasa, a state inspector in 1917 noted that “the employees have in addition the advantage of cultivating their own shambas, … which they are quick to take advantage.”43 So productive were these home and market gardens that, during wartime food shortages in 1918, an inspector noted that “it is not too much to state that without foodstuffs brought in by [plantation workers] to the Gazi market the Gazi people would have been in difficulties for food during the present shortage.”44 These *mashamba* provided workers with more satisfying meals, but also a level of autonomy from the disciplinary strictures of plantation life. Colonial employers wanted a stable and disciplined plantation workforce, but in trying to create it they formed a system rife with contradictions which were seize upon by African workers. Principally, the 30-day punch-cards were meant to bind Africans to one employer, and to force regularity upon them by incentivizing them to work quickly to receive their pay. However, this would not work if Africans were able to subsist on their *posho*, since it would allow them to live on plantations without the need to purchase food commercially, and in consequence to work for wages when they chose and to complete their contract over the period of time they preferred. To

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41 Archibald Church seems to have actually overestimated by a half pound the *posho* that workers actually received. See his *East Africa, A New Dominion: A Crucial Experiment in Tropical Development and its Significance to the British Empire* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, [1927] 1970), 181.
42 Inspection Report, Gazi-Gogoni Estates, September, 1917 (PC/Coast/1/9/38), KNA, DC, Inspection of Labour Camp, East African Estates, Ltd. 18 April, 1916, (PC/Coast/1/9/38), KNA.
43 Inspection Report, Gazi-Gogoni, September, 1917, (PC/Coast/1/9/38), KNA.
44 Inspection of Gazi Rubber and Fibre Estates, 20 March, 1918, (PC/Coast/1/9/38), KNA.
combat this, plantations generally denied *posho* when workers did not work, but the allocation of *mashamba* farms, itself a concession to make life more bearable on the plantation, in turn undermined the denial of *posho*. One exasperated inspector in 1915 argued that “As most men have or can have shambas the loss of posho is absolutely inefficient as a punishment.” Workers, living on the plantation, could produce food for their own consumption and generate cash income outside of the regular labor on the estate. Plantation owners had tried to discipline Africans to be regular workers, but these migrants recognized the contradictions in these efforts and instead repurposed them to open small, but significant, spaces of autonomy in a draconian work environment.

The relative isolation of the plantation from consistent access to food markets meant *posho* was a necessity for rural employers. Newly arrived upcountry migrants without connections in the coastal peasant communities needed reliable access to food while they worked. However, those who went to Mombasa, or even to the plantations that surrounded the city, had their relationship to food more overtly commercialized through the experience of migration. The presence of these migrants, in turn, also further commercialized the comestible landscape of Mombasa.

Just to the north of Mombasa island, Europeans planted sisal with Kikuyu migrants working the fields and Kamba the machinery. Management paid cash wages on the usual 30-day ticket, provided a mixed ration, and even tried to incentivize regularity by giving a bag of rice if one worked six continuous days. However, different from the more rural plantations, workers at Nyali also had the option to take their rations in cash, though when food became cash it too was fixed to a longer schedule. “In lieu of rations,” the inspector of the estate noted, “a man may have Rs. 2/30 per month.” In more rural areas, some plantations did try to shed the obligation of

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45 DC, Inspection of Labour Camp, East African Estates, Ltd. Kinonde. 19 October, 1915, (PC/Coast/1/9/38), KNA.
46 Inspection of Nyali Sisal Estate, 17 March, 1915, (PC/Coast/1/9/32), KNA.
providing food, but they were limited by their geographical location, as was noted that on a plantation well west of Mombasa near Voi, as they gave “rations in cash when [workers] can buy food,” but “otherwise the ration [was] to be of a varied nature of local produce only.” For plantation workers, their proximity to Mombasa correlated to the extent to which one’s comestible practices were being commercialized.

For Africans working outside the plantation sector, the question of whether they acquired their food through paternalist obligations or cash-based transactions depended on the type of work they did as well as their employers. On the docks, dominated by Arab and Swahili workers, but also joined by some upcountry Africans, the pay was the highest in East Africa, and also came with a ration. On a rate basis, dock workers were paid approximately three-times more per shift than planation laborers, though the average number of dock shifts per worker each month during the 1910s ranged from only two to seven days per worker. Consequently, dock workers had often had greater and more immediate access to cash than most others did, but, with *posho* provisioned only a small number of days per month, they likely had to more commonly use their wages to acquire their food.

The other major employer in Mombasa outside the docks was the colonial state, and it did provide *posho* to some workers. However, other state employees, similar to dock hands, had to rely on cash for their daily meal. When seeking to hire workers to cut the bushes in Mombasa, the Medical Officer of Health reported that they would be paid monthly, but also that “Twelve cents per diem are given [to them] daily with which to purchase posho and this is deducted at the end of the month.” With market facilities and other food options in the city, employers did not always

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47 District Commissioner, Voi, to the Provincial Commissioner, Coast. 6 November, 1917, (PC/Coast/1/9/38), KNA.
49 Medical Officer of Health, Mombasa, to the PC, Coast, 6 February, 1918 (PC/Coast/1/9/59), KNA.
supply *posho*, which therefore often made urban labor relations more overtly commercial. Working in these conditions, state employees, dock workers and others earning cash income in Mombasa were the beginning of a growing consumer class of poor urban residents who needed food for purchase, both as food stuffs and as already prepared meals. Women who were excluded from wage labor were already earning their income with this work during the 1910s, but during the 1920s and 1930, as the unemployment became an increasing hardship in Mombasa, many more people, and many of them men, would turn to the work of providing food to these workers as a way to survive in the colonial city.\(^{50}\)

**Conclusion**

The labor migrants that came to the Kenyan coast during the 1910s were the first generation of long-distance, African wage laborers in colonial Kenya. By studying how these migrants acquired their food, we see how the capitalism that was made in Kenya was a composite, drawing as it did on the paternalist system that had structured inequality during the nineteenth century. Especially on plantations, Europeans had to enter into a complex matrix of obligations to employ African workers, providing not only housing and medical care, but also *posho*, as well as *shambas* on which more foodstuffs could be grown. In urban Mombasa, life was more commercialized, and since food could be more easily purchased from shops, markets and hawkers, employers could create more distance between themselves and their workers, pay them a wage, and there the obligation ended. However, even for those employers that paid only in cash, the language of rationing and obligation was still there. African workers were given cash “in lieu of rations” or “rations in cash.” To employ was to pay a wage, but also to be obligated to maintain.

\(^{50}\) See Chapter Two, especially, as well as the subsequent chapters in this dissertation that explore these themes. For women working in the early-colonial food economy in Mombasa, see Margaret Strobel’s *Muslim Women in Mombasa, 1890-1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 129, and Willis, *Mombasa*, 197.
Outside the city, European wage-labor plantations were not run radically different than those that had held slaves in bondage before 1907. African workers, like the slaves before them, faced an asymmetrical workplace in which the field of struggle was bounded within a framework of dependency and obligation. Both slaves and waged Africans had limited access to the structures of power, but used what they had to carve out spaces in which they could, to quote Jonathon Glassman again, “gain more meaningful control over their lives.” In this essay, we have seen how among these efforts were the simple daily acts to make the posho taste a little better with a few ingredients added from the garden. That workers consistently and ardently tended to these plots after long days of hard labor should tell us how significant, indeed, a good-tasting meal was to them as they lived and work, far from home.
Images

Image 1: Migrant Workers in Mombasa, 1907

Waged workers in 1907 who migrated to Mombasa from an unidentified “upcountry” area, and employees of the Conversancy Department. MSS. Afr.s. 1607/1. African and Commonwealth Collections. Bodleian Library, Oxford University.
We know that some upcountry Africans were already arriving as migrants by 1900, but they were not counted in population estimates, indicative of the small size of their communities. However, by 1906, their numbers had increased to the extent that they were statistically bundled with Swahilis (see Table 2 below) to create the new category of “Africans,” a population group that was 2,600 people larger than the number of “Swahilis” in 1900, suggesting that more and more upcountry migrants were coming to Mombasa. For the 1910s (see Table 3), both “Swahili” and “Africans” were dropped in favor of “Natives (Resident)” and “Natives (Non-Resident),” the former combining upcountry Africans with Swahilis and the latter for Mijikenda who split their time between the city and their rural coastal homes. Karim Janmohamed, “A History of Mombasa, c. 1895-1939: Some Aspects of Economic and Social Life in an East African Port Town during Colonial Rule,” PhD Dissertation (Northwestern University, 1978), 249.
Table 2

Mombasa's Population, 1906

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Africans</th>
<th>&quot;Asiatics&quot;: South Asians and Arabs</th>
<th>Europeans</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19,600</td>
<td>6000</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>25,800</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3

MOMBASA’S POPULATION, 1911-17

Maps

Map 1: Mombasa Island, 1890

The densest urban population at the end of the nineteenth century was on the south-eastern side of the island, with the nearby dhow port. The soon-to-be constructed deep-water port was built on the southwest side of the island. Source: Janmohamed, “A History of Mombasa,” 267.
CHAPTER TWO

IMPOVERISHED MEALS: RACE, GENDER AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD IN DEPRESSION-ERA MOMBASA

Before colonialism, East Africa was already part of the global economy. Nineteenth-century East African consumers purchased cloth produced in New England factories, and enslaved Africans along the coast were forced to grow cloves that were sold throughout the Indian Ocean World. People living in East Africa both affected and were affected by fluctuations in these and other international markets. 1 However, as wage labor and processes of commercialization spread during colonialism, the region and the economic lives of its people became increasingly more tied to the rhythms and disruptions of global capitalism. This was especially true for Mombasa. A port town, employment for many, as well as the state of countless ancillary industries, was dependent on the extent to which their region demanded imports and whether the rest of world desired their exports. 2 After the stock market crashed in the United States in 1929, the circulation of imports and exports into and out of Mombasa fell off during the early 1930s, and as a result migrants and other urban residents were forced to endure the consequences of a systemic failure they did not cause. 3 As the previous chapter showed, life as a labor migrant on the Kenyan coast before the 1930s was difficult indeed, as low wages, monotonous food, and insufficient access to what was anyway substandard housing were its common features. However, this chapter will show how the Great Depression of the 1930s created conditions in which these migratory workers were pushed even further into a position of material depravation, ever the more compromising their ability to

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3 Janmohamed, “A History of Mombasa,” 287. See below for more on unemployment during the 1930s.
access the food they needed, but also how they developed strategies to survive in the urban world of Mombasa that otherwise offered few opportunities.

Historians have made clear that the Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s was indeed a global one, and how people far from Wall Street had to confront the devastation wrought by the decisions made by distant financial elites. Scholars are also beginning to write the social history of the Depression in Africa, but generally our understanding of how this affected people in their daily life on the continent remains thin, and particularly so for urban areas. As a consequence, while food-lines in Europe and the United States remain as indelible images that evoke how hunger and want filled Western cities, the history of how economic depression further destabilized already precarious urban livelihoods in Africa remains understudied. In the specific historiography of colonial Mombasa, our best social historians were not always consistently concerned with periodization, providing mostly broad composites of daily life under colonialism with inadequate attention to change over time. Frederick Cooper in his 1987 work on labor in colonial Mombasa is more interested in the specificities of particular historical moments, but he concedes in the introduction that his focus is not on “the daily lives of workers.” Instead, in

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5 Moses E. Ochonu has written a social and political history of the Great Depression in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, though his focus is primarily on rural areas. See his *Colonial Meltdown: Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009). John Lonsdale has written persuasively on the combined effects of first the Great Depression and then the Second World War on Kenya, but his attention to urban areas is limited, and reserved primarily for the 1940s. Lonsdale’s work actually has more relevance to Chapter Three, and is addressed more extensively there. See his “The Depression and the Second World War in the Transformation of Kenya,” in David Killingray and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Africa and the Second World War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 97-142.

6 This would be the case with two otherwise pathbreaking works of urban history, Margaret Strobel’s *Muslim Women in Mombasa, 1890-1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) and Janmohamed’s “A History of Mombasa,” both of which have proved invaluable for reference in the writing of this dissertation. Part IV of Justin Willis’ book on ethnicity, urbanization, and work in early-colonial Mombasa promises in its title to explore up to 1934, which would have covered the most difficult years of the depression, but, though much better on change over time, he largely only addresses the 1920s. See his *Mombasa, the Swahili and the Making of the Mijikenda* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 171-199.
Cooper’s study of labor strikes and the resultant change in colonial labor theory, African workers during the 1930s appear only briefly at moments of protest.  

This chapter, then, provides an urban social history of Mombasa during the 1930s through the lens of how the Depression affected peoples’ ability to acquire food. However, this fills not only an empirical gap, but helps us to understand why the 1930s in particular were the period during which Africans began to formally organize against the inequalities of the British Empire. By going behind the picket line, we can see in the daily lives of Africans the ways in which the city’s racialized political economy structurally imposed depravation and, specifically, hunger and malnutrition, and from this emerges a more intimate knowledge about why Mombasa’s workers were so determined to protest this system during the 1930s and the decades that followed.

While colonial capitalism engineered a society that impoverished most Africans living in Mombasa, migrants and other urban residents also devised strategies to mitigate the economic hardships that such a system imposed. In rural areas, gendered and generational kinship labor had provided the essentials of life, but in the city people had to create new institutions to find shelter, amity, pleasure, and, indeed, food. From the 1970s, scholars have focused our attention on the ways many women made their livelihoods by supplying these needs and desires for people in urban Kenya. Women, working as prostitutes and concubines, provided food, sex and affective pleasure. In moving beyond the moralizing tones of much of the literature on prostitution and concubinage, these authors argued instead that this work was a critical mode of capital accumulation for women who were otherwise excluded from much of the wage-labor economy. These women were able to actually make more money than many wage-earning men and became significant property holders.

in Nairobi and Mombasa by selling to migrants what Luise White has called the “comforts of home.”

However, the “comfort” sector that is the least understood in the literature is the one, this chapter argues, that actually provided such amenities most often and to the most people in colonial Mombasa, and also served as a critical source of income for many. During the 1930s, the city saw the rapid growth of people selling prepared food and drink to the city’s working classes, with roadside vendors and in-home restaurants offering full, prepared meals, and hawkers providing tea, coffee, and small snacks. Prostitutes and concubines certainly made up a portion of the industry, selling mostly sex and some food, but they were in reality only a small part of it. The very poor could only afford a prostitute on occasion, if at all, and concubines could only be housed, fed and paid by people with consistent and higher salaries, a quite small proportion of the African population in the city. Therefore, it was these purveyors of inexpensive prepared food, coffee and tea, what I am referring to in shorthand as street-food vendors, that sold the comforts of home on a regular, daily basis to the majority of Mombasa.

Historians have only rarely addressed street-food vendors or more generally how migrants acquired their daily food and, when they do, they have tended to conflate femininity with the preparation of food. However, a closer examination of just how migrants acquired their meals

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9 See Note One in the Introduction for my use of “street food” as encompassing both prepared beverage and food vendors.

10 For most scholars, this conflation has been implicit. However, James C. McCann quite explicitly marks African food preparation as nearly universally feminine, and dismisses the cooking of men as incidental, writing that “Cooking and food preparation is an application of both knowledge and accumulated experience that has historically be a fundamentally oral skill, and one quite specific to women” and that “cooking constitutes a particular body of gendered knowledge—Africa’s cooks, who built distinct repertoires of methods, processing, and presentation, were women. In African societies, bachelors do cook—but not creatively and rarely well.” The latter sentiment,
each day reveals this to be an inaccurate premise, and one that overlooks the quite radical
transformation in how labor migration precipitated a re-gendering of comestible social relations in
East Africa. During the 1930s, among migrant communities in Mombasa, most of the food that
most men ate was actually being cooked by other men. The city’s migrants, who were primarily
men during the 1930s, either prepared their own food, ate something cooked by a male housemate
or household dependent, or they purchased it from a vendor who, increasingly, may have also been
a man. We knew already that men cooked for wages inside European, South Asian, Swahili and
Arab households, but the re-gendering of food preparation was far more widespread than the small
number of isolated male cooks in elite kitchens. Nearly all African men who migrated to
Mombasa had to learn to cook not only for themselves, but, often, also for each other.

The pathbreaking work on prostitution and concubinage in urban Kenya has provided us
the tools with which we can now think about how rural domesticity was urbanized in colonial East
Africa. This chapter will build on these insights, but while also employing a methodological
approach in which gender history is not only the study of the assumed category of “women,” but
rather, as Joan Scott puts it, of historically-contingent structures that are “a primary way of

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11 We do not have demographic data sorted by sex in Mombasa before 1947, but anecdotal evidence throughout the
archival record suggests that men were the large majority of the migrant African community before the 1940s.
Additionally, in 1947, for when we do have data, women were still only 34 percent of the “African” population in
Mombasa after a period during World War II where it seems clear many more women were migrating to the city.
See Chapter Three for demographic changes in Mombasa after 1940, as well as Table Seven for 1947-62.
12 For men working as cooks inside elite households, see Dane Kennedy, Islands of White: Settler Society and
Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), Strobel, Muslim
signifying power … based on perceived differences between the sexes.”

We need a history of urban East Africa that both examines how women strategized modes of survival, and that accounts for how the gendered terrain on which they struggled was changing in light of political, economic and demographic transformations. Men in rural areas accepted a gendered order of kitchen labor in which it was rendered as female when it meant they were supplied with food, but the realities of urban life made it clear that such a binary vision of who cooked and who did not could no longer be sustained. As cooking became a survival skill in cities not only for women but also for men, migratory masculinity had to expand to incorporate the preparation of food as an act that was, at least when away from a rural home, permissible.

**Race, Inequality and Food in 1930s Mombasa**

The story of the Great Depression in Mombasa is part of a longer one about the changing dynamics of power between labor and management on the East African coast. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, employers in this region had difficulty adequately staffing plantations, urban industries and in finding government laborers, but the 1920s saw the balance of scarcity tilt much more in favor of management as the city’s population grew and more people needed work. Where before workers had been scarce, now it was jobs. With workers’ bargaining power eroding, employers seized the opportunity and lowered wages during the 1920s and, combined with general inflation, real wages and working-class spending power fell significantly by the end of the decade. However, this deteriorating situation became markedly worse with the Depression. With the global economy retracting, the total inward and outward tonnage of

14 The population of Mombasa grew from 19,600 in 1913, to 30,000 in 1922, and to 42,500 by 1931. As the population expanded, so too did the African proportion of it. Mohamed, “A History of Mombasa,” 257 and Willis, *Mombasa*, 185. For labor scarcity in general during the 1910s, see the labor files of the same decade in PC/Coast/1/9, Kenya National Archives, Nairobi (KNA-Nairobi).
shipments in Mombasa’s Kilindini Harbor dropped by 38 percent from 1929-32, and with it the jobs of unloading and loading, as well as those in ancillary industries.\textsuperscript{16} For those workers who still had jobs, their wages were cut, and thousands more were under- or unemployed.\textsuperscript{17} All the while, migration to the city increased as opportunities in rural areas were also declining. Across Kenya’s agricultural areas, nascent processes of increasingly stratified class formation were underway, as older systems of dependency and obligation gave way to free-hold property rights and the accumulation of land, enriching some and relegating others to wage labor, either on plantations or in cities. As this unfolded, notes John Lonsdale, “so the value of land rose while the worth of clients declined.”\textsuperscript{18} The effects of this process pushed Luo and Luhya in Nyanza Province into labor migration, and the rural poor were even worse off in Central Province where settler expropriation reduced the land available to Africans, and in Ukambani where the overgrazing of rapidly expanding cattle populations was leading to soil erosion.\textsuperscript{19} Therefore, whatever people may have heard about difficulties in Mombasa, the prospect of earning what were still the highest wages in East Africa convinced many people that the risk of migration was worth it. However, with all these new migrants and a declining economy, a surplus of workers was created in the city that allowed employers to suppress wages and unemployment to continue even after the economy slowly recovered from mid-decade.\textsuperscript{20} Our evidence is thin and inconsistent, but what we have

\textsuperscript{17} Cooper, \textit{On the African Waterfront}, 42-57.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid,. For the effects of overgrazing and soil erosion in Ukambani, ample documentation exists in a multitude of colonial reports, far too many to cite in a footnote, but for one example see V.A. Beckley, \textit{Soil Deterioration in Kenya} (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1930), McMillan Library, Nairobi.
\textsuperscript{20} See Graph 5 and Graph 6 for population growth in Mombasa and Africans as an increasing percentage of the city.
suggests that African spending power continued to decline during the 1930s, which resulted in lowering their ability to purchase food both in terms of quantity and nutritionally-diverse quality.\textsuperscript{21}

Of course, that Africans bore the most extreme effects of the Great Depression in Mombasa was not a result of the natural order of things, but rather because of racialized conceptions about what Africans required to live, which shaped wage structures in the colonial city. The ideological justification for this unequal system was a racial conceptualization of the “cost of living” within the British Empire. Mombasa was a diverse, cosmopolitan city during the 1930s, the majority of residents being Africans from upcountry and other rural coastal areas who had migrated to the city as workers, but there were also significant Arab, Swahili and South Asian communities, as well as a small European population.\textsuperscript{22} Each group entered a labor market shaped by employers’ perceptions of race and what each perceived racial group “needed” in terms of expenses in order to live in Mombasa. In rationalizing this system, officials and employers proffered that African wages only need match what they assumed the cost of living to be in rural areas. The theoretical underpinnings of this cost-of-living schema were derived from British racial discourses on social-evolutionary civilizational hierarchies. That is, African workers, according to the logic of the wage system, only required compensation that was appropriate to their place in the social evolution of world history. Still at the stage of peasant farmers in the colonial imagination, Africans did not need the higher wages of “more advanced” groups like “Asiatics,” primarily referring to Arabs

\textsuperscript{21} Testimony of [no first name given] MacIntyre, Mombasa Municipal Engineer, to the Mombasa Labour Commission of Inquiry, 1939. (AG/8/119), KNA-Nairobi. For the dock-work sector as one example, wage increases and decreases were actually uneven across different forms of port labor during the Depression, but overall incomes fell for these workers during this period as decreasing tonnage moving through the port meant fewer days of work were available to casual laborers. See Cooper, \textit{On the African Waterfront}, 32-3.

\textsuperscript{22} For example, in 1931 Africans were approximately 50 percent of the population, Arabs 15, South Asians 30, and Europeans just under three percent. Swahili were inconsistently categorized by colonial surveyors and the government more generally, and individuals that would have identified as Swahili, or more likely by their specific “twelve tribes” communal identity, were probably inconsistently either categorized as African or Arab. Janmohamed, “A History of Mombasa,” 258. For more on the demography of Mombasa during the 1930s and throughout the twentieth century, see the relevant tables presented in this dissertation that are listed on page xiii.
and South Asians with the latter usually paid more, and certainly nowhere close to the salaries of those “most advanced” Europeans, whose habits of “civilization” required high wages to be maintained. A 1945 report looking back at how Africans had been compensated in previous decades, remarked that “African labourers’ wage-rates have been based on a scale commensurate with the standard of living customary in the native communities to which they belong, and responsibility has not been accepted for the payment of wages on a scale appropriate to the needs of a civilized man.”

Therefore, the operating premise of wage structures in Mombasa was that Africans would make less than Europeans, South Asians and (some) Arabs, irrespective of the value their labor provided. However, the social historian of Mombasa faces a dearth of data when trying to make precise pronouncements about just how much Depression-era declines in African income affected this racialized income structure and the consequent ability of poor urban Africans to acquire food in this capitalist city. Granular wage and cost-of-living data is almost non-existent for much of the 1930s, but the comparative flood of documentation that was produced after the 1939 general strike in Mombasa provides the best opportunity to discern rough estimates for how economic decline affected the diets of African workers. Following this strike, what became known as the Willan Commission studied wages and the living conditions of workers in the city. In support of its official report, the commission conducted interviews that produced 300 pages of testimony by

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24 I found this to be true in my research on the 1930s in the archives, and Cooper, in his own history of labor in colonial Mombasa, seems to have found little information on wages and actual cost of living for workers in the city during the 1930s. See his quick overview and limited data on the 1930s as opposed to the comparatively rich information he provides on the 1940s and 1950s. For the 1930s, see Cooper, On the African Waterfront, 26-57.
employers, officials and employees about working-class life and labor during the 1930s. The problems of empirical extrapolation from such testimony that comes from the contested terrain of labor negotiations are multitude, not the least being that both sides were providing quantitative and qualitative information meant to buttress arguments about whether to raise, lower or maintain 1939 wages. Nonetheless, the claims and counterclaims of this testimony provide invaluable data for a period of Mombasa’s history for which we have almost no formal documentation of the day-to-day lives of workers and how their position within the city’s racialized political economy structured their spending power and thus access to food. This section will draw on the testimony for the Willan Commission to carefully reconstruct these debates and negotiations in order to see what they tell us about Mombasa’s social structure, as well as to better understand how global economic depression further entrenched urban Africans into a position where they struggled on a daily basis to acquire nourishing meals.

The Willan Commission was formed after the 1939 General Strike that had followed many other work stoppages by both casual and kazi ya mwezi (monthly) laborers throughout the 1930s. Within the broader concern to study workplaces and workers’ lives to avoid such labor conflict in the future, the commission engaged in what Frederick Cooper has called the “Battle of the Budgets,” debating the levels of wages and in-kind compensation that were required for Africans to survive as workers in Mombasa. These arguments were very much structured through the logic of a racialized cost of living, as African budgets were calculated by Europeans “who would have not dreamed of living the life for which they were budgeting.” Their vision was one of basic survival, compensation that would allow workers “to buy maize meal, fuel, potatoes, a bit of meat,

and very little else.” These debates were central to the material conditions of African workers, as they came to shape “the definition of a legitimate wage” in colonial Mombasa.26

During the Battle of the Budget after the 1939 strike, estimates over the cost-of-living in the city varied radically from person to person.27 D.L. Norman, the District Commissioner of Mombasa, offered that Africans could live on 22/50 per month, a figure that should be considered alongside the reality that South Asian workers averaged 80/- per month. Mr. Sonhai, a building contractor and employer of African construction workers, felt that actually 10/- a month was enough for Africans, with 5/- for food and the other 5/- for housing, apparently concluding that food and shelter were the only expenses of a household. The Willan Commission itself recommended that a minimum wage of 18/50 per month as a base salary before housing expenses would be adequate for African workers. However, the missionary Father Lawless, who was based out of the working-class neighborhood of Makupa, provides an impressionistic data point that such wages were below what people needed to achieve daily nourishment in Mombasa, noting that “20/- is really a menial wage for a single man” and that workers have “got to get a certain amount of meat, fish and vegetables besides the ordinary posho [maize-meal porridge].” By implication, Father Lawless was suggesting that 20/- was not enough to purchase a diet beyond basic posho. Despite this perspective, the Father was nonetheless fairly conservative in his suggestion for a more adequate wage, estimating that an increase to 25/- per month for a single man, and 35/- for those living with their families, would be sufficient.28

26 Cooper, On the African Waterfront, 42-54.
27 This conclusion differs from that of Cooper on the nature of this initial Battle of the Budget in 1939 in which he concludes that cost-of-living models presented to the commission were limited to the Medical Officer of Health, District Commissioner and, on the side of the workers, labor activist Makhan Singh, but, as will be shown below, close study of the testimony to the commission, rather than only focusing on its report, show a variety of voices arguing for differing levels of how much income was needed to live in Mombasa. Ibid., 53.
Others had a much higher sense of the cost of living than did officials, employers and missionaries. Makhan Singh, the General Secretary of the Labour Trade Union of East Africa, figured that workers needed at least 50/- per month to live in Mombasa. Additionally, Shariff Adrus bin Mohamed, a sarang (labor recruiter) at the African Wharfage Company who worked with Africans at the port, thought that hard laborers needed at least 60/-, but, given the severity of their labor, felt they could eat up to 100/- of food per month. Our data for this decade is too thin to determine in precise terms exactly how much this would have changed household budgets in relation to the overall cost of living in the city, but it was a rhetorical effort to move beyond the conservatism of Father Lawless who was only able to imagine a raise of 5/- above what even he admitted was the inadequate amount of 20/- per month. Bin Mohamed, who as a sarang also worked as a port laborer, was trying to envision the expenses of a diet would nourish the bodies of workers who lost large amounts of calories during days of hard labor. However, most employers, with a different set of economic incentives, had a radically different conception of the money that African workers needed to purchase their daily food. Their estimates for food per-diems ranged between 4/- and 8/- per month, obviously a mere fraction of Bin Mohamed’s figure of 100/-. Others, with less motivation to keep African compensation suppressed, had higher estimates. Ali bin Namaan, a headman at the port, thought that workers should have at least 30 cents per day for basic food, but 1/- a day would be closer to adequate, while Said bin Oman, a local mudir, felt those living and working in the peri-urban area of Changamwe needed 15/- per month for their food.

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29 Cooper’s observation that “unofficial attempts to present a budget figure were limited to those of the [above mentioned] Indian labor leader, Makhan Singh,” understates the situation, as many Arab and African workers argued for the need for higher budgets in front of the 1939 Mombasa Labour Commission of Inquiry, as this chapter shows. Testimony of Mr. Sondhi, contractor, Father Lawless, and Shariff Adrus bin Mohamed, of the African Warfage Company, to the Mombasa Labour Commission Inquiry, 1939. (AG/8/119), KNA-Nairobi.

30 The testimony of Giddeon Harrison, of the Native Clerk Office Inspector of Works, Railways, Dewji Kawa Shah, Manager of Aluminium Works, Ali bin Namaan, Head at the port, R.K. Desai, of the Vegetables Growers
While many European commentators were suggesting that Africans could live on a total compensation of little more than 20/- per month, the reality was that most workers in Mombasa made far less. By 1939, with the economy recovering but population growth still keeping the labor market saturated, the average African wage in Mombasa was 13/- per month, and some were paid as low as 6/- monthly. These lowered wages were compounded by the tendency of employers to no longer pay posho food rations in addition to cash income. Though the Masters and Servants Ordinance still required it, enforcement of this ordinance by the 1930s was minimal, and the evidence suggests that it was only provided to the extent that employers saw such in-kind payments as required to retain workers. With the Depression and increased migration to the city producing an oversaturated labor market, employers did not often feel such pressure, either to provide these in-kind payments or, without them, the wages required to obtain the necessities of life. While lower wage earners were the most exposed to the decline in real wages, even those middle-income earning Africans felt their compensation was below what was required to live a life they deemed stable and comfortable in the city. For example, Giddeon Harrison, a Mijikenda with 90/- a month office job, reflected that while poorer laborers certainly could not live at the rate of 4/- a month for food,” he also explained that even on his salary he struggled to have a workable household budget, as he spent 70/- per month on food to feed himself, his wife and two children. Pushed by his interviewer that this seemed an enormous amount to spend on food, Harrison replied: “But what can I do? If I do not get good food my family will get sick.”

Reading this testimony closer, we can see that Giddeon, part of the small middle class of urban Africans, was not satisfied to just eat posho, but wanted the ability to dedicate 70/- a month to buy “good food” to maintain his family’s

health. If Giddeon found it difficult for his family to have a diverse and healthy diet on the 90/- he was paid, those living off the average 13/- per month must certainly have struggled to eat much beyond boiled maize-meal.33

People like Harrison were the exception with the large majority of Africans in Mombasa living off far lower wages than his, but he was also part of a small strata of African and Arab workers in the city who had the resources to occasionally provide their families with “good food.” Saidi bin Awath and Mbarak bin Ali, Arab workers at the port, sometimes made an above-average income, but as casual laborers their income was inconsistent, relying on the shipping schedules in which some months they worked 20 days and other times only four, meaning a monthly take-home ranging from 8/- to 40/-, with these totals being slightly higher if they worked night shifts. In their testimony, they asked for 90/- per month for food, and when told that this was a “ridiculous” and “absurd” amount, they responded in the same way Giddeon had, advocating that they and their families deserved diverse nourishment. Bin Awath told the interviewers that a 90/- per month salary was needed to “have good food and milk for the children.” In reality, neither man made close to that amount, and Bin Awath explained that when work was slow he would survive by spending “50 cents a day [on food] if I have no money.”34

Some workers at the port had more security, such as the serangs who were mostly Arab. They were manual laborers, but also had the responsibility to recruit casual workers each day. They made a base salary of 12/- per month, and then 3/- for each shift they worked, though they too were vulnerable to the fluctuations in shipping schedules. Shariff bin Mohamed, a serang,

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33 The 13/- average for African workers across Mombasa derived from the Willan Commission testimony is also generally supported by wage data collected by Cooper for specific sectors, reporting that 52 percent of workers at the railway, a field of employment with more (relatively) high earners than most, averaged Shs. 15 per month, while dockworkers made between an estimated Shs. 13/- to 18/- per month, depending on the frequency of their daily shifts. Cooper, On the African Waterfront, 54.
noted how some days he ate well, others not, recalling the ways the insecurity of his work
determined how much money he had for food: “If I do not get anything I spend 12 cents, but if I
have got work I spend 2/-.“ As even inexpensive prepared meals cost 30 cents, we can assume
days without work were hungry ones.\(^{35}\)

The majority of Mombasa’s working class, therefore, lived primarily on maize-meal posho
or other grains with minimal relish supplements, and even the small, middle-income classes of
Africans and Arabs were dissatisfied enough with the food their wages allowed them to buy that
they used that as a point of negotiation in the aftermath of the 1939 strike. Nonetheless, Mombasa’s
workers, despite colonial opinion to the contrary, did desire a diet filled with more variety and
food that better sustained them, as well as gave them affective pleasure, and they devised what
strategies they could to acquire it. To close the gap between what they were paid and what they
needed and wanted, some workers entered into cyclical debt relationships. Such a strategy actually
fits both into an urban economy that was becoming increasingly monetized, as well as rural East
African social structures. African workers needed money and so they created financial
relationships with South Asian duka (grocery) owners, a situation not radically different than when
people surrendered a level of autonomy for security as was common in rural societies. These
workers became tied to shop owners, and the owners to them in an asymmetrical financial
dependency. John Josiah Stevens, the senior supervisor for the Kenya Landing and Shipping
Company, explained that some Africans “go to the dukas and say if you provide me with food I
will pay you at the end of the month and then they spend more than they earn and get into debt
with the duka and have to keep going to him.”\(^{36}\) Abdulla Mohamed, a Digo man who lived in the

\(^{35}\) Bin Mohamed, Mombasa Labour Commission Inquiry.
\(^{36}\) Testimony of John Josiah Stevens, Senior Supervisor, Kenyan Landing and Shipping Company, to the Mombasa
Majengo neighborhood, employed such a strategy. Though more fortunate than many in that he was able to link together enough shifts at Vacuum Oil Company as a casual worker to earn around 40/- per month, since his salary also fed his wife and two children he spent almost the entirety of his wages on food, costing him between 30/- and 40/- per month. To make his family life in the city work, Mohamed established a debt-relationship with a duka owner in which half his store expenses would be carried over each month. He explained, “I pay half and then I pay the other the following month. … I am always in debt. … If I owe 30/- I pay 15/- … and if I can I give him more.”

For Milker Mwashiri Mulea, his monthly salary put him in a similar situation, in that his salary of 40/- was only enough to cover his housing, water and, since he did not receive a ration, food expenses. After these monthly costs, Mulea still needed money to pay for firewood in order to cook his food, another part of the preparation process that had in rural areas been produced by kinship labor, as young children would gather it from common areas for their mothers. Though collecting firewood had been possible in Mombasa and its peri-urban areas during the early colonial years, by the 1930s it was increasingly an item that had to be purchased, and Mulea was acutely aware of this, noting that after spending down his 40/- salary, he still had “to pay for firewood and other things.” Firewood cost Mulea an additional 3/60 per month, in addition to other life expenses, and so “Sometimes I owe the shopkeeper some money and have to pay that the following month.” His co-worker, Rastas Kashoki, was a milk carrier and made only 17/- per month without housing, though he did have a per diem of 30 cents a day for food. Upon arrival in

38 Information on rural social structures aggregated from interviews conducted with permanently settled migrants in Mombasa, Kenya, November 2015-January 2016, as well as with those who returned, done in Kisumu, Kenya, February 2016. For more on firewood and urbanization, see Chapter Three.
Mombasa, this level of compensation meant he was effectively homeless, sleeping on the veranda of the dairy, but by 1939 he had moved into a one-room apartment that he shared with 30 people. Altogether, Kashoki had about 26/- per month for all his expenses, approximately the amount that Father Lawless thought was adequate for diverse nourishment for the working classes, but well below the cost-of-living estimates that had been provided by many other Africans and Arabs.  

The economic situation of Mulea and Kashoki, with the former receiving no rations and the latter only a small cash per-diem, illustrate how the paternalism that had infused East African capitalism during the first three decades of the twentieth century was beginning to crumble by the 1930s. During the early colonial period, with labor scarcity on the coast supporting the bargaining power of workers, the evidence suggests that employers largely did comply with the Masters and Servants Ordinance, if perhaps only because such in-kind or cash in-lieu payments were needed to keep workers on the job. However, with the Global Depression of the 1930s and increased urban migration, an over-saturated labor market on the coast opened the opportunity for employers to shed the obligation of providing food and housing to their employees. In 1939, the Mombasa Municipal Engineer explained the labor market of the 1930s, and revealed the ways in which African workers had lost the bargaining power that scarcity had provided. He noted: “The point about these boys [African men] is that when we want labour, there is a surplus in the town, and when we want 20 literally hundreds of boys come after the job.” The Municipal Engineer paid his workers 16/- per month with no additional in-kind compensation, compared to the 1920s when they were paid a lower base wage of 12/-, but also received food rations, free water and housing. Municipal Engineer MacIntyre noted that his workers before the Depression “did not spend

40 See Chapter One.
anything on food” and when they returned to their rural homes they went back with “goods and boxes, and they had cases of luggage and when they left Mombasa they were able to pay for that.” Moreover, employees of the Municipal Engineer during the 1920s not only had food, housing and water provided while workers the following decade did not, their base income of 12/- may have been, in real wages, the same or even higher than the 16/- of the 1930s when adjusted for inflation.\(^{41}\) The interviewer, presenting this data back to MacIntyre during the 1939 commission, told him “I put it to you that [the workers] … are not nearly so well off now … it is very much worse.” In response, the Municipal Engineer tacitly admitted that life for Africans had deteriorated over the past decade, conceding that “perhaps it was a little worse.”\(^{42}\) In the absence of consistent and concrete data, this testimony of an employer incentivized to downplay the difficulties that waged workers faced in Mombasa is among the strongest points of evidence we have to argue that workers’ spending power and their consequent ability to buy diverse and plentiful food declined significantly during the 1930s.

However, while falling real wages were likely widespread, the retreat of paternal capitalism evident in the office of the Municipal Engineer was more uneven across the city. In addition to the paternalism of duka debt relations, some employers still provided rations to their workers. Oil refineries, the port and other industries continued to pay their employees in food rations or provided daily per-diems in addition to a base salary, and a shift at the port sometimes included a prepared meal. Nonetheless, these rations and payments in-lieu seemed to always fall short of what was needed, and workers found the quality of the prepared food they were served to be of dubious

\(^{41}\) On both the lack of precise information about 1930s inflation levels in Mombasa, but also the likelihood that it was “severe,” see Cooper, On the African Waterfront, 54.

quality. In addition to these industrial concerns, those working as domestic laborers also continued to be compensated through a composite wage-ration system, and these relations emerged from a longer history of slavery and abolition on the East African coast. As Margaret Strobel has shown, during the first decades after slavery was abolished, many former slaves in Arab and Swahili households remained in the same homes in which they had been enslaved, if only now paid small, cash wages. By the 1930s, though, migrant men began to increasingly take the place of formerly enslaved women, and also found work in European and South-Asian homes. Labor relations were most paternalist in Swahili and Arab households, paying wages as low as 6/- to 8/- per month, though also with in-kind payments of clothes, housing, and food. However, South Asian employers generally followed the structures of the city’s larger industries, paying higher wages, but with less paternalist obligation. One home paid 13/- per month with food and housing, another 16/- or 17/- with food, but not housing, while another paid 20/-, though without providing housing or food.

The labor relations on Mombasa’s peri-urban market gardens also only partially fit into general patterns of increasing proletarianization and the overt monetization the food system. In these fields, migratory Africans, mostly Kikuyu and Meru, worked for South Asian employers and grew produce sold in Mombasa. Wages for these agricultural workers varied from 10/- to 21/- per month, though inconsistently they may have also been compensated through food and housing. Some workers were provided food from the farm, but these created awkward relationships with


44 Strobel, Muslim Women, 127-131.

employers who only reluctantly allowed their workers to eat what could have been sold. Kabatha wa Washomba, who worked on one such market garden outside Mombasa, used his wages to buy and split a bag of maize meal with four friends, as well as some meat, but then would also occasionally add to this with some “Indian vegetables like binda and bogigari and spices” that he picked from his employers’ field for his own consumption. However, Washomba added that “they do not belong to us they belong to the owner. … I take a little vegetables but the owner shouts at me a lot.” Pushed that he may have been stealing them, Washomba replied that “I take it in the presence of the owner, I do not steal it,” but yet his employer would always express displeasure when he did.\footnote{Testimony of Kabatha wa Washomba, agricultural worker, to the Mombasa Labour Commission of Inquiry, 1939. (AG/8/119), KNA-Nairobi.} Washomba’s testimony suggests that workers on this market garden were pushing the owner to be more of a patron than he desired to be, by demanding that they were owed food too as payment for their labor. That he reluctantly permitted his workers to take food from the fields may have been because he was aware of the Master and Servants Ordinance and, if he reported his workers for theft, he would have had to also explain that he was not otherwise providing them with food.

Additionally, throughout Mombasa, many employers during the 1930s practiced a rhetorical, if not in reality material, paternalism. For example, the railway, the largest of state employers in the city, technically paid per diems for food, but at rates so low that these payments did not provide workers with the resources they needed to adequately feed themselves. Manual laborers at the railway made a total salary of 23/- per month, but it was divided as 3/- for housing, 1/- for firewood, and 4/- for food. Barely above the 20/- per month that Father Lawless saw as inadequate for providing a healthy diet, and far below the amounts for which Africans and Arabs were advocating, the inclusion of “per diems” were more a rationalization of low wages than a real
commitment to providing workers with access to diversely nutritious diets. Merely stating that 4/- was reserved for food did not mean it was actually enough to allow workers to eat more than maize meal. The designation of per diems, therefore, only served to cover over the reality that these workers had their food no more guaranteed than those who received a single, gross wage. Manual laborers at the railway, and others in similar situations, were in fact fully proletarianized within Mombasa’s urban food system. Their food was acquired through cash, not paternalist relations.47

Before the 1930s, workers on the Kenyan coast led difficult comestible lives. They primarily subsisted on a diet of maize meal, salt, and, if they were lucky, small amounts of meat, vegetables, and maybe some beans. However, for the most part, they ate boiled maize meal. Their situation was not one many in East Africa would have envied. Nonetheless, it seems clear that the food lives of workers during the 1930s had declined even from that low standard. The evidence we have tells us more about the higher-wage earning workers that made between 40/- and 60/- per month, but who were nonetheless only able to make their budgets work by going deep into debt to duka grocers. The record is unclear about the extent to which workers making less, who were the majority and earning between approximately 6/- and 24/- per month, were able to access credit from duka owners. The archive has no evidence of it, and we might assume that merchants may not have wanted to risk lending to workers who made so little month-to-month, especially if they were casual workers with no guaranteed income. If they were unable to access credit, which seems likely, they would have not been able to afford food in the quantity or variety they needed, let alone desired. The racialized political economy of Mombasa, and the wages that it paid to Africans, meant that their experience of wage labor came with the imposition of structural starvation and malnutrition. While many experienced these depravations, this chapter will explore below how, in

47 Ibid.
addition to such duka-debt relations, Africans and other urban residents also improvised and strategized other ways to round off the sharpest edges of colonial capitalism, and devised ways to survive in the city.

**Gender and Urban Food Systems in 1930s Mombasa**

Out of this unequal political economy, workers and small-scale proprietors created a new urban food system in Mombasa different in scale and composition from anything that had existed in the pre-colonial city. In particular, one of the most striking features of the experience wage-labor migration to cities like Mombasa in East Africa was that men, while they were away from home, cooked. This was in stark contrast to rural areas in which women, almost exclusively, performed kitchen labor, with some help from young children.\(^{48}\) However, not all migrant men in Mombasa cooked and, those who did, did not cook all the food they consumed. The composition of Mombasa’s food system, and the social structures that held it together, were shaped by demographics, how peoples’ income determined what types of households they could create and the food they could afford, and the spatial geography of where people worked in relation to their homes.

Though arrival in urban areas meant living a much more overtly commercialized life, many migrants in Mombasa still managed to acquire their food through membership in a kin group, though the gendered demography of the city and the racialized wages that Africans received created markedly different urban kinship structures. The resiliency of kinship in Mombasa can be partially explained by political economy, as with rent expensive and wages low, only the relatively

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\(^{48}\) This composite of rural social systems has been aggregated from interviews in Mombasa from November 2014 to January 2015 and Kisumu during February 2015, as well as nutritional and ethnological research done during the 1920s and 1930s. See B. Orr and J.L. Gilks, *Studies of Nutrition: The Physique and Health of Two African Tribes* (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1931) and H. Hartmann, “Some Customs of the Luwo (Or Nilotic Kavirondo) Living in South Kavirondo,” *Anthropos* 23, 1/2 (1928): 263-275.
privileged in the African population could afford a home or apartment on their own, meaning that
the atomized autonomy of modern city life was not part of most migrant experiences. Instead, the
majority had to live with others and share rents in order to make their budgets work. However,
these arrangements were not strictly economistic in a commercial sense, as they were also
constructed to be social units that organized the domestic labor of the household.

