Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies (JAIS): **ISSN 2523-6725** (online)
July 2025 Vol. 9, No. 7
Citation: Ng'etich, B. K. & Ng'etich, C. J. (2025). Resilience and Adaptation among the Nandi Households: A Response to Colonial Socio-economic Transformations in Kenya. *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*, 9(7), 206 – 228.

Resilience and Adaptation among the Nandi Households: A Response to Colonial Socio-economic Transformations in Kenya

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Abstract
This article examines the resilience and adaptive capacities of Nandi households during the colonial period, with a particular emphasis on the coping strategies employed by the wives of Nandi migrant labourers in response to the socio-economic disruptions brought about by colonial rule. The study examines how these women navigated the challenges of prolonged spousal absence, land alienation, shifting labour demands, and cultural upheaval. It categorises coping strategies into economic and socio-cultural responses. Economic strategies included utilising remittances, engaging in domestic trade, brewing traditional beer, cooperative farming, and other income-generating activities. Socio-cultural strategies encompassed prostitution, concubinage, and elopement, reflecting both the strain and the agency within the community. The article employs Pull-Push and Agency theories to examine the survival strategies employed by the Nandi households. The study adopted a qualitative design to document the coping approaches. It targeted 100 participants, including wage labourers, their wives, and children. The study utilises the Positivism philosophical paradigm to explore the external factors influencing human behaviour. In contrast, the study employs the Phenomenology paradigm to analyse agency, lived experiences, and intentionality within Nandi households. Through an analysis of these adaptive mechanisms, the study highlights the resilience and ingenuity of Nandi households in maintaining social cohesion and survival in the face of adversity. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of resilience in marginalised communities, historiography of migrant labour studies in Kenya, and offer historical insights relevant to contemporary debates on adaptation and sustainability. The study recommends comparative, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary research to assess the uniqueness and legacy of Nandi women's coping strategies during colonial labour migration. Emphasis should be placed on life histories, indigenous knowledge, and gendered household dynamics.

Keywords: Coping Strategies, Nandi households, Migrant Labour, Adaptation, Resilience, Kenya

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Introduction

The colonial period in Kenya brought profound transformations to indigenous societies, disrupting traditional social structures, economic systems, and cultural practices (Anderson, 2005; Berman & Lonsdale, 1992). Among the communities significantly affected by these changes were the Nandi, a people known for their rich cultural heritage and agrarian way of life (Hollis, 1909; Sang, 2019). Central to these disruptions was the migration of Nandi men into colonial labour systems, leaving behind wives and families to bear the burdens of daily survival in increasingly hostile socio-economic environments (Ochieng', 1985; Silberschmidt, 1999). This study examines the resilience and adaptive strategies of Nandi households during this period, with particular focus on the coping mechanisms developed by the wives of migrant labourers in response to the challenges posed by prolonged spousal absence, land alienation, shifting labour demands, and cultural upheaval (Kanogo, 2005; Kitching, 1980).

The study categorises the coping strategies adopted by these women into two main domains: economic and socio-cultural. Economic approaches included the use of remittances, engagement in domestic trade, traditional beer brewing, cooperative farming, and other forms of income generation (White, 1990; Stichter, 1982). Socio-cultural responses encompassed practices such as prostitution, concubinage, and elopement, reflecting both the strain of colonial pressures and the agency exercised by women in navigating their circumstances (Obbo, 1980; Thomas, 1994). By situating these responses within the frameworks of Pull-Push and Agency theories, this study interrogates both the structural forces that compelled change and the individual actions that signified resistance and adaptation (Lee, 1966; Giddens, 1984).

The study employs a qualitative research design, drawing insights from a purposive sample of 100 participants, comprising wage labourers and their spouses and children. It is grounded in two philosophical paradigms: The study uses positivism to analyse external, structural influences on human behaviour (Comte, 1853; Durkheim, 1895), and Phenomenology, which facilitates an exploration of lived experiences, intentionality, and meaning-making within the community (Sartre, 1943/2003; Husserl, 1931; Schutz, 1967). These paradigms facilitate a comprehensive understanding of how individuals and households perceived and responded to colonial disruption.

