

This study discusses the effects of male labour migration on rural women of Siaya District during the colonial era. In that period, Siaya was the chief labour "reserves". It was a source of labour for the European economy both in the rural and urban set up and the main feature of the relationship was massive circular migration culminating in limited income generating activities in this area. The transmission of the Siaya population into an African wage labour force passed through several phases. The first twenty years of colonial rule involved several experiments with the alternative methods of development, friction between settlers and officials over regular supplies of labour. The First World War heightened the official sense of urgency about labour problems and the impetus for mobilization of African labour. The period after the war marked the establishment of a regular labour supply. Many of the experiments used before and during the First World War were not operational. During the Second World War only a little pressure needed to be applied for people to go to work or to be recruited. After the war it became increasingly difficult to keep most men in their localities.

This widespread introduction of male wage labour and other factors beyond the scope of this study created enormous transformation of the position of Luo women of Siaya. The transformation was determined by the interplay of local conditions, the demands of the colonial state and the interests of the European settlers. The primary purpose of the colonial state was to affect a transfer of surplus from the local economies to the colonial sector. The transfer could only take place materially with a certain amount of violence but after a while with more efficiency but with decreasing violence. The transfer had to take place with the bending of institutions and roles of the original social organization. Since this was based on exploitation of existing technological base or order the colonial personnel were dedicated to uphold aspects of the traditional order. In fact, the most important aspects to be maintained were the household. It was left intact and formed a pre-capitalist pocket in the new system because it was useful to the colonial sector. Women were left responsible for most households while men were drawn into the colonial wage labour force. In this study we try to indicate the new mode, in the course of articulation, heightened some of the pre-existing male-female disparities and created new trends in the household social-economic relationships. Women had to maintain part of the labour force in the rural areas and to produce the labour force. Their work in the household freed men from family responsibilities and allowed them to act as cheap mobile source of labour for the colonial sector.

As a result of involvement in wage labour Siaya society and economy deteriorated and the benefits said to accrue from labour, such as remittances, new ideas and high status for certain families did not mean much. In fact, the colonial government ignored the central role played by women in subsistence until after the second world war-but this recognition did not alter the course of event. A system had been set in motion, which was now accepted and practiced by the Siaya population as the only reliable means of getting cash. Constrained by the demands of colonial economic interests, somehow most women persisted in performing their subsistence tasks and absorbed most of the work previously done by men. And yet this whole system was destructive to the position of women. Women who were unable to cope with rampant male absences freed their marital homes. The economic situation of Siaya today has its genesis in the production system evolved in the colonial period.