In some of these homes, people lived rent-free for periods as dependents of a person who
had access to housing. Muriuki Kathungu remembered that when he first arrived in Mombasa he
was without work, but was nonetheless taken into someone’s home. By 1939, he was employed as
a roadbuilder and had free housing, but missed living with other people. Even though he was in
government housing that prohibited roommates, Kathungu offered to others what he received upon
his arrival in a new city, and took on boarders who would only pay when they had work. For those
he called his “guests,” Kathungu explained that “If they get casual daily work they pay, otherwise
they do not.”49 That notions of dependency and obligation remained paramount in the urban setting
was made clear by Sabakaki Ali Giwisa, who was from Buganda where such a culture was strong
in the political and social structure, when he observed that “In Mombasa a man who needs friends
needs money, but I have no money,” and he continued that “I cannot collect these people for I have
nothing to give them.”50 Part of the reason to have followers, or at least friends who were co-
dependents, was that it allowed for the distribution of domestic labor within the household,
including inside the kitchen. Kabatha wa Washomba, who worked on a South Asian market garden
and lived in the peri-urban area near Mombasa, recalled that, among his friends, “We cook [our

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49 Testimony of Muriuki Kathungu, road builder, to the Mombasa Labour Commission of Inquiry, 1939 (AG/8/119),
KNA-Nairobi.
50 Testimony of Sabakaki Ali Giwisa, employee of the Municipal Canteen, to the Mombasa Labour Commission of
Inquiry, 1939 (AG/8/119), KNA-Nairobi. For reciprocal obligation in the longue durée of Bugandan history, see
food] in turn, one day I, and other day another boy.\textsuperscript{51} Washomba described his relation as one of equal distribution, but evidence from later decades shows that domestic cooking labor in such all-male households was often mediated through hierarchical relations of reciprocal obligation, except that in the city generation replaced gender, with junior men cooking for their elders in exchange for free or reduced-cost food and rent. Though Kathungu was silent on the issue of domestic labor, if later decades are any indication, it seems probable that his dependents who did not have cash for their rent paid for their shelter by working in the kitchen.\textsuperscript{52}

For migrants in Mombasa, entering into dependent relations became a way they could escape the most intense levels of deprivation they faced in the town’s racialized political economy, avoiding both starvation and homelessness. During the great famine of the late-nineteenth century, people on the margins throughout rural East Africa entered into asymmetrical dependencies with powerful “big men” in order to access food, and similarly, in the manufactured, incremental famine of colonial wage labor, urban patriarchs who had secured steady work could use their accumulation of wages to build authority and prestige by taking in those who were without.\textsuperscript{53} This took on added significance in households without women because it allowed these urban “big men” to avoid cooking, and thus maintain their separation from the domestic labor of the kitchen that migration threatened. Some male workers at the Mombasa Public Works made quite clear that remaining

\textsuperscript{51} Testimony of Kabatha wa Washomba, agricultural worker, to the Mombasa Labour Commission of Inquiry, 1939 (AG/8/119), KNA-Nairobi.

\textsuperscript{52} Kathungu to the Commission.

\textsuperscript{53} For the social and political consequences of rinderpest (cattle disease) and famine in late-nineteenth century East Africa, see Charles Ambler, \textit{Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism: The Central Region in the Late Nineteenth Century} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) and White, \textit{Comforts of Home}, 31-35. Additionally, though only a small number of migrants to Mombasa came from Shambaa (present-day northeast Tanzania), Steven Feierman’s examination of how asymmetrical dependencies operated in this region during the famine remains among the most persuasive. See his \textit{Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 46-68.
outside the kitchen was crucial to their masculinity, as, in reference to their ration, they had “refused to cook it because they say that that is the woman’s job to cook and not theirs.”

Historians have also shown that some men with consistent income during the colonial period employed women as concubines, who offered access to prepared food among other comforts. However, like with single-night prostitution, these more long-term arrangements were likely rare and available only to a small number of people, as high-wage earning Africans were few. Taking in a concubine was also significantly more expensive than having a male dependent, since women were also paid wages in addition to receiving food and shelter. For “big men” taking on male dependents, rent had to be paid regardless, and the cost of food, if prepared strategically, does not have to double, triple and so on with each additional person in the home. However, in the stagnant wage environment of 1930s Mombasa, surplus cash to be paid to concubines was scarce. The unemployed male migrant was the less expensive follower if one wanted to build prestige on the cheap.

While such comestible relations continued to be at least partially structured by reciprocal obligation within urban households, as people traversed the city’s geography to go from home to work, they became increasingly entangled in Mombasa’s commercial economy. Far from their kitchens, and realistically without enough time to cook a meal even if they were close, workers had to either bring food with them, or purchase a prepared meal if they wanted something to eat during their shift. Within this context, a diverse group of urban proprietors began to recognize these workers as a new consumer class, though one with extremely limited incomes. With

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54 Testimony of Robbins of the Public Works Department, Mombasa, to the Mombasa Labour Commission of Inquiry, 1939 (AG/8/119), KNA-Nairobi.
55 Willis, Mombasa, 168, 186.
56 The wages that Strobel and Willis report were paid to concubines were because sex, in addition to cooking and cleaning, was expected, and while we certainly should not rule out the possibly of sex between men in homosocial dependent households, there is also no explicit evidence of it, either suggesting that such arrangements were uncommon or that they were recorded given the sexual politics of 1930s Mombasa.
thousands of people every day looking to buy prepared meals, snacks and beverages, urban residents capitalized on this opportunity to secure their own incomes by providing these migrants with the comestible “comforts of home.”

This work of selling prepared food and drink was done mostly by those excluded from the wage-labor economy. As many have noted, wage-labor in British Africa was implicitly rendered as male, emerging both out of the British patriarchal conflation of maleness and waged work, and African rural social structures in which women’s agricultural and household labor was too valuable to sacrifice, and so it was men who were seen as available to be sent to cities and plantations. However, during these early decades of colonialism, some women did migrate to and live in Mombasa and other cities throughout Africa, and needed money to survive within a commercialized economy to support not only themselves, but often also children and husbands who lived with them, and to even send what remittances they could to their rural homes. Moreover, the thousands of women who permanently lived in Mombasa also increasingly needed cash income. While middle- and upper-class Muslim women following purdah generally avoided working in public, historians have noted how formerly enslaved women after abolition, as well as Mijikenda women from surrounding rural areas, began to sell prepared food in Mombasa to generate income in the city.

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57 For the idea of “comforts of home,” see the discussion in the introduction to this chapter.
59 Luise White points out that many prostitutes who migrated to Nairobi were supporting rural households across East Africa, sending remittances to patriarchal men in rural areas who lost their economic base of power during the riderpest of the 1890s. White, Comforts of Home, 29-50. For migratory women living and working in urban areas in Southern Africa during colonialism, see Teresa Barnes, “We Women Work So Hard”: Gender, Urbanization and Social Reproduction in Colonial Harare, Zimbabwe, 1930-1956 (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999).
60 Though acknowledge within the scholarship, information on people selling prepared food in Mombasa during colonialism has been limited to single sentences in two different works of urban history. For formally enslaved women, see Strobel, Muslim Women, 129, and for Mijikenda women, see Willis, Mombasa, 197.
While women were often explicitly excluded from nearly all except domestic wage labor, many men also found it increasingly difficult by the 1930s to find work. By 1933, as migration to the city increased and the Great Depression suppressed the economy, one-third of Mombasa’s population was unemployed.\textsuperscript{61} Even earlier than the 1930s, African men showed a willingness when looking for work be flexible in what they considered masculine labor. Strobel has observed that during the early decades of twentieth century men came to predominate as domestics in the homes of Europeans, Arabs and Indians, necessitating the creation of a new colonially-paternalist term, the “houseboy.” Our evidence of the gendered composition of the street-food industry during the 1930s is thin, and what we have actually points to women primarily doing this work, but, by the 1950s when archival records thicken on this topic, it is clear that men made up a significant portion of the people selling food and drink in the city.\textsuperscript{62} Consequently, even though direct evidence is limited, the masculinization of cooking and serving food in Mombasa’s streets, and the rapid growth of the industry, likely began during the 1930s when men were struggling to find work as wage laborers, and thus would have been incentivized to turn towards the “informal” economies that had previously been a sector controlled mostly by women. Just as the men who worked for wages as domestics had to “redesign their self-image to include housework,” including inside the kitchen, so too other men had to accommodate themselves to the reality that, to survive, they needed to cook and serve food and drinks to both men and women in Mombasa.\textsuperscript{63}

The thesis that the industry rapidly expanded during the Depression is additionally supported by the reality that the municipal government also began in the same period to draft laws to regulate it. In 1929, the Mombasa Municipal Board started to pass licensing laws for non-

\textsuperscript{61} Cooper, \textit{On the African Waterfront}, 33.
\textsuperscript{62} See Chapter Three.
\textsuperscript{63} Strobel, \textit{Muslim Women}, 128-131.
European eateries. While European restaurants were licensed nearly as soon as the British took control of Mombasa, urban authorities had been content to ignore how the rest of the city acquired prepared food. With the new bylaws debated and passed from 1929, the Municipal Board set the initial framework for how officials for the remainder of the century would try to create a “modern” restaurant and eatery infrastructure in the city. Consequently, though largely lacking the administrative capacity to enforce these regulations during the 1930s, these laws nonetheless established health requirements and building codes that have shaped the material struggle of survival for food and beverage vendors in Mombasa up to the present day.

In the bylaws, colonial officials reimagined a new, modern restaurant culture in which the dirt floors of Mombasa’s eateries would be transformed into those made “of cement or wood or of some hard, impervious material.” The walls would similarly be solid and resistant to moisture or other substances, being composed of “glazed tiles, cement or other hard materials.” In addition to these solid floors and walls, the new Mombasa restaurant also needed to be ventilated and have access to clean water and a latrine. These were meant not only to physically alter the architecture of the city’s eateries, but to also enact social change within them. They were designed to prevent the metaphorical collapsing of home and business into a single physical and social entity. The bylaws allowed that people could legally have restaurants in their homes, but they needed to have a food storage, dining room, and latrine that were separate from those of residential use. The distinction between home and work needed to be strictly delineated, in the law, and in the architectural construction of physical space.64

The drafts of these by-laws reveal not only this colonial vision of the comestible city, but also provide evidence into the actual composition of the food and beverage industry for a period

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64 D.S. Fraser, Town Clerk, “Municipality of Mombasa, Second Draft,” 15 November 1930, Restaurant By-Laws, (UY/5/74) Kenya National Archives, Coast Province Regional Branch (KNA-Coast).
during which we have only scant documentation of these institutions. The attention paid to outlawing restaurants built on top of dirt floors and without walls made of “hard materials,” as well as modifying those that existed inside peoples’ homes, tells us that such comestible businesses likely already existed, thus requiring laws to legislatively transform them. Language also provides clues. In 1901, *mkahawani* was the primary word in Swahili used for restaurant, but by 1939 the noun for “hotel” in Swahili, *hoteli*, had had its definition expanded to also mean restaurant. These changes in language, as well as the legislation strictly policing the line between household and restaurant, suggest that vendors’ homes were places where men went to find both the comfort of food and shelter. Migrants, living far from home, found their meals and place of rest in the same institution.

Such combined hotel-restaurant businesses also made good economic sense for those who ran them. If already paying rent for a home with a kitchen, and with limited access to capital, why expend double the rent for a separate restaurant when one could be created within their residence? Moreover, by operating out of their homes, vendors could also grow their revenue by renting bed space to men in need of a cheap place to sleep. Workers who either did not have friends with whom they could share rent, or could not find an urban patriarch to take them on as a dependent, looked to these *hoteli* to fulfill both the comforts of food and shelter. As Luise White has shown, prostitutes sold these “comforts of home,” in addition to sex, when men could occasionally afford them, but, as this dissertation argues, the far more common and daily ways in which men on low incomes acquired these comforts were in these *hoteli* and other eateries.

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65 *A Standard Swahili-English Dictionary (Founded on Madan’s Swahili-English Dictionary) By the Former Inter-Territorial Language Committee for the East African Dependencies under the Direction of the Late Frederick Johnson* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1939), 136. *Hotel* existed as a Swahili word by 1894, but its definition was limited to “hotel,” and did not yet mean “restaurant.” Madan, *English Swahili Dictionary* (1894), 180, 333.

66 White, *Comforts of Home*.
However, whether living in a *hoteli* or another kind of household, when most people went to work for the day they needed to bring already-prepared food with them for lunch, or find a place they could purchase it. On their breaks, people could stop at a *hoteli* in someone’s house if one was located nearby, but they could also find a full meal at a roadside vendor, a *kibanda* in Swahili, or from a hawker selling prepared tea, coffee and snacks. These were especially important in industrial areas where in-home restaurants would not have been common given the paucity of residential housing, and the mobility of *vibanda* (pl. of *kibanda*) and hawkers meant they could easily move to where there was demand. At these *vibanda*, meals were cheap and, consequently, basic. Sidney Mintz has noted that meals created in a context of scarcity, whether environmental or in this case manufactured by a racialized political economy, often were composed largely of a single starch that was meant to be filling, and were complemented by a small relish that acted as a flavoring agent to make the staple more palatable. Such were certainly the conditions in Mombasa. As we learned in the above section, workers desired more diverse and satisfying meals than their wages provided, and often went deep in debt to have them, but, to keep food cheap, in the *vibanda* diversity of flavor was sacrificed for economy of price.

Meals at roadside eateries consisted of a large starch serving such as rice or maize porridge, and were accompanied by a small relish of meat or vegetables. Nonetheless, even with a plate consisting primarily of starches, the majority of workers could only occasionally afford to eat at a *kibanda* with their diminished spending power. Individual meal prices ranged from 24-30 cents, which means most people could not eat all their food at these vendors on a daily basis. This tells us that most of the food that working-class people in Mombasa were eating was prepared at home.

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68 For the effects of wages on what the working class could afford to eat, see the above section in this chapter.
Additionally, since most people worked from the early morning until the early evening, we can conclude that most food eaten outside the house would have been at lunchtime. However, despite its simplicity and the inconsistency of access to it, when people were able to purchase a prepared meal in a Mombasa eatery, it provided quick, easy and filling food. Large portions of maize meal were neither as nutritionally healthy or as diversely interesting as what people ate in rural communities, but, after a morning of hard labor, such filling food was likely quite satiating and desirable.\(^{69}\) By adding a supplementary option to cooking at home or bringing already-prepared food to work, street-food vendors by the 1930s were becoming a prominent part of Mombasa’s landscape.

However, this was also an industry that had emerged nearly completely outside the regulatory structures of Mombasa’s administration. As municipal authorities created new licensing laws to administer the city’s restaurants, their initial motivations during the 1930s were more aesthetic and bureaucratic than economistic. They wanted to gain control over the future trajectory of Mombasa’s eateries. At first, the municipal board proposed a fee structure for the various licensing categories, but this approach was quickly rejected in favor of simply having free registration for all food businesses. These by-laws were less about taxes, and more about having power over the shape and composition of the city. It was social engineering, the creation of a new comestible Mombasa, rather than short-term economic extraction, that characterized official intent at this historical juncture. The Mombasa Minister of Health observed: “These By-laws are intended as a measure of control in a matter of health, not as a means of raising revenue, and it is considerable that while registration is essential for control the licence fee is unjustifiable.”\(^{70}\)

\(^{69}\) For rural diets during this period, with the Kikuyu as the example, see J.B. Orr and J.L. Gilks, *Studies of Nutrition: The Physique and Health of Two African Tribes* (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1931), and, for the colonial period more generally, as well as the Kamba, Luo and Luhya as well, see Chapter One.

\(^{70}\) Minster of Health, Mombasa, to the Town Clerk, Mombasa. 27 June, 1931. (UY/5/74) KNA-Coast.
Nonetheless, while the government did not require a fee for a license during the 1930s, these laws effectively presented an unwanted construction and/or rent bill to anyone who attempted to abide by them. A central advantage that the work of the street-food industry provided to undercapitalized proprietors in Mombasa were the low start-up and operating costs: cooking supplies, a push-cart, perhaps a table and chairs for customers, daily ingredients and fuel. A somewhat larger vendor might also pay wages to a few employees, but theoretically this expense was made up by increased revenue. There were costs, certainly, but they were not insurmountable. However, the restaurant by-laws threatened to create difficult hurdles to entering the industry by increasing the start-up capital required if one was to cook and serve in a restaurant with hard, “impervious” floors and tiled walls, and especially if people needed to remodel their homes to create a dining and cooking space discretely separate from their living quarters. The “healthy,” modern vision of Mombasa’s public-eating culture that officials imagined during the 1930s was one designed to be run and dominated by those who could afford high rents or the remodeling costs necessary to convert their businesses to fit municipal specifications.

These laws, however, quickly faced the hard reality of Mombasa’s actual material conditions. The existence of these street-food vendors was essential to the daily reproduction of the labor force in the city, and Mombasa could not operate without them, unless the state and private employers were willing to raise wages. Low start-up and operating costs opened the industry to more people, but they also were crucial for keeping prices low enough that the city’s working class could afford to patronize these eateries. Workers’ wages prohibited them from eating in licensed restaurants that built their rent and other overhead expenses into the price of their food and drink. Absent a reconfiguration of Mombasa’s social structure, street-food vendors were necessary, however much they offended the aesthetic sensibilities of municipal and health
officials. By 1936, it had become clear that these new bylaws were extremely impractical. The by-
laws, one official observed,

have not and are still not being strictly enforced on the poor class of natives, Arabs and
Indians, as it is clear any attempt at strictly enforcing them would be not only a hardship
on the applicants, but also on the section of the public served by those applicants.\textsuperscript{71}

These laws went largely unenforced, but their occasional application raised anxieties
enough to affect Mombasa’s comestible culture during the 1930s, if only not in the way the drafters
of them had hoped. The home restaurant that had drawn the ire of officials not only continued to
operate, but may have actually increased in number during this period. Officials noted, “there are
in existence a large number of so-called Restaurants, etc. working behind closed doors as it is
impossible for them to obtain licences owing to the stringency of the By-laws.”\textsuperscript{72} Driving
comestible merchants “to work behind doors,” these laws may have simply encouraged some
vendors to leave the streets and to prepare and serve their customers at home, away from the
surveillance, however minor, of health authorities. Some board members saw the impracticality of
such strict building codes, and conceded that perhaps they needed to shape their laws to fit
Mombasa’s urban landscape rather than the other way around. They argued that it was better to
allow vendors to exist as they were, and license these vendors in order to “get some control over
them rather than drive them to work behind doors.”\textsuperscript{73}

The archives provide no evidence that subsequent effort was taken to enforce these laws
any more intensely during the 1930s or for much of the 1940s. Street-food vendors had to adapt to

\textsuperscript{71} Report of the Sub-Committee appointed under Board Minute 938 to reconsider the Mombasa Municipality
(Inspection, Storage and Sale of Food) Bylaws, 1929, and the Mombasa Municipality (Restaurant) Bylaws, 1931. 5
August, 1936 (UY/5/74), KNA-Coast.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Report of the Sub-Committee, (Inspection, Storage and Sale of Food).
haphazard enforcement, but overall this period is notable more for the creation of laws to control the industry, rather than any sustained effort to do so.

**Conclusion: Racism and Urban Struggle in Colonial Mombasa**

The social history of working-class food in Mombasa opens a view into how the large global structures of capitalism and the racism of empire were made manifest in the daily lives of Africans living in a colonial city. Racial inequality was experienced in many ways in Kenya and across the African continent during the colonial period, but among its most visceral and physical forms were the hunger and malnutrition that it forced upon African workers in urban areas. As with the “food deserts” that political economies of racial segregation have created in communities of color in the cities of the United States today, so the urban, African poor in colonial Kenya had to endure the nutritional consequences of unequal access to healthy and diversified diets. In Mombasa, the Great Depression further exacerbated what was already an unequal social structure, causing a decline in the real wages of urban Africans. However, it would be a mistake to attribute these changes simply to the abstraction of a global economic downturn. The poverty wages Africans were paid were not the product of impersonal market forces, but rather the specific choices of individual employers based on racist assumptions about what Africans, as a group, should be paid. The Depression was a challenge, but also an opportunity for the state and private companies in Mombasa. While it deflated global markets, the Depression also put a final end to labor scarcity on the Kenyan coast, allowing employers, without fear of losing their labor force, to keep wages suppressed. In 1939, the Mombasa Municipal Engineer effectively admitted that there was collusion between various state employers to keep wages down when explaining why he lowered monthly salaries during the 1930s from 18/- to 16-. He observed that “In 1930 and 1932 the Railway and Public Works Department found fault with the Municipality boys [the employees
of the Municipal Engineer] that they were being paid higher than their boys, and that is why we came down to those figures, the same figures as the Public Works Department and the Railway.”74 They could have paid their workers more, provided two more precious shillings a month to help improve their employees’ diets, but they did not want to set a precedent of 18/-, a standard still well below what was required, as a higher rate of pay in the city.

African migrant workers thus found themselves in a desperate situation in 1930s Mombasa, but this chapter has also shown the ways in which these workers and other residents in the city improvised new forms of urban living to cope with the reality of unemployment, under-employment or, even if one had a position, living off inadequate wages. However, in the coming decades, these strategies of urban survival would become identified by the British as roadblocks on the path to urban modernity. All-male households, a burgeoning body of development policy began to argue, posed a threat to social order and needed to be replaced by the hetero-patriarchal nuclear family and, instead of these workers eating at unlicensed vendors, they required food either cooked by wives or purchased in state-approved restaurants or canteens. Development would come to promise higher wages, better housing and more amenities for some, but we will also see that for many others it presented a new set of problems in their struggle to survive in colonial Mombasa.

74 Testimony of MacIntyre, Mombasa Municipal Engineer, to the Mombasa Labour Commission of Inquiry, 1939 (AG/8/119), KNA-Nairobi.
Images

Image 2: Street Food in Mombasa, 1908

A rare image of street-food vendors in colonial Mombasa taken in 1908, selling what appear to be fried fish, a form of vending that would prove enduring, and is still common throughout the city today. For more on fried fish selling, see Chapter Three. MSS. Afr.s. 1607/1. African and Commonwealth Collections. Bodleian Library, Oxford University.
Table 4

Ethnicity of Registered Migrant Workers in Mombasa by 1925

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luo and Luhya</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kikuyu</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meru</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embu and Chuka</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamba</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taita</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mijikenda</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baganda (from Uganda)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total number of registered migrant workers in 1925 in Mombasa: 7,555

CHAPTER THREE

DEVOURING DEVELOPMENT: WORKING-CLASS FOOD AND THE MAKING OF MODERN MOMBASA IN LATE-COLONIAL KENYA

The form and substance of Mombasa’s urban modernity was made during the period lasting from the 1930s to the early 1960s. Historians of empire and decolonization in Africa will recognize this as the period that John Lonsdale and D.A. Low have called the “second colonial occupation,” and that Frederick Cooper has identified as the time when what we now recognize as “development” emerged as a form of imperial governance. Unlike much of the research into the history of development in colonial Africa, though, this chapter is part of a growing field of historiography seeking to move beyond studying shifts in imperial thinking and policy, and to instead consider how daily life changed for Africans during a period in which colonial authorities engaged in a massive project of social engineering. However, to understand the everyday in the port city of Mombasa, the broader context of how imperial forms of rule and global political economies changed during these years must remain central to the analysis. The approach taken, therefore, is neither from the “above” or “below,” but one that untangles how structural transformations in British ideology and policy had real impacts on the ways in which working-

2 In the urban context, see the examples of Lisa A. Lindsay, Working with Gender: Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003) and Caleb Edwin Owen, “Lands of Leisure: Recreation, Space, and the Struggle for Urban Kenya, 1900-2000,” (PhD Dissertation, Michigan State University, 2016). The dissertation in progress of Robert Rouphail, also at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, considers the social and cultural history of how cyclones shaped development in colonial Mauritius.
class Africans acquired their food in Mombasa, while also remaining squarely focused on how urban residents operated within, outside and remade the very structures that were imposed upon them.³ Therefore, this chapter is about how a new kind of city emerged from this period of development, but one that was quite different from the ways the British had imagined it might be, and in a form whose traces continue to crucially shape the everyday experiences of the people who live in Mombasa today.

The ideologies and policies that crystalized during these decades into a new form of colonial governance were rooted in a period of ongoing imperial crisis. As Cooper has argued, before the 1930s, British officials knew little about the social lives of the Africans working in colonial cities or on plantations. However, as disorder spread throughout the empire during the 1940s, and with Mombasa as one of the focal points of this global struggle by colonized workers seeking better living standards, the British government responded to this initiative by implementing far-reaching plans aimed at labor stabilization. In Mombasa in particular, a series of strikes during the 1930s focused the lens of imperial concern on this small port town that had an outsized impact on imperial commerce. These strikes forced officials to realize to their horror that Mombasa’s casual workers they had hitherto viewed as being unorganized, as autonomous units of labor, were in fact quite capable of collective action and, within the narrow networks of colonial export economies, of work stoppages that could grind imperial commerce to a halt.⁴ In Mombasa, the British responded by trying to make knowable what they perceived as an inchoate urban mass

³ This is in contrast to the position of Sean Hanretta whose critique of the “colonial rubric” in Africanist historiography sidesteps the crucial issue of power. While I share his view that we need to center African practices of self- and communal-fashioning, we should also not lose sight of the reality that the formation of these cultural and social structures occurred in the context of the extreme political and economic asymmetries of colonial society. Sean Hanretta, Islam and Social Change in French West Africa: The History of an Emancipatory Community (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴ This transformation has been studied in the context of Mombasa and the wider British and French empires by Frederick Cooper in his On the African Waterfront, Decolonization and African Society and Citizenship between Empire and Nation.
of casual African laborers, “detribalized,” little understood, yet also capable of causing great disruptions in the imperial economy. The colonial state, along with the city’s employers, decided that a better paid and stable worker, while more expensive, would also become more rational, more upright, more invested in the workplace and, most importantly, more predictable. They wanted to forge a “respectable” working class, separated from the rest of the urban masses, and represented by rational trade unions that would facilitate smooth communications and negotiations, and thus, theoretically, reduce work stoppages.⁵

Central to such ideas about how to develop Mombasa was the need to remake working-class diets and the social structures and institutions through which their food was provisioned, prepared and served. By the 1930s, the inadequacy of the diet imposed on Africans while working as wage laborers came to be identified as a major structural flaw in the British Empire. If African workers, a growing consensus concluded, were fed a more nutritious and satisfying diet, they would work more efficiently, miss fewer shifts from illness and be more content, which by implication meant the empire would be more economically productive and have greater labor stability. The food of the “modern worker” needed to change and, assumed to be male, he therefore required increased wages to be able to afford enough food for both him and his family who were now going to come to live with him in the city. The modern family of colonial urban development was one in which the all-male households of the past where men cooked, socialized and, in the minds of the state, conspired to be disruptive would be replaced by the purported stability of conjugality, with wage-earning husbands and wives who prepared their food.⁶

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In addition to this new ideology of empire, the realities of migratory family life in Mombasa were changing too. From the 1940s forward, tens of thousands of African women did migrate to the coastal city, and many of them joined their husbands. During this period, as the experience of migration came to be increasingly redefined as one in which conjugal families were possible, the gendered nature of urban food provision and preparation was remade as well. Even though migration and urbanization during the first decades of the twentieth century had radically changed men’s relationship to cooking, their desire to perform rural patriarchies nonetheless remained part of how they wanted to imagine themselves and organize labor within their families. However, to draw on an analogy, when a rubber band is stretched out and then returns to its old form, it resembles how it looked before, but not exactly. Similarly, gendered structures in Mombasa’s migratory communities were elastic, not cyclical. They did not return to be just as they were before. The gendered nature of how food was provisioned and prepared in the growing number of urban African, conjugal families did resemble their rural counterparts, and aligned in some ways with the colonial vision of the modern family, but neither of these gendered renderings of food systems and their divisions of labor squared precisely with how urban residents constructed families, friendships and other more monetized relationships through which they acquired their daily food.7

Indeed, this chapter also examines how, during the same period, food consumed outside of the household was becoming central to these newly emerging, working-class food systems. Street food had been part of city life in Mombasa during the 1930s and before, but interrelated structural changes in the city’s political economy and demography saw the rapid expansion of the industry

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7 This draws on David Schoenbrun’s more general call for Africanists to consider how African modernity was created and interpreted through the “durable” though also changing structures of pre-colonial Africa that continued to inform social action during the colonial and post-colonial periods. David Schoenbrun, “Conjuring the Modern in Africa: Durability and Rupture in Histories of Public Healing between the Great Lakes of Africa,” American Historical Review 111, no. 5 (2006): 1403-1439.
during the final decades of colonialism. The mass unemployment that had been new to Mombasa during the Depression had, during the 1940s and 1950s, became endemic. The unemployed, or in some cases underemployed or underpaid, created a lasting urban class of people in the city unable to rely exclusively or at all on wages to sustain their lives in the city, and so turned to small-scale trading activities, a bundle of practices now commonly referred to as the “informal economy.” Within this context, the decades stretching from the 1930s to the 1950s were the formative years during which “informality” became central to economic life in Mombasa. However, the very notion of informality itself has become controversial in African-studies literature, in part because its existence is dependent on the notion that its antonym, “formality,” actually exists as a separate entity. The economic practices that were deemed informal already existed before their categorical crystallization during the 1950s. However, as these economic activities rapidly expanded and the colonial government came to want to control them under the ideology of urban development, they were increasing rendered as illicit and “unlicensed,” the opposite of the approved, the licensed, the “formal.” The formal/informal divide, as categories of economic analysis, simply repeat the colonial distinction of licensed and unlicensed, rather than engaging in the more crucial task of specifically studying the often inseparable economies of wages and small-scale trading, whether licensed or not, that structured people’s lives in the city.

Consequently, instead of seeing the formal and informal as economic categories, this dissertation views them as political ones that increasingly from the 1950s came to determine a trader’s exposure to an increasingly authoritarian state seeking to excise informality from the social body. Urban development, as much as it was about nutrition, wages, housing and other amenities, was also, fundamentally, about the making of the formal, licensed city. For state authorities in

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developing Mombasa, modernity and formality (licensed) were co-terminus. The formal/informal binary, therefore, is not particularly useful as a tool for understanding how political economies in urban Africa have actually worked historically, but it does provide an insight into a basic assumption that has informed how elites, during the colonial period and after, have tried to remake the continent’s cities and in the process shaped the field of struggle in which vendors and hawkers have operated. However, though political categories, they have also had profound material consequences.

Before the late 1940s in Mombasa, the licensed/unlicensed distinction was not important in a city in which urban officials were content to allow Africans to create their own institutions as long as they still showed up for work. However, once the state became committed to recreating the city as it was imagined by development theorists, the extent to which peoples’ homes, businesses or other activities were rendered as either formal or informal, and therefore licit or illicit, determined whether they would, on a daily basis, face the threat of arrests, fines, prosecutions and potentially the demolition of their structures. Researching these aspects of the history of development is a departure from many of the foundational studies in the field. Cooper’s work on Mombasa and the wider British and French empires set the research agenda for understanding how the rise of development and new imperial theories of labor changed the context for wage-labor struggles in decolonizing Africa, but what remains less clear are the effects of these processes on those who operated outside these formalized sectors, for those who were marked as informal, including the people selling prepared food and drink in Mombasa.9 We see clearly in

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9 Cooper, Decolonization and African Society and On the African Waterfront. Lindsay’s otherwise pathbreaking study into gender and the family during the period of colonial development in Nigeria remains focused on the people included within development plans. Lindsay, Working with Gender. Andrew Burton’s study of colonial policing and urban expulsions in colonial and decolonizing Dar es Salaam heads in a direction similar to this chapter, but his interests remain primarily on colonial policy, rather than social history. See his African Underclass: Urbanisation, Crime, and Colonial Order in Dar es Salaam (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005). Closer to my approach is the recent work of Richard Pithouse on shack-settlement communities in Durban, though with differences of
Cooper’s research how this was a period in which the state worked to create a segmented, and relatively privileged, urban working class, but this chapter asks, what did development mean for those excluded from such plans? Cooper acknowledges this limitation in his approach, and hints that officials, both colonial and post-colonial, were aware of the narrowness of their programs of social engineering, with benefits reserved primarily for railway and dock workers and other select state and private employees, and thus they worried about and felt “a profound distrust of the vast portion of African society that lay outside the small but potentially controllable ‘modern’ workplace and ‘modern’ city.”

Such concerns have not been limited to anxious bureaucrats in Kenya, as many liberal and radical critics more generally concerned with development have shared such a “profound distrust” of people whom urban officials in Victorian Britain called the “residuum” and Marxist theorists the “lumpenproletariat.” While Mombasa’s hawkers and vendors may not fit the exact sociological position of the people who have been termed the lumpenproletariat or residuum, they share with them the fate of being deemed an illegible and disposable social category, as a group that stands in the way of “progress.”

Liberals and radicals alike have feared the inchoateness of the illegible urban poor, the people who do not fit into their visions for the future. By the end of the 1940s, colonial officials looked out and saw such a vast, unknown landscape of hawker and vendors who largely cooked and sold food and drink how and where they wanted, from their homes or squatting on private and public property. They were not


10 These anxieties extended to rural Africa, which colonial, and some post-colonial, officials also saw as existing outside the kind of modernity—economic, social, political and cultural—that they wanted to create. Cooper, On the African Waterfront, 275.

11 Gareth Stedman Jones, Outcast London: A Study of the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) and, for a radical critique of this tendency within Marxism, see Pithouse, “A Politics of the Poor,” and “Thought Amid Waste.”

12 I am drawing here from the insights of Pithouse in his research into shack dwellers and their confrontations with the state in South Africa. See Pithouse, “A Politics of the Poor” and “Thought Amid Waste.”
a working class, not even waged casual workers, but uncontrolled proprietors struggling to skim incomes off the urban economy.

Development in colonial Mombasa was intrinsically dualistic, focused on constructing a new world, but while needing to simultaneously destroy the old. The all-male household was to be replaced by a conjugality composed of husbands, wives and children with a wage-earning man and a woman cooking the food of the family, eating nutritious meals that would power the imperial economy through the labor of men. Outside of the home, the masses of illegible street-food vendors were to be replaced by a controlled and monitored licensed trade, ideally housed in state-built structures. The floating population of unemployed migrants without work to support families could be removed and returned to the reserves, while those traders who did not fit into this new order, the informal, the unlicensed, would form a residuum that would be disposed of through arrests, prosecutions and demolitions. The making of respectable African working and trading classes also necessitated the unmaking of their antitheses, all-male households and illicit hawkers and vendors. In Mombasa, the social, economic and political world that emerged by the end of the 1950s was one radically transformed from that of the 1930s. This new reality had been profoundly affected, though certainly not determined, by colonial development.

Workers’ struggles and the empire of development that emerged in response not only transformed the social landscape and political economy of Mombasa, but also the source base from which historians can study the city’s history. As with the Willan Commission following the 1939 General Strike that provided a textual basis for Chapter Two, so the continuation of strikes and colonial reports provides a documentary foundation for the social history of development during the 1940s and 1950s. Improvements in African spending power and cost of living were uneven at

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13 For this process in Dar es Salaam, see Burton, *African Underclass*. 
best during the decades, and for many their economic condition deteriorated.\(^\text{14}\) As a consequence, strikes of some variety happened nearly every year, and major general strikes occurred in 1947 and 1955. In this context, the state was struck by “a sudden desire to understand” African social life, and as a result a series of sociological studies were produced and provide unprecedented descriptions of daily life in colonial Africa, including key surveys from 1945, 1947 and 1957. As these authors were concerned with nutrition specifically and household budgets generally, they are especially useful for the historian of working-class, urban food systems in Mombasa. Moreover, as the Municipal Board and then Council took the lead in trying to formalize street-food, these businesses and their place in the city shift from scant mention prior to the 1940s to a subject of central concern to city authorities. Therefore, analysis and descriptions in previous chapters that often required informed inferences tied to limited bodies of evidence, from the 1940s can take on a more textured, granular and data-driven approach. As much as the elite authors of these studies and municipal minutes controlled the production of these documents, poor and working-class Mombasa residents, through their answers in interviews and actions that officials reported, have much to say in them as well.

**The Structural Transformation of East Africa: Food, Imperial Crisis and War**

The depravation of the Great Depression marked a new nutritional nadir in the lives of Mombasa’s impoverished majority. For those employed, their below-subsistence wages structurally deprived them of both the quantities and varieties of foods they needed and desired and the unemployed faced an even greater struggle to acquire the food they required in the colonial city. Classical Marxism sees such circumstances as the incubators of a revolutionary class consciousness, as the internal contradictions of capitalism continue to destroy the middle strata of

\(^\text{14}\) See Table
society, throwing ever more people into the exploited masses who will eventually rise to overthrow the system.\textsuperscript{15} However, as history and subsequent scholars have shown, such a programmatic view of history overlooks the ways in which the abstractions of capital and the state have not been, in practice, abstractions at all, but social and cultural systems created by actual individuals whose agency can redirect the course of history away from its seemingly inevitable course. Capitalists and their inconsistent allies in the state have at key points recognized the contradictions in a capitalism set on a course to consume itself, and moderated exploitation and made concessions to workers that have allowed gross inequalities to remain, but at levels more attuned with the maintenance of social stability.\textsuperscript{16}

During the 1930s, officials in Kenya and the wider British Empire increasingly came to see an imperial economic and social system that was unsustainable, one whose internal contradictions needed to be addressed lest it implode upon itself. Strikes protesting material depravation broke out not only in Mombasa during the 1930s, but across the British Empire, especially in the British West Indies and in the mining communities of Southern Africa. In response to what appeared to be a global uprising, the British strategy was equally global. Though officials used different language, their conclusion clearly was that exploitation had been extended too far, and that mass depravation needed to be replaced by at least basic subsistence. Central to these newly emerging designs to “develop” the British Empire was the need to improve the diets and thus nutrition of colonial populations.\textsuperscript{17} The health of the empire, it seemed, hinged on the health of its subjects.

\textsuperscript{15} The Marxist theory of revolutionary change is described most clearly and succinctly in Karl Marx, \textit{The Communist Manifesto} (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969), especially 13-38.
\textsuperscript{16} On a global scale, such work is too broad to cite, but Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale have considered the issue both theoretically and empirically in the case of colonial Kenya in part one, “State and Class,” of their two-volume \textit{Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa} (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1990), particularly chapters four and five.
\textsuperscript{17} Cooper, \textit{On the African Waterfront} and his \textit{Decolonization in African Society}.
However, as scholars are increasingly recognizing, colonial labor theory was not simply a body of ideas created “out there” in the imperial holdings, but were often adapted from practices that had been developed through relations between the state, capital and labor in Britain. The linking of labor stability and productivity to the nutritional health of workers, as opposed to simply being sure they ate the proper quantity of food to survive, was an idea that originated in the metropole rather than the empire. While employers and the state were mostly content to allow the British working classes to subsist on bare essentials during the nineteenth century, with a large proportion of their calories coming from cheaply imported sugar, ideas about the relationship between labor and nutrition had changed by the beginning of the twentieth century. During the early 1920s, with coal-mining strikes in the north and the general economic depression of the industry, the diets of the miners who extracted the energy that ran the British domestic economy became an issue of national concern. Parliament noted that miners’ wages had sunk to 20 percent of their prewar levels, while the cost of living had risen to 180 percent, which prompted William Adamson of the House of Commons to decry “that there is actual starvation existing in the mining districts of this country,” and Member of Parliament J.J. Walsh added that “the vast mass of the mining population to-day are in a state of semi-starvation, they and their children.”

In response, Britain’s Medical Research Council sent a team of nutritionists to study the diets of the country’s miners in Durham, Derbyshire, Northumberland and Stirlingshire. In their findings, we can see an emerging connection made between the social and natural sciences of labor theory, nutrition and economic efficiency. Drawing on a language of objectification, the team’s

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19 Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*.
report reduced workers through analogy to machines whose functional requirements needed more attention from a paternal state and society that depended upon them remaining operational. The report observed that workers resembled “a machine to the extent that, if work has to be done, fuel, as a source of energy, must be supplied.” However, humans, though machine-like, were unique from machines in that they needed not only fuel, but regenerative energy inputs for maintenance and, if they were young, to grow their physical bodies, as “the [human] organism must derive the necessary material for both growth and repair.” Pushing the analogy further, the authors continued to sort the differences and similarities of the “maintenance” and “operation” of machines and human workers, noting that “The energy-giving value of food-stuffs is determined in the same way as the energy value of coal is determined by the engineer—by burning a known amount under definite conditions and determining the amount of heat, in heat units of Calories, which is given off in the process.” However, the team was not only concerned with the energy outputs of the foods workers ate, as they were part of the “new nutrition” movement of the early twentieth century, and so their goal was not only to alleviate hunger through providing simple carbohydrates, but to advocate for a dietetic transformation in which people consumed balanced and diversified diets that included the presence of key minerals and vitamins crucial to bodily health.\(^{21}\)

Britain also conducted nutritional studies in Kenya during the 1920s, but they were shaped by a political economy and ideological context different than that of the postwar metropole. Both were informed by labor concerns, but the miners of 1920s Britain were a more permanently settled working class, and so were studied as workers in already existent industrial situations that produced certain nutritional outcomes. However, in Kenya during the 1920s, British administrators were concerned more with the labor supply, rather than a working class per se, and so their

nutritional studies were aimed towards policies that would have more rural Africans “turn out” and work as wage laborers for European settler, corporate and government enterprises. Despite the reality that an African working class spread across cities and plantations was already in formation during the 1920s, the British still viewed Africans as rural traditionalists engaged largely in either pastoralist or agricultural activities. Therefore, when J.B. Orr and J.L. Gilks set out to study the nutrition of “two African tribes,” the Kikuyu and the Maasai, their interest was not in that of urban or plantation workers, but of Africans in their traditional “tribal” units in bounded rural areas.\footnote{J.B. Orr and J.L. Gilks, \textit{Studies of Nutrition: The Physique and Health of Two African Tribes} (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1931).} For the two authors of a study that would gain such prominence in colonial circles that it was referred to simply as the “Orr and Gilks Report,” the nutrition of the thousands of Africans increasingly filling Kenya’s urban areas such as Mombasa and living off paltry wages were not the concern, but rather their focus was on the perceived deficiencies of rural diets that damaged African health, and in so doing prevented more of them from turning out as workers, and entering labor-migration networks that would lead them to European employers.\footnote{Brantley, “Kikuyu-Maasai,” 53.}

That this notable 1920s colonial nutrition study premised on labor concerns was narrowly focused on rural Africa and the “supply” of African workers should not be a surprise. Despite growing populations of Africans across the continent being dependent on wage-labor to acquire their food, whether in cities, mines or on plantations, employers before the 1930s, as Frederick Cooper points out, asked “little more than how many workers could be obtained for a low wage.” More specific to Mombasa, even at the port, arguably the most important center of African working-class life in East Africa, employers “did not so much as know their workers’ name.”\footnote{Cooper, \textit{On the African Waterfront}, 1-2.} However, the growing imperial crisis over the emergence of workers’ movements across the
empire precipitated a fundamental transformation in how British officials and other employers viewed Africans and their place in the colonial system.25

As a result, by the mid-1930s, the geography of imperial nutritional concern came to include urban Africa and other areas where workers were dependent upon wages. In a 1937 memorandum sent in preparation for a vast nutritional study of East Africa, the authors demonstrated the extent to which the metropolitan attention to the interrelation between “new nutrition” and labor theory had penetrated the objectives of the empire, writing that “information is needed to enable the dietaries commonly provided for those receiving rations during … employment in large industrial undertakings, to be accurately balanced,” and that great attention should be paid to how food and nutrition affected “the performance of work.” However, surveyors were to also make differentiations between various types of labor, and the diets that each required in order “to obtain information of practical value in deciding on the quantity of food necessary for individuals carrying out light as distinct from heavy work,” as “it is necessary to separate the bare costs of maintenance of the body … from the cost of performance of muscular work in the more usual sense of the word.”26

In a preliminary report produced the same year in Tanganyika, the shift in official attitudes towards the “new nutrition” perspective was clear, reflecting the changing emphasis in nutritional studies from solving “hunger” to encouraging diversified diets. Decrying the imposed posho diet, the study chided “Employers who expect a labourer to work and maintain health on a ration of a pound and a half of maize meal and four ounces of beans,” and that they showed “no more appreciation of nutrition than was evident in Lind’s day,” being James Lind, the eighteenth-century

25 Ibid., 1-12, and Cooper, Decolonization and African Society.
26 Memorandum Prepared at the Request of the Standing Medical Research Committee for East Africa, n.d., c. 1937 (FD1/4392), NA.
nutritionist. However, as with the scientists studying miners and their families in 1920s Britain, this concern for African dietaries was not based solely on humanitarian principles, but was connected to economic, which in turn also meant political, stability. The preliminary report continued that the “improved physique and therefore capacity for work and greater output” that would come from better nutrition was “one of the most important things to make those concerned appreciate.” Good nutrition, it seemed, was a cure for a multitude of colonial ailments connected to African workers and the economy, as it would provide “more contented labour on plantations and in the mining industry and contended labour brings the best type and an adequate supply of workers.” Once on the plantation or working in the mine, with an appropriate diet, workers would stay healthy and productive, which would “reduce the enormous wastage of such labour as now occurs in days taken off on account of sickness.” With this increased production, the colony would produce more exports “with the resultant improvement in the economic and financial position of the territory.”

This change in imperial thinking, the notion that better nutrition meant more efficient, productive and stable societies, was globalized during the late 1930s with the publication and then circulation of *Nutrition in the Colonial Empire: Report of the Colonial Advisory Council*. By November of 1939, the Colonial Office was informed that 5,000 copies of volume one and 3,500 of volume two had been sold, primarily to Crown Agents, with an additional 5,000 and 3,500, respectively, available for purchase.\(^{28}\) Six copies were sent to Kenya.\(^{29}\) The report built upon and crystalized the growing consensus that malnutrition was not only a “problem” of rural Africa, but

\(^{27}\) *Preliminary Survey of the Position in regard to Nutrition amongst the Natives of the Tanganyika Territory* (Dar es Salaam: Government Printer, 1937).

\(^{28}\) Letter to C.G. Eastwood, Colonial Office, 21 November 1939 (CO/859/14/6), NA.

\(^{29}\) No title, n.d., c. late 1930s. List of locations to which the *Report on Nutrition in the Colonial Empire* was sent. (CO/859/14/6), NA.
that the nutritional health Africans employed in cities needed to be of central concern to the empire. Colonial Secretary William Ormsby-Gore, in his assessment of the report and its findings, concluded that nutritional policies should be aimed at “both rural and urban peoples.” Moreover, the Colonial Office’s briefing on the report concluded that, as regards nutrition, there were “special problems in the towns” and that more generally “the rates of wages at present paid are often insufficient to provide adequate food for a normal family.” Articulating the ascendency of “new nutrition,” the report found that “Diets are frequently insufficient in quantity and still more often insufficient in quality,” as “they are bulky,” and “the bulk is too often made up of foods that do not supply all the needs of a balanced diet.”

By the end of the 1930s, the ideological context of empire had transformed from an earlier view in which the material condition of urban Africans was important neither to the state nor public or private employers to one in which the British Empire was politically and financially incentivized to improve not only the diets of urban working classes, but also their housing, wages and access to leisure activities. However, while the ideology of empire had changed, the reality that the exigencies of history fundamentally shape the nature of social change had not. In 1939, to save the Empire, the British were prepared to radically change the dietaries of the African working classes, but, with the advent of the Second World War, imperial authorities retreated back to their racial division of resource distribution, and instead instituted policies that, somehow, imposed even more comestible depravation on Kenya’s urban Africans than during the Depression of the 1930s.