In the vibrant tapestry of the Nandi community, resilience shines through as households develop unique strategies to navigate challenges. These coping mechanisms are not just survival tactics; they reflect the rich cultural heritage and the deep-rooted values that bind the community together (Mbithi & Barnes, 1975; Kipkorir, 1973). From communal support to innovative problem-solving, the Nandi households exemplify strength and adaptability in the face of adversity.

This article, therefore, contributes to a deeper historiographical understanding of resilience in marginalised communities, particularly within the context of migrant labour in

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colonial Kenya. It also provides valuable insights into the historical foundations of adaptive capacity, which remain relevant in contemporary discussions on socio-economic sustainability and the enduring impact of structural inequalities.

Statement of the Problem

The colonial labour system in Kenya significantly disrupted traditional Nandi household structures, particularly by displacing men into wage labour and leaving women to bear the socio-economic burdens of survival. While scholars have extensively examined the historical impacts of colonialism on African societies, there is still a notable gap in understanding how Nandi women, specifically the wives of migrant labourers, navigated the compounded challenges of spousal absence, economic hardship, and cultural dislocation. Current scholarship often overlooks the agency of these women and the innovative strategies they employed to sustain their households amid colonial upheaval. This study aims to address a gap in the literature by examining how Nandi women navigated the dual challenges of spousal absence and colonial disruption. It explores the coping strategies employed by these individuals and how these strategies contributed to household resilience, thereby enhancing our understanding of the socio-economic dynamics prevalent during the colonial era.

Objective of the Study

This article seeks to examine the socio-economic conditions of Nandi households during the colonial period, with a specific focus on the transformation of family dynamics, the restructuring of community relationships, and the coping strategies adopted in response to economic and social disruptions induced by colonial rule.

Theoretical Framework and Philosophical Paradigm

This study operates within a dual theoretical framework that integrates Push-Pull theory and Agency theory. Push-Pull theory offers insights into the structural forces, such as the disruption caused by colonial economic practices, land alienation, and labour migration, that compelled Nandi women to adopt new survival strategies. Conversely, Agency theory emphasises their intentional and adaptive capacity to navigate these constraints. Together, these theories facilitate an exploration of the interplay between external pressures and individual and collective decision-making processes.

Philosophically, the study employs a pluralistic paradigm approach, utilising both Positivism and Phenomenology. The Positivist paradigm informs the analysis of external, observable factors that influence human behaviour, such as colonial economic policies and migration patterns. In contrast, the Phenomenological paradigm shapes the interpretation of women's lived experiences, subjective meanings, and intentional actions, particularly in coping strategies like prostitution, elopement, and informal labour. This combination enables a detailed and refined examination of both the structural and experiential dimensions of resilience and adaptation within Nandi households during the colonial period.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the resilience and coping strategies of Nandi households during the colonial period, with a specific focus on the experiences of women left behind by migrant labourers. A purposive sample of 100 participants was selected, encompassing wage labourers, their spouses, and children, to capture a diverse range of perspectives. Data collection incorporated both primary and

secondary sources, including in-depth interviews, oral testimonies, life histories, and archival reviews, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences and adaptive responses to the disruptions caused by colonialism. The data were analysed using a historical comparative approach, which facilitated the categorisation of coping mechanisms into economic strategies, such as trade, remittances, and beer brewing, and socio-cultural strategies, including concubinage and elopement. This analysis highlighted both the constraints and the resilience evident in women's responses to the transformations introduced by colonial rule.

Review of Related Literature and Presentation of Findings

This section provides a thorough review of the existing literature pertinent to the study's themes, followed by a comprehensive presentation and discussion of the research findings. The literature review situates the study within the broader historical context of academic debates surrounding gender, resilience, and the disruptions brought about by colonialism. The findings shed light on how Nandi households, particularly women, dealt with the socio-economic challenges posed by colonial labour migration. The discussion merges empirical data with theoretical insights to present a comprehensive understanding of the coping strategies employed and their implications for household dynamics and gender roles.

Economic Coping Strategies

The following segment examines the economic coping strategies employed by the wives of Nandi migrant labourers to support their households during extended periods of their husbands' absence. It delves into the diverse income-generating activities these women pursued in response to the socio-economic challenges posed by colonial labour migration.

