University of Groningen

The political economy of sugar production in colonial Kenya

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Published in:
Economic History Review

DOI:
[10.1111/ehr.12684](https://doi.org/10.1111/ehr.12684)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bolt, J. (2018). The political economy of sugar production in colonial Kenya: the Asian initiative in Central Nyanza. *Economic History Review*, 71(1), 358-359. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ehr.12684>

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Godriver Wanga-Odhiambo, *The political economy of sugar production in colonial Kenya: the Asian initiative in Central Nyanza* (Lanham, MD and London: Lexington Books, 2016. Pp. xx+285. 3 figs. 25 tabs. ISBN 9781498511636 Hbk. £70)

This book traces the history of sugar production in Kenya, and focuses specifically on the role played by Asians in the establishment of the commercial sugar industry in the Nyanza Province in western Kenya. Currently, sugarcane is one of the most important crops cultivated in the Kenyan economy, and the sugar industry contributes approximately 7.5 per cent to GDP. An estimated six million Kenyans today derive their livelihood directly or indirectly from the sugar industry. Yet, despite opportunities to increase production, Kenya's domestic sugar production has always fallen short of domestic demand. The industry faces substantial difficulties such as lack of consistent support from the government and pervasive mismanagement of the processing and distribution of sugar. In *The political economy of sugar production in colonial Kenya*, Wanga-Odhiambo aims to understand the historical roots of the current challenges faced by the Kenyan sugar industry through an analysis of the Asian sugar industry in Kibos-Muhoroni during the colonial period.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first three chapters discuss the historical background to Asian cane farming in Kenya. Chapter 1 discusses why Asians decided to migrate to East Africa generally and Kenya specifically. The chapter provides some background on various groups of migrants and ends with the conclusion that many settled in Kibos and embarked on a life of cane farming (p. 29). Chapters 2 and 3 discuss how the Asian community initiated sugar production in Kenya in 1906, how Asian sugar production grew over time, and how Asian farmers responded to challenges that farming in the colonial state entailed. The main challenge to Asian cane farming discussed in these chapters is land policies implemented by the colonial authorities in support of European farmers at the expense of Asian (and African) farmers. Asians were, for example, restricted in where they could buy land, in the number of acres they could purchase, and in the period of their land leases.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss in more detail the various challenges faced by Asian cane farmers throughout the colonial period. Chapter 4 examines processes that were crucial in the process of turning sugarcane into the finished product, such as transportation and processing cane into sugar, and describes how at each of the stages colonial policies implemented to support European farmers either neglected Asian farmers or resulted in unwelcome control of Asian farming (p. 161). For example, the colonial state subsidized rail transport for European farmers but not for Asians, forcing them to use inefficient and expensive truck transport which reduced the profitability of cane farming. Chapter 5 discusses how colonial labour policies, aimed at ensuring labour supply to European farmers in particular, negatively affected the labour supply to Asian farms, hindering the expansion of the sugar sector. Both Asian and European farmers struggled to find workers, as for much of the colonial period, many Africans rejected wage labour. Wages offered by farmers were very low and working conditions were hard. In response to labour shortages, the colonial state reduced the incentive to work anywhere other than on the European farms and frustrated initiatives by Asians to obtain labour from outside Kenya. Chapter 6 analyses other challenges that Asian sugarcane farmers faced during the colonial period, such as ecological challenges and the inability to access capital for investments. The soil conditions of the areas assigned to Asians were difficult and the threat of crop diseases was continual. The ability to counter these threats was severely hampered by the inability to secure bank or government loans.

Chapter 7 turns away from the Asian perspective to evaluate the impact of the sugar industry on the region and its local population. The introduction of sugarcane farming spread to Africans, who experienced rising incomes. Cane farming also provided wage opportunities for Africans. Additionally the Asian farming community contributed to the

increase in schools, hospitals, and health centres. However, many of these were originally intended for the Asian community alone. After independence, they were opened to others in the region. There were negative consequences as well, such as the introduction of new taxes to force Africans to supply wage labour, the land squeeze, and expropriation of land for Asians and Europeans.

The final chapter concludes by summarizing the main points of each chapter. The overall message from the book is that the Kenyan cane industry was a relentless battle for Asian farmers who forged a living from sugarcane farming. The book provides a very detailed account of the Asian sugarcane industry, tapping into so far unused archival sources, making it a great source of information. Yet the book lacks some contextualization and a clear structure, and could have benefited from slightly more balance in the argumentation. It never becomes clear, for example, how many of the total of 130,000 Asians living in Kenya actually engaged in sugarcane production, and how large this sector is in international comparison. Furthermore, chapters overlap, sometimes substantially, and the text contains many repetitions of the same points. Additionally, the story provides a narrow Asian perspective on the story. It presents Asian cane farmers often as victims of the colonial authority, but pays little attention to how Asian settlers exploited African labour. This is especially relevant for chapter 7 where the benefits from Asian sugar production are discussed. However, despite these shortcomings, the book provides an interesting perspective on agrarian development in a colonial setting.

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Kevin Hjortshøj O'Rourke and Jeffrey Gale Williamson, eds., *The spread of modern industry to the periphery since 1871* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xviii+391. 40 figs. 82 tabs. ISBN 9780198753643 Hbk. £65)

This volume of 12 essays and two overview chapters stems from a European Research Council grant and subsequent conference undertaken across six years from 2007. A conference (and second grant from 2010) furthered O'Rourke and Williamson's cause, culminating eventually in this extremely useful collection of commissioned works by some of the leading thinkers in international economic history today. *The spread of modern industry's* thesis is simple, and important: to understand whether the roots of modern manufacturing in the developing world can be traced back further than the 'second globalization' of the 1980s to the period following the First World War or perhaps even earlier. That the book begins in 1871—and the citation for 'earlier' is a paper by O'Rourke and Williamson from 1999—gives the reader some clue by page one as to where the subsequent argument is going, but it is research that is nevertheless highly persuasive and meticulously supported.

The spread of modern industry is organized in 14 chapters across five sections: two introductory chapters by O'Rourke, Williamson, and Agustín Bénétrix set out the methodological and quantitative basis of the collection, followed by four sections on 'periphery' regions around the globe—Europe and the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa, respectively. These in turn are made up of national and more concentrated regional studies ranging from the relatively well-studied economies of Italy and China to those of Peru, Mexico, Egypt, Colombia, and beyond. The contributors, including Gianni Toniolo, Tirthankar Roy, and Gareth Austin, will in most cases require no introduction to regular readers of the *Economic History Review*, such is their standing in the field.

The chapters serve to provide 'narrative interpretations of the empirical summary' (p. 11) set out by O'Rourke, Williamson, and Bénétrix in chapter 2. The flesh of this