World War II, in short, precipitated shortages in Kenya’s food supplies that greatly increased its cost in cities, if such food was even available. Food shortages are never apolitical and those that occurred in Kenya’s pre-colonial past were certainly shaped by social inequalities that

30 William Ormsby-Gore to the Colonial Office, 6 May 1938 (CO/859/16/6), NA.
31 Report on Nutrition in the Colonial Empire: Note for the Press. n.d., c. 1938/9 (CO/859/16/6), NA.
determined who was allowed access to scarce resources. However, the shortages themselves were quite explicitly the result of ecological crises in which food was literally scarce.\textsuperscript{32} During World War II, in contrast, Kenya produced more food than it ever had, by orders of magnitude.\textsuperscript{33} This was a food shortage created by political economy, a political economy of war and imperial racism, not an ecological crisis. Starting in 1941, East Africa became the primary supplier of grain to the Allied war effort in the Middle East, which as a consequence funneled mass surpluses of maize, the primary staple of the African working class, as well as the less commonly consumed wheat, out of the country. The war effort meant that the Empire demanded “all East African territories to produce the utmost” and “that all that could be produced was required.”\textsuperscript{34}

However, this structural change in East Africa’s location within global food supply chains was not simply a redirecting of already existent domestic supplies towards exports, but was as much about increasing grain production within Kenya to meet the demands of the Middle Eastern theatre. For urban Kenyans, though, the political economy of restructuring the food supply towards mass-export production meant that food needed to become more expensive for them. The colonial state, under increasing sway from white agriculturalists during the 1940s, remade Kenya’s agricultural economy in a way that radically decreased the risk white farmers took in capitalizing their estates for increased production by guaranteeing minimum prices on maize. As a result, all maize during the war, whether produced by white or African farmers, was to be sold through state marketing boards that provided white farmers this minimum price, but which had the double


\textsuperscript{33} See the Kenya Colony’s agricultural annual reports from 1940-45 (753.14), Commonwealth and African Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford University (hereafter CAC-Oxford).

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Agricultural Department-Annual Report, 1941} (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1941), 2, (753.14. v. 16, 1940), CAC-Oxford.
purpose of also cutting off African maize growers from urban markets so as to maintain the high, controlled price of settler maize. Not only did this mean higher prices for maize in cities, but it also suppressed the potential profits of black farmers, de-incentivizing their production, as the marketing boards paid them little more than half of what it did to European farmers. This differential between what the state paid settler and African farmers has led some historians to conclude that African agriculture was subsidizing white production. However, whatever the relation between white and African farmers, concludes John Lonsdale, “Beyond any dispute is the fact that the real losers from maize control were African urban workers,” as their expenditures on food rose to meet the new, controlled price, with their wages lagging significantly behind.35

Therefore, this rapid transition in which Kenyan food systems were reoriented more fully towards export production further compromised the already precarious situation of Africans living in cities. Moreover, this rural, agricultural restructuring also transformed Kenyan urban spaces by precipitating massive increases in the migration of Africans to Kenya’s cities. The boom in agriculture meant that both Europeans and an emerging class of African capitalists wanted an increasingly commercialized rural economy of land and labor. Starting in the 1930s and then accelerating during the wartime commodity markets of the 1940s, better capitalized African agriculturalists began to expand their acreage and squeeze small holders off their land.36 This was then paired during the 1940s and into the 1950s with settlers who expelled thousands of African squatters from the White Highlands to clear new land for their own cash-crop cultivation, with a few remaining as wage laborers, but with many more sent adrift without a home in the “native

36 Despite the state’s suppression of African farmers’ profits, the wartime demand for such commodities was so great that nonetheless those Africans with access to economic and political resources were able to take advantage of the economic climate and accumulate capital on a scale not seen previously. Lonsdale, “The Depression and the Second World War,” 119-36.
reserve” to which they could return. These two processes, African class formation and settler expulsions of squatters, were created by the same trend towards rural commercialization, and both contributed to growing classes of Africans with either small, sub-economic holdings or who were entirely without land. Many in this rural underclass looked to plantation labor as a source of income, but others turned to cities where the war was generating more jobs, though certainly not enough to keep pace with this vast process of proletarianization that was separating more and more Africans from the land. With ever more of the rural poor turning to urban migration as both a strategy for survival and one that held out the hope of social mobility, Kenya’s cities, as Lonsdale observes, “were transformed.” Estimates vary widely, but Mombasa’s African population during the war grew by at least 10,000, to approximately 55,000. As the economic trends of the 1940s continued into the 1950s, so too did urban growth, with the African population of the city nearly doubling to 90,000 by 1957.37

During the 1940s, these migrants arrived in Mombasa and joined tens of thousands of other workers and hawkers struggling to access urban food in an economy of resource distribution that reflected older colonial racial assumptions about communal and social organization, but also, argues Reynolds Richter, new notions of class and urban citizenship.38 In Mombasa, the emerging desire of the state for a stabilized working class collided with the exigencies of wartime rationing. When colonial scientists during the 1930s were writing about the crisis of urban nutrition, they implicitly carved the outlines of the subject to whom colonial benevolence would be bestowed: the waged, African male worker. While mostly an operating assumption in discourse during the

1940s, Richter’s research demonstrates how wartime rationing allowed these ideas to crystallize into the more concrete forms through the ways in which food was distributed during the war. While other scholars have pointed to how ideas of ethnicity and race were exacerbated and created anew by a wartimes rationing system in which different foodstuffs were allotted to “Africans,” “Asians,” “Arabs” and “Europeans,” Ritcher shows how a colonial vision of class and urban citizenship also created inequalities of distribution within urban African communities. While all residents of Mombasa were technically allotted access to their racially-determined rationed foodstuffs, most Africans only had access to first-come, first-serve dukas where food-queues started hours before they opened and supplies were quickly sold out, meaning most had to purchase at least some, if not all, of their food on the black market at even higher prices. However, for those Africans who worked for wages in industries and state agencies deemed vital to the war effort, they were provided food directly from their employers, avoiding the queues, which made them among the few Africans with a guaranteed supply of food in a city wracked by shortages. As the state was increasingly working to narrow who could be an urban citizen, Richter shows how food became a central way that authorities defined who belonged.39

Therefore, from the late 1920s to the 1940s, nutrition and food came to be central elements in how Britain sought to bring order, stability and legibility to an empire wracked with conflict, and to craft the kinds of subjects it found desirable. During the late 1930s, this meant a more equitable distribution of food throughout rural and urban African society, but, with global war, all Africans were made to bear the burden of sacrificing their nutrition to war effort, mitigated only somewhat if ones labor was deemed crucial to winning the conflict. By the 1940s, the social body that the policies created during the 1930s and then adapted to the exigencies of war were meant to

39 Ibid., 44-50.
create was clear enough. Rural areas would be controlled by a small cadre of white and black capitalist farmers who would employ an African working class who would work on ever larger plantations as land titles were secured and then consolidated into this ownership class, while cities would function through a similarly small group managers and owners who would employ an upright and stable class of African workers, living in the city with their families.

Food was central to this vision. For the state, this stabile working class could only exist if workers were nutritionally better fed, which would make them more efficient and content. Though writing about Nairobi, the vision of E.R. St. A. Davies, writing in 1939, captured the position of officials throughout Kenya and the British Empire when he argued that policy in the colonial city should “encourage the better type of native worker and provide accommodation for him and his family in the town. Fewer natives, better fed, properly housed, constituting with their families a permanent and controlled native population, should be our aim.”40 This would bring localized stability in places of employment, which would extend to the cities in which these workers lived, and through a collection of imperial cities so reconstituted, the empire itself would gain an equilibrium that would allow it to continue into the future. However, the flaw in this imperial logic also reflects the gap in the scholarly literature that has illuminated this shift in imperial thinking we now recognize as the emergence of the empire of development. In reality, outside these grand visions of social engineering, the great majority of Africans who actually lived in these cities could not fit into this version of colonial society, especially in places like Mombasa. Moreover, even those who did superficially fit the subjectivity of what British officials envisioned, their families and social lives diverged significantly from the ideal type theorized in the colonial literature. What follows in the two sections below is a social history of urban development that builds on past

scholarship that elucidated these transformations in imperial thinking, but told us less about how Africans actually lived. Rather than focusing primarily on what the colonial idea of Africa society was, we will see instead, through the lens of Mombasa’s working-class food systems, how these policies were implemented and then remade by Africans in their daily struggles in a colonial city.

**Food and Family in 1940s Mombasa**

The gendered demographics of migration to Mombasa created a relatively homogenous, mostly-male African population in the city during the first decades of the twentieth century. However, by the Second World War and during the years that followed, thousands more women from the interior regions of East Africa began to make their homes in this largest city of the Kenyan coast. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, the mostly male African migrants during the early decades of the twentieth century remade rural structures of food provision and preparation by forming homosocial households in which generation replaced gender, with younger men cooking for their elders in exchange for reduced cost or free access to food and shelter. However, as more and more women came to urban areas, rural ideas about gender and food came to increasingly structure kitchen labor in Mombasa. The first three decades of rapid urbanization had transformed the gendered nature of Kenya’s food systems, but these “durable” structures had not been destroyed.\(^{41}\) They were instead elastic, and many migrant Africans adapted them to the changing realities of the capitalist city.

This shift in how migratory food labor became re-gendered again in 1940s Mombasa was not uniformly experienced by all Africans, but was instead crucially shaped by class differentiation, as well as the idiosyncratic preferences of individuals. Under the model proposed by colonial development, African conjugal structures of food provision and preparation would be

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\(^{41}\) Schoenbrun, “Conjuring the Modern.”
remade to more closely align to gendered ideals in the urban West. Foodstuffs would be acquired through the labor of a male, waged worker, either as employer-provided rations or purchased with cash, and then wives would prepare the food for the family.\textsuperscript{42} While normative for the British, such a construction of the family was actually a departure from rural African patriarchies in which women not only cooked the food, but provided it too, producing it through their agricultural labor. In Mombasa, those most economically-positioned to perform this new gendered vision of the family life of “the modern worker” were those with salaries in government and industrial employ, as they were generally the relatively best paid in Mombasa, and their wages were on the rise. Central to the state’s justification for raising wages and provisioning housing and other benefits was the belief that these changes would facilitate such normative family formation, allowing men to live with wives and children in the city. However, the evidence as to whether people actually aspired to do so is uneven.

Some certainly did. One such man (unnamed), who had migrated from the Nyeri in Central Province and who was “employed in the public service,” had initially lived by himself in a rented room in the Majengo neighborhood of Mombasa, but upon being provided “modern quarters” as part of his job he brought his wife and children to the city. In this home, a new sort of conjugality became possible, as his wife took over cooking and prepared food for the family. They projected an image of working-class modernity not only in gendered relations, but also through their consumption habits. Unlike many, they were able to conspicuously consume fresh milk on a daily basis and consistently ate meat, which was still a somewhat rare luxury only two years removed

\textsuperscript{42} Such an ideological rendering of the African family was rarely stated explicitly, but undergirded the ways in which African wages were debated by colonial labor theorists, as in whether the presumed male laborer earning it could pay for a household that included his wife and children. With only rare exceptions, the notion that women would work was almost never considered. This can be found throughout colonial labor studies during the 1930s and 1940s, but, for one example, see \textit{Report of Committee of Inquiry, Part I}. Frederick Cooper addresses the assumed maleness of African, and “modern,” workers in British colonial ideology in his \textit{Decolonization and African Society}, 2.
from World War II. However, the cost of performing this gendered and consumptive respectability also seemed to stretch the man’s wages beyond what they could sustain, as he explained that “he borrowed money every month, apparently paying one friend off against the other each month.” Other men in Mombasa seemed to not find such domestic arrangements worth the cost, as with a different Kikuyu man who worked as an artisan for Kenya and Uganda Railways and Habour (KURH) and, despite being provided with free housing by his employer, his wife still lived in their rural home in Nyeri. While he sometimes ate with friends, he also cooked his own meals at home over a charcoal burner that included *ugali* accompanied by combinations of potatoes, greens, and onions, while he too was also able to afford the luxuries of ghee, milk and meat. The British ideal of the settled, stable African working class in many ways misunderstood why many, though not all, migrants went to Mombasa. Often, migration to Mombasa was meant as a way to save capital to invest in rural homes, a goal made more possible if dependents were able to be sustained by food grown on the *shamba* (farm) rather than purchased through urban wages. Consequently, while the state may have desired these African men to be part of a stable and permanent working class and to form the normative families of the “modern worker,” some migrants had other priorities that did not involve the creation of such urban households.\(^{43}\)

However, whether or not migrant African men wanted to form such permanent and urban “male breadwinner” families, the political economy of the city seems to have made this nearly impossible for the large majority of them. While the waged workers of the state and Mombasa’s major employers could in some analyses be seen as part of a “labor aristocracy” or, in the terms of more recent scholarship, those endowed with “urban citizenship,” their position of privilege in the

colonial city was truly a relative one. As Frederick Cooper notes, the labor aristocracy, for all the theorization of their status as an economically and politically elevated class, were “often not so well off after all.”

Indeed, during the 1940s in Mombasa, “waged workers” themselves were deeply stratified by pay gradations, and most were living in poverty. For example, at the KUHR, a major employer in Mombasa, Africans working as “artisans” were reportedly earning 70 to 150/- per month, a high salary by colonial standards, but these workers only represented around 12 percent of Africans colony-wide who worked for the KUHR, while “unskilled laborers,” who constituted 80 percent of the workforce, made only 15/- per month plus rations or 4/- in lieu, a wage that unequivocally consigned them to poverty. The 1945 “Phillips Report” concluded that the salary of a lower-wage worker from KUHR could not reasonably support one, let alone multiple, dependents. That this committee would come to such a conclusion can be taken as fairly persuasive evidence of the depths of the poverty that these workers faced, as its members had a quite limited notion of what constituted a minimum living standard for African workers in Mombasa. Theirs was a vision of urban livelihoods in which workers would be just above dire poverty, noting that, when calculating wages, they “should not, of course, be justified in putting a premium on extravagance, even for the sake of eliminating malnutrition,” and that they should be on their “guard lest the main emphasis … be shifted from what [the African worker] needs to what he wants.” Instead, they noted, their understanding of a “minimum standard” was one that attended

44 Though making this broad point, Cooper conceptually does not pay much attention to the relative position of these waged workers to other Africans in the city. Cooper, *On the African Waterfront*, 276.

45 I state here that artisans were “reportedly” paid between these amounts because that is what is listed in the below annual report on wages, but these numbers to not seem to correspond with what at least one worker told social worker N.M. Deverell, who said he that, as a Kenya and Uganda Railway and Harbours artisan, he made only 37/50 per month, though this did include free housing. It seems possible that the worker may have also received food rations in kind, which may account for the lower cash wages, but this is not made explicit in the evidence. *Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbours, including Main and Branch Lines, Lake Marine Services, Motor Services and Coast Port Services* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1945), 6, McMillan Library, Nairobi (hereafter McMillan), and Deverell, “Section Two,” 92.
to basic requirements, but would “not [be] calculated to dispense with the need for effort or to remove the incentive to higher attainment.” From this premise of near basic subsistence and bodily health, the committee nonetheless still felt that “the married man” at the bottom of the salary scale during that period, “even if he has no children, is a long way below” the “poverty datum line.”

Consequently, the poorer classes of Mombasa, the majority being African but also including some Arabs, Swahilis and South Asians, had to create urban family structures of food provision and preparation that would allow them to survive in the city’s unequal political economy. During the 1940s, waged employment was still almost entirely male, and likely even more than in the early decades of the century since migrant men had largely by this point taken over domestic labor, with the exception of childcare, from women. In 1947, it was estimated that of 21,950 Africans registered as being employed in Mombasa, only 250 were women. However, the same study also reported that women accounted for one-third of the adult African population in the city and that, while men were more likely to be temporary migrants, women commonly were more permanent residents. Moreover, while not conclusive, the evidence suggests that many of these women lived with male partners, with the best data we have reports that two-thirds of the African men employed at the KURH in Mombasa lived with their wives. Consequently, approximately 14,000 women lived in Mombasa during the 1940s with little access to wage labor from which to earn income, and many of them lived with men whose own salaries were not adequate to support dependents.

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As a result, African women were almost certainly partially responsible for provisioning food for their urban households, and as a result most families in the city likely did not fit the modernist gendered ideal of the male salary providing all of the household income. Excluded from wage labor, African women increasingly turned towards small-scale, commercial trade to supplement male wages. Though without being specific to gender, two separate reports from the 1940s made note of such hawking activities in Mombasa, describing in 1945 the “conditions in Majengo,” a working-class neighborhood, and its “multitude of petty traders, dealing in a great variety of commodities,” with “its particularities of commercial practice,” and in 1947 labor survey about how “there are also some Africans rendering services to other Africans, some as traders, as boot repairers,” and “as carpenters.”

However, N.M. Deverell, a social worker and co-author of the same 1947 survey, observed in her part of the study that both men and women were engaged in such trading activities. Moreover, in families where “The main source of income is the monthly wage,” often this base amount was being “supplemented by various means.” For women, these “various means” included selling prepared food, foodstuffs, black market commodities, and working as hairdressers. While we cannot know for sure how many African women were among these “traders” in Mombasa, given their lack of access wage labor and how, even if they did live with someone who had a salary, it would most often not have been adequate to support them both, we can logically conclude that many, and even thousands, of African women engaged in such income-generating activities in Mombasa. These women, though now using the cash they earned from these businesses instead of their agricultural labor, acquired foodstuffs that then they cooked for their families.

50 Ibid., 83, and Booker, “Section One,” 11.
51 Deverell, “Section Two,” 70.
However, women’s household labor related to food in Mombasa was not always completely divorced from the natural world. For these women and their families, or anyone living near poverty, their urban lives were becoming more precarious not only because of rising food prices and general scarcity of ingredients, but also because of the changing natural environment of the city. During the first decades of the twentieth century, Mombasa’s built environment overlapped and intermingled with the natural one, still filled with fields, brush and small forests. As a result, poor migrant workers were able to gather firewood with which to cook their food around the island without too much trouble. However, as more buildings were constructed, covering and clearing open areas, and as the many more thousands of migrants who came to the island picked over the remaining wood, an abundance became a scarcity. As a result, what had in rural areas and for the first decades in Mombasa not been an expense, or a minor one, because it could mostly be gathered, had quickly by the 1940s become a major part of urban budgets. While some wood was still available for those willing to search for it, gathering in the main became an increasingly less viable way to acquire cooking fuel for the single male laborer, as the hours it would take to find enough far exceeded the value it would bring. As stated in 1945, “Fuel for cooking is one of the essentials of life for Africans in Mombasa; and few of them, on this small and thickly populated island, are able to collect their own.”\textsuperscript{52} However, as more and more women came to live in Mombasa with their husbands, their labor was directed towards the gathering of wood. A task that had been the responsibility of children in rural areas, a simple job that could be done right before cooking began, now came to take up a significant portion of women’s time in Mombasa, and the financial stakes were high. During the 1940s, even just a single person who cooked for themselves may have spent as much as 7/- to 8/- per month on firewood, which was a

\textsuperscript{52} Report of Committee of Inquiry, 82.
major expense, given that many peoples’ wages were barely more than 30/- for the month. These women collected drift wood or cut it from the small number of remaining mangrove swamps around the island, such as near Mbaraki. Alternatively, they could also engage in the far more time-consuming task of gathering firewood off the island, as when one report observed seeing a “worker’s wife” who had “spent a large part of the day on the mainland and returned with a bundle of bushwood.” However, with limited supplies of gatherable wood, many people simply purchased it, which also seems to primarily have been the responsibility of women living in conjugal relationships. To save money, they could buy it in bulk from the main trading depot at Ndai Kuu, which some women were reported to do once a month, or on a more daily basis from smaller, mostly Arab, retailers throughout the island who sold firewood in bundles of three pieces.

Women in Mombasa, therefore, had even greater responsibilities in the provisioning and preparation of their families’ food than they had in rural areas. Their income from trading contributed, and likely in some cases entirely provided, the food they cooked for their households, while they also now had to gather or purchase the firewood, a task that had been assigned to children on the shamba. African families in Mombasa were not only constructed differently than the state hoped they would be, they were also not simply reproductions of rural structures in the

54 Deverell doubts that the women who purchased wood in wholesale bundles did so for home use due to the effort involved, but, given that other women were willing to travel all the way to the mainland to gather it themselves and the general high expense of wood on the island, it seems reasonable to assume that some people would have decided it was worth the time and energy to buy it in bulk. Deverell, “Section Two,” 63-4. During this period, charcoal and gas burners, ubiquitous today, were a rare, but slowly growing alternative to cooking food over a wood-burning stove. Ibid., 64, 92, 98-9, Angus, “A Memorandum on the Shortage,” and Deputy Price Controller, Coast Province to the Controller of Prices, 26 November 1951 (CP/1/5), Kenya National Archives, Coast Province at the Mombasa Records Centre (hereafter KNA-Coast), and Mombasa Social Survey: Part II.
city. Urban families were, instead, the new creations of people drawing on past practices, but adapting them to the political economy and changing environments of the colonial city.

However, while thousands of Africans were creating such conjugal households in Mombasa during the 1940s, such normative “husband-wife” family formations were only one of the ways in which people in Mombasa created relationships from which they could find nourishment, from food or otherwise. Though specific statistics are lacking, the evidence suggests that likely half, if not more, of the African men in Mombasa did not live without a wife or female partner. Moreover, though no numbers exist to quantify the total proportionally, anecdotal evidence also shows that some women were living in the city without a husband. For these people, living outside the conjugal family, their household food was cooked and consumed through a complex variety of domestic social relationships.

In some instances, these relationships were still between men and women, but those who were not married, and may have only lived together part of the time. For example, some wage-earning men had non-client relationships with prostitutes, acting as touts and bodyguards and in exchange they were “kept” by these women. Luise White stresses that, in Nairobi, such relationships were closer to “boyfriend-girlfriend” sexual partnerships, rather than that of an asymmetry between a pimp and a prostitute. She observes that women rarely shared their earnings with these men, but instead, as her informant Asha Wanjiru told her, “if you wanted you could give him some [money], but if you didn’t you would only have to buy him food, cook it, and eat with him.” Other relationships also provide evidence that men were often dependent on women

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55 Booker, “Section One,” 1.
56 Deverell, “Section Two,” 71.
57 Ibid.
to not only prepare but to provide their food outside of formal structures of marriage. One man living in Mombasa, divorced from his wife, had a new girlfriend who was employed as an ayah, made 5/- more per month than he did, and was provided food at her place of work. While the man seems to have taken many of his meals at vibanda eateries or by buying fried fish for take-away, his girlfriend also served as social-safety net for him, as Deverell observed that “I do not think that he had much difficulty over food as he said that if he was short his ‘wife’ would help him.”

Other men living without wives in the city were also able to avoid performing kitchen labor by creating new domestic structures. For example, a married Kamba man and sweeper for a port company, whose wife was back in Ukambani, lived in a space he shared with a casual laborer at the port and an “old Mkamba woman.” The men shared a room and the woman slept on a couch on the passageway outside. The three of them arranged that if the two men supplied the food, then the older woman would cook the meals that she would be able to eat as well. In another household, this one off the island in the rapidly growing, peri-urban Changamwe neighborhood, a group of migrant men who shared a home drew on generation rather than gender to structure kitchen labor. One member of the household was a Kikuyu man who was married, but had not been able to pay all the brideprice for his wife, and she remained in Embu district with one of their sons. However, their other son, who was 10 years old, had come to live with the father in Mombasa, and he performed the kitchen labor in the migratory household.

While for upcountry laborers, such remaking of gendered and generational norms was necessitated by the long distance they were from their homes, but for other Mombasa residents, even those who were migrants, geography opened the possibility for maintaining the close link

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59 Deverell, “Section Two,” 91.
60 Ibid., 94.
61 Ibid., 98.
between food preparation, gender and kinship. For example, many coastal Mijikenda Africans also migrated to work in Mombasa, but, as both colonial officials and scholars recognize, they were able to maintain close links to their nearby rural homesteads. For example, one man, a Digo, the Mijikenda ethnic group from the rural areas surrounding Mombasa, lived in the city with his brothers’ family where he also took most of his meals. The brothers, living together in a share condition of poverty, supported each other, as it was noted of the man that “if he is short of cash he expects his brother to feed him and he does the same for his brother.” Additionally, on the weekends, he would return to his wife who lived on their farm in Changamwe (then still a fairly rural place), and so could have his meals prepared through the rural, gendered structures of kinship. Another Digo man, a causal laborer at the port who had lived in Mombasa since 1936, was able to rent a room from his aunt who owned a home in Majengo. While responsible for some of his own meals, as part of the household, his aunt prepared food eaten communally at midday, which would have been accessible for him with the port’s two-hour lunch breaks. However, this relationship was not one entirely of dependency, as the man paid his aunt about 10/- a month for the food.\(^\text{62}\)

For both these Digo families, life in the city stretched and remade aspects of their food lives, but kinship remained a key access point for much of the food they ate, and gender continued to structure much of the labor that prepared it. As a result, the Mijikenda in colonial Mombasa were “part-time proletarians,” and indeed part of this meant they needed to only partially, and on a part-time basis, restructure their food systems to accommodate to the changing realities of the capitalist city.\(^\text{63}\)

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 90.

However, many men in the city, thousands of them most likely, did not live with wives, girlfriends, aunts or children, and the food they ate at home was cooked either by themselves or their male friends and roommates. In considering how men reacted to these new responsibilities, any conclusions must be tentative, as affective preference is hard to prove historically without direct testimony. Nonetheless, the fact that no evidence exists during the 1940s or the surrounding decades of households with women in which men cooked does strongly suggest that men only prepared food when compelled by such homosocial situations. Whether they enjoyed the act of cooking is something we cannot ascertain, but it seems clear they would have preferred that women or their male juniors did it for them. While a household in which they did not prepare food may have remained their ideal, a defining feature of migration and urban life for thousands of men during the twentieth century in Mombasa remained that, indeed, they did cook. While James C. McCann dismisses the significance of such realities in his survey of African food history when noting that in Africa “bachelors do cook—but not creatively and rarely well,” it is the view of this dissertation that we should pay closer attention to what was a radical transformation of African gender structures. 64

As addressed in Chapter Two, African men during the 1930s created homosocial households in which cooking responsibilities were shared among men of a similar age, and others in which better paid workers became patrons of the poorer and unemployed, providing them with food and shelter for free or at a lower cost in exchange for their labor in the kitchen. During the 1940s, the evidence we have of specific households does not indicate the continuing presence of these patron-based household structures in Mombasa. If we take this as indicative, the conclusion could be that the soaring cost of living during the war impoverished nearly all African workers,

higher paid or not as raises hardly matched inflation, and thus diminished access to surplus resources to doll out as patronage. Additionally, as more men began to live with their wives, these more normative relationships may have been preferred to those of the migratory household.

However, the evidence for the 1940s requires such conclusions to remain speculative. What is clear, though, is that men situated in similar, rather than asymmetrical, financial relationships did continue to build households in which they shared space, friendship and food. For example, one Kamba man, unmarried and who had work at the port since the 1920s, shared his home and food with multiple male roommates where it was observed that “3 lbs. mixed meal was being prepared to be eaten by 5 men with one very small fried fish for relish.”65 Elsewhere, in a room in Mombasa’s Old Town near the dhow port, a man from Taita, a mostly rural area between Mombasa and Nairobi, shared a room with a friend. While his wife had previously lived with him in Mombasa, she had returned to their shamba near Voi with their three-year-old child. An employee of a transport firm, he seemed to eat most of his meals at home, as he and his roommate shared the household expenses, and were “noticed having tea and bread for breakfast, ugali and stewed liver at midday and Ugali and stew in the evening.”66 However, while for many men, these relationships allowed them to lower their costs through shared expenses, have time off from cooking and provided the amity of friendship in a town far from their families, others did not make such connections, and lived on their own and, when eating at home, cooking their own food.67

While much of the analysis thus far has focused on how working-class Africans acquired food, who cooked it, and who gathered together to eat it, the experiences of many of the city’s poorer classes were also fundamentally defined by not eating, not having access to the resources

65 Deverell, “Section Two,” 96.
66 Ibid., 101.
67 Ibid., 92.
to acquire enough food. For some, this was a literally painful, if somewhat strategic, choice. A 17-year-old painter working for a transport company, who was a first generation son of migrants from Tanganyika, but also lived on his own and was responsible for all his expenses since his mother had moved south to Ramisi near the border, was saving for the bride-price so he could marry his fiancée and therefore symbolically enter adulthood. His need to save money while living on a painter’s salary, even with it being 50/- a month, was difficult, as he at times had to draw on credit just to provision his basic goods. In his efforts to save, therefore, he skipped meals to make his budget work, often skipping dinner. The tendency of men living on their own to skip meals to save money, most likely either for bridge price or to buy rural land, seems to have been fairly common, as Deverell observed in 1947 that “Single men, unless they form a group of tribesmen for the purpose of sharing their food tend to stint on their food … to save money.” She also hypothesized that some of the men she saw smoking while walking to work in the morning may have been doing so, in part, to suppress their appetite. While this was only speculation, one Kamba man did tell her that “if I eat a large quantity of ugali in the evening I do not even require a cup of tea in the morning.”

However, when people were able to eat, the food they consumed inside their homes in Mombasa was cooked by wives, other female relatives, children, male friends or themselves. The structures of these social relationships were both familiar and new for the migrants creating and living within them. Generation, as in rural areas and during the early decades of migrant community formation in Mombasa, remained an important force in determining who was assigned the work of the kitchen, but, as more women came to the city, gender came to again be central to

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68 Ibid., 97.  
69 Ibid., 66.  
70 Ibid., 65
how the labor of food was distributed in urban families. By the 1940s, women were increasingly once again cooking the food that men ate. Gendered ideas about kitchen labor proved extremely elastic in Kenya. For decades, with few women in Mombasa, migratory men cooked their own food, but durable ideas that structured rural patriarchies proved to be stronger than a few decades of urban practice, and men wanted the women in their households to cook their food, as observed of African workers in 1947: “Married men would expect their wives to prepare at least one good meal per day.”71 As we have seen, though, many men did not live with women, and had to continue to perform a migratory masculinity in which cooking was part of their daily life.

Nonetheless, not all, and for some not even most, of the food that they consumed was eaten inside their homes. Street-food businesses continued to grow in 1940s Mombasa, a process that was inexorably tied to the city’s political economy. As during the 1930s, most working-class Africans in Mombasa were living in poverty, structurally placed into that position by their below-subsistence wages. While at their jobs, these workers needed cheap and accessible prepared meals, as returning home to cook food during a shift break was difficult and most licensed restaurants in the city were often not near worksites and, regardless, were priced well out of what nearly all Africans could afford. At the same time, unemployment was significant in the city. Of the 27,500 African men in Mombasa in 1947 (de facto the only Africans eligible for wage employment during the 1940s), only 21,500 of them were registered as employed, leaving 6,000, at least theoretically, without work. Of courses, a certain number of casual laborers would not have been counted, though those employed the day the census was taken were, and such estimates for a variety of technical reasons are never fully reliable, but nonetheless it seems reasonable to say that thousands of African men in a total male population of only 27,500 were unemployed. Moreover, an additional

71 Ibid., 66.
14,000 African women were effectively barred from waged work and so, together, potentially as many as 20,000 of the city’s total adult African population of only 41,500 could not earn a living from wage labor. As I argued above, married women turned towards the informal economy to supplement their husbands’ below-subistence wages and to help provision food for their households, but so too did thousands of others who did not have access to wage labor, including single women, whether widowed or unmarried, as well as the thousands of unemployed men. With the more than 20,000 men working in Mombasa on most days needing a meal while on shift, as well as countless other men and women needing a quick, easy and cheap meals, many of those excluded from wage labor turned to preparing and selling them food, coffee and tea as a way to earn income in the city.

By the 1940s, the ubiquity of these comestible businesses on Mombasa’s landscape, as well as their integration into the lives of the African working class, was clear. The Phillips Report in 1945 noted that taking meals at such eateries appeared “to be a not uncommon practice among Africans in Mombasa,” and Deverell wrote that “Cooked foods of various sorts are sold at eating houses and innumerable wayside stalls.” Moreover, the motivation of Africans to eat in these smaller-scale restaurants was driven as much by taste as economic need. The preference for prepared food seems to have stemmed in part from the basicness of the rations many of them

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72 Consistent, survey-based unemployment numbers are essentially unavailable for colonial Mombasa. However, a 1960 study of the data that were accessible for the city provided a rough estimate that indicated that unemployment remained a major issue in Mombasa throughout the 1950s as well, with a range of between 4,000 to 8,000 men being without work in 1959, though proportionally, as the number of men employed had risen to 33,607, a lower percentage of them were thus unemployment. Nonetheless, many thousands of men were left without waged work and so were incentivized to turn to alternatives such as informality. Additionally, during the 1950s, the overall trend in Kenya was also towards women entering the wage force during that decade. However, the female population of Mombasa increase by over 70 percent from 1947 to 1957, a total of more than 10,000 additional women, which probably, even if some of them were absorbed into wage labor, left many thousands looking to informality. Mombasa Social Survey, Part I, 219, and A.G. Dagleish, Survey of Unemployment (Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, 1960), 20, 22, (753.14, v. 19/1960), CAC-Oxford.

received from employers and the difficulty of finding supplemental foodstuffs during the war and the years that followed. An abundance of evidence exists that Africans during the 1940s bristled against being paid food rations in kind rather than the cash equivalent. While some resistance to this may have come from single men who wanted to reduce their spending on food so as to save money, many other workers were turned off by the dull, repetitive nature of a rationing regime, which provided foodstuffs with only a loose relation to what they would have eaten at home. This depravation of taste that a diet of rations entailed was only thrown into further relief by the numerous working-class eateries throughout the city from which they could find more desirable meals. Multiple officials studying labor unrest in Mombasa during the 1940s were made aware of these preferences, and observed that “the ‘posho’ standard which the African complains about so frequently” was composed of a basicness that “leaves no room for that variety which is increasingly desired by town-dwelling Africans,” and that “the monthly issue of 60 lb. of posho [maize meal] is an anachronism.” Deverell herself conceded, of the food provisioned to workers by employers, that “it is not a diet I could care to recommend.” Rather than be resigned to monotony, many workers looked to the “numerous small eating houses where food can be obtained and of more variety than could possibly be provided by the Railway Administration.”

These sellers of tea, coffee, fried snacks and larger meals became incorporated into the daily routines of the city’s workers. While some people skipped breakfast to economize and others ate bread with tea at home, many others stopped at a roadside stand or a duka shop on their way to work and purchased a hot beverage with either a mahamri, a spiced doughnut, kaimati, fried dough covered in sweet syrup, mofa, a maize-based pastry, or chapatti, pan-fried flat bread of South Asian derivation but that had been indigenized into East African cuisine. During these morning

74 Deverell, “Section Two,” 62.
walks, the homosocial kin and friendship relations that structured migratory households also occasionally extended out to the streets. One morning while walking to work in a group, “Some Africans [were] noticed asking their friends to spare them a piece of their mofa [etc.] and so manage to breakfast for free.” During lunch hours, if men did not return home for food, they would have their meal at a roadside eatery, and while it seems many ate dinner in their households, some people would purchase fried fish from a hawker after work before preparing some ugali and then using the fish as the relish. Other workers, on their way to a night shift at the port, would stop by a vendor and purchase mishkaki, grilled meat.\textsuperscript{76}

The organization of this street-food industry was reflective of deeper, historical East African social relations, while it was also indicative of how the increasing commercialization and urbanization of Mombasa was changing the city’s structure. During the 1940s, Arabs had a prominent place in the business of selling prepared food and drink, particularly in the tea, coffee and fried-snack trades. Arab women dominated the preparation side of the commonly consumed fried morning sweets and chapatti, a food item eaten at all times of the day.\textsuperscript{77} Cooking out of their homes, some women cooked at a larger scale of production, preparing these foods specifically for commercial resale, while others would simply cook bigger portions of food they were already preparing for their families, and then sell the surplus.\textsuperscript{78} The washiri Arab women who prepared these foods entered the industry through a gendered division of labor and urban commerce. Their experiences in the food trade were shaped by the seclusion of women being a part of the performance of Islamic respectability on the Swahili coast. While Muslim women of the lower

\textsuperscript{76} Deverell, “Section Two,” 60-3, 65-6, 70, 85-102.
\textsuperscript{77} East African chapatti is an indigenized version of the South Asian flat bread, roti, also called chapatti at times. The South Asian variety is usually smaller and thinner than that consumed throughout East Africa, though many South Asians, and others, continue to consume roti.
\textsuperscript{78} Deverall, “Section Two,” 70, 87-88.
classes commonly entered public space and performed labor, the *ustaarabu* ideal, the set of ideas undergirding Islamic urbanity on the coast, valorized households in which women were provided for and remained inside the home [go to Strobel for more on this]. However, this hegemonic desire to perform *ustaarabu*, with its nostalgic reference to the patrician merchant and slave-owning classes that had formally dominated coastal politics, could often not be reconciled with the reality of the capitalist political economy that increasingly structured Mombasa’s social relations. As families need more income than men’s wage labor alone could provide, these Arab women created a middle ground between the exigencies of capitalist modernity and coastal respectability, engaging in the commercial economy, but doing so in their homes. They prepared the fried snacks of the working classes, but then did not sell their products themselves in public, instead having them sold in local *maduka* shops or by hawkers on the street, especially in the working-class neighborhoods of Makupa and Mwembe Tayari on the island. The *maduka* were owned by South Asian and Arab men, and the hawkers were women and children, most likely African and doing this work to generate income for their own households or helping to supplement the wages of a male husband or father. Arab women were the producers in this industry, for the most part, but their gender quite literally cost them money, specifically the 12-percent that their sellers commissioned.\(^79\) Whether complicating the ideal types of urban Islamic respectability or the colonial state’s vision of the “modern family,” Arab and African women alike rarely lived entirely on the wages of the men in their lives.

The businesses, then, that prepared and sold fried snacks to Mombasa’s working classes were composed of both men and women, but with fairly gendered roles, as Arab women prepared the food, Arab and South Asian men sold their products in their shops, and African women and

\(^{79}\) Ibid.
children did so too on the city streets. However, during the 1940s, the roadside, prepared-coffee industry was the work almost exclusively of men. Cups of coffee in Mombasa sold for a very low price, two cents, compared to other comestible items such as a *chai*, tea with milk and sugar that went for 15 cents, and so were very much available to the city’s poorer classes. Despite these low unit prices, coffee hawking was actually a fairly profitable business, but it had to be done through economies of scale. As a consequence, the mostly Arab men who worked the sector during the 1940s worked long days, walking through the streets, clinking their cups in their pockets to alert potential customers, and trying to sell enough to generate a profit. One such coffee hawker generally sold two delnas of coffee per day, which amounted to eight cups of dried, ground beans. If consistently reaching that amount, he would make 70/- a month, more than double what many laborers earned.80 While tea was widely available, the evidence we have for the 1940s only references it being sold in *maduka*, alongside the fried snacks offered for breakfast.81 However, given the ubiquity of hawkers selling tea during the 1950s, such businesses probably existed during the previous decade, but simply in smaller numbers.82

For those selling larger meals, the evidence we have for the 1940s suggests that women, and probably African women, predominated in these industries. Deverell, whose study was primary on Africans and would usually specifically identify people of other groups, observed that “Uji [porridge] and mbaazi (cooked beans sometimes mixed with whole maize) are prepared by women and hawked for sale” in the city.83 In addition, while such activities were attributed mostly to women, the number of men selling prepared food during the 1950s pushes this study to conclude that some African men, particularly given the unemployment situation, were likely also doing this

80 Ibid., 87-9.
81 Ibid., 62.
82 See the analysis of tea hawking in 1950s Mombasa below.
83 Deverell, 62-3.
work during the 1940s, but, with our limited sources and the predominance of women in the industry, were simply not being mentioned in colonial reports.\textsuperscript{84}

During the first five decades of colonialism, Mombasa’s poorer classes built a street-food culture that certainly emerged, in part, from pre-colonial antecedents, but on a scale and variety not seen in the coastal city’s history. The industry was created through adaptations to Mombasa’s unequal political economy, but also by the ingenuity of hawkers and vendors seeking to make a living in a city that offered them few alternatives, as well as the taste preferences of urban consumers who wanted more than the \textit{posho} rations of wage labor. However, by the end of the 1940s, this expanding industry had grown to an extent that it began to catch the attention of a colonial state that was at the same time increasingly interested in gaining control over and remaking the economic, social and aesthetic composition of the city. In Mombasa, a new form of government, “urban development,” would soon radically transform the relationship between these street-food proprietors and the state.

\textbf{Street-Food and Urban Development in Late-Colonial Mombasa}

Development is a system of paternalism, a mode of power that has a long history on the Swahili coast.\textsuperscript{85} The nefariousness of paternalism lies in its ability to round off the sharp edges of what are most often, at their base, violent systems of domination. Paternalism reached its apogee of exploitation on the slave plantations of the Americas, but it has also infused asymmetrical power relations around the world and throughout history, providing ideological cover for social inequity. Like other forms of paternalism, this new one in post-war East Africa had its softer edges. The

\textsuperscript{84} More to the point, the tendency to remember and report the majority of a gender in an industry as the only gender was also in evidence in many of my oral interviews about the second half of the twentieth century in which many informants had no memory of women working as prepared food hawkers before the 1980s and 1990s, despite the fact that the archival record clearly shows they did. Likely, there were so many men in the industry, especially during the 1970s, that it simply has been remembered as a “male” profession.

\textsuperscript{85} Cooper, \textit{Plantation Slavery} and Glassman, \textit{Feasts and Riot}.
new developmental empire, theorized during the 1930s and 1940s, could finally be implemented more forcefully during the 1950s with world war and its aftermath slowly receding. As the British faced an empire of continuing instability from labor protests, the premise of development seemed as urgent during the early 1950s as it had during the mass strikes of the 1930s. In this new, developmentalist empire, overt coercion needed to be replaced with accommodation. Africans needed to be made to feel invested in living in a world run by Britain. The colonial city and its social structures needed to be remade. African men should be able to afford to have their families with them in the cities. They needed to live in modern homes. They needed spaces of leisure. As the British faced an empire of continuing instability from labor protests, the premise of development seemed as urgent during the early 1950s as it had during the mass strikes of the 1930s. In this new, developmentalist empire, overt coercion needed to be replaced with accommodation. Africans needed to be made to feel invested in living in a world run by Britain. The colonial city and its social structures needed to be remade. African men should be able to afford to have their families with them in the cities. They needed to live in modern homes. They needed spaces of leisure.

And, critical for our purposes, they needed proper places to eat.

The inclusion of working-class eateries as part of Mombasa’s urban development plans came in 1947. After the Municipal Board debated for months about whether and to what extent the state should take on the responsibility of building municipally-run food canteens, the “Ten Year Development Plan” of the same year crystalized it as a priority. The records are thin on details, but by late 1947 the municipality started to receive rents for the use of kitchens in canteens that had formally only served alcohol in Mwembe Tayari, Changamwe, Kisauni, and Majengo, all areas with large populations of African workers. The repurposing of these alcohol canteens to

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87 The extreme violence that underlay this paternalism, and the social order they wanted to create through it, was made evident in Kenya through the repressive tactics the British employed to suppress the Mau Mau movement during the 1950s, incarcerating nearly an entire ethnic group, the Kikuyu, in concentration camps and guarded “villages,” waging a forest war against Mau Mau fighters, and killing over 1,000 others through court-sanctioned executions, for crimes as small as possessing a firearm. Caroline Elkins, Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya (New York: Henry Holt, 2005) and David Anderson, Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

88 P.H. Brown, African Affairs: Ten Year Development Plan, 16 August 1947 (UY/12/310), KNA-Nairobi, and see the numerous documents on the question of using the kitchens in alcohol canteens to serve food to the public in UY/12/309, KNA-Nairobi.

89 Municipal Board of Mombasa, Native Trust Fund, Canteen, 1947 (UY/12/310), KNA-Nairobi, and Native Trust Fund Canteens, Estimating Trading Accounts for the Year 1948, Municipal Board of Mombasa, 1947 (UY/12/310),
also serve food was part of the larger development plan for Mombasa that aimed to bring the city into a modernity recognizable to the colonial state. For the British, the “modernization” of colonial cities was about reconfiguring temporal and spatial geographies. Development would bring Mombasa in line with the upward trajectory of world, historical progress. The author of the ten-year plan, Municipal African Affairs Officer P.H. Brown, put forward that “In no instance is anything projected which is alien to urban development in England at present or which, in most instances, is not considered as basic progress and development.”

As the municipal government slowly began to build the types of eateries it thought more suitable to a stable, urban working class, it also sharpened its attention on the people who were already providing food to the city’s working poor. Little more than a month after the release of the development plan, the Town Clerk and the General Purposes Committee proposed a 15-point set of recommendations for trading in Mombasa, some of which aimed to radically restructure the city’s comestible cultures. Among them, it was suggested that “all street trading be abolished” and “That the vending of all foodstuffs excluding uncut fruits and beverages be prohibited.” Alongside these suggestions, it was proposed alternatively to raise the license fees on street traders. During the 1930s, the state saw licenses exclusively as a form of control and not as a way to generate revenue, but, with the postwar state expanding, licensing fees became more important to municipal budgets and, additionally, allowed the state more control over the nature of capital accumulation and class formation in the colonial city. In the debate, Captain Hamely of the board specifically outlined that these fees would allow them to undercut the economic advantage that street-food vending provided to hawkers and others vendors, noting that “it had been felt that the

KNA-Nairobi, Minutes of the African Affairs Committee, Municipal Board of Mombasa, 17 February, 1948 (UY/12/310), KNA-Nairobi.  
90 Brown, “Ten Year Development Plan.”  
91 General Purposes Committee, Municipal Board of Mombasa 19 September 1947 (UY/12/310), KNA-Nairobi.
license fee should be increased, because the hawker had no overhead charges to meet in the manner as the shopkeeper, thus producing unfair competition.”92 What poorer members of society saw as a rare advantage that allowed them to earn higher profits, Captain Hamely and the vision of urban development that he supported saw as a form of “unfair” accumulation outside the controlled logics of bureaucratic capitalism.