Use of Husbands' Remittances

Nandi migrant husbands' remittances were among the key economic coping mechanisms adopted by their wives to survive during the colonial period (Kanogo, 2005; Stichter, 1982). Most men who joined the King's African Rifles (KAR) or the Kenya Police remitted cash through the office of the District Commissioner in Nandi. Officials instructed wives listed as next of kin to visit the DC's office, where they were issued a card that functioned as a revisit pass for each subsequent visit, as remittances were issued monthly (Ochieng', 1985). This bureaucratic system of distribution ensured that women received modest but regular financial support, which they relied on to meet household needs, including purchasing clothing and essential goods, as well as paying for hut and poll taxes (White, 1990).

A case in point is Arap Leting' Kwombo Baras, a migrant labourer on a European farm in Trans Nzoia, who worked as a tractor driver for ten years with a monthly salary of eight shillings. He reported that every two months, he would travel home to Sarora Kipkaren farm in Nandi district to deliver money personally for household expenses and tax obligations (A. L. K. Baras, personal communication, January 20, 2015). These remittances not only provided economic relief but also helped maintain a connection between absent husbands and their families, reinforcing the adaptive strategies of Nandi women during a period of colonial hardship and social dislocation (Silberschmidt, 1999).

According to A. Bartile, A. Cheptaiwa, and B. Matero (personal communication, July 10, 2016). Some migrant men who worked in plantations, road works, and bridge construction remitted cash and sometimes goods to their spouses in far rural areas. Oral accounts revealed that some labourers remitted cash back home monthly, and this system

helped the women at home endure difficult economic times during their husbands' absences. Although the money economy was not prevalent before the 1930s, the concept of a money economy was not familiar in rural Nandi, as it was associated with the British colonial era.

An oral interview with Susana Chemng'ok, aged 90, revealed that her husband would at times return home with some household items already purchased, such as sufurias, cups, kettles, soap, cooking fat, and some clothing. Shops were relatively unknown in the 1920s, as this was an early period in the development of the British capitalist system. With time, labour migration gained momentum, particularly after the Second World War, when husbands started seeking employment in distant places such as Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, and Nyanza. It became increasingly complex for the husbands to return home every month, as they had previously done. It came to pass, as revealed by oral sources, that the only method devised to send home remittances was through friends or workmates in the same farm or industry (S. Chepng'ok, personal communication, September 12, 2015). The migrant labourers could only come home during holidays and cultural festivals around December; hence, many wives strove hard to get remittances from these men. Those husbands who worked as soldiers could only remit money through the DC's office, the Provincial commissioner's office, and the chiefs. The native chief could provide a confirmation notice to the DC's office if the beneficiary were from his location.

McFadden (1978) argues that the wives of migrant labourers received cash remittances through their husbands' friends and relatives, as well as through the colonial government's offices. Scholars have documented this practice of remitting money through colonial offices and friends in other parts of Africa. Patricia McFadden, writing on South Africa and Malawi, showed that in 1960, the government of Malawi received a total of 1,652,936 pounds in remittances. The author also reports that migrant labourers sent 879,516 pounds from South Africa to support their families' survival.

According to M. Kitur, T. Chepyego, and B. Jesang's (personal communication, September 12, 2014), one of the children of a migrant labourer attests that regular monthly remittances relieved their mother of domestic insecurity and maintained the balance of authority firmly in favour of their missing father. Families used some of these remittances to pay debts incurred during the fathers' absence. Viewed through a phenomenological lens, the use of remittances by the wives of Nandi migrant labourers reveals the complex, lived experiences of women navigating the socio-economic disruptions brought about by colonial labour migration. Rather than passive recipients of financial aid, these women actively interpreted and gave meaning to the remittances within their specific social and economic contexts. The findings indicate that remittances, often sent through the District Commissioner's office or via trusted intermediaries, constituted a critical survival strategy. Despite their limited prior engagement with a monetised economy, many women displayed remarkable adaptability. They appropriated these funds to meet household needs, pay taxes, settle debts, and preserve familial continuity. Those who deployed the remittances judiciously not only endured their husbands' prolonged absences but also maintained a degree of socio-economic stability. This adaptation underscores the women's agency and intentionality, central tenets of phenomenology, as they navigated the altered landscape of family life during the colonial period.

