

*The Eastern Africa Journal of Historical and Social Sciences Research*  
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This journal dedicates its inaugural issue to the Asian Question in Kenya, although it bears an East African tag and no justification is given to explain the apparent emphasis on Kenya. It is published by the Eight Publishers and contains eight articles plus two book reports which are wrongly referred to as book reviews in the journal. The eight contributors are members of the History Department at Kenyatta University, though the journal is their own personal initiative. This fact alone waters down the interdisciplinary initiative implied in the 'Social Science Research' title, which the journal hopes to achieve.

The journal opens with an introductory chapter by S. Omwoyo arguing that Asians in Kenya are important in any objective study of Kenyan History. He further clarifies the conceptual problem of understanding Asians in East Africa and narrows their reference in the study only to immigrants from the Indian sub-continent, comprising Indians, Pakistanis and Goans. The rest of the introduction is more of a chapter synopsis than an introduction to a study. It does not demonstrate any creative ability to transcend the particularity of each chapter to analyse and attract readers to read the chapters in the sequel. There is no lofty abstraction of the ideas that link the various chapters into a study that is based on new data or that challenges already established knowledge. Thus from the start, one is compelled into asking what original contribution the journal adds to knowledge in general. The effect of the introduction is therefore not felt.

Kiriama sets chapter two rolling by examining the pre-colonial contacts between East Africa and Asia. He argues that these contacts predated the building of the Uganda railway. With good archaeological backing, he shows how trade relations maintained these contacts. But he seems to be unaware of Basiles, the possible author of the *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea*, whose evidence he uses extensively.

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In the second half of the chapter, Kiriama fails to deliver a lucid, detailed and flowing analysis of the eighteenth and nineteenth century activities of Asians in East Africa. The Portuguese are frozen while the dynamics of the mercantile trade at the time are not effectively examined. The author merely asserts Asian success in the East African trade which hitherto is not demonstrated in the essay. All emerging European powers at the sea are consigned to the penumbra of discourse while Africans are noted to have become jealous of the Asian success. At this point, the author suddenly realises that the Asian question had started in East Africa. In his subsequent rush to connect this chapter to the next one, Kiriama makes the analysis sketchy, lacking in detail and, thus, fails to render a systematic analysis of the events. This reduces the journals initiative from the start.

In chapter three, Ngari attempts a triple-pronged analysis of the origins of the Indian question between 1895-1923. He sees the Indian question emerging and developing within the British imperial system in Kenya. Indians came to Kenya as artisans, soldiers, etc. But more were attracted by the perceived opportunities for prosperity through commerce. But their continued immigration and prosperity threatened the privileged status of the white settlers who had settled in the white highlands. The settlers consequently used their influence on the state apparatus to frustrate and emasculate Indian progress. Indians reacted to this through political parties, deputations, the press, etc. This boiled down to a show down with each race trying to out-do the other in their defence of Africans.

Apart from the mention of Harry Thuku, Ngari freezes Africans in this chapter. He concludes that the paramountcy of African interests in the Devonshire white paper of 1923 rested largely on Indian interests and initiatives. This of course, is a debatable issue. Although Ngari has an appreciable amount of detail and is systematic in his argument, his chapter narrows the analysis from East Africa to Kenya. The wider and richer East African geographical area is subsequently left out without any acceptable explanation.

Lemoosa continues this rushing tradition in chapter four by examining Asians in the Kenyan colonial economy. The author is indeed adroit in his summative praise of Indian business acumen and dynamism. He lauds Indian shrewdness in business dealing, their capacity to seize rare commercial opportunities and their ability to maximise on these transactions. He shows how Asians outwitted the European promotion of African businessmen which was undercut by a lack of commitment on the part of the colonial state. He crowns the Asian indefatigable business ability on the fact that they set up a

schooling system that ably promoted their professional and commercial superiority.

Lemoosa contradicts his analysis when he attributes the Asian business success to 'favourable colonial policies' (p. 33). Furthermore, he avers that the Asian trading community contributed to economic development in Kenya. This is hardly demonstrated in his analysis. He also misses out the problem besetting African participation in the colonial economy when he glosses over the fact that in the colonial situation, Africans were almost always hewers of wood and drawers of water. Asians, on the other hand, used their middleman role to fleece Africans through unfair prices and unwarranted profits on loans which at times amounted to usury. Africans, Lemoosa failed to note, were victims of a double tragedy: that of European and Asian avarice.

Contrary to Lemoosa's economic development theory, Asians played a mercantilist middleman role in the colonial economy in Kenya. They did not participate in production where wealth is created. Rather, they circulated what they did not produce. They therefore gained profit by 'buying cheap and selling dear'. They capitalised on the ignorance of Africans and, therefore, their activities were parasitic to the Kenyan economy. Of all the races in colonial Kenya, the role of Asians was very detrimental to development and this earned them the ire of both Europeans and Africans.

Njogu in chapter five questions the racist definition of aliens so dominant in contemporary discourse. He argues that Asian politics fell prey to this European invented racist approach to politics. Thus Asians fought for recognition in the colonial system, first and foremost as Asians. A product of this struggle is the Devonshire white paper of 1923, which according to Njogu, 'favoured Africans'. He does not show how. Asians occasionally allied with Africans in their struggle, but this was broken when a division between Hindu and Muslim Indians occurred in the inter-war period. The failure to effectively join the African liberation struggle carved for Asians an improbable post-independence future under African leadership. However, it becomes increasingly clear when reading this chapter that Njogu's attempt to pitch his argument at a lofty level often degenerates into excessive use of jargons.