However, the “colonial state” that was initiating such development plans in Mombasa was not a unitary force, but a complex and ever changing assemblage of competing interests that would converge and conflict depending on the nature and implications of the issue under debate. The Board was dominated by Europeans, who were allotted seats and hired for administrative posts in numbers greatly disproportionate to their population in the city.93 Throughout the 1950s, European officials in Mombasa were generally, with some exceptions, in agreement about their desire to radically reorder working-class food systems. However, many of the Arab and South Asian and, especially later when they had more representation, African officials questioned the totalizing vision of their European colleagues, and pushed for more moderation and negotiation when dealing with street-food vendors. These Arab, South Asian and African officials were part of Mombasa’s urban elite and shared some of the ideological views of their European counterparts, but they also in dealing with the issue of street food often demonstrated that they had a perspective more attuned to the dynamics of the city and what sorts of institutions and relationships were required to keep it functioning.

For example, Councilman Jetha, part of the South Asian community, rejected the 1947 proposal to raise licensing fees that Captain Hamely had supported. In a vote split almost entirely

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92 Minutes of the Municipal Board of Mombasa, 4 November 1947 (UY/12/310), KNA-Nairobi.
down racial lines, Jetha convinced other South Asian, Arab and the one African on the Board to vote with him, and they stalled the proposed fee hikes inside the General Purposes Committee. Councilman Jetha then spent much of the next year, 1948, trying to exempt maize and cereal roasters from becoming entangled in the increasingly strict sanitation laws of the city, and argued to the Board that it “should not only see to the cleanliness of the town but also to the welfare of its inhabitants.” He saw in these increased fees the dual tragedy that they would put maize roasters “out of business” and “not only deprive that person of his livelihood but deprive a section of the community of a commodity it wished to purchase.” Understanding the continuing necessity of the competitive advantage that low overheads provided to such hawkers and venders and the workers who benefited from their cheaper prices, Jetha contended that these fees did not take account of the reality that “the labouring classes cannot afford to go into restaurants,” and that these small-scale businesses allowed them to access “roasted maize at a price within their means.” The same year, when the Board was working to formalize zoning laws that would bar hawkers and vendors from central areas of Mombasa, and add additional licensing costs, Jetha was joined in his defense of hawkers by Councilman Janmohamed who argued that “the creation of prohibited areas and the proposed fee to be charged for a general hawkers licence would cause great hardship,” and that “many hawkers would be unable to pay the fee and would find the lucrative area of town barred to them.”

Despite these urgings for restraint from Jetha, Janmohamed and those who voted with them, these councilors ultimately lost the debate over the future of Mombasa, and instead the city government over the coming years, led departmentally by the Town Clerk and the Medical Officer

94 Minutes of the Municipal Board of Mombasa, 4 November 1947 (UY/12310), KNA-Nairobi.
95 Minutes of the Municipal Board of Mombasa, 6 January 1948 (UY/12/310), KNA-Nairobi, and Minutes of the General Purposes Committee, 1 June 1948 (UY/5/85), KNA-Coast.
96 Minutes concerning the Mombasa Municipality (Hawkers) Bylaws 1948, 21 May 1948 (UY/5/85), KNA-Nairobi.
of Health, began to institute a system of surveillance, arrests, displacement and demolitions as its new administrative policy towards illicit vendors and hawkers. This change in urban policy, representing a clear attack on the businesses of the poor, was not unique to Mombasa, as governing authorities were also engaged in a similar restructuring in Nairobi, a period of the city’s history that Claire Robertson calls the “First Hawkers War.”

Mombasa officials began their “war” against street food with an effort to remove vendors during the early 1950s near Kilindini port on Mombasa island, the center of working life for thousands of the city’s laboring classes. At a recently established street-food market near the docks, women food vendors served prepared meals to the workers, and had been “welcomed” by their customers when they arrived in 1951. During the initial push by authorities to oust these women, port workers were able to successfully defend them. They pushed the Labor Office at the port, and succeeded in having a shed built for the women. With these vendors secure, the workers were happy that “they were then being provided with cheap and good food.” However, on a second pass, the Labor Officer ignored the preferences of the workers, and displaced two thirds of the women who vended food by the port, reducing their numbers from 150 to 50. The effects of this were negative both for the vendors and the workers who had purchased their food. These “100 deserving and old women” were “put out of business,” and were deprived of access to the port, one of the most lucrative prepared-food markets in the city. For the workers, meal breaks became less satisfying, more inconvenient and expensive. In terms of taste, the reduction in the number of

97 Claire C. Robertson, Trouble Showed the Way: Women, Men, and Trade in the Nairobi Area (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1997), 104, 130-45.
98 It was reported in 1959 that the port employed more than 8,000 people, most in private companies, but nearly 2,000 of those worked for the state-run East African Railways and Harbours. Report of a Board of Inquiry Appointed to Inquire into Employment in the Port of Mombasa (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1959), 10, (753.14r 19/1959), CAC-Oxford. Commonly termed the “Parkin Report,” it is also available in Kenya as a typed document at the Coast Province branch of the Kenya National Archives. See, “Parkin Report,” (CP/7/12), KNA-Coast.
vendors “resulted in a deterioration of the standard of food,” and as a result “many labourers are forced to have their meals elsewhere where they have to pay more.”

The next year, municipal authorities turned their attention to coffee and tea hawkers, an industry itself under rapid transformation from the increased urban migration of rural Africans during the 1950s. Primarily run by Arabs during the first half of the twentieth century, more and more Africans began to work as tea and coffee hawkers during the final years of colonialism. However, policy towards these hawkers shifted significantly beginning in January of 1953, and may have not been unrelated to the increased African presence within the industry, when the Medical Officer of Health wrote to Mombasa’s Liwali and complained that, since he arrived, “I have considered coffee [and] tea … hawkers to be a serious menace to the health of the town.”

Expression a palpable sense of revulsion, the Medical Officer of Health rejected the long-followed practices through which coffee was hawked in the city, the click-clicking of cups in the vendor’s pocket, and recoiled at the bodily contact between the seller and the products consumed by their customers. He observed that “cups are either kept in the pocket of the hawker, or rattled about in his hand. In either case they have been exposed to a serious degree of contamination, as their clothes are usually filthy, and it would greatly surprise me if the hawkers wash their hands during the day.” He also worried that these hawkers were spoiling the city’s physical environment, as when a client finished a cup of coffee “the dregs are discarded onto the street or pavement.” He also saw the industry’s system of cup washing to be completely inadequate and, though without any evidence as he conceded “I cannot prove it,” he nonetheless accused that these beverage vendors were “responsible for much of the tuberculosis, typhoid, dysenteries and other infectious

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100 Conclusion reached by tracking and aggregating surnames of coffee and tea hawkers found in UY/28/98, KNA-Coast, UY/12/338, KNA-Nairobi, UY/12/315, KNA-Nairobi, and UY/12/693, KNA-Nairobi.
diseases in the town.” Proposing a new, tightly-monitored prepared beverage industry, he stated that the only conditions under which he would approve further licenses for selling beverages were for those that were bottled or, if they were prepared by the hawker, they needed to be served in a disposable cup and the proprietor needed more extensive washing and waste-disposal facilities.101

In response, Mombasa’s Liwali, himself a part of the Municipal Board and a prominent voice in the Arab and Swahili communities from which many of these hawkers came, defended coffee and tea hawking and its place within the city’s history and society. However, the Liwali also, to a certain extent, conceded to the logic of his governing colleague, the Medical Officer of Health. He wrote that “coffee hawkers have been doing this sort of work for over 50 years now and their method of operating have been the same ever since.” Though it seems certain that coffee hawking had a history quite a bit longer than fifty years, the point was that these vendors were intrinsic to the city itself, as “coffee is an essential food to Arabs and it has become the essential diet to African labourers as well and all these people cannot live without it.” He informed the Medical Officer of Health that the proposals for reforming the industry were not practical since hawkers could not afford to rapidly remake their businesses and, using arguments similar to those of Jetha, contended that if these rules were enforced the vendors would “have no other alternative except to stop at once from selling the coffee and will mean depriving these people of their only means of livelihood and also depriving this essential diet to these African labourers and poor Arabs.” Nonetheless, the Liwali also upheld the sanitation logic that these businesses needed to change, and he did not reject the Medical Officer of Health’s reforms, but asked that they be

101 Medical Officer of Health, Mombasa to the Liwali, Mombasa, 23 January 1953 (UY/28/98), KNA-Coast.
delayed. Soon thereafter, the council agreed, recommending to wait to enact the policies until the following year, in 1954.

However, whatever concession the Liwali was able to negotiate, municipal authorities and other elites with similar aesthetic sensibilities continued to move to clear prepared beverage and food hawkers from Mombasa’s landscape. During October of 1953, less than a year after the agreement to delay enforcement, Rosina House, located on Salim Road (now Digo Road) in the town center, wrote to the municipality to complain about coffee hawkers that were operating near their building “during the early morning hours.” As a result of their complaints, the hawker “nuisance was checked up by the Askaris [police].” Days later, though, the coffee sellers had returned and were operating each morning, and Rosina House asked the government “to send some askaris between 6:30 and 8 a.m. every morning and have this nuisance checked out entirely.” The police returned, and cleared the hawkers out again. The class dimensions of such actions, with elite residents taking advantage of the new policies of urban development to mobilized state coercion in order to excise the economic activities of the poor from their neighborhoods, also inflected the experiences of people selling prepared food. The next year, in 1954, a group of licensed restaurant owners hired an attorney to complain to Mombasa’s Town Clerk about unlicensed Africans and Arabs who were “vending cooked food round about Mwembe Tayari, and particularly in the proximity of their hotels [restaurants].” While those from Rosina House were more concerned about the general presence of hawkers and what it meant for the aesthetics of their neighborhood, these restauranteurs were clearly more directly worried that street-food vendors

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102 Liwali of Mombasa to the Medical Officer of Health, Mombasa, date covered by stamp of receipt, c. early February 1953, (UY/28/98), KNA-Coast.
104 Rozina House to the Officer in Charge, Mombasa Municipality, 15 October 1953 (UY/28/98), KNA-Coast.
105 A.Z. Mahmud, Esq. to the Town Clerk, Mombasa, 20 August 1954 (UY/28/98), KNA-Coast.
with their low overhead and therefore cheap prices would draw away their customers. Using the legitimacy their building and trade licenses granted them in Mombasa’s political structure, they directed the state to clear out these competitors. The next day, the Town Clerk informed their attorney that the “matter has now been investigated and prosecutions have been taken against the unlicensed Street Traders for contravention of the Mombasa Municipal By-laws,” and reported that “these persons have now ceased this unauthorised trading.”

However, since the point of these forced removals from the perspective of the state was that they be part of a larger development project meant to promote order, stability and colonial control, authorities realized they could not just clear out these street-food vendors and provide no alternatives to the workers who needed the food and beverages these hawkers sold. Moreover, with thousands of residents relying on these comestible professions for their income, the state also understood that it needed to create alternative economic opportunities to the traders who had been displaced. Through these clear-outs, the state had manufactured a problem for which poor Mombasa traders had already found a solution. That is, hawkers themselves had answered the question of how to feed underpaid workers and provide income to the city’s vast population of the unemployed, but now the colonial state was trying to engineer its own system over which it would have control. The government’s response to a question the majority of the city was not asking them to answer was to create a network of food canteens around the city that would be located near key worksites in which some of the hawkers who lost their livelihoods would be able to work legally. Rather than illegible and unplanned urban development, these new institutions would compartmentalize these vendors into delineated spaces where they would be made visible to the state through licensing and inspections. They would, in short, become “modern.”

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106 Town Clerk, Mombasa to A.Z. Mahmud, Esq., 21 August 1954 (UY/28/98), KNA-Coast.
The creation of a network of licensed, working-class eateries in Mombasa had first been considered during the early 1950s, but at that point the emphasis was on private employers building their own canteens for their employees, and staffing them with the hawkers being displaced by the first rounds of clear-outs. However, the city’s industrial concerns had little interest in expanding their obligation to feed workers beyond providing them a ration. Municipal authorities sent a circular to larger employers at the port suggesting they build food canteen, but the responses were tepid, as “the Committee was informed that some companies had replied declining to allow women [hawkers] within their compounds and others stated that they had referred the matter to their principles in the United Kingdom.” Some employers did eventually build canteens for their workers, but these were few. Nonetheless, the city government continued to squeeze food and beverage hawkers and expel them from their areas of operation, and so pressure continued to build on the state to find a way for workers to have access to affordable food and to allow those who needed income to provide it.

By 1957, when the Medical Officer of Health initiated another mass operation against people selling prepared food in Mombasa, government inaction to alleviate the suffering caused by the ways in which this displaced the otherwise unemployed and decreased the access of the poor to affordable prepared food in the city was becoming increasing untenable. This was perhaps in large part because of changing political structures in the Kenya Colony. Mombasa officials were likely more aware of the difficulties this caused for Africans in the city because, by the later 1950s, more Africans were in the municipal government and who were themselves tied to newly forming

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urban constituencies. With this limited political liberalization of the colonial state’s more than five decades of racially authoritarian rule, a select-few Africans entered into elected and appointed positions during the 1950s, especially towards the end of the decade. On the issue of street-food, these newly-installed African officials generally occupied a middle ground, operating within the developmentalist logic that unlicensed hawking was anathema to modern Mombasa and its future, but while being on the whole far more amenable than most of their European colleagues to compromises and negotiations that would enable the industry, in effect, to continue.

By 1957, while operations against vendors continued apace, little had been accomplished towards building the food canteens that were ostensibly to feed workers who now increasingly lacked access to food and income to hawkers who had been displaced. Funding had been, by this point, allocated to build these canteens, but it was stuck deep in the municipal bureaucracy. Ronald Ngala, an African and Coastal Member of the colony-wide Legislative Council, sent a letter to the Mombasa Town Clerk to argue the case of the food hawkers from his constituency. While his motive may have been in part driven by genuine, self-realized concern, Ngala was also clearly responding to Mombasa residents who had come to him demanding affordable food be available to the city’s poorer classes. He told the Town Clerk that “Many Africans have been to me to emphasise the need for having some African food at Mwembe Tayari,” a working-class neighborhood, and then continued that “I have visited Mwembe Tayari and seen that none of the local restaurants there sells any African food, e.g., beans, sima [ugali], maize, porridge, e.t.c.” However, even if it was available, these “local restaurants are too costly for the type of African wishing to have his meals at Mwembe Tayari.” Conceding to the official line that hawkers should not be part of the city’s long-term plans, Ngala nonetheless proposed that “some temporary
arrangements should be made to allow those Africans selling food at Mwembe Tayari to continue doing so awaiting the new arrangements,” those being food-vendor stalls in the local market.¹¹⁰

While the Town Clerk, A.V. Ratcliff, seemed to have little confidence that Ngala’s proposal would pass through the municipal council, F.P.B. Derrick, Mombasa’s District Commissioner, more clearly understood the vital role that street-food played in the city, a position that had been made clear to him by mobilized African residents who had complained to his office. While agreeing with the sanitary logic of the Medical Officer of Health, Derrick nonetheless felt the need for social stability should at least in the short term be prioritized. In a circular sent to the Chairman of the municipal board, the Medical Officer of Health, the African Affairs Officer and the District Officer in Majengo, the District Commissioner wrote that “I do not know if you are aware of the very considerable feeling there is among Africans in the town regarding the prohibition which has recently been imposed … on food vendors selling food in the streets and in open spaces.” He continued that, while acknowledging the importance of sanitation, he also encouraged authorities to “go slowly in this matter as otherwise there may well be repercussions” because “a very large proportion of the manual labourers employed in this town traditionally obtain their food from itinerant food vendors and do not go to Arab or African owned ‘hotels’ where the food is much more expensive.” While one canteen had been approved for construction in the High Level industrial area, Derrick argued that many more would be needed in order to adequately provide food to the city’s working classes, and that in the meantime temporary areas needed to be established in which street-food vendors could “carry on their trade.” Making clear the link between his position and the political action of Africans in Mombasa, he concluded his letter by

¹¹⁰ D.M.J. Korokoro for the Coast-MLC to the Town Clerk, Mombasa, 30 August 1957 (UY/28/98), KNA-Coast.
acknowledging that “I have brought this matter to your attention because I have received representations from a number of Africans.”111

In addition to such concerns at the district and national level, some municipal officials, and seemingly only ones who were African, were questioning the logic of a total prohibition of street-food in the city. This included the members of the Mombasa African Affairs Council, David Ikumi, George G. Madumadu and Lance Jones. While touring Mombasa’s industrial area in 1957, they observed and spoke with vendors working in this part of the city. Along with multiple tea vendors, they saw “over 30 unlicensed food vendors of various descriptions and cleanliness” who catered to workers in the area. These vendors, existing in a political environment in which they faced the constant threat of prosecution, continued nonetheless to operate. Like other officials, African or otherwise, the three councilors were tentative to explicitly approve of these businesses, but they did concede to their necessity within Mombasa’s political economy. For people needing income, “this trade is profitable” and for those workers who required their meals while on the job, these vendors provided a “great service to the customers.” Their position was not simply drawn from sympathy for the traders, but came from their understanding of street-food being generative of Mombasa’s modern future. In contrast to most other municipal officials, this African delegation saw itinerant street-food vending as integral to and a part of the city’s capitalist expansion. Their mobility was critical to a city in which “buildings will continue to be erected in and around Mombasa” and such food was required to feed the consequent “influx of labor [that] is increasing daily.”112

Whatever the internal debates of the government were about the future of street food vendors in Mombasa, the city’s workers kept working, still needed food, and these small-scale

111 F.P.B. Derrick, District Commissioner, Circular, 10 September 1957 (UY/28/98), KNA-Coast.
112 Minutes of the Sub-Committee, Trade and Housing Committee, 18 April, 1957 (UY/12/53), KNA-Nairobi.
proprietors continued to serve it to them, making small profits and their urban lives economically viable. Moreover, some had actually achieved official recognition, and with it security. At the Port’s street-food market, one of the first areas the state had targeted during the early 1950s, those that had survived the early raids were granted licensed status in a city that otherwise prohibited their type of business. Dock authorities, with significant political and economic sway in the colony, had seemingly made clear that their employees who labored at the most important transportation choke point in the Kenyan economy, and really that of East Africa as well, needed access to food while at work. As a result, during lunchtime, dock workers would exit the port and walk to the north of the Labour Compound “where up to 48 licensed food vendors—licensed by the port—cook varying types of meals on the spot for African workers.” At these small eateries, food prices remained steady and affordable throughout the 1950s, and customers could find large portions of food and thus “the place is obviously popular with the men.” However, despite these efforts to limit food hawking to these 48 licensed vendors, the attraction of the one of the largest concentrations of working-class customers in Mombasa drew in unlicensed vendors as well, a fact made evident in 1958 when state authorities moved through Mombasa with another round of raids and arrests of food vendors that were focused, “in particular, at the Dockyard area.”

After the operation, F.J. Khamisi, one of four elected African representatives on the municipal council, expressed dismay at what he felt as a breaking of a recent tacit agreement to halt arrests until enough food canteens had been built to feed the city’s working classes and find employment for hawkers. Responding to complaints from his constituents, Khamisi questioned why these raids had happened since as the council was aware “we have … established only a few

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of these canteens,” and, more generally that “It should be realised that these food vendors are serving a very useful purpose in providing at a very reasonable price, food which is much needed by the workers,” and that the hawkers “are at the same time earning a decent living out of the meagre profits derived from this business.” Similar to other officials, Khamisi too conceded to the logic of the government that trading outside the controlled confines of municipal licensing had no future in modern Mombasa, but he also modestly proposed that the council minimize the arrests and localize them “to areas that are presently served by the existence of the present Food Vendors Canteens.”

However, Khamisi was ignored and the operation against street-food vendors continued. The next month, August 1958, he wrote the council again, expressing that “he viewed with dismay and disgust the arrest and prosecution of African women food vendors,” and he asked “for the suspension of such measures.” When the letter was finally addressed more than two weeks later, the council again rejected his overtures, and responded by patronizing one of only four elected Africans on a council of more than twenty in a city in which Africans represented the large majority of the population. Councilors accused Khamisi of not understanding that this was an issue of racial justice for Africans. They argued that “the control of food standards was in the interests of everybody,” and that “disease knew no colour bar.” Racial justice, according to this colonial logic, was the restructuring of Mombasa to fit the modernist aesthetics and public-health priorities of the state, irrespective of whether this devastated the livelihoods of already poor African hawkers and compromised the ability of other low-income workers to find adequate food throughout their workday. The Committee concluded its assessment of Khamisi’s suggestions by rendering him as anti-modern, stating that his position on street food revealed him to be a “retrogressive rather than

\[115\] Ibid.
progressive leader of his people.”

Following this attempt by Khamisi, there was little pushback within the council against these arrests, prosecutions and demolitions.

Part of the state’s reluctance to halt its raids on street-food vendors came from facing the reality that their alternative, the municipal canteen that was to replace informality, could not be realized until they had excised these eateries from the city. By the end of the 1950s, the state had started to create a new comestible geography in Mombasa, installing government-built food canteens in Mwembe Tayari, Majengo, Makupa and the High-Level industrial area.

However, the flaw in the state’s logic of comestible urban planning came from a misunderstanding, or purposeful ignorance, of why unlicensed vendors were so popular in the first place, both for proprietors and customers. The low overhead and operating costs that came from being unlicensed and not paying rents provided hawkers with minimal capital start-up and operating costs, which then also allowed them to keep their food prices cheap. Some of the new canteens did have waiting lists of vendors wanting a stall, which indicates that at least some people valued the security from demolitions, arrests and displacement that a licensed business theoretically supplied, but as a consequence they also had to incorporate the monthly fees into their pricing structures.

As a result, these canteen food vendors struggled to compete with those who were unlicensed. For example, at the High-Level canteen, meant to serve industrial workers, business was bad. In 1958, the women who ran the eateries in the canteen complained that “their business was being seriously interfered with by the operations of illicit food vendors and that they could double their output if the demand were there.” In a debate over whether to expand the size of this canteen, the African

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117 Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Health Committee, 3 October, 1958 (UY/12/693), KNA-Nairobi, Minutes of the Trade and Housing Committee, MAAC, 15 January, 1959 (UY/12/382), KNA-Nairobi, Minutes of the Trade and Housing Committee, MAAC, 9 July, 1959, and Minutes of the Trade and Housing Committee, 21 June, 1956 (UY/12/53), KNA-Nairobi.
118 Minutes of the Mombasa African Advisory Council, no date, c. 1959. (UY/12/382), KNA-Nairobi.
Affairs Officer concluded “that the construction of additional stalls would only be justified on the basis of the complete suppression of the illegal trade.”

In addition to building these food canteens, the state also wanted to restructure the prepared beverage trade that had so horrified the Medical Officer of Health back in 1953. While municipal authorities saw a city in which African women were “food vendors” and African and Arab men were “tea hawkers,” the actual social composition of who was serving food, tea and coffee to the city’s workers was more complex, evading such simplistic categorization. For the tea industry, municipal licensing operated through two categories, one for people with “tea houses” and the other for mobile “tea hawkers.” During the 1940s, as we saw, the maduka selling tea also offered a variety of fried snacks, and so the selling of tea was never strictly separate from that of offering prepared food. However, during the 1950s, the state explicitly banned and enforced a prohibition against tea operators selling food items. In practice, while some Mombasa workers were similar to the English working class in treating the highly-caloric cup of sugary and milky tea as a meal, this was a choice of poverty rather than preference, and many preferred to also eat some fried dough snacks, bread and other varieties of cooked food with their tea when they could afford it. Moreover, the fried food that many tea hawkers sold was some of the cheapest in Mombasa, while still being filling with a high caloric content, and so was a less expensive substitute for heartier meals sold by food vendors. To appeal themselves to this class of workers, proprietors wanted to offer not only tea but a variety of small snack items for those who wanted to save money on their

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120 These conclusions about the demography of these respective comestible industries in late-colonial Mombasa are drawn from data aggregated from files contained in (UY/12/315), KNA-Nairobi, (UY/12/338), KNA-Nairobi, (UY/12/693), KNA-Nairobi, (UY/12/382), KNA-Nairobi, and (UY/12/698), KNA-Nairobi.
121 Minutes of the Trade and Housing Committee, 10 September, 1959 (UY/12/382), KNA-Nairobi.
daily meals. A bigger selection meant a larger customer base, and thus potentially higher profits. Weighing the costs of arrests and prosecution or losing the profits from selling these foods, the record suggests that many continued to offer the fried snacks of the Swahili coast.

Moreover, the “tea” industry itself was changing during the 1950s, shifting from breakfast and snacks focus towards a hybrid model in which lines were blurred between the purported division between “female” food vendors and “male” tea hawks and houses. Tea hawking, unlike street food, was legal in 1950s Mombasa, but in tightly delineated terms. Tea hawks strategically continued to apply for licenses, agreeing to sell only tea, but then created the businesses they deemed most profitable irrespective of what municipal authorities demanded. Such a license provided, even if one was operating beyond its terms, a certain level of political legitimation that may have helped some to avoid the raids that were sweeping through the city during the 1950s. While some hawkers and tea shop owners only pushed beyond their license to sell the usual fried snacks and bread, others were operating what amounted to restaurants, some on quite a large scale. In January of 1959, three different Arab shops were running illicit teahouse-restaurants that were attached to the exterior of their buildings, and the council, again concerned about capital accumulation occurring outside municipal control, lamented that “There are ample [licensed restaurants] in the area who suffer through this setup.”

However, most tea hawkers cum street-food vendors operated on a smaller scale, but still managed to provide a variety of food options to their customers. Joseph K. Njengu, a “tea hawker,” sold what would have been recognizable offerings at a street-food vendor’s stand, “cooked maize and beans and meat,” while Ahmed bin Said, licensed only to hawk tea, nonetheless turned his cart “into a restaurant” during the early morning and evening hours. Elsewhere, tea hawker Abed bin

Faraj had “a large awning with tables and chairs” where he “cooked bread [sic.] and beans contrary to Licensing By-laws,” while Rajab Abdalla was also “selling bread and beans from his tea cart.” Other tea hawkers were caught and penalized, but continued to trade as they saw fit. Kombo Mwanganyi was not reissued a license “in 1957 because he was always dirty and selling food. His license was restored again in 1958. He is again dirty and selling foodstuffs.”\(^1\) Murethi Tutri, who had applied for a license, was told to wait until after the hearing on his application, but he ignored the authorities and continued to hawk. Compounding the frustration of the council, “bread was found cut and uncut in a box on his table next to his cart.”\(^2\) As with the women who sold food on Mombasa’s streets, these male tea hawkers and tea-house owners risked prosecution and demolition, as when the council recommended that “all Tea Hawkers found selling commodities other than those authorised by their licenses” be prosecuted. In particular, they should target “those Tea Hawkers who had erected shelters around their carts,” and “That the Town Planning committee be recommended to authorise the demolition of [such] shelters.”\(^3\)

At the close of the 1950s, the ideal of Mombasa’s working classes eating only inside approved, licensed facilities remained mostly a modernist dream, as the eateries of vendors and hawkers were still the foundation of how the city’s workers acquired food when outside their homes. By 1961, municipal authorities conceded they had failed to prevent the sale of bread and other snacks by tea vendors, and relented to allow them to sell *mahamri* and sliced bread. However, this was insufficient for some vendors, and they continued to push the boundaries. Almost a full decade after demolitions and prosecutions had begun, restaurant owners were still “complaining

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\(^1\) Minutes of the Health Committee, 6 March, 1959 (UY/12/698), KNA-Nairobi and Minutes of the Health Committee, 15 April, 1959. (UY/12/698), KNA-Nairobi.
\(^2\) Minutes of the Health Committee, 8 May 1959 (UY/12/698), KNA-Nairobi.
of unfair competition by Tea Hawkers who were acting as ‘petty-Hotel Keepers’ [restaurateurs] and selling food not covered by their licenses.”

Conclusion

For all the resources put behind development, the Mombasa that emerged at the end of colonial rule had perhaps been radically transformed, but these changes came as much from the poor struggling to make their lives in the city work as it did from top-down structural engineering. Even if people had wanted to live in the households of the “modern worker” where men earned wages and women only performed kitchen labor and other domestic work, the political economy of the city made such family formations hard to sustain. However, development and pressures from labor movements did result in some material improvement for those within the confines of the waged world. On the income of wage laborers during the 1950s, the nature of the data, complications in correlation to inflation, and great wage differentials between employment sectors makes both precise and general conclusions difficult, but overall real wages did increase slightly by the end of the of the decade. Nonetheless, the base-line of the 1940s was a condition of impoverishment, and so minor growth in real wages did not likely provide many households the option of performing a gendered domesticity in which husbands earned wages and wives worked only the household. More convincing is the conclusion that married men continued to work for wages, as such jobs were still mostly reserved for them, and many of their wives labored in Mombasa’s streets as small-scale traders selling, among other items, prepared food and drink.

Additionally, many migrants continued to live outside conjugal families and cooked their own food or purchased it, as observed in a 1958 study of Kongewea, a growing peri-urban suburb

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north of Mombasa, that “most single men” in the community “do their own cooking or eat in the local ‘hotel.’” The same study identified a monthly salary of 300/- per month as ideal for forging modern, African workers who could afford to purchase their own homes, and felt that “It is to this group that future plans must be directed in order to create a stable class of urban Africans who have an investment, however small, in the community and who therefore will have an invested interest in the stability and future of its Local Government.” However, since that amount was more than double what most in the city actually made, and that those who did represented only 11 percent of the adult-male, African population, and less than eight percent of all African adults, most family structures would have required that “women’s work” generate cash. The gendered division of labor meant that these women worked as street traders because it was their only option, but they were also joined by many unemployed men, or those seeking alternatives to wage labor, and, as we have seen, many of them turned to selling prepared food and drink. In 1960, researcher A.G. Dagleish observed in surveying the labor landscape of Kenya as a whole that “Mention must be made of the problem presented by the large number of Africans who are seemingly unemployed, but who are frequently in self-employment, often of a kind which is perilously close to legality.”

During the 1940s and 1950s, these and the other transformations addressed in this chapter had remade Mombasa to the extent that, by the end of colonialism, proportionally, more women cooked more of the food that men ate in Mombasa than had been the case during the first three decades of the twentieth century. However, many men continued to prepare their own food, and purchased it from both female and male cooks on the streets. The gendering of these urban food

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129 Mombasa Social Survey, Part I, 390.  
130 Ibid., 390.  
131 Survey of Unemployment, 20.  
132 Ibid., 9.
systems emerged through the competing and overlapping forces of efforts to reproduce rural patriarchies, developmental notions of the modern family, and the need for Mombasa’s poor to earn enough income to survive in the city. Neither model, rural or developmentalist, emerged just as envisioned, but they were combined with the city’s political economy to create new urban families and bonds of comestible kinship in an idiosyncratic variety that escapes simple categorization.

At the close of the 1950s, Kenya would soon be independent. Becoming an independent republic in 1963, more than 60 years of racial authoritarianism under colonialism came to an end. However, in terms of family formation and the gendering of the provision and preparation of food, the political economy that drove such social structures during the 1950s was little changed during the 1960s. More women came to the city, and when they lived with husbands it was deemed the wife’s responsibility to cook. Men continued to prepare food, but only when on their own or for profit. Independence, therefore, was not a major marker in the periodization of food, gender and the family in Mombasa, but it was for a change in the politics of street food. During the late-colonial period in Mombasa, even after a few African representatives had been added to the government, hawkers and vendors were only able to infiltrate the mechanisms of state to a limited extent given that, especially on the municipal council that administered licensing and sanitation laws, Europeans held large majorities, despite being an extreme numerical minority in the city. However, the newly-elected African councilors who took their seats on the post-colonial municipal council were suddenly tied to African constituencies in ways that Europeans had never been. In this new political context in which government officials were incentivized to listen to their

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133 Europeans were three percent of Mombasa’s population in 1957, but held a majority vote on the municipal council, as they were provided racially-reserved positions voted-on only by other Europeans. *Mombasa Social Survey, Part I*, 216, and Burke, “The Development of Municipal Government,” 130-35.
constituencies, or at least those people within them who raised their voices, vendors and hawkers found an opening into the elite spaces of governance on a scale unimaginable during the colonial period and, as well shall see, were able to influence policy. Nonetheless, the consequences of the institutionalization of the ideologies of urban development and planning, as well as the tactics of arrests, prosecutions, removals and demolitions as the method for administering those deemed “informal” in the city, were lasting. The way these governing assumptions manifested themselves and the political purposes and interests they served would change, but, unquestionably, they continued to build insecurity into the lives of the people who made their living selling food and drink to Mombasa’s poorer classes.
An imperfect image for the purposes of this dissertation, as this is a rural family, but it does capture the ideal type the British sought to valorize and reproduce in cities as well. This photo was taken during the 1950s in the midst of a massive commercialization and “modernization” of the African countryside, and its representation of domestic structures and dietary choice was meant to invoke the modernity of Leonard Githui and his family, who are unnamed. The caption that accompanies it notes that Githui was “an enlightened Kikuyu farmer,” who was joined by “his family at table. Meat and vegetables and an orange a piece make a good healthy meal.” British Official Photograph. INF/10/164 Part I. National Archives, United Kingdom.
Image 4: Cooking in rural Kenya, c. 1950s

British Official Photograph. INF/10/164 Part I. Photo of an unnamed woman in an unnamed part of rural Kenya, c. 1950s, and indicative of the gendered division of kitchen labor in rural areas, a system being reconstituted in new forms in Mombasa during this period.
A maize-based *ugali*, usually accompanied by a relish. Photo by author, February 2015.
Tables

Table 5

Source: Janmohamed, “A History of Mombasa,” 257. For further context to these numbers, in 1925 it was reported that there were 7,555 kazi ya mwezi, or “monthly workers,” e.g., not casual laborers, in Mombasa, which helps us determine in rough estimate how many upcountry Africans were a percentage of the “Africans” figure in the above graph. Most kazi ya mwezi were upcountry migrants, and so during the 1920s these workers may have represented at least 50 percent of the “Africans” figure. For the growing population of “Africans” reported in years 1931, 1935, 1939 and 1945, that we have little evidence of a rapid uptick in the Swahili population with, on the contrary, much anecdotal evidence of growing number of migrants, suggests that the “upcountry” as well as likely Mijikenda percentage of the “African” population was increasing along with the overall rise in the population of that statistical group. Frederick Cooper, On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 28-9.
Table 6

Africans as a Percentage of the Population of Mombasa Island, 1921-57


Table 7

WOMEN AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE AFRICAN POPULATION OF MOMBASA, 1947-62

Table 8

Average Monthly Wages in Mombasa, 1938-58

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Stevedoring workers (estimated)</th>
<th>Casual Shore workers (estimated)</th>
<th>Shore laborers</th>
<th>Railway</th>
<th>Government and Municipality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>54.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>152.25</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These are entry-level wages, and do not account for incremental raises for long-term employees. Source: *Mombasa Social Survey, Part I, 226.*
Table 9

Weekly Expenditure on Food by Item, 1939-58

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Tea (3.5 oz.)</th>
<th>Salt (3.5 oz.)</th>
<th>Vegetables (28 oz.)</th>
<th>Sugar (14 oz.)</th>
<th>Sim-Sim Oil (15.75 oz.)</th>
<th>Beans (14 oz.)</th>
<th>Potatoes (56 oz.)</th>
<th>Maize or Mixed Meal (126 oz.)</th>
<th>Beef (56 oz.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *Mombasa Social Survey, Part I, 228.*
The data in the preceding three graphs indicate, overall, an increase in waged, working class African spending power on food during the period from the late 1930s to the end of the 1950s. For example, from 1939-58, the cost of the diet in Table [blank] increased by 23.7 percent, but wages for railway workers, to select one group of wage earners, also grew by 440 percent during that same period, nearly doubling their real wages for purchasing food. However, important qualifications are also necessary. While wages rose significantly faster in proportion to many items of the above sample diet, this was less true in regards to the price of maize/mixed meal, which was in fact the most significant element in African food budgets, as the price of maize/mixed meal increased by 338 percent from 1939 to 1958. Combined with the reality that the base-line economic status of workers during the late 1930s was one of dire poverty, and that most poor Africans in the city primarily ate maize-based posho, the improvements in real wages and how they translated to what Africans could actually afford to eat may not have been, in the end, particularly impactful. Source: *Mombasa Social Survey, Part I*, 228, 242.
Table 12

Average Monthly Salaries for the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbours, 1945

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Shillings per Month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africans</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europeans</td>
<td>855.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabs and South Asians</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Salaries at the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbours, the largest single employer of Africans in Mombasa in 1945, demonstrate how wages were central to the making of a racialized class structure in the city, with the average African salary being only 7.3 percent of what Europeans made and 25 percent of the income of South Asian and Arab employees. Source: Data for calculating average incomes from *Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Kenya and Uganda Railways and Harbours, Including Main and Branch Lines, Lake Marine Services, Motor Car Services, Coast Port Services* (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1945), 4-6. For such workers as a portion of those in Mombasa in 1945, see Janmohamed, “A History of Mombasa,” 340.
Of the 22,702 Africans who worked for the KURH, 80 percent were “unskilled laborers,” meaning that the majority of Africans working for the railways and harbors made far less than the 62.5/-monthly average listed in figure [blank], as these manual laborers made only 23/- per month in Mombasa (as of 1945, 3,857 Africans were employed by KURH in Mombasa). The wage structures of colonial Kenya were creating a racialized class structure, but were also dividing Africans into differentiated classes, with a small minority making closer to living wages while the majority remained impoverished. Source: Report of the General Manager on Railways and Harbours: For the Year Ended 31st December, 1946 (Nairobi: Government Printer, 1947), 68, McMillan, Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure, 6, and Janmohamed, “A History of Mombasa,” 340.
Table 14

Monthly Salaries for Africans in Private European Employ in Mombasa, 1946

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Shillings per Month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laborers</td>
<td>45.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Workers</td>
<td>83.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Semi-Skilled Workers</td>
<td>64.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Factory Worker</td>
<td>51.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artisan</td>
<td>72.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanic</td>
<td>90.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Shop Worker</td>
<td>50.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>101.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardener</td>
<td>30.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Workers</td>
<td>42.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, these African wages can be compared to the average of 885.5/- for Europeans and 250/- for South Asians working for the KURH. Source: (CP/1/30), KNA-Coast.
Maps

Map 2: Mombasa Island and the North Mainland, 1945.

Mombasa Island and the North Mainland, 1945. Note the increasing density in the Central Business District (CBD), south-east of “Old Mombasa (Mvita).” Nyali, on the mainland, remained mostly plantations at this point, but would become an elite neighborhood for tourists and residents during the second half of the twentieth century. Source: Janmohamed, “A History of Mombasa,” 277.
In addition to the increased density on the island and in Nyali, notice the homes in Kisauni and Likoni, both areas where migrants were increasingly living. Source: Atlas of Kenya: A Comprehensive Series of New and Authentic Maps Prepared from the National Survey and other Governmental Sources with Gazetteer and Notes on Pronunciation and Spelling (Nairobi: Survey of Kenya, [1959] 1962), 38.
CHAPTER FOUR

“TO BE MAKING FOOD VENDORS A REGULAR AND PERMANENT FEATURE IN THE TOWN”: STREET FOOD AND THE PARAMETERS OF THE POSSIBLE IN DECOLONIZING MOMBASA, 1963-1971

By the time Kenya became independent in December of 1963, street-food vendors in the coastal city of Mombasa had endured nearly 15 years of a concerted and concentrated effort to erase their businesses from the city’s landscape. During this period, the central question vendors faced in their struggles was whether their modes of urban income generation would survive the dramatic restructuring of city through colonial theories of modernization and development. Starting during the late-1940s, urban officials worked to remake the city as modern, with a stabilized and permanent urban working class. With attention focused on quelling labor unrest and producing greater imperial stability, colonial officials sought to remake the social lives of urban Africans with the intention of creating a stable and predictable labor force. Modern African workers were to live in comfortable housing with their families, engage their leisure time in wholesome, productive recreation, and, of great consequence to the city’s street-food vendors, if these urban residents were to consume food outside these new households, it would be in licensed and tightly monitored public eateries. However, to create this new comestible culture, the old one—run by illicitly operating and only dimly monitored purveyors of tea, coffee and prepared food—needed to be destroyed.¹

Despite the intensity of the harassments, prosecutions, and demolitions that came with modernization and development during the late-colonial period, street-food vendors retained and even expanded their foothold in the city. A 1964 estimate placed the number of “illegal” food

¹ For more on modernization, development and street-food vendors in late-colonial Mombasa, see Chapter Three.
vendors at 124 on Mombasa island and 64 in the mainland suburbs around the city. This actually probably greatly underestimated the number of people selling food illicitly, since tea shops and hawkers were not counted, and they often sold prepared food contrary to the terms of their licenses. Not only had these vendors survived late-colonial development, they had also maintained their hold on the most desirous comestible geography of the city. Sellers of prepared food, like any other proprietor, need to be geographically well-situated within a city’s network of consumers to maximize their returns. Street-food vendors’ operations were based on economies of scale, on the small scale, selling high volumes of cheap sugary tea, the starchy-staple ugali with vegetable and meat-based relishes to accompany it, and various fried snacks. Retaining control of highly-trafficked areas was fundamental to their businesses, and though they had to confront a violent colonial bureaucracy, many had succeeded in doing just that.

Scanning the landscape of early independence Mombasa, illicit vendors and hawkers sold prepared food in a variety of such high-volume locations. They set up around Mombasa’s busy public markets, such as Makupa and MacKinnon, as well as in public parks like Coronation Gardens in the center of town. They also remained visible in the industrial-commercial parts of the city, providing lunch to the city’s waged working classes, especially in the High Level Godown neighborhood, the loading, unloading and storage zone for many of East Africa’s commodities. While the colonial state had tried to appropriate these comestible geographies from vendors and hawkers by building competing municipal food canteens, vendors continued to operate in close proximity and were able to undercut these state institutions by offering lower prices.

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In this way, the day-to-day reality of “anti-colonial” struggle for street-food vendors had only partially been an issue of flags and elected officials, and more so one fought over how the trading landscape of Mombasa was to be constituted. As control of the Kenyan state transferred from British to African hands, the extent to which the struggles and interests of these vendors were to be represented in the new government remained unclear. However, an initial answer emerged little more than a month after Kenya gained independence, as the General Purposes Committee of the newly post-colonial Municipal Council of Mombasa considered a report on “unauthorised food vendors” in the city. If any of Mombasa’s street-food proprietors were in the council’s chambers on that day, February 10, 1964, the comments by health official A.H.B. Rydon would have been uneasily familiar. In his report, Rydon urged the council to see “that these unauthorised vendors presented a hazard to the health of the citizens of Mombasa.” Detailing specific concerns, Rydon, the Ag. Medical Officer of Health, argued that vendors could spread “diseases such as food poisoning, diarrhoea and dysentery and typhoid … by the unhygienic preparation and handling of food.” He urged cooperation between government departments, and considered that force may be necessary to curb the industry. He hoped that support would be forthcoming for “any measures which would be taken by the officers of the Council in conjunction with the Police in prosecuting these illegal vendors and removing them from the streets and open spaces of Mombasa.”

For tea hawkers and shop owners, food vendors and home-restaurant operators, such an approach to the city’s comestible industry, and the vision of independent Mombasa that it articulated, bore a strong resemblance to the practices of the old, colonial government. However, as a burgeoning thread of Africanist historiography pushes us to consider, drawing a straight line between a colonial past and a neo-colonial future sidesteps the crucial task of interrogating how

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4 Minutes of the GPC, MMC, 10 February, 1964 (UY/12/338), KNA-Nairobi.
inherited structures were reworked in new contexts and deployed in ways that concepts such as “continuity” or “colonial legacies” fail to adequately explain.\(^5\) While the states, economies and policing systems of independent Africa did mirror those of the colonial period in significant ways, decolonization also entailed a reshuffling of the networks and cultural languages through which power and authority were exercised. This did not always, or even often, result in the kind of liberation that Africans imagined as European colonies fell, but it did significantly redirect and modify the platforms and languages through which they struggled.

As the February health report indicated, colonially-produced ideas about food, urban space and sanitation would remain part of how vendors interacted with the independent state, but as Africans and other Kenyans began to increasingly occupy more, though certainly not all, of the government offices that had been held by Europeans, and as the language of republican citizenship infused governing discourse, the nature of communication and claim-making did change in meaningful ways. Debates over licensing and the occupation of public and private land would continue, but, within the political culture of an independent republic rather than a colony, the language of conflict and accommodation became reconfigured, opening new possibilities for how street-food vendors might fit into Mombasa’s landscape. These proprietors, no longer subjects of the British Crown, were now wananchi (citizens) and were thus owed the matunda ya uhuru (fruits of freedom/independence). These generic discourses took the form of contingent practice when vendors translated them to have meaning within their specific struggles to maintain their businesses and survive in a city whose policies had been designed to destroy their livelihoods.

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Reworking their strategies, street-food vendors in post-colonial Mombasa came to stake their claims through a *bricolage* of discourses. They shamed independent urban authorities with a language of honor and obligation, and in which mostly urged them to live up to their duty to provide the *wananchi* with their endowed *haki* (right) to earn a living and thus allow them to provide food and education to their children. These vendors, *pace* David Schoenbrun and Frederick Cooper, drew upon globally circulating ideas such as citizenship and rights, and their claims were shaped by how capitalism and statist bureaucracy had remade Kenyan society, but they were also inflected through the specific materiality of their experiences and articulated within the “bundles of durable language” from pre-colonial Africa that continued to infuse ideologies and power structures in colonial and independent Africa.⁶

These post-colonial strategies and changing networks of power were not without tangible consequences. As the February 10 meeting in 1964 of the General Purposes Committee drew to a close, the councilors indicated to health officials that their program of urban sanitation in relation to street-food vendors may not, in fact, be so easily pushed through the council. Rather than recommending it for approval and adoption, the committee instead tabled it and formed a sub-committee to consider its implications. In effect, this temporarily withdrew the council’s support for prosecuting vendors. Distressed, Rydon, along with the Town Clerk, lodged a formal objection with the council, asserting that “the Sub-Committee was made contrary to their advice since the delay in prosecuting unauthorised food vendors was not in the interests of public health.”⁷ A door had been opened, and through it existed the possibly of a different comestible Mombasa in

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⁷ Minutes of the GPC, 10 February, 1964.
independent Kenya. Illicit vendors would struggle in the coming years to keep that open door from slamming back shut again.