Supplementary Employment

The colonial labour economy in Kenya disrupted traditional gender roles and household structures, particularly in regions such as Nandi, where prolonged male absence due to wage

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labour necessitated new forms of economic participation by women. Although it was not culturally normative for Nandi women to engage in waged labour or to leave their homesteads, the structural pressures created by colonialism, land alienation, taxation, and the militarisation of African men forced women to assume unconventional economic roles to sustain their families.

Stichter (1982) highlights the shifting roles of women in Kenya's labour economy during the late colonial period. Seeking supplementary jobs was another economic survival strategy devised by the wives of migrant labourers. It was not Nandi culture for women to work or go out of the compound, but due to the consequences of the prolonged absence of husbands, women and children were forced to do the odds. They sought wage employment, mainly in agriculture, as well as in children's nursing and in towns, where they worked as beer brewers and prostitutes. The move away from the use of migrant labour, which began after the Second World War, was accompanied by a steady rise in the number of women in formal employment. However, most of these were still in the agricultural sector. The employment of women outside of agriculture increased after the war, particularly during the emergency; however, by 1956, this trend had begun to slacken. Until independence in 1963, there was no significant advance in the rate of women's employment. The bulk of women or female labour remained self-employed in small-scale agriculture, and in all branches of the capitalist economy, women's earnings were uniformly less than men's.

The Kenya Colony and Protectorate (1926, p. 55) noted that, in addition to agricultural production, women continued to perform the arduous tasks of food preparation, childbearing, and childrearing. There were few occupations open to women in towns other than prostitution and beer-brewing. A few positions, such as ayahs or children's nurses, were held mainly through Nandi, Kikuyu, and Ganda. One good source of income was the renting of lodging space to men in Nairobi for those who had purchased houses in Pumwani with funds gained through prostitution. Most of the Nandi women who went as far as Nairobi for prostitution managed to come back home when they were rich to prove their duty outside, and it became an encouragement for those wives who were desperate at home. This dynamic is evident in the oral testimony of T. T. Busienei (personal communication, September 20, 2014), who recounted that:

> When my sister, whom I followed by birth, came home from Nairobi those days in the early 1950s, I was still a young girl of about 25 years. She came home with fine things, such as clothes, bags, chains, shoes, blankets, and cooking ware, including sufurias, cups, and milking cans. When I asked her what she was doing in town, she told me that she was a house help (ayah) in an Indian family. I was motivated, and when the time came for her to return to Nairobi, I accompanied her. At that time, my husband had joined the King's African Rifles and only came home once a year. A few coins he remitted home were not enough for the two children that I had and me. So, I decided to look for an alternative source to sort things out myself, as nobody in the family cared for me. I was fortunate enough to find a job as a house helper in an Asian family in Buruburu. I struggled to understand the Swahili language, but I later gained a basic understanding of Swahili, which has Arabic influences. I still understand a few Arabic words and can communicate in the Arabic language, though I did not know how to write or read. I spent fifteen years in Nairobi working under an Asian trader. I managed to save a little

> money, which enabled me to purchase this 20-acre piece of land in Surungai village, and these cattle, which have helped me support my children's education. I even sold some to construct this house. My husband, on the other hand, also came home but settled in Kaptel with another wife whom he had married while I was in Nairobi. I am now financially stable and strong in my homeland, and all my children have found suitable partners and got married. I am now with my grandchildren.

Another informant, Rusy Malosoi, offered a more candid account of engaging in transactional sex work as a survival strategy. She narrated:

> When the situation here at home became unbearable, with children, lack of food, and clothing for children while my husband had gone to Kitale, I decided to move out of the reserve to Kapsabet town, where I engaged in sexual relationships with men in bars. Later, I was employed as a bartender in one of the bars and managed to juggle the two jobs. This work brought me many customers. It was as if the income had doubled, i.e., from the men and the bar dues at the end of the month. This money made me rich, and later, in the early 1970s, I decided to return home to rejoin my family, only to find that my family members were not welcoming to me. However, when they saw that I had decided to buy land and construct a decent house, and managed to buy some cows, they again decided to win me back, but I had already made up my mind to stay aside. My husband and one of our children have agreed to join me on the new farm, where I have already established myself. Although I am old, I remain strong enough to command authority (R. Malosoi, personal communication, October 10, 2015).