Nabende takes on the demanding task of examining the political economy of Asian education in Kenya. The title promises a lot in terms of theoretical enrichment. Nabende further laments the lacuna in Asian studies in Kenya in terms of the failure to document their educational involvement. To fill this gap, he noted that colonialism dictated a racially segregated educational system. Asians were left out of the colonial policy on education and it was

only the changing dynamics of the international economy that gave leeway for Asian considerations. Nabende simply credits the international economy too much. Colonialists, he adds, were forced to take note of the activities of Indian schools like Aga Khan, Visa Oshwal, etc., and, therefore, change their policy orientation after 1945. However, Nabende's assessment has no element of the political economy perspective. Kinyanjui (1979) would be a relevant introduction to this approach in education. The fact that Nabende does not note the role of missionaries in education simply attest to this inadequate grounding. The Christian missionary orientation of education in colonial Kenya was part of the political economy of colonialism and the main reason why Asians were singled out as targets of its 'civilising mission'.

Musalia examines the tussle between Asians and Africans in the post-colonial economy. In explaining the Asian dominance of the economy, she identifies among others, what she calls 'historical dynamics'; that is, their early involvement in racial discrimination in education, public sector employment and in their family structure and organisation. What Musalia also calls historical dynamics is in fact the colonial labour structure, while her early involvement in education contradicts Nabende's assessment in the previous chapter. In his explanation of the last reason above, Musalia introduces an unqualified racial tinge to loan acquisition arguing that Asians got loans because 'most financial institutions are owned and managed by fellow Asians'. This assumption is inaccurate and oversimplified. On the contrary, we are told that Africans failed to take control of the economy even when legislative controls aimed at encouraging Africanisation of the economy were put in place. At times, Asians fought the Africanisation process while others connived with corrupt African officials to frustrate the legislative initiatives.

The author lashes out against Africans for re-investing their business profits in land rather than in business, arguing that 'small scale subsistence farming had not been rewarding'. It is at this point that corruption and unfair trade dealings would have been tackled as promised in the introduction. Corruption is a product of Asian advances and African connivance and vice versa. It is not race specific and cannot therefore be exclusively an Asian phenomenon. On this basis, Musalia should have afforded readers a more convincing analysis of Asian and African participation in corrupt dealings — both being products of excess avarice.

To crown it all, Nyanhoga gives a general view of Asians in post colonial Kenya. It also appears an unnecessary chapter given that what is discussed could have aptly fitted elsewhere in the study. The author discusses the

question of racial integration in politics and the economy. He notes that from the start, that caste was an impediment to racial integration. Racial animosity was further exacerbated by the various economic anomalies some Asians engaged in with a small section of co-opted Africans. The author catalogues some of these ills including the yet to be resolved Goldenberg rip-off. To resolve this animosity, Nyanchoga vouches for a multi-cultural education curriculum and equal shareholding in business for Africans and Asians. The practicability of the last suggestion is difficult to perceive. In general, the study has no conclusion and this omission is not catered for in the introduction as is always done in journals.

This is not a referred journal. The 8 publishers are themselves the eight contributors and editors. Their initiative is laudable and worth encouraging, given this era of western dominance of the academic process from research funding to publishing. This does not however mean that we should allow publications that flout pertinent editorial regulations. The one under review is not based on new research. It could have benefited a lot from both archival and other primary research had the contributors done a thorough job. Because of this failure, it cannot claim any originality. It also reflects inadequate peer review. There was an apparent sharing of books and notes among the contributors as the references show. This initiative must also have begun with a firm resolve that the eight contributors would eventually publish their contributions. This curtailed any room for competition and quality which reflects poorly for an inaugural journal issue.

The glaring editorial mistakes in the journal in terms of spelling and grammar are a reflection of the editorial omission. A meticulous editor would for instance remind Omwoyo never to begin a new paragraph with the word 'this' without qualifying it; that his page 9 second paragraph last line ought to be three and not two races; he would certainly break up certain lengthy and almost meaningless sentences on pages 2 and 9; and remind Ngari on page 19 to use the word 're-thought' and not 're-thinked'. He would delete the unnecessary question mark on the fourth line on page 18 and tell Ngari to include Were (1991) on his list of references. Njogu would be told to delete the repeated 'did they' on the last sentence of page 40 and include Nabende (1994) and Spear (1961) on his list of references while Nyanchoga would have been told to include Finkle (1966). Using the phrase 'Asians denial to own land in the highland' to mean Asians were not allowed to own land in the highlands is wrong. Editors would have corrected this mistake in Musalia's article on page 60. I also find it difficult on page 79 to visualise how Nyanchoga quotes a study by Salvadori (1989) that writes about Amin Walji who entered Parliament in 1992. An editorial team would have

corrected these and numerous other mistakes all over the journal. These are simple procedures that cannot be overlooked for any publication worth the name and this one cannot be an exception. It should therefore be read by all those interested in recommending possible areas of improvement.

### **References**

Kinyanjui, K., 1979, *The Political Economy of Educational Inequality; A Study of the Roots of Educational Inequality in Colonial and Post-Colonial Kenya* Ph.D. Thesis, Graduate School of Education of Harvard University.