During the early years of independence, the “Africanization” and “Kenyanization” of the government’s administration and the nation’s economy became central pillars of Kenya’s decolonization program. Africans, long marginalized, were to take a more representative place in positions of government and have wider influence in the economy. However, while Africanization did to a certain extent occur, President Jomo Kenyatta, who eschewed more radical notions of decolonization, conceded that many positions throughout government would continue to be occupied by Europeans until indigenous Kenyans were “ready” to take their place. The effects of this were felt nationally, at the level of local governance, and in particular in Mombasa’s offices of the Medical Officer of Health. Consequently, while the city’s municipal councilors were now Kenyans, Europeans remained in positions of power in urban government through the auspices of a new, racialized creation of decolonization: the former colonial official turned “expatriate” white expert. This new constellation of power—white experts shaping policy but with Kenyan nationals now holding key decision-making authority—created tensions almost immediately over the issue of how to administer Mombasa’s street-food vendors.

By the mid-1960s, the unemployment problem in Mombasa was reaching a crisis point, and municipal officials were feeling pressure to allow their constituents to do what they could to generate income. Salaried wage jobs were few, and people increasingly turned to vending and hawking as a way to make a living, with the food industry a popular choice. Though we do not

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8 For the limits of Africanization and Kenyanization in Kenya’s Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, see my article manuscript, “‘Safariland’: Tourism, Development and the Marketing of Kenya in the Post-Colonial World,” currently under review.
have consistent longitudinal data on the number of people working as street-food vendors, in Rydon’s 1964 report he pointed with anxiety “to the ever-increasing numbers of unauthorised food vendors who are at present plying their illegal trade in Mombasa.” Though the council was fairly quiet about its actions during the first months of independence, Rydon’s anxieties reveal the different tactics the independent government was employing when he wrote that “Everyone is aware of the acute unemployment situation in Mombasa,” but he then pleaded “that permitting unlicensed vendors of cooked food to carry on their unlawful trade is not a solution to the problem.” Rydon accused the councilors of turning “a blind eye,” but they were at this juncture in actuality seeking a middle ground of accommodation between the inherent violence of developmental modernization and the reality that they had more immediate obligations to their constituency of citizens than had colonial officials to their subjects.9

However, while new, less-precarious spaces for vending were slowly opening, municipal officials also continued in other ways to operate within the licensing logic they inherited from the colonial state. The major thrust of the council’s early-independence policy towards the selling of prepared food was to continue and expand the colonial program of building municipal food canteens to, over time, replace illicit street-food vendors. In an April meeting in 1964, two months after Rydon’s report, municipal officials began to build their own comestible map of the city, and, like vendors, to consider where demand was highest for prepared food. The General Purposes Committee proposed building canteens near the Mombasa port, a major center of employment in the city, near the train station, where tea vendors had sold food nearby in Jubilee Square, next to housing estates, and by the Labor Department’s compound.10

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9 A.H.B. Rydon, Ag. Medical Officer of Health to the GPC, MCM, 5 February, 1964 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi.
10 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 13 April, 1964 (UY/12/338), KNA-Nairobi.
While reproducing and further entrenching the colonial program of food canteens, the municipal council worked to create a distinctly new approach to the illicit vendors who continued to work outside these state eateries. During the initial months after independence, the council had deprioritized the enforcement of bylaws against street-food vendors, but they also, more structurally, began rethinking what it meant to be licensed. One form of vending in the city was to sell fried fish, which had long been consumed on the Kenyan coast. This market rapidly grew with the large migration during the colonial period of Luo workers to Mombasa from the Lake Victoria region, where fish had constituted a large part of their diet. While most food vendors primarily provided lunch food, fried-fish sellers were more of a take-out dinner service. Workers would get off their shift, or hawkers would finish their day of selling, they would purchase a fried fish, and then bring it home where they would cook some ugali or another starch to accompany it. At a November 1964 meeting of the General Purposes Committee, Councilor S.M.S. Makuto, one of the main advocates for street-food vendors, brought up these fried fish sellers, many of whom operated in Majengo, one of the largest African neighborhoods on the island. He argued that “this Council should not attach any conditions to the licenses for the sale of fried fish.” The issue was not the general legality of frying fish for sale, as preparing and selling fried-fish was a legal profession, and these traders were considered distinct from “unlicensed food vendors.” However, fried-fish sellers were required to have running water and access to drainage, despite the uneven infrastructure of the city. The council tabled Makuto’s proposition and created a sub-committee to inspect the premises in which these vendors operated. Ten days later, the sub-committee reported that “as people did very little business it was unreasonable and unnecessary to require them to have washing facilities.” At the meeting, the Medical Officer of Health, C.D. Rosenwald, protested and

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11 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 9 November, 1964 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi.
engaged in a “lengthy discussion” with the councilors. However, limited in that moment in real power and the social capital to exert enough pressure, Rosenwald conceded to removing the requirement of having running water in favor of a more broad understanding of what constituted “washing facilities,” which could include “a large drum with a tap” or a “washing basin.”

Fried-fish sellers had already been a legally-recognized profession, but the first two months of independence for them meant an easing of some of the difficult-to-meet requirements for their trade. The subtle changes to the licensing parameters of these fried-fish sellers were relatively uncontroversial, but the approach the council took with “unauthorised food vendors,” those operating outside municipal canteens, had more radical implications for the composition of urban space in the city. Building on the concession to deprioritize the prosecution of food vendors, the council went further when it decided to grant temporary licenses to roadside and in-home food vendors, which marked the first time these professions had been legally recognized in Mombasa. The councilors’ vision was still one in which roadside and in-home food vendors were not part of the city’s future, but, in the present, they would be temporarily licensed until the new canteens were built, and into which it was expected they would eventually move. This allowed councilors to compromise with their constituencies, to not deny them the haki to make a living, but while still operating within the licensing logic of the council, and preserving the idea that canteens were what the city’s comestible culture was to be.

This change in policy began informally and idiosyncratically. The evidence is sparse, but suggestive that specific groups of vendors were pressuring their councilors to provide them better security in their trade. During the first months of independence, the council issued letters to a limited number of vendors who operated near the High-Level Godown neighborhood, granting

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them permission to sell prepared food. Such actions technically violated the city’s by-laws, since food vending, except in municipal canteens, was illegal, but enough influence had been applied to convince these councilors to circumvent the city’s codes. However, these backchannel actions were neither fully-communicated nor agreed upon, and vendors continued to be arrested and harassed by police. By March 1965, the council realized it needed to formally legalize street-food vending if tangible changes were to occur. After detailing the continued harassment that vendors faced, the councilors ended their committee meeting by instructing the Medical Officer of Health to generate a report “on the possibilities of issuing a limited number of temporary licences to the foodvendors who would [eventually] be accommodated in the new canteens.”

However, the council did not act with a unitary voice, and the constituencies that councilors relied upon were not built only from the interests of unlicensed vendors. The following month a coalition led by J.Z.M. Mgaya, at the request of licensed vendors operating inside the market, asked for the removal of “all unlicensed traders and foodvendors” operating on the mainland in areas around “Chamgamwe Foodvendors Canteen and Market.” At that same meeting, Councilor M. Babu also suggested that tea licensing quotas, which to that point only affected Mombasa island, also be instituted and fixed at 20 on the mainland where African suburbs such as Changamwe, as well as Kisauni and Likoni, were rapidly growing. Moreover, on Mombasa island, despite the council considering temporary licenses, vendors still faced the daily possibility of harassment and demolition. The next month, April 1964, the council issued eviction notices to food vendors and other traders operating in the heavily-populated Mwembe Tayari neighborhood, and their representatives in the Coast Province National Traders Association, the replacement for the colonial Mombasa African Traders Association, claimed that their trading space were being

13 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 8 March, 1965 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi.
14 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 12 April, 1965 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi.
claimed by the state so that it could “be taken over by the Kenya Bus Service.”15 Despite this pushback, the council was trending in favor of the city’s illicit, or potentially soon to be licit, street-food vendors. Two months later, Councilor A.J.K. Mulandi disputed the idea that vendors around Changamwe should be removed, feeling “that until the Council had erected a temporary market at Changamwe the unauthorized traders and foodvendors should not be removed from the road reserves near the Municipal Changamwe Housing Estate.” Reversing its previous position, the General Purposes Committee agreed, and recommended “that no action be taken to remove the unauthorized traders and foodvendors from the Road reserves near the Changamwe Foodvendors Canteen and Market until the Council had erected a temporary market.”16

Sitting in the council chambers during this decision and waiting their turn to speak, the Medical Office of Health, C.D. Rosenwald, and the Chief Medical Inspector, were likely not pleased by this development. Taking the floor, they spoke more generally of what they perceived as the consequences of actions such as the council’s amendment that required the Medical Officer of Health to provide temporary licenses “to all food vendors who were reasonably clean.” They saw this not as temporary stop-gap, but as the first step that would dismantle their authority in the city. The health officials argued that, if the council legalized street food as currently constituted, they would not only lose control of vending, but also their ability to impose strict standards on already licensed “restaurants and other premises dealing in food.” Realizing the instability of their strict position, the health officials pushed for a compromise by conceding that issuing temporary licenses only to the number of vendors that would then be accommodated in the canteens had the possibility of at least containing legally-legitimated roadside food vending. Otherwise, they worried that providing “unlimited licenses would greatly increase the risk [to public health] and

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16 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, June 1965 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi.
give no hope of a solution to the problem in the foreseeable future.” They requested that the
council’s minute requiring them to license all food vendors be rescinded and asked for specific
details on what the sanitation requirements would be for these temporarily licenses, if the were to
be issued.\textsuperscript{17}

These health officials had been correct to be worried about how their claims would be
received by the council. After consideration, the committee denied all their requests. The minute
requiring unlimited licensing of street-food vendors was confirmed, and the Medical Officer of
Health was to “be instructed to issue licenses to all food vendors who were reasonably clean and
prosecute those who were not,” and, perhaps speaking to councilors who were skeptical, urged
“that members of the Council should give all support to the Health Department in carrying out the
instructions contained” in their above order.\textsuperscript{18}

Word spread quickly throughout Mombasa that free, temporary licensed were going to be
issued by the council, and street-food vendors in the city began to strategize how best to use this
new licensing category. Rosenwald noted soon after that his office was receiving applications from
people already “approved for tea and mahamri hawkers licenses” who have “said that they would
prefer to take out food vendor licenses, widen their scope of trade, and save license fees.” However,
Rosenwald had it backwards. These tea and mahamri vendors likely had already widened the scope
of their trade to serve beans, roast meat and maize, as well as other prepared food, but now saw
these licenses as a cost-free way to legitimate their existing businesses.\textsuperscript{19} Rosenwald was

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} The practice of hawkers and vendors taking out tea or other licenses, but then selling prepared foods beyond what
those licenses proscribed, began during the 1950s and the licensing refusal records show continued into the
independence period. See, for example, “Refusals,” Addendum to the Agenda of the General Purposes Committee,
12 April, 1965 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi, and “Licenses for Refusals, G.P. Committee, Addendum to the Agenda.
7 June, 1965. See Chapter Three, “Devouring Development,” for more on the use of tea licenses by food vendors
during the late-colonial period.
exasperated as he watched the system of control and surveillance that the colonial state had built quickly falling apart within a year of independence. He wrote the council, arguing that not only would health authorities be unable to impose strict sanitation conditions on restaurants, but also, just as concerning, that increasingly there remained “no conceivable reason why any hawker selling any item of food should be expected to pay a license fee.” Not simply threatening revenues, Rosenwald saw food vendors, who were already prominent in the city and “expected to appear in increasing numbers,” as “the greatest present threat to health in Mombasa.” Bringing out the tensions of Kenya’s limited Africanization, Rosenwald complained that he and his European colleagues, as well as the local employees who worked for them, could not continue much longer, noting that “Several of the Inspectors expressed the view that it was futile to try to do their jobs properly in the impossible circumstances being forced upon them by the Council.” This attitude was “fast overtaking expatriate officers” and, trying to press on the nation-building sympathies of these independent officials, he pushed them to consider that such a viewpoint may quickly be “appearing in local officers, on whom Mombasa is to depend for many years to come.”

However, for Rosenwald, health and sanitation were only part of his disdain for roadside street-food vendors. His distaste for them was also aesthetic and tied a need to produce a consumable image of Mombasa to global markets. By the mid-1960s, the Kenyan government was working to refine its development priorities, and tourism had been identified as a key source of foreign-direct investment and foreign exchange. Mombasa’s coastline and the resort hotels and ancillary industries that lined it constituted one of the central pillars of Kenya’s post-colonial tourism strategy. The “idea of Kenya” that was supposed to be produced for tourism consumption was a mix of primeval naturalism in safaris and on beaches, rural African “traditions,” and urban

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modernity in its developed cities. Food vendors did not fit into the global-norms of urban architecture that imperialism had created and, for Rosenwald, they represented how African cities were producing an unrecognizable modernity. He stressed that if the vendors were “not provided proper canteens,” and even if they were licensed only after they removed their structures, these traders “will inevitably build further unsightly unauthorised buildings.” Vendors’ structures were “neither traditional nor picturesque,” but instead were “only unsightly and insanitary” and “have brought adverse comment from tourists, and particularly from visiting health personnel and civil servants from the rest of Kenya.” Concluding, Rosenwald drew a clear line between the health department and the Municipal Council, and wanted to remove health officials from any liability, stating that if licenses were to be provided, the council should not seek “approval or encouragement from the Health Department.” He and his officers “felt that the Council should bear the full responsibility for the consequences, and not be in a position to say that the licences were approved by the Health Department.”

As the council mulled Rosenwald’s letter, vendors continued to apply for the free temporarily licenses. By the time the General Purposes Committee reconvened on June 21, over 300 tea vendors had submitted applications. As the councilors debated, it became clear that the opening that temporary food-vendors’ licenses had created might remain, but that it would be narrowed. Retreating from the idea of unlimited licenses, the committee members agreed to the previously proposed concession from the Rosenwald and the Health Inspector, and agreed only to license as many vendors as could fit into the new canteens once they opened. When the recommendation of the committee went in front of the general council about two weeks later,

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21 For more on tourism and the Kenyan government’s global marketing campaign during decolonization, see my “‘Safariland.’”
22 Rosenwald, “Licensing of Food Vendors.”
sentiment was solidifying around this more limited view of temporary, licensed vending. One councilor, A. Ali, according to the *Daily Nation*, “jumped to his feet” during the meeting and declared, “I wish to support [the Minister of Health],” and he was seconded by the Mayor Msanifu Kombo who told his colleagues that “I hope all councilors will do likewise.” After a vote, the council unanimously passed the Rosenwald’s recommendations. The *Daily Nation*, at the conclusion of its article on the meeting, editorialized that “An unlimited number of food hawkers would inevitably result in the lowering of standards in all sorts of other food handling establishments.”

The moment of unlimited licenses had come and gone, and the narrowed version of temporary licensing was reconfirmed and further entrenched a month later when the Ministry of Local Government in Nairobi became aware of the activities of the Municipal Council of Mombasa. Officials in Nairobi wrote that they were “extremely perturbed” to have heard that the Mombasa council was “proposing to issue licences in contravention of their own by-laws and that such action was considered irresponsible and very disappointing when it came from the second most important municipality in the country.” Solidifying the position of Rosenwald and his staff with the support of the national government, the Ministry of Local Government concluded that it was “pleased to note” that the municipal council “had now decided to take the advice of the Medical Officer of Health on the subject of licencing foodvendors.”

While a discourse premised on sanitation, nation-building, and modernization informed Rosenwald’s arguments, and seemed to have convinced many councilors and Nairobi-based officials, street-food vendors pushed back with a language informed by anti-colonialism and a notion of democratic decolonization. Nicholas Ntinda, of the CPTA, brought the food vendors case

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to the nationally-published *Daily Nation* newspaper, and there asserted that “his members were ‘very annoyed’ at the Ministry’s remarks” that “condemn the licensing of food vendors.” The council’s laws, he argued, were “colonialist-made.” The predecessor organization during colonialism, MATA, had framed their arguments around the lack of representation that Africans had had in the municipal council, and that its exclusionary laws reflected the racist composition of urban authority. While Kenya was now independent, Ntinda pointed to how the such laws of the colonial system were continuing to inform vendors’ realities. Instead of reproducing such colonial iniquities, he argued, the council should help street-food vendors to also benefit from the new constellation of power and governance in independent Kenya by creating “new democratic by-laws prepared by our elected councillors.”

However, while the colonial-era MATA had represented and bundled together the interests of both licit and illicit vendors, the politics of decolonization and the reconfiguration of urban licensing was continuing to pull vendors apart. On September 22, 1965, the General Purposes Committee considered a second petition written by Councilor Mgaya, who represented the vendors working the Changamwe Municipal Canteen, and voiced their concerns over the food vendors operating near these official eateries. For vendors who made the decision to work out of municipal canteens, the choice was not an economic one, as their businesses struggled to compete with illicit vendors who could offer lower prices, but rather one of security and stability, as for them the consistency of not facing constant harassment, arrests and demolitions superseded the priority of potentially higher profits outside municipal canteens. However, after independence, they still struggled “to pay their rents owing to severe competition from the unauthorized food vendors,” except now the deprioritization of prosecuting illicit vendors and the creation of temporary licenses

had, as health officials worried, made less clear any advantage to staying inside the canteens. As these municipal vendors saw those outside gaining greater security while they continued to pay rents, tensions between the licensed and unlicensed became tauter. In their petition, they argued that “it was unfair on the part of the council to permit unauthorised food vendors to operate,” and that “they were of the opinion that the unlicensed traders and foodvendors should be removed immediately from the entrance of the Changamwe Housing Estates.” They stopped short of denying them the haki to make a living, suggesting “they be asked to occupy vacant spaces away from the Estate,” but ultimately aligned themselves with this state’s vision that roadside vending would not a permanent feature of the town. They concluded that these relocated vendors should be warned that “when the temporary market which the Council intended building in the near future was erected all such unlicensed people would be removed.” The committee, perhaps swayed by the ways that these vendors had mobilized the council’s own logic, recommended their petition for adoption by the council.27

The direction that urban governance of street food took in early independence Mombasa was indeed not a straight line between the “colonial legacies” of late-colonial development, but instead drew on these past practices and then recast them through a multi-valent set of conflicts and struggles between and amongst councilors, vendors and health officials.28 Shifting sets of pressures could also quickly reorient alliances. During a meeting in January, 1966, less than six months after Councilor Ali had yelled out that he “wished to support” the Medical Officer of Health, he reversed himself and took the side of illicit. The records do not indicate how or by whom he was pressured into this reversal, but he stated in the council that because “of the limited number of licensed foodvendors in the town and owing to the prosecutions of a number of

27 Minutes of the GPC, 22 September, 1965 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi.
28 See footnote five above.
unlicensed foodvendors by the police,” that he felt the 60 licenses at which the temporary quota had been set was far too low, and that it needed to be raised to 130. During the same meeting, I.K. Ndirangu tried to push the issue even further, arguing that only raising the quota to 130 would not solve the problem for hawkers, and that instead it should be abolished all together. He urged the council to see that “the people were becoming clean” and that any number above the 130 should be licensed as long as “they were clean and complied with the council’s requirements.” After a warning from the Medical Officer of Health, Ndirangu’s suggestion was not adopted, but the quota was recommended to be increased from 60 to 130, and less than a month later this change was adopted by the council. At the same meeting, N.S. Rihal, the newly installed Medical Officer of Health was ordered to inspect throughout the city to find vendors who were clean, but not licensed because the existing quota.29

At the news of the licensing quota being expanded spread, vendors began applying again in large numbers. By March, the council had 182 applications for such licenses pending, and these were “on the increase day by day.” Rihal, of Mombasa’s South Asian community, had replaced his European predecessor as the Medical Officer of Health, but was no less interested in moving beyond the colonial-licensing logic. Bristling at the idea that he report back to the council on clean vendors who might be licensed, Rihal retorted in a February 4 meeting that “I am afraid I do not agree with the logic” licensing more foodvendors, since, “in my opinion, ALL … are dirty and potentially dangerous when they lack the elementary essentials of hygiene,” and he further pointed out that “Allowing foodvendors to operate at all is contrary to Council’s requirements set out in its Bylaws and certainly against the principles of the Public Health Act.”30

30 N.S. Rihal, Medical Officer of Health, Mombasa, to the Town Clerk, Mombasa. 4 February, 1966 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi.
However, in response to push-back from some municipal councilors, Rihal also revealed the shaky scientific link between these vendors and public health realities in the city. He disputed the idea that “because not many people have died” that street food was safe, and argued that “Our feeling is that cases of Dysentery … are quite considerable and some of them might be patronizing the foodvendors.” In such situations, Rihal argued, “we feel that prevention is better than cure.” With only thin evidence that vendors contributed to public health problems, and with councilors concerned to keep their constituents happy, over the next month the council continued to reaffirm that Rihal needed to identify cleanly operating vendors and provide them with licenses.

The following month, Rihal sent a memo to the council regarding the issue of licensing food vendors, and in it repeated his concerns over sanitation, but also drew, as had Rosenwald, on circulating ideas about modernization, aesthetics, and economic development. He explained to the council that the objective of the Department of the Medical Officer of Health was not only to maintain food sanitation in the city, but also to foster the “establishment of food-catering premises (canteens, restaurants, eating houses, etc.) rather than foodvending on the roadside.” Their mission was as much aesthetic and social, as medical. It was, “in other words, to remove the unsightly features of the food-vending trade from the roadside into properly run premises.” He concluded his thoughts by linking this aesthetic and social project to a modernizing and economic one, rearticulating the vision of Rosenwald, by arguing that “a consistent and forceful policy is required by the Council so that the unsightly aspect of the Foodvendors’ trade be removed from the roadsides in view of the increasing Tourist Trade.”

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31 Ibid.
32 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 7 March, 1966 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi.
modernizing nation-state, “It becomes incumbent on all of us to present a good image of this country.”

First with Rosenwald, and then Rihal, the Medical Officer of Health failed to convince the council with unsubstantiated claims that food vendors were responsible for a deterioration of Mombasa’s public health, but succeeded when linking the sanitation project to the aesthetics and economics of modernization and the growing tourism industry. After reading his letter at an April meeting, they reversed their decision to require the Medical Officer of Health to license people beyond a quota of 60. Though a month behind the unfolding of these events in Mombasa, once the Ministry of Local Government in Nairobi read of the council’s attempt to again expand the licensing of people vending food in Mombasa, they chastised the councilors, writing that the “Medical Officer of Health has explained very clearly to your Council the health hazards involved in increasing the number of food vendors.” Greatly concerned at the implications of the actions of the council, the ministry worried that the city’s councilors were moving towards making “food vendors a regular and permanent feature in the town.”

If fact, Mombasa’s councilors were trying to do something far less radical than that. Most seemed fully committed to the idea of transferring roadside vendors into municipal canteens, but they faced a constituency of street-food vendors who were mostly uninterested in that particular vision of post-colonial Mombasa. The councilors were caught in between, trying to stay within the modernization logic of the state, but while not losing the support of their constituencies who had a quite different set of priorities for Mombasa’s comestible landscape.

34 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 12 April, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.
35 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 9 May, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.
Moreover, as the 1960s unfolded, the incentives to join municipal canteens were only further eroded. While the council had been pressured into easing enforcement and to license at least a limited number of foodvendors, they were still concerned with revenue. Food-vendor canteens and the licensing of food more generally had never been about producing surplus revenue for the state, but officials, both colonial and post-colonial, were concerned that they not operate at too high a loss. For those operating in these canteens, up to the mid-1960s the restricted mobility and higher prices that municipal vending necessitated, to a curtained extent, been mitigated by one factor; that they received free and unlimited water in the canteens. Despite health officials’ anxieties to the contrary, street-food vendors did use water consistently, for their cooking and washing. It just was not running water most of the time, but purchased in a portable jerry-can. Municipal vendors, though paying fees and unable to respond to shifts in consumer-market geographies, at least did not have this expense. However, during the mid-1960s, it came to the attention of the council just how much this small luxury for its vendors was costing the city.³⁶

Looking at older numbers, the council noted how in 1957 it received only Shs. 3424/- for stall rents, but paid out Shs. 8,245/70 in water bills.³⁷ Moreover, while these rents fell well below the revenue they received, that revenue itself was quite inconsistent. For municipal vendors on the margins, delaying or not paying the council rents became an obvious way to make up for precarious profits. At the High-Level Godown Canteen, the vendors collectively carried arrears of over Shs.

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³⁶ Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 22 September, 1965 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.
³⁷ Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 10 October, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.
1,000/-, month to month.\(^38\) Looking to balance their deficits, the state decided both to enforce eviction notices on people in arrears, and to begin charging for water inside the canteens.\(^39\)

Just as the new canteens were opening, the state was working to make them even less desirous spaces in which vendors would work. During the mid- to late-1960s, canteens across the city were completed and, in anticipation of stalls becoming available, the council began to lay down policies for how roadside vendors would be cleared from Mombasa’s landscape. The vendors who held temporary licenses would be provided first option to occupy stalls in the new canteens. However, once offered a stall, if vendors declined, their temporarily licenses would be cancelled, thus rendering them again illicit.\(^40\) Perhaps realizing that the incentives were aligned against them, the council also shifted back towards more coercive tactics to try to make its project of canteens work. In their orders to Rihal, they included that he “be instructed to allocate stalls of the food vendors Canteen immediately after the water and drainage works had been carried out,” and “that those people who decline to accept the stalls allocated to them be not permitted to trade in the illegal sale of food and be removed from the road reserves.” Revealing their anxieties about whether their licensed vendors could compete, the council concluded “that all unauthorised vendors operating in the vicinity of the Council’s Food Vendors Canteens [will] be removed in order to permit the authorized food vendors to trade without any competition.”\(^41\)

With his orders, the Medical Officer of Health began moving around town and issued citations not only to establish public food vendors, but also in ways that disrupted socio-economic

\(^{38}\) For example, see Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 8 August, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi, Minutes of the GPC, MCM 12 September, 1966, (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi, Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 10 October, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi, Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 7 November, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.

\(^{39}\) Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 22 September, 1965 (UY/12/339), KNA-Nairobi, Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 7 February, 1966 (UY/12/339), and KNA-Nairobi, Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 12 August, 1968 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.


\(^{41}\) Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 12 April, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.
relationships between friends, co-workers, and cooks. While many people visited food vendors for lunch, others created their own more personal arrangements for acquiring food during the working day or leisure time. Curio woodcarvers, most of them Kamba and who faced their own eviction problems, had claimed and worked out of public space in the Tudor Housing Estate on Mombasa island.\(^{42}\) They had arranged four cooks who worked directly for them, cooking lunch. After receiving citation, an advocate for the woodcarvers, Mohamed Jahazi, appeared in front of the council and said that “the Wood Carvers wanted a cheap meal of their preference and if the Tudor Rest House provided such cheap food they would discharge their cooks.” The council noted that “owing to undue competition from the unauthorised food vendors the Tudor Rest House had to be shut down,” and the Medical Officer of Health also added that these cooks “had been operating in the most unhygienic and insanitary conditions and should be treated like other unauthorised food vendors.”\(^{43}\) Staying within the logic of the council, but while seeking accommodation, it was decided to provide temporary licenses to these cooks, but then require them to occupy a municipal canteen that would be built in Tudor. Two months later, a member of Mombasa’s Chelsea Football Club was brought before the council with charges that he prepared and sold “meat soup, tea and mahamri” to the other members of the club. After negotiation, the Medical Officer of Health agreed to allow him to continue if he met basic health department standards.\(^{44}\)

While both these small-scale comestible arrangements survived the council’s inquiries, many larger concerns, the businesses that sold food to the general public, those that posed a greater threat to canteens, did not. In the same meeting when the wood-carvers’ cooks were provided temporary licenses, it was also resolved to “take action against all those whom the Council had


\(^{43}\) Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 9 May, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.

\(^{44}\) Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 12 September, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi, and Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 10 October, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.
served notices to remove their unauthorised structures and quit the place.”45 Momentum was building against vendors. When the Coast’s Provincial Commissioner I.M. Mathenge was taken on a tour of the many sites of development in the city, he could not help being offended by the ubiquity of food vendors throughout the city, and noted “that people who have constructed illegal structures must stop this practice forthwith.” Mathenge announced that food vendors would have “two weeks notice … to move into council stalls at Majengo which are lying vacant.”46 In fact, they had less time than that. Twelve days later, municipal authorities struck with its largest demolition since independence. Responding to the pressure from Mathenge, municipal authorities demolished around 100 food stalls in the industrial areas of Mombasa.47

Over the coming months, as canteens opened, the council continued to try to phase out temporarily licensing, bring vendors into the canteens, and rid the city of roadside vendors. The council found some success convincing vendors to join the canteens, but others who lost their licenses chose the precarity of illicit vending over working inside expensive, state institutions. The Medical Officer of Health noted at a June meeting in 1966 that many of the new food stalls were filled by former roadside vendors, but that “a few stalls remained to be taken up,” though he was “trying to get these occupied as soon as possible.”48 However, while these new institutions of urban development opened their doors, those who had tried to operate outside these spaces were feeling the violent edge of modernization. Nicholas Ntinda, the provincial Secretary of the Kenya National Traders Association, told the *Daily Nation* that the “Hawkers and food-vendors whose bandas [structures] have been demolished by the Municipal Council are suffering from starvation.”

Looking to the council, Ntinda tried to appeal through a discourse of patriarchy, with the councilors

45 Minutes of the GPC, 9 May, 1966.
46 “Marathon Tour for P.C.,” *Daily Nation* 13 May, 1966
48 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 13 June, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.
as paternal patrons. Using specifically gendered and generational language, he pleaded the
councilors see how these food-vendors and hawkers were mostly “elderly widows who had no
means of support since their bandas were demolished.”49 These elected representatives were failing
in their duty to creation an environment in which wananchi, especially those who were understood
to be vulnerable, “elderly widows,” could make a living and support themselves. Councilors’
requirements were not the same as nineteenth-century patrons who had to provide such patronage
in exchange for subaltern labor, but they were at least obligated to the provide conditions, in
capitalist Kenya, where people could make their own way.

Such arguments seem to generally have held some sway. The council continued to funnel
food vendors into municipal canteens, but the limited number of stalls could not possibly have
accommodated the hundreds of roadside vendors who operated in Mombasa, even assuming they
all would have wanted to work within those spaces.50 The council had used the tool of violence,
demolishing at least 100 vibanda throughout the city in the preceding months, but in the following
years councilors, tied to constituents angry about these demolitions, also tried to reach a negotiated
settlement with the city’s comestible traders. They continued to vigorously police people who set
up on roadsides and other open, public places, and especially those who were near municipal
canteens, but they also looked to revive and expand an order urban institution as a concession to
the “elderly widows” who had been displaced.51

In 1967, the council created a new comestible licensing category, one in which people
could operate small eateries out of their homes. This had long been one form of prepared-food
vending in the city, and as an alternative to roadside vending it suited the council, as it allowed

50 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 10 October, 1966 (UY/12/353), KNA-Nairobi.
51 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 8 April, 1968 (UY/12/882), KNA-Nairobi.
vendors to work, but while keeping them off the street and away from the landscape’s that tourists and international visitors would see. Their licenses were quite specific, and had stipulations, but it was a way to prepare and sell food legally outside the canteens. They were allowed to sell *mbaazi* (cooked beans), *muhogo* (cooked cassava), *uji* (porridge), and fried fish. By late 1968, many vendors had seized on this opening, and started businesses out of homes, even creating small-scale food bazaars verging on restaurants within residential buildings. These created tensions with other residents who complained that their homes were being transformed into eateries, as during the day and evening, people living in these buildings dealt with “excessive noise from the clients who come to have food” and their communal kitchens were “loaded with food vendors cookery to the exclusion of tenants.” However, with the streets under heavy surveillance, and these home eateries presented as the legal alternative, these businesses were only growing throughout the city. The Medical Officer of Health, not pleased by either the sanitary arrangements of these spaces or the noise they created, recommended to the council that no new licenses in this category be approved, and all others not be renewed once they expired. The council, however, having found its temporary solution, ordered the health department to continue issuing licenses to allow these home restaurants.

As the 1960s came to a close, vendors in Mombasa looked out at an ambiguous comestible landscape, and likely had, at best, mixed feelings about how they had faired during the early years of *uhuru*. Those seven years had been tumultuous, at one point offering the possibility that vendors would be provided with free licenses, validating their businesses and liberating them from the daily anxieties of citations and demolitions. However, these spaces had, to a certain extent, opened only temporarily in order to facilitate the entrenchment in independent Mombasa of the colonial

52 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 8 January, 1968 (UY/12/882), KNA-Nairobi.
53 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 11 November, 1968 (UY/12/882), KNA-Nairobi.
program of moving roadside vendors off the streets and into municipal food canteens. Once these canteens were ready, the violence of demolitions and expulsions they had endured during colonialism returned. However, municipal officials also seemed, at a certain level, to understand the limits of their own power, and the need to accommodate themselves to the economic realities of a city ravaged by unemployment. While home restaurants lacked the mobility to situate one’s business most advantageously, and to respond to the shifting geographies of consumer markets, they did provide a respite from the municipal authorities and their demolition crews.

**Conclusion: Post-Colonial Contingency and Comestible Politics in Independent Mombasa**

Shariff Nassir in 1970 was the deputy chairman of the Kenya African Nation Union (KANU) and a rising figure within the party ranks. On March 26 of that year, he was working out of KANU’s Mombasa office when 150 Muslim women showed up in protest “to make their feelings known over the way municipal inspectors treat them when found vending their wares in Mombasa.” These women pushed Nassir, a descendent of a coastal patrician family, to fulfill his role as their official, their patron, and to take their case to the council. These vendors “had been refused licences to sell pre-cooked food,” and drawing on a gendered language of paternalism, told him that they were “widows and need money to send their children to school.” Persuaded, pressured, or both, Nassir went to the Town Clerk, N. Adembesa, who he convinced to take the issue to the Municipal Council.54

Little more than a week later, on April 3, the council discussed “the ban on selling food in the streets” of Mombasa. Juma Ferunzy, not part of the council but the East African Legislative Assembly, came to the meeting and spoke to the councilors, framing the challenges vendors faced in the longer unfolding of anti-colonial struggle, noting that the council’s by-laws “have been a

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nuisance to mothers [selling food] for quite a long time and should be relaxed.” He reassured his perhaps nervous municipal colleagues that it was not his “intention to blame this council, but surely these by-laws were formed during colonial times and they should now be changed to keep up with the wind of independence.” The deputy mayor and councilmember, A.N. Mwindau, perhaps influenced by the presence of KANU and Ferunzy, or just acting from personal conviction, added that “we cannot deny the fact that most of us were brought up and educated by money earned by our mothers through cooking and selling food—which is now being denied them.” Emphasizing his point, he continued that “I, for one, was educated by money earned by my mother in this way during colonial days.” Councilor Mwaruwa added that these vendors were vulnerable figures, needing paternal assistance, as they often were unmarried and had children in school, and that these vendors “have to get money to educate their children otherwise they will be a bother to the council.” These sons were failing their mothers who had raised them to become leaders of the nation through the money they earned working as street-food vendors, and worse still they were preventing other mothers from doing the same, creating the next generation of productive Kenyan citizens.

The General Purposes Committee that same month took up the council’s call to reconsider food vending in the city. Far short of the unlimited temporary licenses that had been considered and a brief reality during the mid-1960s, the committee was flexible but narrow in its imagination of how the street-food industry might change. They took the already existing category of the home restaurant, and augmented it. In drafting this new license, they outlined that food needed to be cooked indoors, and about this they were emphatic: “no cooking [was] to be allowed outside the premises … or on the pavement except warming of the already cooked food.” With this stipulation,

they were being quite precise in their language so as not to again legalize full-scale eateries on the city’s roads and open spaces. Thus, people could again be mobile, better situate themselves within the consumptive markets of the city’s comestible geography, but the food could only be the limited items of *mbaazi, muhogo, uji*, and fried fish, and it had to be pre-prepared, inside their homes.56

The door to a different comestible Mombasa had been propped open again. Women food vendors had used their collective power to shame the council into creating a more flexible licensing category, providing a way that women could sell food on Mombasa’s streets, where their visibility and mobility could provide better access to more diverse consumer markets. These women had instrumentalized gender, generation, and discourses of obligation to push politicians to take their position seriously. These political languages have deep roots in East Africa, but were repurposed and remade by these women and others within the modernist bureaucracy and commercial economies of decolonizing Mombasa to stake claims to space, ways of making a living, and to lodge and push their voices into elite enclaves such as the Municipal Council.

The urban social structure that was made in independent Mombasa out of such struggles is inexplicable outside of an understanding of how the colonial period shaped the parameters of what the economy and governance could be, but such “continuities” and “legacies” of colonialism are only the starting point of the analysis. Decolonizing Mombasa was made by people who drew on a *bricolage* of discourses, some colonial and others with long pre-colonial genealogies, and they used them to wage a new kind of politics to make sense of, challenge, and fight for space within a grossly unequal urban economy.

The partial opening women food vendors created in 1970 produced a new administrative category around which they could mobilize, decided to fall within, or to repurpose into a form of

56 Minutes of the GPC, MCM, 13 April, 1970 (UY/12/882), KNA-Nairobi.
vending they found preferable. Providing a legal way to once again operate on the street, the category generated a diverse set of possibilities for these women and others to prepare and sell food around the city. However, a year later the context would change dramatically for everyone who tried to make a living selling food and beverages on Mombasa’s streets. The fear of food vendors as vectors for infectious diseases during the 1950s and 1960s in Mombasa had been mostly theoretical, as foodborne illness existed, but did not present a great threat to public health. Sanitation as a form of urban control had been deployed against vendors throughout colonialism and the early independence periods, but, especially during the 1960s it seems clear that the aesthetics of the modern city, and its connection to the tourism economy, were as much, if not more so, the reasons for the ferocity of the state’s attack on roadside vending. However, during 1971, cholera outbreaks began in Mombasa and other parts of Kenya. While the evidence linking these outbreaks specifically to food vendors was often suspect, the specter of cholera, the spreading fear of contagion, provided a new and potent justification for municipal authorities in their drive to suppress and eradicate street-food vendors from Mombasa. The door, just as it opened, slammed shut yet again.
Images

Image 6: Unauthorized structure, c. 1960s

Photo from the 1960s of an unauthorized structure in Mombasa. The source is not clear if this is a home or a business, or both, but regardless is similar in design to roadside, street-food eateries. Note the use of corrugated-iron sheets with supporting wood beams. Source: Harm J. de Blij, *Mombasa: An African City* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 74.
Maps

Map 4: Mombasa, 1969

CHAPTER FIVE

CONTAGIONS AND CONFLICT: THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF WORKING-CLASS FOOD IN 1970s MOMBASA

The early years of Kenya’s independence were genuinely transformative ones for the people in Mombasa who sold prepared food and drink to the city’s poorer classes. Having spent the final decade of colonialism as pariahs of the urban landscape, targeted for removal through prosecutions and demolitions, after independence they were able to successfully mobilize their new power as wananchi (citizens) by building a constituency through which they pressured officials in the Mombasa Municipal Council to redefine how prepared food and drinks could be sold in the city. While for most of the colonial period the only legal categories of street-food vending outside municipal canteens were beverage-only tea and coffee licenses, food vendors during the 1960s and early 1970s used their influence inside the council to push officials to create two new licensing categories that in effect legalized the right of people to sell prepared food throughout the city without having to be inside the formalized confines of a restaurant or a municipal canteen. Despite these achievements, selling prepared food and drink on the city’s streets or inside one’s home remained a precarious and difficult way to earn income, as some zealous officials still conducted raids and demolitions, only a few types of food could be sold, and the licensing quotas were capped well below the amounts needed to legalize everyone who wanted to do such work.¹ Nonetheless, the very fact that they had redefined the official vision of urban modernity so that the professions of in-home and roadside eateries were written into the city’s by-laws, even if in a limited fashion, was indeed a tiding of the radical possibilities of how the

¹ Licenses to sell prepared food were fixed at 50 for Mombasa Island, and 30 each for the surrounding peri-urban, mainland neighborhoods of Changamwe, Likoni and Kisauni, and there could be only one business per city block. Minutes of the Mombasa Municipal Council. April 1970. (UY/12/517), Kenya National Archives, Coast Province (KNA-Coast), and Food Vendors License, Min: 856/67 (5) as amended by Min: 1490/68 (6), Sale of Cooked Beans (Mbaazi), Cooked Cassava (Muhogo), Porridge (uji) and Fried Fish. (UY/12/517), KNA-Coast.
wananchi might remake independent Kenya. However, a transformation in the global ecology of disease that began on the other side of the Indian Ocean during the early 1960s would profoundly change the position of street-food vendors in Mombasa during the remainder of the 1970s, and in many ways stills effects the politics of urban food in Kenya up until the present day.

During the final years of colonial rule in Kenya, an outbreak of a relatively new strain of cholera began thousands of kilometers away in rural Indonesia in May and June of 1961. The cholera that struck Makassar on Indonesia’s Sulawesi Island, Vibrio cholerae 01 El Tor, had not caused much concern for medical researchers since its discovery during the 1930s because it was seen as less virulent than its classical relative, Vibrio Cholerae 01, the bacterium that had ravaged the Indian Ocean World and beyond during the nineteenth century. However, with alarming speed, the disease spread beyond Sulawesi and drew the attention of the international health community. By the end of 1961, additional cases of El Tor were recorded in Hong Kong, Macao and the Philippines. During 1962, the infection spread to Turkey, Taiwan, Iran and Borneo. That same year, the World Health Organization officially moved to include El Tor vibrio as part of how it defined Cholera, upgrading it from its previous designation as the diarrheal disease “Paracholera.”

For the quarter century before the Sulawesi outbreak, cholera infections had been sporadic, isolated to a few endemic areas, and short-lived. Whatever hopes that the disease may have been nearing its effective eradication were quickly dashed, however, as this new bacterium exploded into world’s Seventh Cholera Pandemic during the 1960s.

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2 The urban politics of the street-food industry in late-colonial and early-independence Mombasa is covered in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

For much of that decade, the pandemic was primarily limited to Asia, but it began to move into Europe and Africa during the 1970s. It first spread through the Persian Gulf and then into the Levant and North Africa. El Tor then jumped all the way to coastal West Africa when students returned home via airline travel to The Gambia after having been infected while abroad. The disease went inland, reaching Mopti in Mali, and spread eastward down the coast with an alarming quickness along fishing and trade routes, reaching as far as Nigeria. By 1970, cholera also arrived in East Africa. It travelled west from the Persian Gulf region and crossed into Africa via the Red Sea, infecting people in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia. Cholera would soon move south across the Somali border and into Kenya.4

Cholera was not new to East Africa, but by the early 1970s it had not posed a major public-health threat for more than a half century. The region had been hit by the first four cholera pandemics that swept through the Indian Ocean World during the nineteenth century. The Fourth Pandemic in particular struck the commercial port of Zanzibar especially hard from 1869-70 and Myron Echenberg estimates that the death toll may have been at least 100,000 people. That the devastation of cholera was etched into the consciousness of the coastal population is evidenced by the linguistic indigenization of the disease into regional languages. By mid-century, even before the Fourth Pandemic, kipindupindu had become the Swahili word for cholera, and this remains unchanged as the term for the infection today.5 In Mijikenda languages, those predominant in the rural areas of what is now the Kenyan coast, cholera was specifically defined as muandzala during the mid-1800s, and by the end of the century a word that had previously meant a person “who is

5 Though published in 1882, Ludwig Kraft conducted the majority of the research for his Swahili dictionary during the 1840s, so it is probable that kipindupindu has been part of Swahili since at least that period, if not earlier, as the first outbreaks in the region began during the 1820s. Ludwig Kraft, A Dictionary of the Swahili Language (London: Trübner, 1882), viii, 153. For the cholera in nineteenth-century Zanzibar, see Echenberg, Africa in the Time of Cholera, 50-64.
cold, spiritless; he is not sprightly as to his limbs, he resembles one who is sick,” *peho*, had had its definition expanded to mean “epidemic.” In a modified form, *peho ya kumwaga*, it meant cholera.\(^6\) The epidemic of *kumwaga*, a term that at mid-century meant “to spill, to scatter, to shed,” though by the end of the 1800s had changed to “diarrhea,” affected people throughout the century in East Africa and the wider Indian Ocean World.\(^7\) However, the devastation of cholera during the nineteenth century was not matched during the first seven decades of the twentieth, as East Africa remained largely free from the disease except for a few small outbreaks.\(^8\) Classical cholera, *Vibrio Cholera 01*, did not become endemic to the region during the 1800s. Once the disease was contained and eliminated after each outbreak, cholera no longer posed an immediate threat to public health.\(^9\) The lull was broken in February of 1971. That month, reports of cholera infections emerged from Kenya’s northern coastal region in the Tana River District near the Somali border, and by March the *Daily Nation* confirmed that 52 people had contracted the bacterium and 20 of them had died.\(^10\) Over the coming years and decades, Kenyans, and many other communities throughout the world, would come to realize that this newest strain of cholera, El Tor, was far more adaptive, mobile and lasting than its classical predecessor, *Vibrio Cholera 01*.

The El Tor cholera that arrived in Kenya during the early 1970s became endemic in the region and elsewhere in Africa. This was transformative not only to the health of people living in Kenya, but also for the political context in which urban struggle could be waged. Historians of post-colonial Kenya, and Africa in general, have paid little attention to the ways disease and urban

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\(^8\) For example, the relatively minor 1912 outbreak of cholera in Zanzibar. See the files describing the outbreak in (PC/Coast/1/15/91), Kenya National Archives, Nairobi (KNA-Nairobi).


life became ever more intertwined during the 1970s, and so have missed how environmental history helps to explain changing patterns of urban administration and the strategies that city residents have employed in response. Much has been written on sanitation and disease in colonial Africa, but less clear are the ways that post-colonial urban governance was also structured through attempts to control the natural world. As a consequence, this chapter argues, the scholarship has overlooked a key causative force in urban formation in post-colonial Africa.\footnote{For sanitation in colonial Kenya, see “Segregationist Town Planning and the Emergence of African Political Protest in Colonial Nairobi, 1899-1939,” (PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 2006). The crucial document that set the administrative structure for sanitation in colonial East Africa was W.J. Simpson, Sanitary Matters in the East African Protectorate, Uganda, and Zanzibar (London: Colonial Office, 1915). For a broader view of sanitation in colonial Africa, see Philip D. Curtin, “Medical Knowledge and Urban Planning in Tropical Africa,” American Historical Review 90, no. 3 (1985): 594-613. The closest we have to a post-colonial political ecology of cholera and sanitation is Echenburg’s Africa in the Time of Cholera, but his analysis is more one of how politics affected the spread of cholera, rather than how cholera itself, the concern of this chapter, was affecting politics. Moreover, Echenberg is uneven in precise attention to cholera in urban areas, opting instead to operate at the analytical level of nations and regions. See Africa in the Time of Cholera, 140-183.}

While historians have to this point not fully recognized the significance of the political ecology of informality, disease and urban sanitation in post-colonial Africa, novelists have been more discerning observers of how these forces have made the lives of those selling food and drink, as well as their customers, far more precarious. In Meja Mwangi’s classic novel of 1970s working-class Nairobi, Going Down River Road, his narrative generates a clear argument that council demolitions of food kiosks during cholera campaigns were short-sighted attacks on visible targets, generating political spectacle, rather than being long-term solutions to infrastructural problems. With his usual sardonic style, Mwangi describes how “the City Council’s good-health brigade” goes to “work” on the eateries that feed the workers of a large construction site now that the “cholera killer is in town,” pulling them down and demolishing them. He continues that “There are rumours rife that the Council will build organized sanitary Food Kiosks but no mention was made of when. Or what the food prices will be like.” Chapters later, the food kiosks reopen, and
Mwangi narrates that even the government understands the role vendors play in the social structure and political economy of the city, as “someone realized that in order to keep them working, the workers had to be fed. The ministry ordered them to get clean and reopened the workers’ hotels [restaurants].”

