

**UCLA**

**Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies**

**Title**

Migrant Labour in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/624595pr>

**Journal**

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 14(3)

**ISSN**

0041-5715

**Author**

Sheldon, Kathleen

**Publication Date**

1985

**DOI**

10.5070/F7143017030

**Copyright Information**

Copyright 1985 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Audrey Lourde. Sister Outsider. The Crossing Press: New York, 1984, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>African Woman magazine. January/February, 1982, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>Bell Hooks. From Margin to Center: Feminist Theory. South End Press: Boston, 1984, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup>Hooks, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Hooks, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup>Hooks, p. 161.

Sharon Stichter, Migrant Labour in Kenya: Capitalism and African Response 1895-1975. Essex, UK: Longman, 1982.

Sharon Stichter's book describes the effect of the capitalist world market on local Kenyan economies. It is a model of clear writing and an important contribution on this topic, with one central limitation that I will return to later in this review.

The book is arranged chronologically, moving from the militarily-based economic activity of the nineteenth century to a conclusion where she speculates on the possibilities for future working class action in Kenya. The areas covered include the development of a migrant labor economy before and after World War One, the increasing presence of wage labor, the conflict of estate and peasant sectors in the 1920s, the depression of the 1930s, and the background to the Mau Mau rebellion of the 1950s.

She states that in the nineteenth century the internal self-sufficiency of the lineage societies was a barrier to capitalist penetration, as there was no need to earn wages. Local elders and leaders began to act as collaborators by providing wage labor for European projects, in part because the monetary return was greater for the suppliers of labor than for the laborers themselves. Eventually therefore, "a peripheral capitalist economy emerged, built on part-time migrant and squatter labour." (p. 19)

The author includes specific descriptions of various African societies, showing for example why Kikuyu, Kamba, Lu and other societies reacted differently to European demands for labor. The three main forces that impelled Africans to work for wages were land alienation, taxation, and administrative coercion. Thus groups such as the Kikuyu

which were more deeply affected by population density and land insufficiency, were more apt to enter the wage labor market than the Luo. Within ethnic groups she differentiates between one location and another. With the Luo example she shows that in the period before World War One the Luo of Central Kavirondo provided more workers than Luo of other regions, both in absolute numbers and in percentage. The Luo of South Kavirondo provided the least number of workers. The reasons for such variation include the relative strength or weakness of chiefs in protecting their own local labor requirements, and the variation in population densities. In the Luo example there was only 2.7 acres of land available per person in Central Kavirondo, compared to 7.1 acres in South Kavirondo.

By the 1930s and increasingly throughout the 1940s and 1950s the ever larger numbers of wage laborers led to the development of work-oriented organizations among Africans, especially among white-collar workers and artisans. The work force was not a monolithic entity however, and there were continuing differences between ethnic groups and between various skill levels. Stichter cites one example of a 1945 railway workers' labor action that was undercut and finally unsuccessful due to ethnic divisions. (pp. 167-168)

During the post World War Two period Stichter discusses the background to the development of the Mau Mau rebellion. She concludes that it was not simply a peasant rebellion, based on problems of land alienation and shortages. Rather, the European sector of the Kenyan economy adversely affected three important elements of the African economy. The peasant sector is the best known, but migrant labor and squatters were also involved. Migrant labor, as was mentioned above, was changing its character and becoming increasingly divided. Settler agriculture was unable to meet the demands of unskilled labor, and squatters were in a worsening position. Although the economy was expanding the need was for more skilled workers; thus the post World War Two period was marked by an oversupply of unskilled labor. The nationalists were responding from a situation of relative deprivation rather than absolute deprivation. At the same time, throughout the 1950s there was a large increase in the number of workers that were solely dependent on wages: although half of the urban formal sector workers owned land, this land provided only a miniscule portion of their subsistence. (p. 145) This is a clear indication of the developing capitalist nature of Kenyan labor relations.

The important limitation in this work is the exclusion of any serious discussion of the history of women workers in Kenya. Though men did provide the largest portion of migrant laborers, the women who came to town deserve more comment than a passing reference to attempts to control prostitution "among

Kikuyu women and the flow of young Kikuyu girls into town." (p. 171) The issue of women in the rural areas is only mentioned in a footnote, where it is described as follows: "Another important mechanism of adjustment in the peasant economy was the transfer of more farm labour to wives and children who remained at home." (p. 92). The changing sexual division of labor is central to understanding local African response to world capitalism. There is abundant material on Kenyan women, and there could have been a fuller discussion of this issue in this book. Even a topic such as the source of food for urban formal sector workers (mentioned above) can only be fully understood when women's contribution is a part of the discussion. The omission of women's work, and the listing of women in the index only<sup>1</sup> under "wives and family" are particularly disappointing from Stichter, who has written on Kenyan women workers<sup>1</sup> and is an editor of the recently published collection African Women South of the Sahara.

Nonetheless Migrant Labour in Kenya is a lucid and useful contribution to African (male) labor history. In her conclusion she speculates about Kenya's future. She states that there is a Kenyan working class, but that we should not expect a "genuinely worker-led revolution" until there is a deepening of the labor/capital conflict at both the local and international levels. While this is undoubtedly true, it is not clear whether or not she agrees with the implications of this; will a worker-led revolution only have a chance after further capitalist development in Kenya? She does not claim to be telling the future of Kenyan workers, only providing us with a solid history from which to develop our own speculations.

Kathleen Sheldon  
Department of History  
UCLA

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>S. Stichter, "Women and the Labor Force in Kenya, 1895-1964," Rural Africana 29 (Winter 1975-6) pp. 45-67.