Mwangi’s fiction points to the changing reality for vendors during the 1970s as cholera came to reinvigorate the practice of demolitions that had been on the wane since independence in 1963. While no evidence remains that directly ties cholera to specific food vendors in Mombasa, it would also be disingenuous to contend that the food and drink being sold to the public did not at some level act as a vector for the disease to spread throughout the city. However, this chapter also argues that food vendors were at most a surface-level effect of the more structural causes of why Mombasa and other cities in Kenya were vulnerable to cholera. Their role as potential vectors was epiphenomenal to the underlying problem that the city’s infrastructure, the responsibility of the government, was insufficient to keep the city adequately sanitary. The demolishing of vendors’ structures, as well as arresting and prosecuting them, was much easier, cheaper and faster than extending clean water and sewerage to the entire city, and these tactics also provided a political spectacle that allowed politicians to demonstrate their commitment to sanitation. It can be simultaneously true that in banning and prosecuting food vendors, as well as demolishing their businesses, that health officials were genuine in their concern, acting in good faith and trying to keep the city safe from the pandemic, but also in so doing were pursuing the path they deemed most politically possible, given their realistic lack of resources to remake the city’s infrastructure. However, these points of finer context likely would have not been persuasive to those whose livelihoods were made illegal, had their eateries demolished, or were arrested because they

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continued to work in order to feed, shelter and educate themselves and their families. This chapter, then, is a study of a political ecology in which food and drink vendors were made to bear the most intense burdens of these “cholera campaigns” in 1970s Mombasa.

**Urban Politics, Cholera and “Operation ‘Clean-up’ Mombasa”**

By the end of March 1971, as cholera was spreading in the Tana River District, municipal officials in Mombasa banned the sale of prepared food and drink by hawkers and vendors in the city. In arguing for these policies, the municipal council stated that, as “cholera had already appeared in the neighboring areas … urgent steps should be taken to control foodvendors” and “tea and coffee hawkers who do not have running water supply, drainage facilities and access to sanitary accommodation if this council was to keep this disease out of their area.”

Municipal authorities also used the new political leverage of cholera to accelerate plans to reshape the architectural landscape of the city. The previous month, prior to the outbreak of cholera, the council had made one of its more aggressive moves since independence against not only food but all vendors who had built unauthorized structures when it issued notices that all such buildings would be demolished, though, conceding to the political climate of the moment that made such actions less permissible, the council also allowed vendors six months to vacate these premises before they would be demolished. However, in March, the urgency of cholera allowed the council to rapidly speed up the timeline, resolving that their order “be amended by the deletion of the words ‘six months’ appearing therein and substitution therefor of the words ‘ten days’ and the Town Clerk be instructed to serve the notices forthwith,” and it was recommended “that any other unauthorised structures handling food which require demolition would be reported … in pursuance of the

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plenary power of that Committee … with a view to their demolition.”\textsuperscript{14} Cholera posed a danger to the health of everyone in Mombasa, but, for food and drink vendors, it also threatened their livelihoods.

Since the emergence of development as a new mode of urban governance during the late-colonial period, the state had been attempting to divide Mombasa’s hawkers and vendors into two categories, licensed and unlicensed, the former legitimate and supported, and the other illicit and targeted for removal. While the state succeeded only partially in creating a consciousness among licensed vendors as distinct from those operating illicitly, people who had licenses were generally free from the threat of demolitions and prosecutions. However, this divide began to crumble during the “cholera campaigns” of the 1970s, as suspicion fell on everyone selling prepared food in the city. In addition to vendors working in unauthorized structures, the state in 1971 also closed down many of the municipal food canteens, putting their vendors out of work, and cancelled the licenses of state-approved tea and food hawkers.\textsuperscript{15} Cholera provided the post-independence council with unprecedented political capital to reshape the comestible geography of the city, but the very logic of sanitation upon which this relied was also dissolving the distinction between licensed and unlicensed that state authorities had been trying to forge since the late-colonial period.

During the 1971 epidemic, the council acted decisively in banning all vending and hawking of food in the city, but putting thousands of people out of work overnight had political consequences. By April, municipal officials in Mombasa were beginning to feel intense pressure both from constituencies within the city and from a wider context of cholera control across Kenya. Responding to protests from food vendors whose licenses had been suspended, the council


\textsuperscript{15} “Mombasa food ban stays in force,” \textit{Daily Nation} 7 April, 1971 (McMillan).
contended that it would “not yield to any pressure to relax its decision on the withdrawal of licenses.” Some councilors tried to be sympathetic by acknowledging the difficulties that their policies placed on vendors, but remained firm on the importance of sanitation. Councilor Adembesa observed that even though “those whose licenses have been withdrawn could to a certain extent ask for consideration on humanitarian grounds, it would have to be borne in mind that plans to tackle threats to human lives must be given priority.” However, Mombasa’s councilors did not administer in political vacuum and, though they had quickly passed their own food ban in March, the capital city of Nairobi had been struggling to enact similar emergency measures. On April 8, Nairobi’s attempt to ban food, tea and vegetable vendors had failed, and the same Councilor Adembesa conceded that now “it was inevitable that as a result of this decision ‘pressure will mount on us to do the same.’” The vendors in Nairobi had framed their debates, as had those Mombasa in previous years, through discourses of state and citizenship. Nairobi’s vendors “hailed” the city’s councilors as having made a “statesmenlike decision” by not passing the ban. Nathaniel Njagi, President of the Kenya Street Traders Society, continued to flatter the republicanism of the council, noting that its officials “had come to the aid of the electorate at the correct time and that they deserve praise for rejecting the proposal.” With this now publicized inconsistency between Nairobi and Mombasa in how the wananchi were being governed, Adembesa concluded, after holding virtually the opposite position the day before, that he was “inclined to recommend that the actions [against vendors] we earlier took be relaxed, at least for the time being.”

The next day, the Mombasa council shifted its focus from enforcing the ban towards accommodation. Even the Medical Officer of Health, while expressing concern “that these

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16 Ibid.
17 “Mombasa now may lift tea kiosk ban,” *Daily Nation* 8 April, 1971 (McMillan).
licensed hawkers and food vendors were a hazard to health,” conceded that “sight should not be lost of the fact” food vendors had been “earning their livelihood in this business for a number of years.”\textsuperscript{18} However, despite this shift in official language, in practice the ban remained.\textsuperscript{19}

The political context of Nairobi had moved councilors in Mombasa, but it was not sufficient to convince them to allow people to begin selling food and drink again on the streets of the city. However, vendors themselves were more persuasive. Since independence, the city’s vendors had been developing new strategies for how to pressure councilors to bend and reshape the state’s laws to conform to a vision of the city in which their businesses also had a place. Among these strategies were interpersonal confrontations in which vendors stormed government offices in large numbers to publically shame officials. As they faced a total ban on their livelihoods, vendors went to the top of the city’s vertical power structure. On April 8, the Mayor told the General Purposes Committee that his office “had been receiving delegations of hundreds of hawkers and food vendors for the past few days pleading that the ban should be lifted.”\textsuperscript{20} Through these protests, vendors shamed their councilors that they were denying Kenyans the ability to care for their children, as the \textit{Daily Nation} reported that these delegations “had been bringing with them children, claiming they had nothing to eat.”\textsuperscript{21}

While the pressure from Nairobi had been insufficient, that from the vendors pushed the council to action. In their effort to resolve the “controversy in the town among food vendors and hawkers who live entirely on the trade,” the Council on April 14 decided to end the ban on selling prepared food and drink in the city. Indicating the level of resistance that the administrators had felt, “An official of the council said the ‘tension’ had been growing day by day and there was fear

\textsuperscript{18} Minutes of the Health Committee, MCM, 8 April, 1971 (UY/12/528), KNA-Nairobi.
\textsuperscript{19} Minutes of the General Purposes Committee (GPC), MCM, 14 April, 1971 (UY/12/528), KNA-Coast.
\textsuperscript{20} Minutes of the GPC, 14 April, 1971.
‘that some hostile people might resort to taking the law into their own hands.’”\textsuperscript{22} However, if the council lost its initiative on banning all food vendors and hawkers, they in defeat tried to reassert the legitimacy of their licensing system, to retain some control over the city. Though the ban was “lifted forthwith,” the council emphasized that “Only licensed hawkers, however, will be allowed to trade.”\textsuperscript{23}

However, from as far back as the 1950s, licensing had proved an illusory mechanism for controlling the composition of eateries in Mombasa. People who had licenses often worked outside their parameters if they thought it more advantageous to their businesses, and those without them kept on cooking and selling as long as they could avoid the authorities. Whatever efforts the council had made, it was clear by May that vendors were operating much as they always had. Many of the licensed hawkers and vendors in 1971, as they had before, ran comestible businesses that only loosely aligned with the vision of the urban food landscape laid out in the city’s bylaws. Ali Matano, who had a tea, bread and mahamri (Swahili donut) license, had been “cooking ‘ugali’ [maize-meal porridge], meat and other foods,” while coffee hawker Macharia Njau had been denied a renewal on his coffee license because he was “food vending instead of coffee hawking.”\textsuperscript{24} Additionally, while the state required for sanitation reasons that cassava be grilled and not fried, people continued to fry it to bring in customers who preferred that style of preparation, as demonstrated when Mbaruk Hassan was convicted and fined for “frying cassava instead of grilling it” and “failing to heed warnings” to the contrary in June of 1971.\textsuperscript{25}

The El Tor strain of cholera arrived in Kenya during 1971, but failed to spread as widely as had been feared and did not fundamentally reorder urban politics. In Mombasa, six patients

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{23} “Council urges action to prevent cholera,” \textit{Daily Nation} 15 April, 1971 (McMillan).  
\textsuperscript{24} Minutes of the GPC, MCM 5 May, 1971 (UY/12/530A), KNA-Nairobi.  
\textsuperscript{25} Minutes of the GPC, MCM 2 June, 1971 (UY/12/530A), KNA-Nairobi.
were brought to the city’s health facilities from Tana River where the outbreak began to receive
treatment, and three others from the north coast had slipped through quarantines and caused panic
among officials, but they were quickly found and admitted to the Infectious Disease Hospital. That
was the extent of Mombasa’s first cholera threat since the nineteenth century. “Operation ‘Clean-
up’ Mombasa” that had been conducted to combat it revealed both strategies that would form the
foundation of cholera campaigns in the future, as well as the continuing power of poor urban food
and drink vendors to influence politics in the city. The Medical Officer of Health, reviewing 1971
in the annual report, pointed directly to the political action by hawkers and vendors as to why the
ban was repealed, noting that this “small but vociferous section of the community” had pressured
the council into lifting the prohibition.26

**Infrastructure, Vendors and Public Health**

The Medical Officer of Health did face a potential public-health crisis in 1970s Mombasa,
and was right to be worried about the possibility a cholera outbreak far more devastating than the
scare of 1971. The annual report of that year reflected that “Considering living conditions in slums
and mushrooming shanties and the extreme unhygienic state of unauthorised structures handling
food, it is more to Providence that no epidemic of a communicable disease has broken out up to
now.”27 However, the intensity of the municipality’s focus on food vendors was far
disproportionate to their place within the broader diagnosis of why Mombasa was vulnerable to a
catastrophic outbreak of an infectious disease. Much more fundamental to the question of the city’s
public-health was the reality that declining public investments in infrastructure and municipal
staffing were being compounded by a rapidly growing urban population. The city’s sewers, water

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26 Information in the above paragraph and the direct quote are from Medical Officer of Health, Annual Report, 1972. (UY/14/249), KNA-Nairobi.
27 Ibid.
system and other public facilities were not adequate to accommodate the more than ten thousand additional people moving to and being born in the city every year. While some and even many street-food vendors may have been unhygienic as it was defined in the law, most of the reason for this falls to fact that there was not sufficient access in the city to clean water or adequate sewerage.

John Iliffe has focused the attention of historians to the importance of demographics in African history and, in particular for the purposes of this study, to that of the rapid population growth that occurred during the post-war and early-independence periods. Population alone does not explain the economic struggles of African states since the 1970s, but, when considered alongside a global political economy in which African officials had to account for quickly increasing populations with public resources made ever scarcer by global recession and the government cutbacks of structural adjustment that followed, the challenge of maintaining urban infrastructures equal to the task of keeping cities sanitary was an understandably daunting one.

Mombasa, like many cities across Africa, had been growing quickly since the Second World War. After independence, the population grew by 4.7 percent each year, reaching 225,000 by 1969. Growth would continue through the 1970s, with the population of the city topping 340,000 by 1979, an increase of two thirds during the 1970s. The highest concentrations of population growth during this period were in Mombasa’s peri-urban areas that surrounded the city, in particular Changamwe, Kisauni and Likoni. As residents in these neighborhoods increased in number, the housing crisis became acute. A University of Nairobi study during the early 1970s reported that, in Kisauni north of Mombasa island, the occupancy rate of an average habitable room was 3.6, and the author estimated that this low-income area required 640 more houses to

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reach more sustainable levels of accommodation. Such density also overstrained the city’s patchwork sewer system. The coastal area north of Mombasa island was and remains one of the more overtly stratified parts of the city. Nyali on the east side, with tourist hotels and high-income homes, had been fitted with an underground, flush sewer system, but, with only minor exceptions, people living in the neighborhoods a short walk to the west only had access to pit latrines. While pit latrines certainly can be sanitary in many situations, their carrying capacity is quite literally finite in relation to the ground in which they are situated. In 1971, the Medical Officer of Health reported that “Disposal of sewage is another problem which the Council should tackle without much delay,” and “that disposal by pits is becoming more and more difficult.” The following year, the situation had not been addressed, and the office wrote with increasing concern that “sewerage in private individual plots is becoming more and more of an acute problem, some areas have become sewage sick [saturated] and can take no more soakage.”

Recognizing the problem as a structural one, the Medical Officer of Health urged that “The need, therefore, for a sewerage system of the treatment and disposal of sewage cannot be overemphasized.” As another year passed with no large infrastructural changes, the 1973 report ended with little hope that the money would be forthcoming to enact the changes required to house and provide infrastructure to Kenya’s cities, concluding that “The continued trek of people from rural areas to urban centres has not only created housing problems for larger local authorities like Nairobi and Mombasa but strained all their other services, so much so that it is becoming a financial nightmare to those authorities.”

People selling prepared food and drink from their homes and on Mombasa’s streets may not have had consistent access to sanitary facilities, but few others in the city did either.

31 MOH-AR, 1973 (UY/12/249), KNA-Nairobi.
Another problem for the Municipal Council and its health authorities was that, despite their efforts to focus attention on roadside vendors operating from “unauthorised structures” as the vectors of disease, the reality was that the state-run food canteens that were their responsibility fell below the very standards they demanded of people operating outside them. In the month before the cholera outbreak of 1971, the Foodvendors Canteen on Kinyozi street had been shut down for an indefinite amount of time for repairs and, since the progress towards reopening had been “very slow,” it was reported that “the stall-holders of this canteen were now operating outside the Canteen on the road-reserves.” Having secured legal stalls, these municipal vendors nonetheless had to construct their businesses on the roadside as an illicit vendor would since the authorities had been unable to make the needed repairs to their canteen. However, rather than understanding the need for such a compromise, the council turned towards coercion to make up for its own failings, asking the Town Clerk “to write a letter forthwith to the Police instructing them that strict enforcement of the by-laws be carried out” against their own vendors.32

However, even in open canteens, their infrastructures were insufficient to meet the city’s health standards. As reported in March 1971, as cholera struck the coast, the “Council’s Canteens at Liverpool and Cardiff Streets lacked … sanitary accommodation and drainage facilities and [the] general hygienic standard prevailing in these two canteens and in Mwembe Tayari Foodvendors Canteen was poor.” As a result, Liverpool and Cardiff were closed during the cholera campaign “until such time as drainage facilities and water borne sanitation to the satisfaction of the Medical Officer of Health have been provided.”33 Three weeks later, the decision on whether to fund repairs in these canteens had still not made it out of the Council’s finance committee and, while Mwembe Tayari had been allowed to remain open, with its funding for repairs having been

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32 Minutes of the MCM, March 1971 (UY/12/52), KNA-Coast.
33 Minutes of the MCM, 26 March, 1971 (UY/12/527), KNA-Coast.
already secured, “the construction had not yet started.” Consequently, the council demanded higher standards of the city’s roadside vendors and hawkers than it could maintain in its own canteens and, whatever the sanitation in these council institutions, they were also unavailable for significant periods of time during 1971 and in the years that followed even if vendors wanted to operate inside them.

For the remainder of the 1970s, food-vendor canteens were shut down and hawkers had their licenses suspended for at least a short period nearly every year. For food hawkers, even when their businesses were allowed, the quota of licenses remained fixed far below the number of people who wanted to work in the industry. Therefore, food vendors and hawkers had only uneven access to working in a fashion legitimated by the state during a time when the reintroduction of cholera into East Africa and the resultant public-health campaigns were making the prospect of working outside municipal licensing an increasingly precarious proposition. Cholera pushed more people into illicit operations, even though the potential consequences for doing so were becoming more and more dire.

The attraction of food vending despite its illegality can be understood in the ever growing market for such services that the rise in population was creating. Dense demographic data on 1970s Mombasa is thin, but what we have suggests that the overwhelming majority of people in the city, if they did not pack food, needed to purchase it while at work. For example, in 1973, most people living in the working-class areas of Mainland North had to leave their neighborhoods to go to work, and the majority of those, 86 percent, had to commute to Mombasa island. In 1978, David

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34 Ibid., and Minutes of the GPC, MCM, (UY/12/528), KNA-Coast.
35 Eventually the Council Mwembe Tayari’s food canteen, as well as the one inside Makupa Market. MOH-AR, 1971 (UY/14/249), KNA-Nairobi.
36 Mombasa: Mainland North, 40.
E.L. Angote, who worked in the industrial area on the island, explained the necessity of food vendors for workers in the city in a letter to the editor that appeared in the *Daily Nation*:

> I could say along Dar es Salaam Road [in the industrial area] there are about 400 labourers who depend entirely on the kiosks for their meals. They are expected on duty much earlier than 8 a.m. and the nature of their work can affect their health if they do not even get a scrap of food for lunch. They cannot afford hotel [restaurant] meals, which range from 5/- for the cheapest. “37

The poor entrepreneurial classes in Mombasa understood this as Angote did, and the number of people selling cooked food and drink in the city continued to grow during the 1970s. We see the word “mushrooming” appear for the first time during this period as a verb to describe the growth of food hawkers and vendors around the city, demonstrating the sense that officials and others had that these businesses were continually springing up all over Mombasa. The Medical Officer of Health complained in 1973 that “All sorts of unauthorised structures selling food under extremely unhygienic conditions could be seen mushrooming even [on] the main thoroughfare and open spaces of the town.”38

That such an industry not only continued, but grew, during the 1970s despite its increasing illegality is explicable through the political economy that Angote described, that workers needed food to work, and so at a certain level the state had no choice but to allow at least some of them to operate. However, also crucial was the reality that municipal authorities simply did not have the resources to enforce its prepared food and drink bylaws. The state not only struggled to fund sanitation-infrastructure projects in Mombasa, but also to fully staff the city’s health department. During the late-colonial period, 16 public-health officials monitored and enforced the city’s health codes, but by 1978 the municipality employed only 10. The growth in urban population made this deficit in personnel even more extreme. Considering that the 16 colonial-era health officials were

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37 “Why not occupy these people more usefully?” *Daily Nation* 21 June, 1978 (McMillan).
responsible for monitoring a much smaller city and even then failed to stop or even control illicit vending, as the population in Mombasa more than doubled to 340,000 by the end of the 1970s, it is unsurprising that food vendors and hawkers were able to operate throughout the city on a daily basis.39

“To tackle the problem of selling food in the streets”: Cholera and Inequality

After the first cholera scare during 1971, the threat of an urban outbreak remained a concern for Mombasa’s officials during the following years. With each successive time the disease broke out in other parts of Kenya, Mombasa’s urban authorities sharpened the administrative and operational structure for how to combat the disease in their city. Since cholera was mobile, officials would be too. In 1974, when cholera infections were reported in Nyanza Province in western Kenya, the Ministry of Health and the Department of Public Health and Social Services in Mombasa created three Mobile Surveillance Teams. Composed of a nurse and health assistant, these teams would inspect every reported diarrheal case in the city, administer anti-bacterial medications, and take a swab for lab testing. Officials also began to rethink the city through an ecological geography of infection. They identified Mombasa’s peri-urban neighborhoods, working class and with minimal state-provided infrastructure, as “those areas which because of the prevailing sanitary conditions and the migrant population therein were considered high risk areas of the Community to warrant extra precautions.”40 Health authorities, in effect, created an epidemiological map in which cholera came from the outside and saw as the city’s vulnerable points those neighborhoods where migrants came to live, the same neighborhood’s that urban authorities had failed to integrate into a comprehensive sanitation infrastructure. If cholera entered

40 Public Health and Social Services, Mombasa: Annual Report, 1974, and U.K. Nathwani, Medical Officer of Health, to the Chairman and Members of the Education, Public Health and Social Services Committee, 8 January, 1975 (UY/7/38), KNA-Nairobi.
Mombasa, according to this geographical rendering, the vendors and hawkers who sold prepared food and drink to these communities would become the primary vector that would then spread the disease to the rest of the city.

Until 1978, cholera was as much an idea as a reality for most people living in Mombasa. It was an idea that greatly affected the lives of vendors and hawkers, but the majority of the city’s residents were not greatly affected outside losing easy access to prepared food during cholera prevention schemes that had become increasingly commonplace during the 1970s. However, in 1978, Mombasa experienced the first of what would be many subsequent outbreaks of cholera over the following decades. The epidemic started outside Kenya’s borders. During October 1977, people in the coastal district of Rufiji in Tanzania became infected with cholera, and it spread through the coastal region and north to Arusha, and across the channel to Zanzibar. In Tanzania, reports recall that over 3,000 people were killed by the disease during 1977 and early 1978. Kenyan authorities were concerned that the infection might spread over the border and into their increasingly densely-populated cities. By March of 1978, people with diarrheal disease were being inspected, and it was believed that at least one person in Kwale, a rural area outside Mombasa, had died of cholera that they suspected had come from Tanzania. By April, the arrival of cholera in Mombasa had been confirmed.

Cholera was certainly devastating to those who contracted it, but the disease also induced a crisis for vendors of prepared food and drink whether they caught it or not. In March, as a precautionary measure, the demolitions began. The Provincial Medical Officer of Health for the Coast, Dr. A.E.R. Fernandes, reported that “several unhygienic food kiosks in the port area have

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41 “Dirty rag market is a ‘danger to life,’” *Daily Nation* 25 April, 1978 (McMillan).
42 “Hospitals clear cholera suspects,” *Daily Nation* 17 March, 1978 (McMillan), and “New moves as cholera hits more at Coast,” *Daily Nation* 17 April, 1978 (McMillan).
been pulled down,” and added that “[t]his exercise will be carried out in all high risk areas,” and that “his office was coordinating with the local authorities to carry out the exercise.”43 By mid-
April, state-enforced closures of eateries throughout Mombasa started as cholera cases were confirmed inside the city. The Daily Nation reported that cholera “measures include the closing of mass food kiosks which do not have amply sanitary facilities,” as well as “[d]irty hotels [restaurants]” and “meat and cassava roasters.”44

Over the next two and a half months, state authorities enacted the most intense intervention into urban life that Mombasa’s residents had seen since the end of colonialism, and the city’s vendors and hawkers were among the central targets. The city’s three surveillance teams were expanded to ten. These teams of health officials were also able to hire casual laborers who would be in charge of demolitions, and they were to coordinate their efforts with the police if people did not abide by their orders. Mombasa residents who were not vendors or hawkers would have encountered these teams if they were among the thousands who were swabbed for testing after becoming sick with diarrheal disease, or if they attended an educational sanitation presentation.45 For vendors and hawkers, their interactions with these roving teams most often resulted in the confiscation of their foodstuffs, an arrest and eventual prosecution, and, if they had one, the demolition of their structure.

From March to the end of June, 1978, vendors and hawkers experienced health officials, casual hired-laborers, and police who surveilled their neighborhoods looking for people violating the cholera campaign’s measures. During April, after clearing people out of the structures they had

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43 “Hospitals clear cholera suspects,” Daily Nation.
45 Minutes of the Cholera Meeting, Mombasa (UY/12/710), KNA-Nairobi. The information on coordination with police and their employment of casual laborers, as well as information on their activities, is aggregated from daily minutes of the cholera meeting during May and June in the same file.
built to be their eateries, the authorities returned and their teams demolished them and broke and smashed cutlery and utensils so as to be “sure that no food is bring served in abandoned kiosks.”

By May, the cholera committee estimated that “90% of kiosks visited were closed in all the wards.” However, with people needing this work to survive, such state optimism was soon replaced with the realization that food vendors would do what they could to continue to operate by evading the cholera teams. On May 12, the Medical Officer of Health told the Daily Nation that “We know there are a number of kiosk dealers who do private business after making sure that council officers are not around, but we will catch them,” and, emphasizing the point, observed that “Some kiosk operators defied the order to close down,” and so “We now make sure we destroy whatever they have.”

As the campaign continued during late May and into June, authorities surveilled major work zones on the island and moved through the working-class and mostly migrant communities on the mainland where hawkers and vendors often did business. In Changamwe, Dr. Mutunga, part of the cholera committee, reported that they had “discovered a number of people selling tea and other foods,” and the team had “confiscated everything.” Nearby, in Chaani, officials found the “roasting of meat and fish” and “the culprits had their licenses taken away and everything they had confiscated.” In early June, “A tea hawker at Changamwe was got and taken to the police,” and the next day “The team started with the Likoni Ferry where they found people roasting maize and at Mama Ngina drive they caught a man who was roasting cassava and took him to Central Police where he will be charged.”

46 Minutes of the Cholera Meeting, 29 April, 1978 (UY/12/710), KNA-Nairobi.
47 Minutes of the Cholera Committee Meeting, 6 May, 1978 (UY/12/710), KNA-Nairobi.
and at a kiosk in Jomvu Kuu “Everything was to be confiscated and it will be demolished tomorrow,” and nearby they also needed to “arrange to demolish a kiosk structure near the new Airport.”

As June wore on, these arrests, prosecutions and demolitions continued apace without relief. David E.L. Angote, who above explained the necessity of food kiosks, also described a scene that had been playing out daily in Mombasa since March. Near where he worked in the industrial area of Mombasa island, he recalled that “On June 16 I noticed the brutality of Mombasa Municipal askari [police] in the execution of an ‘operation close-down kiosks’ in the name of cholera.” He observed that, “On that day, precisely at noon, the said askari invaded two vibandas [kiosks] opposite Magnum International and next to Express Handling Services Building. The askaris with their labourers moved in and uprooted the kiosks and used very bitter language during the operation.” Angote may very well have been describing the four people the cholera committee referenced the following day who, in that area, were caught “selling tea and maaragwe [beans]” and were then “arrested and taken to the Police Station.”

The actions of the state against these hawkers were not uniformly embraced by Mombasa’s urban residents. In the pages of the Daily Nation, Angote and others questioned the utility of dedicating such enormous financial resources of the state towards these measures while other development projects remained unfunded. Angote agreed with another reader who had written when he wondered why “the council is more ready to pay 20 labourers to uproot two kiosks rather than having the same number at the same rate of pay repair the worst roads [in Mombasa] I have ever seen in the republic,” and he also pushed the government to see to consequences of such raids

50 Minutes of the Daily Cholera Meeting, 7 June, 1978 (UY/12/710), KNA-Nairobi.
in “the loss of income to kiosk proprietors” and “the loss of health and social justice to customers” who no longer had access to cheap food.”

Municipal and provincial authorities also had to confront the sustained resistance of hawkers and vendors against these actions. That the cholera teams needed to engage in daily surveillance and raids tells us that people continued to take significant risks to keep working and earning income. This resistance came in a variety of forms. For some people, it manifested as simply continuing to operate each day, and evading authorities as best they could. Other people were more confrontational, as in early June when the cholera team was trying to stop maize roasters working outside the Coast Province General Hospital, and the hawkers “brought problem and Police assistance was sought.” Later in the month, a man was caught selling tea near a municipal market, but “refused to accompany the team to the police station” and so “The matter was reported to the Police for action.”

Vendors and hawkers also tried to directly engage and pressure municipal officials as they had done since the 1960s, but the reality of cholera actually being in Mombasa drastically diminished the political capital of public shaming. The evidence of vendors politically mobilizing as a group during 1978 is scarce, which itself is an indication of their declining influence. The one moment we have on record was an attempt in late June to convince state officials to drop the ban, a proposition that was promptly rejected. During 1971, when cholera had been merely an idea, a threat that caused anxiety, food vendors had been able to exert tremendous influence as a “small but vociferous community,” but the political ecology of cholera arriving in Mombasa had shifted the balance of power back towards health officials and the strict enforcement of sanitary laws and

53 “Why not occupy these people more usefully,” Daily Nation.
preventative measures. Without formal access to the state, the resistance of vendors and hawkers became concentrated in the daily struggle to continue operating while evading cholera patrols.

While “objectively” breaking the city’s laws, these vendors were also subject to the cholera campaign in ways made harsher because of their location in Mombasa’s racial and class structures. The city’s comestible culture for much of the twentieth century, and as it remains today, has been divided along class lines that have often also been racialized. “Restaurants,” contained inside municipally-approved buildings with kitchens, dining rooms and access to lavatories, were frequented only by those who could afford them, the middle and upper classes, which during the colonial period were white, Arab, South Asian and with a small number of Africans. While more Africans since independence have ascended into these higher classes, the divide remains and disproportionate numbers of whites, Arabs and South Asians are in the middle and upper classes. In Mombasa, those with financial resources are able to eat in restaurants when they chose, while the remainder and majority of the city eats out by purchasing food from hawkers and vendors. These classed and racialized patterns of consumption have also been reflected in the ownership of the city’s eateries. To afford the licensing and the rental or purchase price of an approved restaurant facility, one needs to certainly earn far more than the working poor do. However, since the earliest years of the twentieth century, many Mombasa residents have turned to food and drink vending and hawking as a way to earn income in a city that has most often offered few other viable employment possibilities. The inequalities of Mombasa’s social structure shaped the formation of the city’s eatery culture, and these same inequities inflected how people in the city differentially experienced cholera measures.

While the Cholera Campaign represented an existential threat to vendors and hawkers, for restaurant and bar owners, it was more an inconvenience. People operating on Mombasa’s streets
faced arrest, prosecution and demolitions, but often the worst consequences for restaurant owners were cleaning up, making minor repairs, or a fine. Restaurants were closed temporarily if they had sanitation violations, but once these had been addressed they could reopen and operate thereafter. Owners of restaurants had the advantage that usually their establishments were inherently more sanitary according to the logic of the municipal bylaws. With their access to capital, restaurant proprietors were able to set up their businesses inside licensed buildings that had lavatories and running water, either by tank or plumbing. These were the most crucial conditions in the bylaws’ definition of what made an eatery sanitary, which in practice meant that all restaurants needed to do was follow basic rules and keep their space clean, and they could remain operational during the campaign. However, vendors and hawkers could not afford such facilities, and so instead of having their businesses in such buildings, they squatted on public and private land selling prepared food and drink, and often from unauthorized structures. The political economy of the city made this profession necessary because of the needed income it provided to these proprietors and because the working poor required the cheap food they sold. However, that same political economy through business licensing, alienated private and state property, and its processes of class formation also made it so these vendors and hawkers could not afford to conduct their businesses in a way that was legal. This had been the case during and since the colonial period, but the political ecology of cholera in urban Kenya only exacerbated the ways that class and race shaped peoples’ access to having a business legitimated by the state.

Therefore, the city’s bylaws and the cholera campaign premised upon them were classed and racialized in such a way that restaurants were better situated to endure the 1978 “clean-up,” but structural prejudice also made it so that, when restaurants did break laws, the consequences they faced were less impactful. In late May, for example, two restaurants were found to be
operating despite closure orders. Chetna restaurant was advised that “It should close immediately otherwise Police will be brought in,” and the other restaurant was told that, unless it acquired a water-storage tank, the police would visit them as well.56 The key point, however, is that they were not immediately arrested, as so many vendors and hawkers were, and instead were provided a second chance. Later in mid-June, a surveillance team visited the Dockers Club where people had been roasting meat, which was a violation of cholera measures. Instead of being arrested, they were advised to cease their activities, which “they accepted and stopped,” and later the “Gulshan Hotel was warned to not roast meat.”57 The next day, two people in the working-class neighborhood of Likoni were “found roasting maize” and “were arrested and taken to [the] Police station” to be charged.58

During June, one health official noted that “most of the hotels [restaurants] and bars have been very cooperative and the problem was with the food vendors.”59 This, in a sense, summarized the situation well, as restaurant owners had to do little to conform to the cholera measures and, even when they did not, faced limited if any consequences, while vendors and hawkers, to comply, had to completely stop their businesses and, without preparation, find a new way to generate income in a city with few opportunities. We should not be surprised that vendors and hawkers resisted and created a “problem” for urban authorities, as the cholera campaigns represented the potential end, at least for many months, of a way that they had devised to survive in this coastal city.

The many proprietors of food and drink businesses in Mombasa continued to create a “problem” for the cholera teams, but their resolve did seem to waver over time as raid after raid

built incredible instability into their daily lives. By late June, it seems that the cholera team had substantially reduced the number of people still operating, noting that as the team surveilled the North Mainland area “mainly to check on hawkers” that they found “very few” and, returning to the same neighborhoods days later, observed that “There were no hawkers.” Reports of hawkers and vendors would continue to emerge, but their numbers were fewer. The cholera campaign, with its 10 teams of inspectors and paid laborers, and the support of the police, was a far more disruptive force than had been the understaffed and under-resourced municipal council of the past.

Conclusion: The Political Ecology of Urban Struggle in Africa

For street-food vendors, the 1970s began with tremendous optimism as their businesses, if only in a limited way, had been recognized as legitimate by Mombasa’s government. The decade closed with the most concerted effort to that point to wipe them from the city’s landscape. The explanation for this lies in the political ecology of cholera, sanitation and informality in post-colonial urban Africa, a set of conditions found throughout the continent during the 1970s that persist up to the present.

The cholera that arrived in Kenya during the early 1970s and transformed this newly-independent nation’s politics, El Tor, became endemic in the region and in other areas throughout the continent. While Africa had previously only experienced cholera through outbreaks that came from the outside, this new strain has been vying for a more permanent residence in African ecosystems. El Tor’s weakness has been its strength. The bacterium has far more asymptomatic cases than did its classic relative, and is also less deadly. While better for the people who contract it, this also means there have been a far greater proportion of survivors and asymptomatic carriers

61 See the Daily Cholera Meeting minutes for July and August in (UY/12/710), KNA-Nairobi.
to either spread the disease to new areas or to keep it active within communities where it is already present. During the seventh pandemic, Africa has turned from an outer periphery in the global ecosystem of cholera that was vulnerable to occasional epidemics, to now being the epicenter of the disease. Recent data indicates that, from 1995-2011, 95 percent of world-wide cholera infections occurred in Africa.\textsuperscript{62} Kenya has had outbreaks every decade since the 1970s, and most recently during 2009 when over 10,000 people contracted the disease.\textsuperscript{63}

This chapter has shown how the “struggle for the city” for these vendors and hawkers in Mombasa was economic and political, but also one in which politics and economics were inexplicable outside a changing global ecology.\textsuperscript{64} By 1978, as a result of cholera, vendors had lost much of the political capital in Kenya’s government that they had been building since independence, and were pushed from the city’s landscape with a force they had not experienced in the past. However, the broad contours of the urban political economy that had fostered the emergence of these businesses during the preceding eight decades had been little changed once the 1978 cholera epidemic was contained. After cholera measures were relaxed, vendors rebuilt, and hawkers returned to the streets, providing cheap food to people who needed it, and earning income to support themselves and their families. Having become endemic in the region, cholera would remain both a specter and reality in the decades that followed, and so too would arrests, prosecutions and demolitions.

\textsuperscript{62}Echenberg, \textit{Africa in the Time of Cholera}, 1-12.
\textsuperscript{64}The phrase “struggle for the city” comes from the edited volume \textit{Struggle for the City: Migrant Labor, Capital, and the State in Urban Africa}, edited by Frederick Cooper (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983).
Close up of Changamwe, mid-1960s, the growing peri-urban neighborhood west of Mombasa Island. Generally poor and working class, Changamwe was also a crucial node in the economic geography of Mombasa and Kenya, being the location of Moi International Airport and with the Mombasa-Nairobi highway running through it. Source: Harm J. de Blij, *Mombasa: An African City* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 56.
CHAPTER SIX

“GIVING A NEW LOOK TO PWANI”: BEAUTIFICATION, ELECTORAL POLITICS AND URBAN DEMOLITIONS IN MOMBASA AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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“Woe unto you if you are poor, ugly and, therefore, undesirable. The message is violently clear: Kenya’s urban centres are not for you.”
David Kakali, columnist for the Daily Nation, 26 January, 2002

“Is beauty more important than livelihood?”
K.K. Wales, letter to the editor, Daily Nation, 29 January, 2002

By early January 2002, the operation seemed to be winding down. After more than a week of demolition crews moving through Mombasa island and the close mainland neighborhoods of Chamgamwe, Kisauni and Likoni, pulling down and bulldozing thousands of food, tea and other vendors’ kiosks, the “exercise” abated during a pre-planned visit by President Daniel arap Moi for New Year’s celebrations. The quiet lasted for more than a week thereafter until MP Shariff Nassir, representative of the Mvita constituency on Mombasa Island and leader of the demolitions, announced on January 11 that his operation would now resume once again. Rather than clouding his aims in euphemism, Nassir explicitly warned that the vendors and hawkers who continued to work in Mombasa “will have to reckon with Force Number Two, which will be more vicious than any other demolition they have seen before.”

* Quote in the title comes from: Ratí S. Shad to Reuben Rotich, District Commissioner, Mombasa District, 23 January (CQ/18/18), Kenya National Archives, Coast Province at the Mombasa Records Centre.
3 The evidence on the first week of demolitions will be elaborated in detail in the chapter below, but generally comes from CQ/18/18, Kenya National Archives, Coast Province at the Mombasa Records Centre (hereafter KNA-Coast). See also the articles on Moi’s visit to Mombasa before and after the 2002 New Year, cited below, in the Daily Nation.
On January 13, “Force Number Two” materialized. At Makadara Gardens, a visible and centrally-located park just outside Old Town on Mombasa Island, a lorry carrying 30 state police officers, or askari, arrived “brandishing metal bars and rungus [clubs].” The askari moved from one kiosk to the next, looting the wares and other goods inside, and demolishing not only the structures, but also the furniture inside. To these vendors who had just had their investments destroyed, they looked on curiously and angrily at two kiosk restaurants that remained standing once the demolitions had finished. As their eateries were in ruins, vendors watched as business continued “as usual at the Coconut Café” and “patrons sat comfortably at Camel’s Joint,” the former owned by an assistant government minister and the latter by a Kenya African National Union (KANU) campaign officer. Nassir the MP denied accusations that the demolitions had been selective, and focused instead on how this was part of a broader project of aesthetic and economic modernization of Mombasa, telling reporters that “the place would be beautified and turned into a recreation resort.”

While these January 13 demolitions reinitiated Nassir’s “beautification” campaign in Mombasa, the true ferocity of “Force Number Two” became apparent the next day. During the early morning of January 14, 300 askari and youth militia moved on kiosks in Bombolulu, a working-class suburb north of Mombasa town. Arriving around 3 a.m., these demolition crews, many of whom were reported as being drunk, began dismantling kiosks and looting the valuables inside and, when bulldozers later flattened the area, they “cheered wildly.” As the light of day revealed the extent of the destruction, “more than 1,000 kiosks, business premises and bars built on the road reserve at Bombolulu” had been demolished.

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These kiosk owners, running restaurants, tea houses, bars and other comestible businesses, were not alone in experiencing the sharp, coercive and at times violent edge of how political liberalization was changing the practice of politics in Kenya during the 1990s and 2000s. However, as Daniel Branch and Jacqueline M. Klopp have separately argued, the issue was not that multi-party democracy was incompatible with Kenyan society, as the autocratic Moi strategically claimed, but rather it was that the president’s regime encouraged and tacitly authorized violent political and ethnic cleansing in order to assure electoral victories for ruling-party candidates, and to generally give the impression that multi-partyism would destabilize a Kenya that only Moi could keep under control.\(^7\) While KANU elites were complicit in these violent ruptures, Branch argues that they were also rooted in decades-long, local struggles over land and what Jeremy Prestholdt has elsewhere called the “politics of the soil,” the competing claims over who in Kenya can assert indigeneity in particular regions and even over specific parcels of land. These were not, therefore, conflicts invented by elites, but KANU politicians did exacerbate and instrumentalize them in their attempts to retain power as political liberalization swept through Kenya.\(^8\)

These methods of politically-targeted ethnic cleansing took the form of intense interpersonal and communal violence, exemplified in the killings, assaults and intimidation in the Rift Valley before the 1992 election and then in the Likoni neighborhood of Mombasa in the lead-up to the vote in 1997, but, as Klopp argues, KANU also repurposed the old administrative tactic of urban demolitions and attacks on the property of the poor as a new political strategy to drive supporters of opposition candidates out of Kenya’s cities.\(^9\) Klopp, across two related studies,

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\(^9\) Klopp, “Remembering the Destruction of Muoroto.”
demonstrates how these demolitions served the dual purpose of cleansing areas of potential opposition, while also clearing land that could then be doled out as patronage to “well-connected individuals and land-buying companies” in order to bind these elites and large businesses to the regime, thus buttressing Moi’s system of neo-patrimonial control. In response to this mass appropriation of squatter and public land that Kenyans criticized as “land grabbing mania,” Klopp argues there emerged a decentralized but vast resistance against it organized by “a cross-section of society from rural communities, pastoralists, and urban squatters to middle-class Nairobians.”

Klopp’s research into these urban conflicts dislodges debates about corruption from the arena of high politics, and shows the devastating effects that KANU’s machinations to stay in power had on the poor living in Kenya’s cities. While this chapter will build on her findings by placing the 2001-02 demolitions in Mombasa into this broader context, it will also show that her analytical framework of “land-grabbing” in Kenya as KANU politicians and their elite patrons set in opposition to the resistance of informal vendors, squatters and sympathetic sections of the middle-classes reduces to a binary what was a far more complex social field. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci, Jonathon Glassman has shown how subaltern “resistance” in highly-asymmetric power structures does not always manifest itself as the outright rejection of the oppressive society, but instead exploited people, with few other viable alternatives, have often appropriated and used the structures of that social system in order to advance their position within it. By the 1990s, the people selling prepared food and drink to Mombasa’s poor had experienced little respite from a

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11 Studying the forms of resistance on the nineteenth-century Swahili coast, Jonathon Glassman rejects a “class-theoretical analysis” that would impose “false-consciousness” on the slaves and other dependent-groups who did not outright reject coastal society, but instead chose to further embed themselves in it in order to gain relative social ascendance from their positions of marginality. For these theoretical considerations, see Glassman’s introduction in his *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 1-25.
state that had been trying to erase them from the city’s landscape since the 1950s. The increased political competition and desperation of both KANU and opposition parties to secure and consolidate constituencies during multi-partyism opened opportunities not only for “well-connected individuals and land-buying companies,” but also for the poor whose votes suddenly mattered far more than they had. Mombasa’s street-food vendors and hawkers seized on this changing political climate, and engaged in their own form of “land-grabbing” from the late 1980s to the early 2000s by exchanging their political loyalty for unprecedented access to urban land, which in turn allowed them to gain some much needed stability in their livelihoods.

However, Kenya’s social inequalities also crucially differentiated the experiences of these poor urban residents from those of elites within the political economy of land-grabbing in 1990s and 2000s Kenya, and requires that comparisons between them only be made when considering how power shaped these transactions. Elite land-grabbers expropriated land that had been controlled by squatters or gazetted for public use through a process of state-sponsored privatization that transferred ownership of these assets to the poor and the general public to a small, politically-connected clique.\textsuperscript{12} The situation for Mombasa’s hawkers and vendors was both radically different and produced by the same political moment. These small-scale proprietors leveraged their support for councilors and MPs in exchange for licenses that granted them temporary occupation rights to public lands such as road reserves, parks and other open spaces. Many of these transactions were extra-legal, as officials in granting access were often operating beyond the authority of their docket, but, by bringing the police and other enforcement agents into the relationship through bribery, vendors’ land claims became legal in practice. Using this opportunity, prepared food and

\textsuperscript{12} Klopp, “Pilfering the public.”
drink proprietors built an unprecedented number of new small kiosk restaurants across Mombasa along roadsides, in parks and on whatever other open land they could.

Faced with few other alternatives, Mombasa’s vendors and hawkers engaged in this tenuous form of land-grabbing as “resistance” against an urban political economy that otherwise did not present them with viable ways to earn a living in a city a rife within unemployment and low-wage jobs. However, despite increased legitimation during the 1980s and 1990s, this period also saw the perpetuation, augmentation and re-accommodation to changing political circumstances of the long-standing urban-planning notion that street-food vendors, the architectures of their structures, and the social webs their businesses created as being antithetical to urban modernity. Combining this discursive context with the tenuousness of their legality, this made vendors extremely vulnerable to the predations of elite land-grabbers who desired their plots and to politicians who came to view them as a threat to their electoral success.

By late 2001, Shariff Nassir had much to be concerned about both his and his party’s electoral prospects in Mombasa, Kenya’s second largest city. Support for KANU and Nassir had been rapidly declining during the 1990s, and the 2002 election presented the real possibility that the regime would fall from power. Since the upcountry Africans who comprised the majority of informal vendors in Mombasa also happened to generally be opposition supporters, the more than half century of urban planning policy that had attempted to negate and then erase these people from Mombasa’s landscape provided him an opportunity. Using demolitions in the name of “beautification” and economic development, Mombasa’s urban past provided Nassir with the justifications he needed to politically cleanse the city of those voters who opposed both him and KANU.
Land and Legitimation in Late Twentieth-Century Mombasa

During the final decade and a half of the twentieth century, the vendors and hawkers selling prepared food and drink to Mombasa’s working classes achieved a hitherto unprecedented level of stability in their working lives through increased access to licenses and urban land on which to conduct their businesses. During the 1980s, the increasing inflow of migrants from rural areas to Mombasa, combined with the economic declines of decade, meant that the unemployment and underemployment problems that had wracked Mombasa since the 1930s only worsened. As much as Kenya was an authoritarian, one-party state under Moi and KANU, government officials still felt a certain obligation to pay attention to the needs of everyday Kenyans (wananchi), if only to maintain social stability through patrimonial control. Much scholarly attention has been focused on the ways in which many authoritarian states in postcolonial Africa have maintained power through drawing economic and other political elites into dependency relationships with the ruling regime, but they also needed to assuage, at least to a certain extent, the lower-earning majority in order to keep the country functioning. While during the 1980s the unemployment problem on its own pressured politicians to reconsider their administration of informality, the combination of this economic situation with multi-partyism during the 1990s only increased the need for urban officials to soften their approach towards people operating businesses on Mombasa’s streets. With growing competition for votes, politicians much more directly needed the support not only of powerful elites, but also of the wananchi. Within these shifting economic, demographic and political contexts, street-food vendors were able to forge chains of dependency and obligation with

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13 There is a lack of good city-level data on unemployment and underemployment for Mombasa, but impressionistically
both municipal and national officials, exchanging political loyalty for access to licenses and urban land to conduct their businesses.

Aggregated statistical evidence demonstrates how these transformations in Kenya’s political economy remade urban landscapes, as the number of street-food vendors increased dramatically in Mombasa and other cities in the country. During the 1980s and 1990s, with a general economic slump exacerbated by structural-adjustment policies, job growth in the waged “formal” sector could not keep pace with the country’s rapid rural to urban migration, and presented a potential unemployment crisis in Kenya. As a result, employment in the “informal” economy grew dramatically not only in gross terms, but also as a share of the labor market during this period, and working-class eateries were among the most popular sectors in which people started businesses.\(^{15}\) While formal wage employment was stagnant during a period of rapid growth in the size of Kenya’s urban workforce, the informal sector underwent a period of “spectacular” expansion. According to government statistics, in 1979, 121,600 people worked in informal industries in Kenya’s cities. By 1994, that number had grown to just under 1.8 million.\(^ {16}\) In effect, informality was a buffer against a potentially catastrophic unemployment crisis. The authoritarian government was neither unaware of the political instability that such an unemployment situation could produce, nor of the role of informality in assuaging it. The 1995 Kenya government Economic Survey noted that the period from 1991-1994 was one of “serious contraction of employment in the formal or modern sector, and the informal sector has definitely played a vital role in absorbing surplus labor.” Recognizing this, the state “has promoted the sector as a major source of employment and income” in a variety of ways including “allocating or setting aside land


for carrying out informal activities … and sensitizing the public on the significance of the sector to the Kenyan economy.”17 As we will see, the report seems to have exaggerated the extent to which the government was working to create a more positive perception of informality, but it was certainly correct in identifying a tangible increase in vendors’ access to urban land as a result of the late-twentieth century economic crisis that Kenya and many other African states were enduring.

With this changing political framework that provided informal vendors more official legitimation, working-class restaurants proliferated throughout Mombasa during the 1980s and 1990s. 18 For the city’s poorer residents, this meant an incredible expansion of access to prepared food, as these cheaply-priced eateries could be found all around the city on road reserves, sidewalks, in parks and even inside peoples’ homes. Their menus reflected the cosmopolitan nature of Mombasa, with the cuisines of both the Swahili coast and upcountry areas widely available. Surveying their options, hungry residents of Mombasa looking for an inexpensive breakfast in the city could without too much trouble find a tea cart or a larger street-food vendor offering highly-sugary and milky tea (chai) with either stewed chickpeas (mbaazi) or a spiced doughnut (mahamri) to complement it. For lunch and dinner, food kiosks (kibanda, [s.] vibanda [pl.]) were cooking and serving Swahili dishes such as the rice-based plates of pilau and biriyani, or for a more modest meal simple white rice or chapatti was also available. Common upcountry menu items included the staple porridge ugali (also called sima) with a meat or vegetable relish, as well as the Central

18 My argument that Mombasa’s roadside, working-class eateries expanded rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s is evidenced not only by applying these national aggregate statistics to the city, but also through anecdotal observations in interviews and in the archival record. This trend was indicated in numerous interviews, two among them including with Nzala Ngotho, Interview, Mombasa, Kenya, January 2015 and Jeremiah Mbunu, Interview, Mombasa, Kenya, January 2015. In the archival record, see many references during the 1980s and 1990s in CQ/20/55, KNA-Coast and CQ/18/10, KNA-Coast.
Province staple *githeri*, a mixture of maize and beans.\(^{19}\) These vendors provided variety, but also food that the poor could afford, as larger restaurants with their high overhead were financially out of reach for most of the city’s residents. A man who worked as a food vendor during this period remembered that prices in restaurants were “*gharama* (expensive)” and even double those in *vibanda* for the same food, citing that one could get chapatti on the streets for 30 cents, while in a restaurant it would cost 60.\(^{20}\)

The easing of intensive prosecutions and mass demolitions during the 1980s and 1990s not only expanded prepared food options throughout Mombasa for the poorer classes, but it also opened the potential of stability for the people working in the industry. Women such as Josephe (no last name given), a migrant who arrived in Mombasa in 1980 from the Rift Valley, could even accumulate small amounts of capital and establish themselves as notable people in their urban communities. Josephe, after working in a larger restaurant as a waitress during the early 1980s, opened a *kibanda* next to United Touring Company, an area highly trafficked by bus travelers and the drivers who worked in transport who needed meals before leaving or upon arrival. With multiple cooks and wait-staff under her employ, she described business during this period as “*Supa, kabisa* [amazing],” and observed that “at the end of the day it was huge money.”\(^{21}\) Like Josephe, Mohamed Amir Temu, who had migrated to Mombasa from Moshi in Tanzania during the late 1960s and worked as a repair man (*fundi*) and in construction until the 1980s, also started a *kibanda* in 1985. Compared to his time a construction laborer, Temu remembered that to cook “*simā,* to cook chapatti,” this work was “*rahisi* [easy].” Financially, there was no comparison. Even as a headman working construction, a rare job indeed, he recalls that the pay might be 1000

\(^{19}\) The information on food available at roadside eateries during the 1980s and 1990s was drawn from interviews conducted in Mombasa from November 2014 to January 2015, especially those with

\(^{20}\) Mohamed Amir Temu, Interview, Mombasa, Kenya, 5 December 2014.

\(^{21}\) Josephe. Interview, Mombasa, Kenya, 26 November 2014.
Kshs. a day, while running a kiosk on good day could net 1500 and he could eat all his own meals at work rather than buying them from someone else. While Temu had problems with municipal-council harassment during the 1980s, they were not so much that he could not operate, and he recalls a general easing of administrative pressure during the 1990s.\textsuperscript{22}

Aligning with these two anecdotal experiences, the archival record also suggests that this process of legitimation for vendors began during the mid-1980s, and accelerated during the 1990s. Officials both local and national began to build patrimonial bonds between themselves and street traders, securing much needed mutual, though still asymmetrical, support. These relations were becoming visible on Mombasa’s landscape as, upon surveying the working-class neighborhood of Mwembe Tayari in 1984, a provincial official noted that several kiosks in the area were operating “with full license from the council.” However, these relations of patrimonial dependency were not made between a cohesive “state” and a unified block of “vendors,” but instead were embedded in complex, overlapping and at times competing political, governing and social networks. In 1988, providing evidence both of the emergence of these dependencies as well as that not all officials agreed about how they were to be constituted, the Mayor of Mombasa complained at a meeting in his office that the removal of kiosks was made more difficult because of “interference by Politicians.” However, perhaps not wanting the nature of these relationships to become too public, the Mayor at the same meeting ordered his Municipal Inspector to not investigate them, but instead to allow the mayor himself to inquire, and that the inspector “should go on doing his job and leave the politicians to the politicians.”\textsuperscript{23}

The experience of James Kubai’s effort to have his tea-kiosk business legitimated during the 1980s is illustrative of the overlapping and at times conflicting webs of dependency and

\textsuperscript{22} Temu, Interview.
\textsuperscript{23} Meeting held in the Mayor’s Parlour, 24 October 1988 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
obligation that shaped the emergence of subaltern “land-grabbing” in Mombasa. Kubai, who had operated his kiosk since 1978, tried to build a relationship with the coast’s provincial administration, a nationally-appointed political entity that had jurisdiction over certain parts of Mombasa, especially land. By 1984, Kubai had won the sympathies of key figures in the provincial office, who seemed inclined to grant him access to land through the Commissioner of Lands, also a federal body. However, simultaneously, other vendors in Mwembe Tayari where he operated had been building their own relations of support with locally-elected municipal officers, who had granted them licensing and land without going through federal procedures. Part of the land they were issued included that on which Kubai’s kiosk was located. The municipal government allotted this land to Shariff Tata in order so that he could expand his restaurant in a transaction arranged by the Municipal Health Inspector, William Karisa, who then also sent an eviction notice to Kubai. In response, Kubai drew on his federal supporters, and B.R. Maina, the Provincial Planning Officer, wrote to the Town Clerk of the municipal government, and asked that he refrain from “pulling down [Kubai’s] kiosk.” While the archive does not provide evidence for the eventual conclusion of this dispute, it does suggest that by the mid-1980s vendors in Mombasa were not only trying to legitimate their squatting rights through creating patrimonial relations, but that in so doing they also had to negotiate the complex and often competing layers of Kenya’s bureaucracy in order to find officials to back their claims.⁴⁴

However, as can be seen in Kubai’s experience, the actual formal procedures for who controlled Mombasa’s urban land were in dispute even between officials, not simply the vendors. The municipal council unambiguously controlled business licensing in the city during the mid-

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⁴⁴ B.R. Maina, for the Provincial Physical Planning Officer, Coast Province to the Commissioner of Lands, 14 May, 1984 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast, James Kubai to the Provincial Physical Planning Officer, Coast Province, 26 November 1984 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast, and B.R. Maina, Provincial Physical Planning Officer to the Town Clerk, Mombasa, 27 November 1984 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
1980s, and so could decide who was a licensed vendor and who was not, but the administration of the city’s public lands was more controversial. The exact contours of how Kenyan urban land was administered during the 1980s and 1990s are hard to figure in precise terms, and not simply because the documentation is inconsistent, but more fundamentally because so many of the transactions were at least in part illicit. That the municipal health inspector’s office had authorized Shariff Tata to expand his restaurant onto the neighboring plot was well beyond its authority. We can sketch the outlines of the general legal framework for how vendors and hawkers were administered, but the ways in which these laws actually functioned can only be figured by studying how they were applied and enforced in practice.

Much of the land in Mombasa came under federal, not local, jurisdiction, and this was especially true in those areas where food vendors wanted to build kiosks. The many road reserves, sidewalks and spaces left open for public projects on the side of roadways were specially administered by the federal Kenyan Highway Authority. However, while Highway Authorities claimed legal control, the federal Commissioner of Lands, as Kubai understood and tried to work through, also claimed jurisdiction, and was responsible for issuing the Temporary Occupation Licenses (TOL) that granted traders temporary permission to squat on public land.

However, while much of the administrative power over land was federal, municipal authorities in Mombasa in practice also built patrimonial relationships through granting access to land. City offices often issued licenses to vendors, and did not require them to also apply for federal TOL. Since the laws were enforced by local police and inspectors, bribery schemes emerged in which vendors paid, in effect, a tax to municipal authorities for permission to occupy their land,

26 See many the correspondences between federal authorities and applicants and others about Temporary Occupation Licenses in CQ/20/55, KNA-Coast and CQ/18/10, KNA-Coast
and were left alone to conduct their business, and at times even those without licenses could pay a bribe to avoid prosecution. In 1987, the federal government tried to reassert its control over land allocation in Mombasa by appropriating municipal authority over licensing by requesting that “all future kiosk applicants channel their requests” through the federal Divisional Development Committee “for approval” before being issued. However, two years later, the evidence suggests that municipal authorities had not disinvested themselves from the political patronage and business of land allocation, as a representative for the District Commissioner, a federal official, felt it necessary to restate that “the [municipal] Town Clerk is advised to instruct his officers to desist from issuing licenses for any hawking or kiosk business on government land without prior consultation of this officer.” At stake in these intra-governmental conflicts was the question of which agencies and officials would control urban land, and thus the patronage networks stemming from it. During this period, the Mombasa Municipal Council was, a former vendor told me, “like a business.” Therefore, legitimation, for the operators of roadside eateries, quite literally came at a price, but the cost nonetheless provided them with protection from wanton prosecutions and the potential demolition of their restaurants, allowing them to achieve a stability rare for people working in their industry during the second-half of the twentieth century.

Despite this easing of prosecutions and demolitions, though, vendors and hawkers still lived and worked in an ideological context in which, as had been true since the institutionalization

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27 This general sketch of the emerging patrimonial system of urban administration during the 1980s and 1990s was generated through a close reading of hundreds of correspondences, far too many to cite individually, between vendors and municipal officials, vendors and federal officials, and municipal and federal officials, in CQ/20/55 and CQ/18/10, both held at KNA-Coast, and I drew from my interviews and newspaper coverage, especially the interview with Temu and two separate articles (that by coincidence have nearly the same title) John Mbaria, “Why kiosks in Mombasa had to go,” Daily Nation 27 December 2001, McMillan and L.G. Mwacharo, Letter to the Editor, “Why Mombasa kiosks had to go,” Daily Nation, 1 January, 2002. McMillan.

28 A.R.K. Odicoh, for the District Commissioner, Mombasa District to Sylvester Obanda Ogwell (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.

29 Temu, Interview.
of a particular form of urban development during the late-colonial period, their working-class eateries were seen to be antithetical to a particular, elite vision of “modern” Mombasa. Many of the ideological contents for this vision of Mombasa were generated under colonialism, and then carried through decolonization and indigenized into a certain classed and racialized view of post-colonial urban modernity. As during colonialism, the people in independent Mombasa who sold cheap food to the city’s poor were rendered as bio-medically insanitary, aesthetically “ugly,” and their status as squatters called into question the normalization of land as alienated, private property. Within this definition of African urbanism, the economic and bureaucratic informality of street-food vendors needed to be excised from the social body of the city, or at least segregated within it, in order for Mombasa to achieve its modernity. Even with the increased recognition and legitimation during the 1980s and 1990s, these ideas of modernization and development remained, and continued to inflect the relationship between vendors and the state.

For example, the ways in which this process of legitimation intersected with ideas about modernization and development reinvigorated an older, spatial segregation of the city with roots in the colonial period. As street-food kiosks were increasingly allowed to operate in the city, a new urban geography of where it was permissible for them to conduct business emerged simultaneously. While the colonial state for the most part never legalized street-food vendors, their laws were most vigorously enforced in those areas in which African bodies were not supposed to be present except as laborers, especially the Central Business District (CBD). During the 1980s and 1990s, the spaces where vendors were allowed to build their businesses mapped rather closely onto those same areas where the colonial state had also tacitly and reluctantly permitted them, in African neighborhoods and around large areas of working-class employment. Outside these

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30 See chapters three, four and five in this dissertation.
spaces, vendors and the hawkers during the colonial period risked prosecution, as they were barred from operating inside elite geographies, such as the major streets in the CBD on Mombasa Island, near government buildings, hospitals, upper-class neighborhoods such as Kizingo, the former segregated white quarter that was now also filled with wealthy Kenyans, and in areas frequented by tourists.

To enact this vision of Mombasa’s urbanism, authorities began by the end of the 1980s to formalize the new, controlled comestible geography of the city that it had been haphazardly already enforcing. In 1989, the municipal council met to discuss the “Proper Planning of Kiosks in Mombasa,” and the chairman of the meeting emphasized the need to manage and confine vendors and hawkers in order to cultivate their desired urban aesthetic, claiming that if informality “is not checked, the town will soon lose its good image.” If they acted, the chairman noted, they could “make the town look clean and retain its planned face.”31 As they drew borders, places like Airport Road in the mainland neighborhood of Changamwe, where vendors were visible to arriving tourists, officials resolved that kiosks should “be removed and placed in the open area of Chaani-Port Reitz Road,” a more secluded street that ran parallel to the road from the airport. However, vendors already situated in spaces that had long been raced and classed in certain ways were less vulnerable to relocation campaigns. Food and tea kiosks in Likoni, Mwembe Tayari and other parts of Changamwe, all lower-income and predominantly African neighborhoods, were mostly allowed to remain as they were. Additionally, the industrial neighborhood of Shimanzi on the island was already rendered as a working-class space, was infrequently seen by elites and tourists, and the committee, not insignificantly, also understood the practical impossibility of removing the vendors and hawkers who served meals to workers in perhaps the largest area of employment in the city.

31 Minutes of the Meeting on Proper Planning of Kiosks in Mombasa, 27 February 1989 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
They commented that the street-food vendors in the “labour compound provide an essential service to the 98% [of] industrial workers who eat there,” as “the industries do not have canteens to feed the workers.”

When thinking about how they wanted to shape the urban geography of Mombasa, government and private elites were also concerned that kiosks were potential vectors for the social “contamination” of racialized and classed space. For example, in March of 1985, B.R. Maina, the same Provincial Planning Officer who had advocated for Kubai and his tea stand in working-class Mwembe Tayari, rejected the idea of kiosks being put up near government buildings, as such businesses “would expose the surrounding Government officers and properties to people of unknown character who would patronise the kiosk.” More generally, the 1980s and 1990s saw the creation of a new set of classed ideas in which officials, upper- and middle-class Kenyans and other elites came to associate vendors and hawkers with criminality, as in 1987 when a police official wrote to Mombasa’s DC that “kiosks have also proved to be the hide out of criminals at night. These are the places where criminals waylay the public” and that “Many people have been killed because of these black sports.” Foreign officials made the interpretative leap as well that vendors were to be equated with criminality, as R.G.C. Diamond, the Honorary British Consular Representative, wrote to the Mombasa Town Clerk to complain that the kiosks around their compound “attract gangsters. We have had several breakings and visitors have been mugged whilst entering and leaving our premises.” Meanwhile, middle-class Mombasa residents also were suspicious, and accused vendors of drawing in criminality and unknown people to their

32 Kiosks in Mombasa working sub-committee, no date, c. March 1989 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
33 B.R. Maina, Provincial Planning Officer, Coast Province to the District Land Officer, Mombasa District, 21 March 1985 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
34 James B.O. Mblero [check], for Officer Commanding Police Division to the DC, Mombasa 24 November 1987 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
35 R.G.C. Diamond, Honorary British Consular Representative to the Town Clerk, Mombasa 16 May, 1996 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
neighborhoods. As just one example, the residents of an apartment in Ganjoni on Mombasa Island wrote the Mayor, Najib Balala, in 1998 to complain that “these Kiosks … bring in strange people loitering in the area without knowing their intentions.”\(^{36}\) Pushing back against this discursive current that criminalized their very presence, some vendors tried to assure the government that they were simply industrious *wananchi* trying to earn income, as kiosk owner C.N. Mukwana did in 1999 when explaining that “we are only innocent and obedient citizens of this town who are just struggling for our survival and with no security threat whatsoever.”\(^{37}\)

However, as much as Mombasa’s government and private elites wanted to spatially segment the city’s social classes, the reality was that people selling prepared food and drink were highly incentivized to operate in the very areas in which they had been barred. The quarters from which the government tried to exclude food kiosks were in fact spaces of high employment, heavily trafficked by low-wage earners looking for affordable meals while at work. With this potential customer base, vendors and hawkers continued to risk prosecutions and demolitions by operating in these restricted areas. In 1986, the District Public Health Officer wrote to the Town Clerk about the growing presence of hawkers around the Coast Provincial General Hospital, a large employer in the town, and complained that despite promises, “To date not action has been taken and more structures are coming up every day.”\(^{38}\) Thinking about the CBD, Mombasa Mayor A.S. Mwindani complained in August of 1989 that “there are too many hawkers within the Town,” and especially on “the main streets such as Digo Road, Moi Avenue, Jomo Kenyatta Avenue and Haile Sellasie Road.” Concerned here about the aesthetic implication of such classed bodies and their structures in the center of town, Mayor Mwindani complained that the “hawkers were an eye-sore” and

\(^{36}\) Tenants of Ganjoni to Najib Balala, Mayor of Mombasa, 7 November 1998 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.

\(^{37}\) C.N. Mukwana, kiosk owner to the Town Clerk, Mombasa, 31 May 1999 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.

\(^{38}\) J.C.M. Azenga, District Public Health Officer to the Town Clerk, Mombasa 16 September 1986 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
ordered that they “must be removed immediately,” as during August many “V.I.P.’s will be visiting … especially during the ASK [Agricultural Show of Kenya].” The mayor requested that after their removal “sub-inspectors should then intensify their patrols and ensure that [vendors and hawkers] … do not return.”

In addition to elite anxieties about social and aesthetic contamination, street-food vendors were also made vulnerable during this period through the very nature of their legitimation. In the arrangements between officials and kiosk operators, the vendors were provided access to road reserves, parks and other public spaces to conduct their business, but it was always explicitly awarded on a temporary basis, with no (legally-recognized) long-term rights to their plots. Without the capital to purchase or rent such land, street-food operators accepted these terms as an improvement on the alternative of explicit illegality. Consequently, while urban land was being increasingly distributed to poor vendors as patronage during this period, these arrangements could be easily rescinded, and thus had economic precarity built into them. In August 1984, vendor Sammy Wanbua was made to understand this when he received a license to conduct his business on federal land, but under the caveat that he could stay only “till such time that it is required for permanent development.”

The inherent ephemeralness of vendors’ occupation rights was also reflected in the restrictions placed on the architecture of their kiosks, as they could only construct and operate their eateries from temporary, moveable structures. J.K. Lulu was informed of such parameters to his legitimacy when he was issued a license for occupation rights in an unused car park, and was instructed that his “Kiosk must be of a moveable nature,” like the “coca-cola type or such similar structure. No permanent or semi-permanent structure is allowed,” and “You will

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39 A.S. Mwindani, Mayor of Mombasa to the Municipal Inspector, Mombasa. 17 August 1989 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
40 J.R. Njenga, Commissioner of Lands to Sammy Wanbua, 7 August, 1984 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
be required to vacate the site on notice from this office, and in such event, leave the place in a tidy condition.\textsuperscript{41}

This precarious temporariness was present whether one acquired a TOL or not. As the occupation license could be revoked at any time, it was not particularly better than simply, as many people did, registering for a trading license from the council, and then paying bribery fees to local authorities to be granted access to land. Whichever option vendors chose, they were vulnerable to eviction from either public development projects or elite land grabs. During the later 1980s, Sylvester Obanda Ogwell tried to establish a kiosk, and chose to deal mostly with the local administration. Ogwell received a municipal trading license, received permission “to build a kiosk on the ground of the former United Sports Club,” and connected to water and power through the Ministry of Water and Kenya Power and Lighting. He decorated the inside “with beautiful wall painting and put a wooden floor, glass windows and high roof,” and furnished it with “round tables, table tennis birds in cages and an aquarium.” All this was paid for with a K.Shs. 64,000 cooperative bank loan. After being in operation for less than three months, in March of 1987, a representative of the District Commissioner arrived at Ogwell’s kiosk with two police officers, informing him that his business needed to close immediately and then confiscated his municipally-issued trading license. The next day, the same district official returned and informed Ogwell that in a week his kiosk would be demolished because “the government … sold this land to a rich person who wants to build flats,” finding out later that the “rich person” was a company called Cresent Investment.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{41} D.T.A. Owino, District Land Officer to J.K. Lulu, 3 December 1987 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
\textsuperscript{42} Sylvester Obanda Ogwell to the Mombasa Lands Officer, Coast Province, 2 March 1988 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast, and Sylvester Obanda Ogwell to the Provincial State Council 4 March 1988 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
In technical bureaucratic terms, Ogwell had erred. He had been licensed by the municipal government to operate as a trader, but had only received undocumented “permission” to occupy the land, and had not been granted a TOL by federal land authorities. We do not know whether Ogwell was aware that he needed an occupation license from federal authorities, but what is clear is that he followed the same procedure that many of his vendor contemporaries did to gain a level of official legitimacy. He was issued a trading license from the municipal government, tacitly granted permission to occupy public land and, we cannot know this for sure as it would not have been prudent to admit this in writing, but he almost certainly paid regular bribes as well to municipal inspectors and/or police officers to retain his hold on the plot. However, as the tea-kiosk operator Kubai experienced back in 1984, federal and municipal authorities often competed over the same parcels of urban land, and vendors often found themselves caught in between. Crucially, and revealingly, it was federal, not municipal, officials that were threatening to oust Ogwell from the land he occupied and demolish the kiosk he had built on it. In discussing the issue with the state attorney, the federally-appointed District Commissioner, K.P.A. Langat, rejected outright any notion that Ogwell had rights to the land, asserting that “the basis of any occupation or development of land is ownership,” and that “Ownership is either freehold, leasehold or temporary occupation license.” Reasserting his office’s control over the land, the DC argued that “Connecting water, electricity and council licenses does not give anybody any right to occupy government land illegally.”

According to the laws of Kenya in 1988, DC Langat was actually quite correct, but even if Ogwell had acquired a Temporary Occupation License, his situation would not have been improved when threatened with eviction. As per procedure, if the state wanted to “develop” the

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43 K.P.A. Langat, District Commissioner, Mombasa District to the Principle State Council, Mombasa 8 March 1988 (CQ/20/55), KNA-Coast.
plot, they would have had full legal authority to evict Ogwell or any other vendor occupying the land.

By the middle of the 1990s, despite the continuing challenges that street-food vendors faced, they took what advantages they could from the overall easement in prosecutions and demolitions, and they lined Mombasa’s streets, parks and other open spaces with tea stands, grills for roasting meat and cereals, and larger eateries selling whole meals. As this dramatic transformation of the city’s landscape became increasingly evident to both municipal and federal officials, the government faced increasing pressure to curtail and manage street-food vendors, as well as other hawkers and kiosks. For example, by the mid-1990s, informal traders had reclaimed their space on Airport Road in Changamwe where the state had tried to expel them in the late 1980s. As the state tried to clear them again, they did so with the idea of creating a controlled transport corridor in which tourists arriving in Mombasa would see only a tailored vision of urban Kenya that did not include the architecture of economic informality.44 In order to socially engineer this corridor, in December of 1996, municipal authorities announced that they would demolish kiosks on Airport Road under the stated purpose that they needed to do infrastructural improvements and grading work.45 While it certainly is possible the road was due for repairs, the Town Clerk J. Mutuma Angaine, in a letter the following month, also revealed that an additional motivation was “to urgently remove the unsightly kiosks along the Airport Road—Changamwe/Port Reitz area.” Wanting to change the aesthetic experience for arriving tourists, the Town Clerk wrote “that to create a more favourable first impression by visitors from abroad to

44 For a broader examination of the tourism image that independent Kenya officials were trying to create to market the country to potential tourists, see my “‘Safariland’: Tourism, Development and the Marketing of Kenya in the Post-Colonial World,” currently under review.
45 A.M. Kijivu, Chief Municipal Inspector, Town Clerk, Mombasa to the Kiosk Owners along Airport Road, 19 December 1996 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
Kenya and Mombasa, it is important to carry out the above exercise [the removals] and immediately follow it up with planting of flowers and ornamental trees where the kiosks now stand.”

The exact dates are not evident in the archival record, but what is clear is that, sometime in 1997 or perhaps 1998, demolitions crews moved in and evicted the vendors from Airport Road and demolished their kiosks. However, like in the CBD and elsewhere, in a city wracked by poverty and unemployment, the incentive for vendors to return to a place highly-trafficked with potential customers was too hard to resist. During October of 1998, the District Commissioner, P.P. Olando, expressed his disappointment to the Town Clerk “that kiosks and hawkers are once more encroaching slowly … on Airport Road after we demolished all the Kiosks and removed all the hawkers there!” Observing its retransformation, he lamented: “It will be unfortunate if the road will revert to the old ugly state it was earlier.”

Outside the restricted areas, the state also worked to reclaim land in the middle- and working-class housing estates that had been built for government employees during late-colonial and post-colonial urban development campaigns. Filled with open areas in an otherwise densely-populated city, these estates had proved a popular source of land that federal authorities doled out to kiosk operators, and where people with municipal trading licenses could squat. In April of 1996, the Provincial Works Officer noted that “so many kiosks and other structures have been mushrooming all [over] government pool housing premises,” and requested the assistance of the district commissioner “in the demolition of all undesirable [kiosks].” Similar to the idea to plant flowers and trees on Airport Road to create barriers to would-be kiosk builders, federal authorities

46 J. Mutuma Angaine, Town Clerk, Mombasa to the Provincial Commissioner, Coast Province, 21 January 1997 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
47 P.P. Olando, DC, MD to the TC, Mombasa, 14 October, 1998 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
48 Provincial Works Officer, Coast to the DC, MD 2 April 1996 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
also proposed walling off and landscaping these estates to block outside access to them and to also inculcate a new appreciation of a particular form of urban aesthetics. Jesse Gitou, the Chief Public Health Officer, advised Iwiya wa Mpare, the Provincial Works Officer, “to erect a permanent perimeter fence around all Government Quarters and proceed to demolish all the unauthorised structures and kiosks within your compounds,” and to employ gardeners and repair crews to clear “overgrowth of vegetation and grass” and fix “existing building and drainage systems.” If completed, Gituo predicted that “Such activities aimed at [the] cleanliness of the estate will instill discipline and discourage the erection of kiosks and unauthorised structures.” He then combined his aesthetic and security desires by suggesting they plant kai-apple or bougainvillea trees along the chain-link fence, both of which flower but also have sharp, piercing thorns.49

However, vendors used their political connections, as well as the media, to push back against these and other state efforts to clear them from the land they had claimed. As Mpare, the Provincial Works Officer, worked to implement the request of the municipal Chief Public Health Inspector to clear and secure government housing estates, he had to consider the political implications of evicting vendors who had been licensed by the council. He reported to the Town Clerk, with what appears to have been some annoyance, that “it was found that most of the illegal structures have been licensed by your council.” Nonetheless, sensitive to the political ramifications, Mpare also conceded that “To forestall any undue publicity associated with demolitions we are working on a formula to allow some of the kiosk operators to continue running their businesses on a temporary basis.”50 National officials were also concerned to cultivate relations with vendors, as in 1998 when newly-elected Member of Parliament Emmanuel Maitha

49 Jesse Gituo, Chief Public Health Officer to Iwiya-Wa-Mpare, Provincial Works Officer, Coast Province, 13 June 1996 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
50 Iwiya-wa-Mpare, Provincial Works Officer, Coast Province to the Town Clerk, Mombasa 9 July 1996 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
of Kisauni, who won the mostly African and working-class neighborhood after defecting from KANU and joining the Democratic Party (DP), wrote directly to the Mombasa District DC to complain that it had come to his “notice that the group of 100 hawkers” in his constituency, who “have been doing business for many years to support their families,” have recently been “constantly harassed by the area chief/The council askaris [police].” He suggested the DC “look into their case” and that he do his “best to assist.”

The next year, the vendors operating in the government-staff housing quarters in Tononoka, part of Bondeni Ward, a small neighborhood on the northwest portion of Mombasa Island, were told by the area chief that their kiosks were schedule for demolition. In response, more than 150 vendors of a diverse variety went to their municipal councilor, Mohamed Abdalla, and with his support they successfully petitioned the District Commissioner who rescinded the demolition order.

Therefore, even with this renewed emphasis at the end of the twentieth century on controlling vendors and their place in the city, the relations that these small-scale proprietors had been cultivating with government officials since the 1980s served as a buttress that guarded them, at least some of the time, from being forced off the land on which they made their living. In October of 1999, the new Provincial Works Officer, J.Z. Ruwa, still wanted to demolish most of the kiosks in the housing estate in Tononoka, but, after speaking with the elected officials of the municipal council, he realized that “It would be impossible to get rid of all the kiosks at once due to its political implications.” However, not all elected politicians in the region were so bounded to these vendors and hawkers, most of whom were migrants from upcountry. In fact, as KANU’s control of Kenyan politics began to precipitously slip during the first years of the twentieth century,

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51 E.K. Maitha, Member of Parliament, Kisauni-Mombasa to the DC, MD 28 April 1998 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
52 E.M. Gichana & Co. Advocates to the DC, MD 17 September 1999 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
53 J.Z. Ruwa, Provincila Works Officer, Coast Province to the DC, MD (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast.
the ruling party came to see the “upcountry” constituencies as a liability. For long-time KANU MP Shariff Nassir, who represented the Mvita constituency on Mombasa Island, the prospect of demolishing kiosks did not present a political vulnerability, as it did for so many, but instead represented a political opportunity.

**Demolishing Democracy: Elections, Violence and Vendors in Mombasa, 2001-02**

By the early 2000s, KANU’s control over Kenyan politics was threatened in a way unprecedented since the party’s rivalry with and eventual defeat of Oginga Odinga’s Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) during the 1960s, which ushered in KANU’s dominance first under President Jomo Kenyatta and then Daniel arap Moi. The cracks first appeared during the 1990s when Moi reintroduced multiparty democracy, after being pressured to do so by internal resistance and the international community that leveraged aid payments. However, with political infrastructural advantages and violent tactics, KANU survived the 1992 and 1997 elections with continued control of the presidency and parliament. However, with Moi having reached his term limits and the growing popularity of multiple opposition parties, both the highest executive office and the legislature were at risk for a party that had to varying degrees run Kenya’s government since independence.54

KANU’s power was slipping at the national level, and so too was it under threat in Mombasa. The personage and symbol of the party in Mombasa and the wider coast since the early 1970s had been Nassir, the Mvita MP, who during the Moi years was labeled derisively by critics as one of the president’s “ethnic kingpins,” regional-ethnic rulers meant to enact centralized authority on the local-level throughout Kenya. Nassir held a seat in parliament from the 1970s

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until the end of Moi’s rule, and had a portfolio with numerous influential posts in the federal government. Though an adept politician who often chose his words carefully, he also occasionally verbalized the authoritarianism at the root of his and his party’s politics, as when, while installing the mlolongo electoral reforms during the 1980s, a queuing voting system criticized for being undemocratic, he informed the Kenyan public that the changes were happening “wapende, wasipende,” translated roughly as “whether they like it or not.”

While Nassir and KANU maintained control during the 1990s, their popularity nationally and in Mombasa was on the wane as competitive elections presented Kenyans with the opportunity for change. This became clear during the first multi-party election in 1992 when, despite spending far more on his campaign than did opposition candidate Omar Mwinyi of Forum for the Restoration of Democracy-Kenya (FORD-Kenya), Nassir was only able to win his Mvita seat by around 100 votes, even with the reported ballot-stuffing. Not only Nassir, but KANU more generally was faltering in Mombasa during the elections of 1992, as the party’s rising young star, Emmanuel Maitha, lost the Kisanui seat to Rashid Mzee from FORD-Kenya. KANU’s brewing political crisis in Mombasa was not simply a result of the reintroduction of multi-party elections, but also, as journalist Wycliffe Muga argues, of the creation of a more unified, multi-ethnic “upcountry” voting bloc, a change from the 1980s when voting patterns fell more along ethnic lines. Voters who fell within the “upcountry” constituency, those being primarily migrants and

56 This trend towards the creation of an “upcountry” vote in Mombasa is as yet undocumented in the political science and historical literature, and proper analysis of its formation and historical afterlives is well beyond the scope of this chapter. However, it is worth investigating in other studies, as it departs greatly from the trends in other parts of Kenya during this period in which distinct “ethnic” constituencies were emerging. However, I would tentatively argue that the centuries-long othering of first slaves and then migrant laborers by coastal society as watu wa bara and washenzi, or “upcountry” and “savages” in English, created a more racialized context in which such race-based, rather than ethnic, political categories were possible. However, for the purposes of this chapter, what is important is the very real and growing perception that “upcountry” voters favored opposition candidates, and the way this then affected the behavior of KANU officials. To date, the only analytical treatment of this “upcountry”
the descents of migrants from regions such as Ukambani, Central Province and Nyanza, tended to favor opposition candidates and, since as a bloc they represented the majority of Mombasa’s residents, this did not bode well for KANU’s political future in Kenya’s second city. The ruling party’s problems only mounted during the 1997 election. While KANU had won the Changamwe seat in 1992, the party lost it in 1997 and during the same election, while Maitha managed to defeat Mzee for the Kisauni MP position during their second contest, KANU actually lost the seat because Maitha had defected to the DP. Nassir himself retained his parliamentary seat once again in the 1997 election, but KANU, the party he represented, was losing its hold on Mombasa.

As the 2002 election approached, the situation appeared to be worsening for KANU and its coastal stalwart. For the election contest for the Mvita seat, Nassir faced a charismatic and popular opposition candidate in Najib Balala, Mombasa’s former mayor who it seemed could win Muslim voters and was also reportedly popular within upcountry constituencies. Ironically, Nassir had actually in part created his vulnerability to the upcountry constituency, as KANU had gerrymandered Mvita district during the 1980s to protect him from intra-party rivals by excising the predominantly Muslim Old Town from the district once the neighborhood had grown “disillusioned” with him after more than a decade in power. Following the re-districting, most Mvita voters were from Tononoka and Majengo, diverse middle- and working-class voting constituency is in Wycliffe Muga’s brief focus on it in his profile of Changamwe MP Emmanuel Maitha after his death in 2004. For migrants politically mobilizing in Mombasa around the category of “African” in a different context, see Chapter Three and my article manuscript “Developing Racial Conflict: Street Vendors, Hawkers and Boycotts in Late-Colonial Mombasa,” and for more recent political relations between coastal communities and “upcountry” Africans, see Justin Willis and George Gona, “Pwani C Kenya? Memory, Documents and Seccessionist Politics in Coastal Kenya,” African Affairs 112, no. 446 (2012): 48-71. James R. Brennan analyzes the emergence of “African” politics in coastal Tanzania, in his Taifa: Making Nation and Race in Urban Tanzania (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012).

57 Wycliffe Muga, “Maitha’s trek from coastal village to the posh Muthaiga,” Daily Nation 12 September 2004. Accessed online at <nation.co.ke>. (Hereafter, Daily Nation citations without archival reference have been accessed from the newspaper’s online archive, which can be searched back to the late 1990s, but not before. Key-word, e- searches, however, for the newspaper’s entire run may be conducted on computers in the Daily Nation’s physical archive in Nairobi).
neighboringhoods in Mombasa that had sizable Muslim populations, but also were also home to
generations of migrants and their descendants. This gerrymandering had fixed a short-term
problem during the 1980s, but also exposed Nassir to the changes in voting demographics during
the 1990s. Rather than accept these changing political realities, Nassir chose to instead try to
socially engineer through coercion and violence an electoral map more favorable to him and
KANU.

Mombasa’s twentieth-century history of urban planning and modernization schemes that
had rendered informality and in particular street-food as antithetical to what made the city modern,
sanitary and aesthetically pleasing provided Nassir with ample resources from which to justify the
actions he determined necessary to survive Kenya’s period of political liberalization. Migrant
Africans and their descendants, the political constituency that threatened Nassir, worked in a
variety of industries in early twentieth-first-century Mombasa, but they were especially prominent
in the business of selling prepared food to the city’s working classes. Coastal communities were
involved too, especially Swahili and Arabs in tea and coffee hawking, as well as Mijikenda in all
aspects of the industry, but more generally “upcountry” Africans comprised the majority of the
people working as street-food vendors in the city. While urban demolitions of such comestible

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58 Muga, “Maitha’s trek,” which is a profile of Emmanuel Maitha after his sudden death in 2004, but which also
contains an invaluable summary and analysis of Mombasa’s late twentieth-century political history.
59 There is no simple way to cite the evidence on the demography of Mombasa’s street-food trade, as it primarily
comes from an accumulation of anecdotal evidence in archives and interviews, rather than densely empirical social
surveys. The only quantitative data available would be the statistics cited in notes 15, 16 and 17 that show how
informal trading was growing rapidly alongside rapid rural-urban migration to Kenyan cities, of which large
proportions were from “upcountry” areas. Despite the difficulties of the data, the overall impression supports the
view that the majority of street-food operators were from or descendants of migrants from Kenya’s interior. The
archival evidence includes close readings of the Mombasa Municipal Council minutes and correspondences that
address vendors and hawkers from the 1940s to the early 2000s (available in KNA-Nairobi and KNA-Coast in the
UY category and CQ from the KNA-Coast), paying attention to surnames and when people were identified
ethnically, as well as similarly in reading newspaper coverage about street-food in, especially, the Daily Nation,
mostly from the 1970s to the early 2000s. My conclusion also comes from present-day ethnographic observation that
correlates to the more recent archival and oral evidence. However, the demographic question is also a historical one,
as Mijikenda, Swahili and Arab women predominated the street-food industry during the first two decades of the
businesses and other informal structures have always been political, KANU repurposed them as a strategy, Jacqueline Klopp as argued, to socially-engineer new electoral maps in Kenyan cities by using property destruction of poor opposition supporters as a way to cleanse them from districts in which ruling-party candidates were under threat. In the early 2000s, therefore, neither urban demolitions nor using them as a form of political cleansing were novel in Kenya. However, the scale of destruction to which Nassir demonstrated he would resort was indeed a new and disastrous experience for Kenya’s urban poor.

The timing of the 2002 election was opportune for Nassir. As described in the previous section, after more than a decade of expansion and reduced harassment and demolitions of food-kiosk operators, the city had been tightening its controls, and shown an increased wiliness to evict hawkers and demolish their structures. By 2001, hawkers and vendors in Mombasa faced yet another “beautification” campaign. However, the state’s aims were limited, and placed within the logic of urban administration that had been developing since the mid-1980s. The state accepted the reality and necessity of street-food in the city, but it needed to exist outside protected zones, especially the Central Business District (CBD). Combining aesthetics and sanitation, the Council justified its new initiative against hawkers and vendors with its 2001 motto to create a “Cleaner and Heathier Environment for all,” which in practice meant segregating vendors and their poor and working-class customers into tightly-controlled urban geographies. The statements of most public officials demonstrate that they were aware of the need to placate vendor and hawker constituencies, but while still wanting to refashion and segregate the city along their preferred urban-planning designs. This tension was evidence when the Acting Town Clerk noted that “All over the town you will see residents busy either selling or purchasing items. This is good and

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twentieth century, but this changed in enduring ways during the 1930s. See Chapter Two for this moment of transformation during the 1930s, based on different sources than those cited above.
encouraged. However, the sellers have gone beyond acceptable area,” and “jammed the main streets.” As a consequence, “The Council has for the last one year appealed to hawkers to move out of Digo Road, Moi Avenue and Kenyatta Avenue [all streets in the center of the CBD],” and, as they remain, “The Council has resolved that it will invoke its by-laws to remove all hawkers on those three main roads.”

However, for the vendors who had staked claims to land on these roads, moving was not as simple as the state wanted to believe it to be. The governing authorities often framed “relocation” as the solution to the “hawker problem,” but this did not take into consideration how a food kiosk’s location within the city’s urban geography was determinative of its economic viability. The people who continued to operate street-food stalls on major urban avenues despite drawing official ire were not irrationally obstinate, but were trying to maximize the small returns they could with their street-food eateries. With the town center full of shops, schools, universities, government buildings and, not incidentally, many other non-food hawkers and vendors needing meals, this meant that thousands of low-income people required food for purchase in these areas on a daily basis. Tapping into this market was crucial, and vendors’ customers needed them as well. For people surviving on low-incomes in Mombasa, without street-food, the city’s town center was effectively a “food desert.” Many fully-licensed and rent-paying restaurants existed on the island, but these were beyond the means of most who either lived on or came to the island for the day. For example, students from the nearby Mombasa Technical Institute, a short walk from a street-food market on Tom Mboya Avenue, observed that “95% of the college population are commuters hence they cannot travel back home for lunch therefore they take their meals at the Kiosks.” Moreover, in their particular section of Mombasa, no other restaurants were available.

\*60 H.O. Mboga, Acting Town Clerk to the Provincial Applied Technology Officer, Coast Province, 13 February 2001 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
but, as they pointed out, even if they were “mere students cannot afford their rates.” The closest restaurant, Cool Breeze Inn, was “too expensive,” as “The least cost per meal in Cool Breeze Inn [was] … Kshs 120/= compared to the Kiosks which one can take a meal at a price of less than Kshs. 20/=.” In addition to price, kiosks provided flexible opening hours that allowed students, and certainly others, to “take their meals at any time of the day,” and they “appreciate their services since they are clean and decent.”

Despite the geographical advantages that vendors and their customers found in these informal market spaces, the state remained determined to reconfigure the landscape of urban street food and, by the end of February 2001, these plans were becoming more ambitious. The Municipal Council had initially limited its aim to clearing the main roads, but later in the month, as federal authorities became involved through the Ministry of Roads and Public Works, they decided to try to clear all hawkers off the city’s road reserves. During the 1980s and 1990s, despite demolitions continuing, they were usually localized to specific streets and neighborhoods, such as the multiple attempts to create the tourism corridor in Changamwe. However, this new directive was a qualitatively more structural endeavor, moving towards clearing all hawkers squatting on and around roads throughout the city.

The authorities were cautious, though, only publishing notices in local newspapers requesting that all such hawkers operating on road reserves vacate the area. However, people ignored the order, and for months little happened. By June 2001, though, new District Commissioner Reuben Rotich had taken over the project, and tried to enact it within a “relocation”

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61 The Mombasa Polytechnic Students Union to the Provincial Commissioner, Coast Province 10 January 2002 (CQ/18/19), KNA-Coast.
63 Ibid., and Reuben K. Rotich, DC, MD to District Officer, Island, Likoni, Kisauni and Changamwe Divisions, Mombasa, 29 June 2001 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
framework, which was more politically palatable than demolitions with no alternative sites. Vendors and hawkers, as Rotich saw it, had to leave the road reserves, but they would be relocated to state-controlled markets, a policy framework with antecedents to the original urban-planning schemes of the colonial state during the 1950s and early 1960s. During June and July, district officers from Island, Changamwe, Kisauni and Likoni divisions sent in proposed sites for new hawking grounds, but over the following months no evidence indicates that any substantive work was done to prepare these areas for vendors.

After months of inactivity, the plan to remove all hawkers and vendors from the city’s road reserves was taken up again in December 2001 by Mombasa’s federal administration. Provincial authorities ordered the city’s chiefs to issue quit notices in their areas to all the people operating kiosks, and that they be required to demolish and remove their own structures. After issuing two orders, and with vendors continuing to ignore them, the provincial and district authorities held a meeting on December 21 that was attended by the Town Clerk, municipal councilors, people from the tourism industry, representatives of the army and police and many others. Nassir was in the room, and the meeting was led by DC Rotich. We do not have minutes for the meeting, and our best source is a somewhat compromised description of it by attorneys who represented Nassir and the Municipal Council when they were later sued. However, with all those competing interests in the room, some with their power derived from the support of upcountry constituencies, it seems likely there were dissenting opinions in a meeting described as “stormy” by a reporter from the Daily Nation. Nonetheless, whatever the arguments and disagreements, with Nassir and Rotich in

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64 See Chapter Three.
65 M.A. Ali, District Officer, Likoni to the DC, MD (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast, C.M. Katee, District Officer, Island Division to DC, MD, 2 July 2001 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast, Shufaa O. Mwijuma, District Officer, Kisauni Division to DC, MD (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast, and District Officer, Changamwe to DC, MD, 19 July 2001 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
control, the meeting concluded with the resolution “that illegal structures (read, structures erected on road reserves) be removed” from Mombasa.⁶⁶

On December 23, privately-hired crews guarded by the police began to move through Mombasa and started demolishing kiosks on road reserves. While Nassir had remained in the background during the planning phase, allowing Rotich to chair the final meeting, he quickly became the public face of the demolitions. Provincial officials and the mayor refused to comment about the operation, but Nassir followed the demolition crews in a limousine, monitoring their activities. With kiosks being ripped apart, their debris littered across Mombasa’s roads, some of them burning with black smoke filling the city’s air and “as hired men continued to terrorize hawkers on the streets,” officials from opposition parties quickly erupted in protest against the demolitions and KANU. Luyai Liyali, Kennedy Muthini and Aaron Mutele, three municipal councilors from the Social Democratic Party (SDP) who represented predominantly “upcountry” African, working-class constituencies, proclaimed that “the demolitions were not authorised by the council,” and demanded that the MP Nassir and DC Rotich “explain their position and clear the air over who is in charge of this town – the council or the government.” These advocates for hawkers and vendors were joined by an odd ally, representatives and supporters of the tourism industry, as it seems that, whatever their view may have been on removing hawkers from Airport Road or other public areas, they were nonetheless dismayed that the extremity of this operation would damage the image of Kenya. One observed that “This looks like Mombasa is in the throes of a civil war,” though while also identifying the political nature of the demolitions, noting that it

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“could not escape the accusation that they were targeting upcountry people who owned most of the demolished businesses.”

The next day, a group of people whose kiosks had been demolished mobilized, and employed a tactic vendors had long used to assert their right to the city. Over 200 vendors marched on Mombasa’s Town Hall to confront city authorities and demand an end to the demolitions, and they were joined in solidarity by Councilor Liyali from the opposition SDP who had the day before criticized the legality of the demolitions. At Town Hall, Liyali asked, “Bwana Town Clerk, can you tell these people why Mr Nassir is demolishing their kiosks without the council’s authority?” Opposition Councilor Mohamed Bashir, from the National Democratic Party and representing the Port Reitz constituency, part of the wider northern suburb region that included Changamwe and Chaani, was also with the protesters, and he too engaged in a “bitter exchange” with the town clerk. Sensing a lack of control over the situation, the town clerk negotiated with Liyali for a little time so the municipal government could discuss the situation, retreating back into the offices. However, instead of meeting with other councilors, he spoke with police officials in his office, and then 45 minutes later a group of 50 paid youth militia arrived with rungu (clubs) and “stormed the Town Hall, pounced on the unsuspecting hawkers and kiosk owners before flushing them out of the Town Clerk’s office corridors,” and “a number” of the protesters were “seriously injured.” Once outside the building, kiosk owners began to throw stones at the youth militia, but then fled as the National Youth Service showed up to control the area.

The nature of the evidence does not allow us to definitively know if the municipal council may have initially, through some of its members, at least tacitly signed off on the operation at the December 21 meeting, but what does seem clear is that city officials had lost control of the administration of their city to a KANU-led federal administration. The *Daily Nation*, in its editorial the day after the attack on the hawkers at Town Hall, characterized the organization of the operation as one in which Nassir “has personally supervised the demolitions,” while “The Mombasa Municipal Council has been reduced to a by-stander in the whole exercise,” and that “The Mombasa police and the provincial administration have provided back-up for Mr Nassir’s forces.” Nassir, reminding the city of the power he still had, warned those who may consider questioning the legality of his actions that “anyone who dares think of suing him should first reckon with the fact that he holds the exalted office of Ministry in the Kenyan Government and that his lawyer is the attorney general.”

However, while faced with the destruction of their property and even physical violence, vendors and hawkers nonetheless continued to protest the demolitions, and they were supported by their government advocates. Councilor Liyali, recovering from his injuries after being attacked at Town Hall, was becoming increasingly radicalized during the campaign, and argued that “The demolition of kiosks in Mombasa was tantamount to a declaration of war against the poor by the government” and “asked all the kiosk owners and hawkers whose property was either destroyed, looted or set ablaze to arm themselves and fight back.” The next day, whether responding to Liyali’s call or acting of their own initiative, hawkers and vendors in Changamwe engaged in their largest form of organized resistance to that point, strategically protesting in way that was both

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69 “Is Nassir above the law?” *Daily Nation.*
visible and costly to the Kenyan government. Though Changamwe was generally poor and working-class, tremendous amounts of capital still circulated through it, even if such wealth rarely stayed in the community. The home of the airport, tourists and the foreign exchange they brought to Kenya had to traverse Changamwe in order to travel by air and, in addition, the Nairobi-Mombasa road that cut through the neighborhood was the major automotive transport artery through which commodities entered and left the country via the Mombasa port. With such a valuable transport corridor in their community, vendors and hawkers made use of the visibility it would bring to their struggle. As demolition crews arrived to knock down more kiosks on December 26, vendors were busy pulling debris and tires into the streets. After building barricades and then setting the tires on fire within them, they had succeeded in temporarily shutting down major parts of two of the most important sectors of the Kenyan economy: tourism and commodity transport. The Changamwe protesters then banded up, were even joined by their MP, Rhamadhan Kajembe, and went to stop the demolition crews. As the protesters approached demolition crews at work near the Akamba bus stop, Kajembe took to the offensive and “threw himself in front of the bulldozer.”

Following this confrontation, the scale and the intensity of the protests and the state’s reaction quickly escalated. At the Akamba Craft kiosks on Airport Road, an important and visible space for Kamba curio carvers, protesters tried to physically stop the demolition crews, and the police officers guarding the operation opened fire. After the police shot their guns, people in the area turned to looting in what seems clearly to have had class undertones within the trading

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71 Frederick Cooper similarly observes how workers’ movements in colonial Mombasa made use of the city’s strategic position in imperial trade networks to pressure employers through protest to raise their compensation. See his On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
72 “Chaos as Mombasa’s kiosk clear-out continues,” Daily Nation.
community, as they targeted shops inside licensed buildings and reportedly were “accusing their owners of being behind their predicament.” The protesters then failed in their attempt to burn down a gasoline station, but were able to immobilize a firetruck that had been sent to put out the fires on their barricades. At one point, the protesters actually found Nassir who then had to be “rescued by police after his convoy was set upon by small-scale traders armed with stones and other weapons.” During all this, the roads shut down, and “Holiday makers were forced back to their hotels, unable to take their flights,” as “a queue of vans carrying tourists and other passengers [formed] on both side of the flashpoint,” though some were eventually allowed through. By the end of the day, the authorities reported that one person had died, but people from the community claimed more deaths had occurred.73

These Changamwe protests would prove to be the most intense during the period of demolitions, but vendors also used other tactics to push back. Some used the court system, as many hawkers had been doing since at least the 1990s.74 On December 27, despite Nassir’s threats about his connections to the attorney general, a group of vendors filed a lawsuit against him claiming that he did not have the legal authority to conduct the demolitions. Other vendors used visibility as a way to pressure officials, as with the hundreds of people whose kiosks had been destroyed and who then came together and set up a temporary camp and market on Mama Ngina Drive, a popular island location on cliff-buffs where people spent leisure time socializing. In defiance of the authorities, they started to again “cook and sell food in the open” and, with nowhere else to go, “They vowed not to move until the government allocated them an alternative site.”75

73 Ibid.
74 For examples of kiosk owners using the courts during the 1990s, see Gikandi and Company Advocates to Paul Olando, DC, MD, 28 February 1998 (CQ/18/10), KNA-Coast, and E.A. Akatsa, Khisa Akata and Co. Advocates to the DC, MD, 23 October 1998 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
Nassir, meanwhile, on the same day he was sued held a press conference in which he tried to defend and justify his actions. Situating his actions within an urban planning and development framework, as well as drawing on more recent elite anxieties about criminality, Nassir argued that Mombasa “must be kept clean … to attract more tourists and investors,” and urged that “Those against the move should now go around the town and see the difference.” He continued “that although kiosks were originally meant to help poor people earn a living, they had been misused as they have been turned into outlets for chang’aa [illicit liquor] and drugs.” Nassir made these ideas his own, and put them to use for his as well as his party’s specific political ends. However, the preceding decades in which these informal businesses had been marked as something to be excised from the urban landscape, as antithetical to what would make Mombasa “modern,” and as vectors for criminality, had provided Nassir with a diverse arsenal of justifications for his demolition campaign.

After this initial burst of coercive, administrative violence, the demolitions subsided during the last days of December. Nassir was briefly taken ill and went to the hospital, and President Moi was scheduled to arrive for a New Year’s Celebration in Mombasa. As scholars have noted, Moi’s was a decentralized authoritarianism in that he preferred for his “ethnic kingpins” to carry out central directives in their communities, which allowed the Nairobi government to maintain plausible deniability. Local rulers carried out acts of bribery, coercion and violence, and Moi shielded them from prosecution, keeping him a safe distance from the daily administration of his repressive regime in the country’s provinces. These demolitions in Mombasa were no different, and by the politics of Moi’s Kenya it would have been “unseemly” for him to have been in the city

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76 Ibid.
78 Branch, Kenya, 217-244, and Klopp, “Remembering the Destruction.”
with these demolitions occurring. As a consequence, we have no direct evidence as to whether Moi explicitly or tacitly called for the demolition program, but he also made no concerted effort to stop them while he was in town, and they recommenced soon after he left. Less than two weeks into January, with Nassir out of the hospital and Moi safely out of town, authorities again sent out additional quit notices to hawkers and vendors in Mombasa.79

These demolitions had and would continue to shatter, crack and splinter not only the wood and corrugated iron that composed the materiality of city’s kiosks, but also the social and economic relationships that had been built between street-food vendors and their customers. Among the many vendors with an impending demolition date were those operating on Tom Mboya Avenue, the same ones who served students at Mombasa’s polytechnic college. Warned that the eateries would be pulled down on January 12, 2002, the students who frequented them wrote the Provincial Commissioner, and explained how the demolitions would destroy the dense networks of credit between vendors and customers that allowed the industry to function. They explained how many students deposit their money with a vendor at the beginning of a school term, which many had already done, and pointed out that, if the food stalls were to be destroyed, “the Kiosk owners may not be in position of refunding the money,” leaving already money-strapped students in a more difficult situation. Moreover, such debt relations were often reversed, with vendors extending credit to trusted and known customers who needed it and, with many students away from Mombasa for break, food sellers would “suffer losses as they have not recovered the credit offered.”80 For food-kiosk owners, the threat of eviction from their physical location also meant not only losing

79 “Nassir’s new kiosks order,” Daily Nation.
80 The Mombasa Polytechnic Students Union to the Provincial Commissioner, Coast Province 10 January 2002 (CQ/18/19), KNA-Coast. Meja Mwangi, in his novel on 1970s working-class Nairobi, narrates about how credit relations also existed in that city and the ways in which closures and demolitions, during the sanitation campaigns during the 1970s, created problems for vendors trying to recoup credit that had been extended to customers. Meja Mwangi, Going Down River Road (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1976), 165-75.
the structure of their business, but also the potential loss of their connection to social networks of credit and debt in which they had outlaid money to customers who they afterward may not be able to find. Conversely, during the demolitions, many of Mombasa’s poor residents may have lost the money they had deposited with particular food vendors who they may not have been able to find after their kiosks were destroyed.

Nonetheless, despite such pleas, the demolitions began again on January 13. As detailed in the introduction to this chapter, crews destroyed kiosks in Makadara Park, just on the edge of Old Town on Mombasa Island, and then the following day engaged in one of the largest demolitions of the operation, tearing down over 1,000 kiosks in Bombolulu on the mainland, north of the island. Over the next month, the demolitions continued, unabated. The crews went into new neighborhoods, and swept back over old ones to be sure all the kiosks had been destroyed. While in previous and smaller-scale demolitions during the 1980s and 1990s, kiosks that fed the city’s working classes were usually spared, if only because of their functional necessity, but no such concessions were issued by Nassir. Railway authorities, one of the city’s largest employers, had long since allowed vendors to operate a food court near their facilities so their workers could have food while on shift, but in mid-January the police “descended on a cluster of kiosks near the Railway Station,” while around the same time 80 kiosks were destroyed in the nearby industrial neighborhood, Shimanzi, and an additional 200 trading structures were flattened by the port.81 During the same week, the operation also focused on finishing the clearing of highly-visible spaces, as around 20 kiosks were destroyed on centrally-located Haile Salassie Road, and the areas around government buildings were cleared out too, as “they demolished food kiosks near the

Mombasa Law courts, Customs department and Mbaraki police lines.”\(^{82}\) Nassir’s operatives spent some time off the island as well, moving through the peri-urban area of Likoni to the south, demolishing around 500 kiosks and other structures.\(^{83}\)

By the final week of January and into the first of February, the crews had mostly finished demolishing kiosks on Mombasa island, and so intensified their focused on the peri-urban suburbs on the northern and western parts of the mainland. The northern mainland area was a starkly divided space, as the eastern coastal side was filled with elite tourism hotels and upper-class residential space, while the western portion was the home to large communities of the city’s poor and working-classes. However, food vendors operated not only in the working-class parts of the north mainland, but also in its elite areas because hotel workers and people working in upper-class homes also needed food-for-purchase during their shifts. Therefore, during the final week of January, approximately 800 kiosks were pulled down in the working-class, and mostly migrant, neighborhoods of Kisauni, including in the sub-locations of Bombolulu, Vok, Kengeleni and Kongowea, but crews also conducted smaller sweeps and demolished structures near the hotels in the elite, north-mainland enclave of Nyali, including around Reef and Kenol.\(^{84}\) The next week, the operation turned to mainland west, a working-class space further from the tourist beaches and golf courses, but while also being home to the airport. As we have seen, in the effort to create a tourism corridor, this area endured some of the most intense demolitions during the relative calm of the 1990s, but those operations were usually tightly-focused on Airport Road and the other connectors on which tourists would drive. However, Nassir’s vision was more totalizing. Despite the protests of late December, over only a matter of days in early February, demolition crews destroyed

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\(^{82}\) “City elevation,” *Daily Nation*.

\(^{83}\) A.L. Sunkuli, District Officer II, MD to DC, MD, 17 January 2002 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.

approximately 1,250 kiosks in the neighborhoods of Changamwe, Msikiti Nuru, Kisumu Ndogo, Wanyani, Magongo, Chaani and Birikani.  

Within these aggregates of thousands of kiosks being demolished between December 2001 and February 2002, there were also just as many individual stories of hardship wrought by this destruction. When pulling down a kiosk, authorities were often not only denying the proprietor their income, but were also threatening the stability of the lives of the many dependents vendors often had. One such person was Letty Grace Aluoch, who started a street-food kiosk on Mombasa Island in 1997 and, like many others, does not appear to have had a federal TOL, but was licensed by the Municipal Council. During her time as a food vendor, she transgressed the boundary of where it was officially permissible to operate, setting up in the government quarter, but, lasting for nearly six years, she was able to maintain her foothold in that contested space and sold workday meals to the employees of the Provincial Commissioner’s office, the Law Courts, the Municipal Council and even the State-House police officers. However, in January 2002, along with thousands of others in Mombasa, her kiosk was demolished, which likely would have happened even if she had a TOL. Before the demolition, the money she earned from her business had to be stretched to provide for herself and six dependents, and had to cover expenses ranging from “medication, school fees, uniforms, book[s], food, clothing and shelter.” With such a household economy, she certainly struggled before the demolition, but she descended into crisis after losing her business. Without money for rent, she was evicted from her apartment, and was made homeless along with her four and her deceased sister’s two children. Once the owner of a restaurant, after the demolition, hunger became part of her family’s daily existence, surviving only on the occasional generosity of her old neighbors, who would “at times … give us a sufuria [pot] of porridge.”

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85 “Kiosk Report,” District Officer II, MD to DC, MD, 7 February 2002 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
few other options, on January 30 she wrote the very authorities who had taken her livelihood, asking for another opportunity to work as a vendor and, in the meantime, needing to survive day-to-day, “if you could assist us with food for the time being and also if you could request any church to give us shelter.” Aluoch’s kiosk, and with it her livelihood, was only one of the many thousands that were destroyed from December 2001 to February 2002.

These demolitions and the destruction of the material, social and economic infrastructures of Mombasa’s poor sparked fierce debate in the city and Kenya more widely. A question of fundamental importance, both then and now, remains: why did this occur? Nassir himself vociferously denied that the operation had any connection to the approaching 2002 national elections, or that he was specifically targeting upcountry communities to drive them from the city’s electoral rolls, but many commentators saw this destruction of the property of the poor as just the latest episode of a familiar KANU tactic. Only days into the demolitions, Daily Nation columnist John Mbaria wrote that Nassir was “afraid for his political survival” with the election only months away and, “So, what to do? Chase the upcountry folk away.” When challenged by reporters about the political motivations behind his operation, Nassir pushed back and “denied that the demolitions were selective and said all kiosks next to roads would go,” and added that “Even a kiosk belonging to my nephew was demolished along Digo Road. So this talk of selective demolition is all nonsense.” However, whether his nephew’s kiosk was demolished, for which there is no corroborating evidence other than Nassir’s word, what is clear is that the crews tended to avoid kiosks that were owned by party officials and that, demographically, the majority of kiosks were

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86 Letty Grace Aluoch to DC, MD, 30 January 2002 (CQ/18/18/), KNA-Coast.
owned and run by upcountry people.⁸⁹ So, selective or not, this was still a campaign aimed primarily at upcountry communities and, despite Nassir’s denials, questions persisted. Robert Odual, also writing for the *Daily Nation*, reported on December 31 that “speculation abounds of a wider political plot,” in particular since “demolitions were largely focused on Mombasa’s major thoroughfares including Moi, Kenyatta, Haile Selassie avenues, large chunks of which fall within Mr Nassir’s Mvita constituency,” and since voter registration was only a month away, people “cannot help but discern a scheme similar to the 1997 violence in Likoni mainly directed at upcountry communities.”⁹⁰

For the opposition, the nature of the demolitions was clear. As Moi celebrated New Year’s Day in Mombasa, Musikari Kombo, an MP from FORD-Kenya, explicitly politicized the operation, and put his party behind the vendors and hawkers. He wrote in a *Daily Nation* letter to the editor that “We, in Ford-Kenya are shocked that a government that is supposedly for the good of the people, is turning against them.” Kombo defended the “hawkers in Mombasa and elsewhere in the country” who were “law-abiding Kenyans whose only crime is to try to make an honest living in a hostile economic environment created by a corrupt and inefficient Kanu regime.” Not mincing words, he concluded by linking such actions as the kiosk demolitions to the violent politics that it undergirded and produced, arguing that “Kenyans should say no to clashes, and to a regime that thrives on tribal cleansing and economic genocide.”⁹¹ As these criticisms were aimed not only at Nassir but KANU more broadly, we need to also see how this was a project of political cleansing designed to help not only the Mvita MP, but also his party. During January and February,

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⁸⁹ For the crews avoiding KANU-connected kiosks, see the introduction to this chapter, and Bensen Abele, “Minister’s men demolish more kiosks in city,” *Daily Nation*, 14 January, 2002, McMillan.
as the demolitions had mostly moved well outside Nassir’s district and into Changamwe and Kisauni, the sweeps were targeting constituencies who had swept KANU from power in previous elections.

For Nassir, these demolitions also served a double purpose, both removing opposition voters, while at the same time potentially gaining him additional ones within his core constituencies. This was because, as much as Nassir was intensely criticized, many others were overjoyed with the operation. In particular, for more conservative sections of Mombasa’s society, upcountry communities and their new migratory cultural institutions such as street-food kiosks that they had created represented part of a more general sense that coastal society was on the decline through a diminishment and a tainting of its past “glories.” These views cannot be easily separated from a longer racial history in which Swahili and Arab communities on the East African coast have often constructed coastal, Muslim urbanity as “civilization” (uestaarabu) and people from upcountry (watu wa bara) as embodying “barbarism” (ushenzi), a set of ideas that had in the past justified the enslavement of Africans from the interior, especially during the nineteenth century.92 As proclamations of support for Nassir emerged, one particular sub-genre evoked a sense of opportunity that these demolitions could reinstall Mombasa back into the hands of its “original” inhabitants. One such letter was titled in a way that most observers would have understood its implicit message, written as it was from the “True Citizens of Mombasa ‘Town’” to Nassir. Not only did its authors claim their coastal authenticity, but they also made reference to an older Mombasa, referring to it as “Mombas,” a common appellation for the city from the nineteenth century.

92 For race, slavery and post-abolition East Africa, see the work especially of Jonathon Glassman in War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Violence in Colonial Zanzibar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) and Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995). Older, but still very sharp and relevant in analysis, is Frederick Cooper’s work on similar themes, including From Slaves to Squatters: Plantation Labor and Agriculture in Zanzibar and Coastal Kenya (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1980), and Plantation Slavery on the Coast of East Africa (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
century. They wanted to “out right congratulate [Nassir]” for his “determination and courage shown by demolishing the ILLEGAL kiosks and other structures which had been erected all over our beautiful TOWN. KUDOS & KEEP IT UP!”93 Another supporter, Seif Sheyumbe, wrote a letter to the editor in early January during the lull in demolitions, in which he also drew on a nostalgic rendering of Mombasa, conflating aesthetic modernization with restoration, writing that “The beautiful place that Mombasa is needs beautiful roads, which is why Mr Nassir’s endeavour to restore Mvita and other areas to their former glory deserves support,” while also reducing vendors to a social infection, noting that the “Erection of illegal structures … led to an influx of jobless people, who gradually turned them into dwelling places—harboring carjackers and gangsters, besides making the streets dirty.”94

However, Nassir, who had survived for decades as a politician, chose his words quite carefully to try to avoid any explicit or even implicit reference to the underlying racial and political components of the demolitions. By mid-February of 2002, with the street-food industry in ruins, the demolitions of kiosks were winding down, but Nassir’s vision of political and racial cleansing was wider than vendors and hawkers, and he moved on to his next project to clear shack settlements from the city. By late February, this next operation had left more than 2,000 people homeless. When speaking to journalists, he momentarily broke from his usual controlled, calmly bureaucratic language, and let slip a comment revelatory not only about his views on shack dwellers, but certainly kiosks as well, quipping that “Slum dwellers will not be spared. Let them go back to their

93 “True Citizens of Mombas” to Shariff Nassir, Member of Parliament, Mvita District, 29 December 2001 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
homes.” Such language was not ambiguous in Mombasa. He wanted to cleanse Mombasa of poor, “upcountry” residents, and send them back to the interior, to bara.95

**Conclusion: The Political Economy of Urban Struggle in Twenty-First Century Africa**

The people making their living selling prepared food and drink in Mombasa have much in common with others in similar “informal” industries throughout Africa. With economic opportunities in rural areas few, and with those that do exist offering little promise of social mobility, people in Kenya and across the continent look to the city as a space of potential, the possibility, even if slim, to improve one’s earning power and achieve social mobility and respectability. Cities do, in fact, provide that potential possibility. With denser concentrations of salaried or higher wage-earning jobs, many Africans throughout the twentieth century and during this one have come to cities and found work that has allowed them to find a level of stability hard to find in rural agricultural and pastoral economies. However, as with most “bootstrap” narratives, these people tend to be the exceptions, and for most people living in urban Africa, life is a difficult struggle to earn enough money for food, shelter, basic commodities and, when possible, for enjoying the leisure activities the city has to offer.

In Mombasa, a political economy of narrow opportunity has existed for as long as we have records, but the number of people struggling in this coastal city dramatically increased during the twentieth and into our current century. One of the key decades for Mombasa’s labor economy, as it was for much of the world, was the 1930s. That decade, through the combination of the Great Depression and increased migration from rural areas with deteriorating economies, saw the transition from a scarcity of waged workers to an overly saturated labor market. While longitudinal data in thin, combined quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that Mombasa’s labor market

has effectively remained saturated since the 1930s up to the present day. With few opportunities for wage labor, and with most of the jobs that did exist being extremely low-paying given the structural advantages that saturation provided capital over labor, many people living in the city have had to survive by working in the “informal” sector. I have argued elsewhere in this dissertation that many of these people went into the business of providing the “comforts of home” by selling prepared food and drink to the growing mass market of migrants and other poor urban residents. This economy, created by the impoverished improvising means of survival, was driven both by the needs of the proprietors as well as the customers. With a city providing little secure, well-paid work, people needed jobs selling food, while their customers, with little income of their own, desired inexpensive places where they could buy their daily meals. This dynamic fundamentally shaped the formation of twentieth-century Mombasa, engendering the growth of a vast network of street-food vendors that allowed the city to function. Nassir destroyed the materiality of this social and cultural institution, smashing, crushing and burning it down, but he did not change the underlying political economy that had created it.

For government officials and others, this became increasingly clear in the months and years that followed the 2001-02 demolitions. In April 2002, less than two months after the operation ended, a representative for the new District Commissioner observed “that Kiosks are coming up again after a successful demolition of the same to clean up our city.” Later that month, the Medical Officer of Health was similarly concerned, noting: “Following the demolition of kiosks, the hawkers are back at the same areas hawking food and other wares.” Moreover, it appeared that after the devastation of Nassir’s campaign, some of these vendors took a different approach

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96 See the evidence presented in this chapter as well as chapters two through five.
97 See Chapter Two.
98 A.L. Sunkuli, for the DC, MD to All District Commissioners, 4 April 2002 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
99 M.B. Lugogo, Medical Officer of Health, Mombasa to the DC, MD, 23 April 2002 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
to constructing their kiosks, replacing wood with concrete, as one “Concerned Mombasa Resident” wrote, “with great sorrow” that kiosks were being rebuilt, but that now proprietors were “using block and not the usual timbers.” This gradual reestablishment of vendors and hawkers caused great concern for those who had dreamed of a return to old Mombasa, as the city “had started to regain its lost glory, but with such kind of people it’s going to be very hard. We know you’re [the District Commissioner] hard working … don’t let small people to spoil your effort Please.”

The reason hawkers and vendors returned was not only because the city’s political economy incentivized such economic behavior, but also because state officials began to again rebuild patrimonial relationships that semi-legitimized the work of selling food and drink on Mombasa’s streets. In the Mombasa of the early 2000s, vendors and hawkers endured incredible hardship, but they had also proved themselves a political force. In the end, Nassir actually showed how, even with the intensity of the coercion and violence to which he resorted, such operations did not guarantee electoral victory. In the 2002 election, Nassir lost the seat he had held for nearly 30 years, defeated by Najib Balala, and KANU was swept from power both in Mombasa and nationally, losing control of parliament, and in the presidential election Mwai Kibaki defeated Uhuru Kenyatta, Moi’s hand-picked KANU candidate. Nassir and KANU had gambled, and lost.

As Mombasa’s poor rebuilt their structures and their lives after this last desperate attempt of KANU to retain control, they worked again to make space for themselves in a city that had so violently rejected them, and so used the available tools of patronage and bribery to find some security in a precarious world. We can see this in August of 2002, as licensed traders around MacKinnon Market on the edge of Old Town noted with frustration in a letter to Mayor of

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100 “Concerned Mombasa Resident” to the DC, MD, 12 July 2002 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast. For similar sentiments, also see Khalid Awad Bukhiet, “Hawkers menace’ has returned to our city,” Coastweek, 30 August – 5 September 2003 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
Mombasa that “Your inspectors are colluding with the hawkers, by accepting bribes and Kshs20/= daily rent for the hawker to operate thus them being legal,” and then continued that “There are 4 illegal Shanty Kiosks operating on pavements and they cook food on unhygienic open grounds.”

Vendors continued to use such direct bribery relations to secure space, but they also tried, as they had done since independence, to use the globally-circulating concepts of citizenship, rights, development and democratic governance to politically and practically argue that, as wananchi, they and their livelihoods deserved protection. In 2003, for example, a group of vendors had formed a new organization premised on their shared experience of displacement from a specific geography, the Displaced Traders of Machakos Street Mombasa. More than a year after the demolitions, with no viable, legal alternative trading centers created as had been promised, they contended that “As Tax Payers and parents we feel that as citizens of this country we are entitled to a good working environment whereby we pay rates to enhance the economic development of the country as well as raising the standard of living,” and, as such, “We condemn the act of demolishing kiosks without giving any alternative place for earning our daily bread as an act of crime against humanity.” Following this declaration, they tacitly reminded the new government of their voting power, writing that “we are grateful for the ouster of the Regime that victimized us and are responsible for the same due to our voting pattern,” and then made clear what, as they were writing to the new government, they wanted for their support, suggesting that “there are existing facilities for our rehabilitation on the same Machakos Street,” and “The road reserve between Aga Khan walk and Tangana road on Machakos street has enough space, which the council can utilize to earn revenue as well as creating employment opportunities.”

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101 “Shop owners of the Mackinon market and its neighborhood” to the Mayor of Mombasa, n.d., c. August 2002 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
102 Charles Mamu Mwangi, Secretary, Machakos Street Traders Society to the Town Clerk, Mombasa, 6 February 2003 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
The record is not clear on whether this specific association was able to pressure the municipal government into allotting them part of the road reserve on Machakos Street, but what we do know is that street-food vendors, with or without the approval of the state, returned and reclaimed Mombasa as a space in which they could earn a living in the years after the demolitions. An *East African Standard* article in 2003 observed that “Hawkers have invaded Mombasa’s Central Business District (CBD) once again,” and that “A survey showed that hawkers have also started businesses in residential estates as was the case before the now infamous kiosk demolition exercise in December 2001,” with Chamgamwe as “the worst hit with food stalls emerging again, causing concerns over the effectiveness of the exercise spearheaded by former Cabinet Minister Shariff Nassir.” The new District Commissioner for Mombasa, John Egesa, vowed that he would “use the law to ensure that the hawking menace does not take root in the town.”103 Despite such proclamations, more than a year later, the state had clearly failed to stop vendors and hawkers, as evidenced when a district officer noted in October 2004 on the “emergence/mushrooming of kiosks on road reserves,” and thus concluded that “Now the situation is going back to the old in a big way.”104

Today in Mombasa, if you walk down Mikindani Road in the late evening, the street is quiet. A series of empty stalls line the sides of the road, mostly made with wooden poles and some with corrugated iron roofs. During this time of the evening, if looking closely, you can see the small charcoal remains of where a stove operated, and how the dirt floor is striated from where a broom was meticulously dragged across it after a day’s work. Mikindani Road is an in-between space in the urban geography of Mombasa, sitting on the edges of three neighborhoods, the Central

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104 Jan Ireri, Distric Officer, Island Division, Mombasa to the Town Clerk, Mombasa, 18 October 2004 (CQ/18/18), KNA-Coast.
Business District, Kizingo, home to the islands most elite residences, and the government quarter. Only a short walk from this road, people can find restaurants offering a variety of cuisines from Kenyan to Chinese, as well as upscale cafes with espresso and prepared meals. However, for many, if not the majority, of the people who work in or around the government offices, businesses and elite homes in this part of the city, their income does not come close to allowing them to eat in these restaurants and cafes. Instead, during the early morning and afternoon, they frequent the eateries that fill these stalls each day on streets like Mikindani where, during the early morning, hot coals replace the charred remains from the previous evening, and heat stoves cooking tea, beans, and deep-frying mahamri donuts and pan-frying chapatti. After the morning rush, these proprietors on Mikindani, and throughout the city, regroup, still offering most of these breakfast items throughout the day, but they then also add the maize-meal porridge ugali, a meat or vegetable relish and possibly the favorite item of Central Province, githeri, a mixture of maize kernels and beans.\(^\text{105}\)

The history of urban planning and development in Mombasa has placed these street-food vendors and others in similar locations throughout the city on a razor-thin edge. Other, less visible parts of the city would provide more day-to-day security, not attracting the attention of beautification-minded officials, but they also would not have access to such busily-trafficked parts of Mombasa. While I only met a few street-food vendors who seemed to have been able to accumulate surplus capital, nearly all of them with whom I spoke viewed the profession as a viable way to make a living, earning enough for housing, clothing and, if they had children, school fees and books. However, access to the consumer markets they needed to make their businesses profitable meant staking claims to urban land in the highly-visible and tightly-policed parts of the

\[^{105}\] These descriptions of Mikindani Road come from time spent living on the street during 2015.
city like Mikindani Road, places that urban planners had long since decided they do not belong. These vendors continue to work, and to feed those who rely upon them, both their families and customers, but Mombasa’s urban history has also produced a present in which each day potentially portends the loss of that livelihood.
CONCLUSION

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF FOOD IN KENYA AND THE WORLD

Global capitalism, once again, may soon transform Kenya’s food systems. During the past six years, Kenya has become an increasingly attractive target for the fast-food industry. However, as the formation of colonial capitalism in early twentieth-century East Africa did not simply remake the region in the image of industrial England, so too have the world’s fast-food corporations and their franchisers reshaped their businesses to fit Kenya’s consumer markets, supply chains and broader political economy.\(^1\) As this dissertation has shown, the stratified nature of twentieth-century urban Kenya created a food system in which the poor and working classes effectively were excluded from eating in the licensed and regulated confines of large restaurants, and instead took their food at roadside eateries. Kenyan restaurants, historically and in the present, quite simply, are for the middle and upper classes. Consequently, while large portions of fast-food revenues in the United States come from the spending of poorer classes, those recently established in Kenya are designed to cater to the elite.

Identifying this sector of Kenyan society as its market, global fast-food has grown along with the rise of Kenya’s middle class, which now may number somewhere close to 20 million people.\(^2\) The first Western fast-food chain to arrive in Kenya was KFC in 2011. They now have 10 restaurants, with plans to expand.\(^3\) Christopher J. Bak, an American and formally part of an “emerging-market” hedge fund in New York City, opened Kenya’s first Subway in 2013 after he

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1. For an older but still relevant overview of the history of capitalism in Africa as well as a critical engagement with the literature on it, see Frederick Cooper, “Africa and the World Economy,” *African Studies Review* 24, no. 2/3 (1981): 1-86.
2. The spending power of this middle class is evident not only in the rising number of fast-food restaurants, but by the growth of the retail sector in general, having increased in size by 67 percent over the past five years, the fastest growing in Africa. Kevin Mwanza, “Burger King Opens First East African Outlet in Kenya,” *AFK Insider*, 16 November 2016.
had already started two others in Tanzania. There are now seven in Nairobi. McDonald’s, perhaps the most recognizable symbol of the globalization of American capitalism, has actually been among the most hesitant of fast-food chains in Africa, concentrating most of its restaurants in North and South Africa, and none in the eastern part of the continent. On its website, McDonald’s notes that “We have not set a firm date for the development of McDonald’s restaurants in Kenya,” but, leaving the door open, continued that “in the future we may take steps to open McDonald’s” in the country. However, in addition to Subway and KFC, plenty of other fast-food chains have seen in Kenya a place of profit and opened franchises, including Burger King, Cold Stone Creamery, Domino’s Pizza, and Pizza Hut from the United States and, from South Africa, Debonairs Pizza, Naked Pizza and Steers. Today, on a walk through the Central Business District of Nairobi, the city’s downtown, one can see a KFC, Subway, Cold Stone Creamery and, just recently opened in 2015, the Japanese fast-food chain, Teriyaki Japan.

These beginnings portend a radical change in the ownership of and capital flows that structure Kenya’s prepared food industry. Until this recent arrival of global fast food, though with some exceptions, nearly all of Kenya’s eateries have been locally owned, from street-food to middle-income restaurants and up to fine dining. While important to critically understand how

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4 Mulupi, “Interview: The Man who is bringing the Subway Franchise to Kenya,” How We Made it in Africa, 3 April 2013.
8 Observed by the author during March-April, 2015.
9 A crucial, but recent, exception to this would be the rapid rise of Java House, which combines a Starbucks model with “sit down” chain restaurants. The business was started originally in Nairobi in 1999, but by Westerners who then sold 90 percent of the company to the Washington, D.C.-based hedge fund Emerging Capital Partners in 2012. Java House is big business, producing $24 million in revenue in 2014, with 40 locations in Kenya and four in Uganda, and plans for Africa-wide expansion. The first branch in Mombasa just recently opened. Duncan Miriri, “Kenyan Coffee Chain Java House targets Africa Expansion,” Reuters, 14 October 2015. Other exceptions would include many hotel restaurants aimed at tourists.
these institutions have certainly not been free from the inequalities of a gendered and racialized process of class formation in Kenya, as this dissertation has shown through the experiences of vendors, this localized nature of ownership has, though, meant that capital produced through the daily consumptive practices of Africans has tended to mostly stay in the region. However, corporate fast-food would restructure this comestible economy so that an increasing portion of the revenue generated through daily eating practices in Kenya would be transferred from the Kenyan economy to these companies and their shareholders. At present, the primary issue preventing an even more rapid increase in the number of global fast-food chains in Kenya is that the region’s food-supply chains do not provide the consistency and uniformity of product that corporate standardization demands. However, the experience of another post-colonial country may be instructive for the future of Kenya. When McDonald’s first arrived in India in 1996, executives faced similar supply-chain issues, but then responded by investing $100 million and six years of time to create their own, compartmentalized and controlled system of food production and supply, which included 4,000 acres of potato farms sourcing directly, and only, to McDonald’s through a surrogate company, McCain Foods. With their supply chain in place, expansion became more possible, and as of 2015 McDonald’s had 200 restaurants in India, with the goal to grow to nearly 500 by 2020.10 If Subway, Burger King or others decide to take this same approach, or if McDonald’s chooses to scale down its India plan and enter the Kenyan market, the future seems likely to be one in which ever more comestible capital is transferred out of Kenya.

The direct effects of this potential future for street-food vendors, though, depend largely on how dynamic and adaptive the corporatized fast-food industry wants to be in Kenya. With meals at these restaurants currently costing the equivalent of $6-10, they present little competition to the

10 “McDonald’s India to Double Outlets by 2020,” The Hindu, 13 September 2015.
vendors who are able to provide food to Kenya’s urban poor for less than 20 percent of such prices. However, as corporations have understood for some time, tremendous surplus value can be generated by operating at economies of scale, keeping prices low and making small profits per transaction, and after thousands, millions and billions of them, these totals add up. Poor Kenyans are not able to spend much money on food, but spend it they do every day. Coca Cola figured out some time ago that it can profitably produce and sell its soda locally in Kenya at dramatically reduced prices, and today its brand is consumed in the country by rich and poor alike, from bustling Nairobi to rural Samburu.\textsuperscript{11} Fast-food chains may, or perhaps already have, come to this same conclusion. A very imaginable future in Kenya is one in which fast-food food companies sidestep the existent food-supply chains they find inadequate for their purposes and instead create their own vertically integrated ones, as they have already done in the United States and elsewhere in the world. The history of fast food in the United States has shown that when these companies seize control of the supply chain, they can and have employed models of production and used their power gained through market share to greatly suppress commodity prices.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, given the abundance of “cheap,” or more accurately underpaid and exploited, labor in Kenya, the use of these workers throughout the supply chain from the point of production to their retail outlets would allow companies to lower their in-restaurant prices considerably in comparison to what they charge in the United States and other Western economies. No clear evidence exists that this is in the immediate plans of the fast-food corporations that are presently in Kenya, as they seem for the moment to be focused on the middle classes. However, all the evidence we do have about the fast-food industry’s past would suggest a reorientation and expansion of their market to include poorer


Kenyans may become part of their future plans. As Eric Schlosser has shown, the high-technology and minimal labor-cost restaurant model that McDonald’s and other fast-food companies created in the United States over the last half century has allowed them an expansive customer base that includes all classes in American society. Since the 1950s, street-food vendors in Mombasa have struggled to maintain their foothold in the city, but, if the fast-food industry figures a way to adapt its model to draw the urban poor to its restaurants, we may find that the corporatization of Kenya’s food system will do far more to destroy these businesses than demolitions ever could.

However, this is only one possible future. Another one exists in which global dialogues between food justice activists, scholars and practitioners continue to open new possibilities for how our collective food futures can be organized around a set of priorities other than corporate profits. In Mombasa, street-food vendors have already figured out a way to bring prepared food cheaply to the urban poor, and keep the capital they generate within these same communities. This was true in the early 1950s when the British instituted the first coordinated effort to drive these vendors from the city, and it has remained so with all the subsequent attempts of post-colonial authorities to demolish and destroy the comestible infrastructures that these vendors have built, and then rebuilt. Rather than directing state resources towards the destruction of these businesses, the Kenyan government should instead work towards policies that would bring much-needed, long-term stability to these proprietors who have been able to successfully create an urban food system that allows the poor to have access to a diverse variety of prepared food in the city. The greatest political challenge for such a future comes from the reality that their businesses thrive in the absence of one of industrial capitalism’s core principles: the inviolability of private property. As shown especially in Chapter Six, these vendors have had to pay various “rents” in the form of bribes and other fees, but they have also in many ways operated throughout the twentieth century
outside a system in which they are tied to specific parcels of rented or owned land. The savings they gain through their more flexible understandings of property has been key to a business model in which they can enter the industry with small capital start-up costs, which also allows them to keep their prices low and thus affordable for the urban poor. Garth Myers has perceptively pointed out that development schemes to grant title to urban shack dwellers could have the unintended (or perhaps intended) consequence of only further excluding the poor from urban Africa. More legible forms of title allow for the easier purchase of land, which could perhaps help some poorer individuals in the short term, but over a longer period is likely to lead to more exclusion with larger concerns buying up and “developing” the land into more expensive housing and retail space: in short, it would produce gentrification. Similarly, the more the prepared food of Mombasa’s poor comes from businesses tied by contract or ownership to specific parcels of land, the more likely it is the proprietors will be those who already had the capital resources to control the property, such as the well-capitalized franchisers of fast-food conglomerates. That proprietors coming from the urban poor would have no place in this comestible future has been made clear by the description from McDonald’s of who would be their ideal franchisers in Kenya. They would have a variety of qualities, but, among them, would be access to “significant capital.” Without question, thinking imaginatively about alternative forms of urban property presents an incredible political challenge given the weight of history and power behind the sacrosanct notion that it be inviolable, but such an imagination is necessary if the world’s cities are to become more just.

Additionally, not only should Kenyan authorities pay closer attention to and learn from the visions of the city that vendors have been struggling to create over the past 100 years, but the food justice movement more globally should as well. While hawkers and vendors have not had the

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14 See note six.
opportunity to write position papers on urban planning, they nonetheless have also clearly demonstrated that they have their own ideas about how cities should be socially and economically constituted, and have therefore provided “theory from the south” useful to those seeking better food futures throughout the world.\textsuperscript{15} As food justice movements outside Africa consider more equitable and nourishing ways that poor communities can access prepared food while away from their homes, they would do well to consider the century of experience that Mombasa’s street-food vendors have in theorizing and practicing alternative models to “the restaurant.” In some American cities, restauranteurs have been experimenting with the idea of stripping down infrastructural overheads and focusing on providing quality food at more reasonable prices, a notion novel to the United States but common in Mombasa for at least one hundred years. The “food trucks” now seen throughout urban America as well as the growing trend of semi-permanent “food carts” in cities like Portland suggest that a desire for alternatives such as those practiced in Mombasa exists, but fast-food nonetheless remains a dominant part of the American dietary. While critically important to not romanticize poverty, with care and attention to global solidarity, I think “the West” has much to learn from the intellectual production of African street-food vendors who have found ways to keep ownership local, ingredients mostly fresh, prices affordable and, most crucially, have had the ingenuity to think beyond the idea of “the restaurant” codified in the licensing and laws of modern states.

Just as the histories of Mombasa’s and the world’s food systems were not pre-determined, neither are their futures. Nonetheless, the fraught history of fast-food in the United States should

provoke us to question what the introduction of these industries into Kenya means for the future of the country’s food systems. While many Americans are now learning and thinking more radically about how they can acquire prepared food while out of their homes, in ways that Kenyans have done for a century, it would be a cruel irony indeed if Americans remade their system of eateries along a model similar to that of street-food in Africa at the same time as corporations from their country transform Kenya into a fast-food economy.

This dissertation has been focused on an analysis of how industrial capitalism and the rapid growth of Mombasa transformed the food systems through which migrants acquired their food. I hope this leads to a new emphasis on these issues in African and food history, but also that the experiences and struggles of workers and small-scale proprietors to build and maintain a food system in their port town on the coast of East Africa has something to tell the world about how we might create a more equitable future.
Images

Image 7: Kibanda eatery, 2015

Image 7 (top left), of two vendors in the Central Business District (CBD) on Moi avenue carrying away what goods they can during demolitions in late December 2001, and, Image Eight (top right), a bulldozer demolishing structures in Bombolulu, a peri-urban Mombasa neighborhood, north of the island. Image Seven: *Daily Nation*, 26 December 2001, McMillan.

Image 10: Demolished kiosks, 2002

The street protest in Changamwe on 26 December 2001, which shut down traffic on the main access route to Nairobi and the airport for part of the day. *Daily Nation*, 28 December 2001.

Changamwe MP Rhamadhan Kajembe, who criticized the demolitions, speaks to vendors and hawkers from his constituency during the 26 December 2001 Changamwe protests, during which he later laid down in front of a bulldozer. *Daily Nation*, 26 December 2001.
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