These oral narratives provide grounded insights into how women not only substituted economically for absent husbands but also accumulated wealth and redefined gender authority within the community. The personal decisions of Busienei and Malosoi challenge colonial and patriarchal discourses that framed African women as dependent or passive. She illustrates how women, particularly wives of absent migrant labourers, exercised agency and resilience in the face of economic hardship and social exclusion during the colonial period. Faced with severe domestic deprivation, the respondents made a strategic decision to leave the reserve in pursuit of economic survival, engaging in stigmatised but lucrative forms of labour. Her subsequent financial success and eventual reintegration into the socio-economic landscape, albeit on her terms, reveal the complex interplay between gender, migration, morality, and economic adaptation. Ultimately, her story challenges narrow interpretations of women's roles and highlights the transformative potential of individual agency in the face of structural constraints.

Some wives of migrant labourers sought employment in coffee and tea estates between the 1920s and 1930s. These women performed light activities and, as a result, they received only a meagre income to meet household needs. Oral sources asserted that women went in the morning to plug tea and coffee and returned in the evening. Older people often remained at home to provide security and cook food for the young children, as well as for relatives who were at work (C. Tarkwen & B. Taprandich, personal communication, September 13, 2015).

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Bryceson (1980, pp. 16–19) and Stichter (1985, p. 160) highlight that the leading employers were the colonial settlers, who sought to capitalise on these labour reservoirs. These women utilised this strategy to survive as long as their husbands were away, and it enabled them to survive successfully during the entire period their husbands were absent on migrant duties. Women outside Nandi and Kenya also utilised this coping mechanism, as Debora F. Bryceson (1980) asserts that women in the Zambian copper belt were employed in light farm activities to generate household income in the absence of their husbands.

From a positivist perspective, the resilience of Nandi women in colonial Kenya can be empirically observed through their measurable socio-economic responses to the absence of their husbands. Faced with economic disruptions, these women engaged in wage labour, domestic service, and petty trade, activities that can be quantified in terms of income generation and resource allocation. Some migrated to urban centres, acquired land, and invested in their children, demonstrating adaptive behaviours that were both systematic and outcome-oriented. These observable strategies reflect rational decision-making aimed at household survival and socio-economic advancement. The empirical evidence of such actions provides a basis for objectively analysing women's agency within the constraints of a patriarchal and colonial economy, thus underscoring their role as active economic agents rather than passive dependents.

Domestic Hawking

Domestic hawking was one of the strategies used by women of migrant labourers while older people and children stayed at home to supplement remittances from their husbands. Archival reports show that between 1905 and 1920, officials formally commissioned two markets at Kapsabet and Kaptumo stations, gazetted them as townships, and collected market fees amounting to Rs. 297 for the first time (Kenya Colony and Protectorate, 1905–1920). Women were the major participants in these trading activities. An oral source revealed that the items traded included millet, milk, sorghum, maize, tobacco, calabashes, skins, bananas, beads, cowrie shells, and knives. People exchanged various items with those from Kavirondo (North and Central Nyanza), including baskets, hoes, yams, fish, flour, sweet potatoes, cassava, onions, pepper, hides, and pots (C. Leu & B. Mase, personal communication, September 13, 2015).

According to J. Talam (personal communication, September 14, 2015), the wives of migrant men would walk from Kabiyet to Kapsabet, where they would exchange items such as baskets, fish, pots, maize, salt, clothes, and dry beans during the harvesting periods. Through this petty hawking or trading, they managed to get small profits to sustain the household. They walked in groups, accompanied by some children, during market days, although there was some petty hawking at the village level, as narrated by some informants. One informant revealed that:

> I used to move for two days, from Kabiyet to Kapsabet, in the company of other women, to sell clothes. I was a clothes seller for over twenty years until I was branded 'mama nguo', meaning the mother of clothes. I had a relative at Baraton, my aunt, who would often accommodate me, and the next day, I could reach Kapsabet market very early. I was known for this business, which enabled me to construct an Iron sheet house, being the first one in the village. However, it has now turned brown due to rust. My children, whom I educated

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> at Kabiyet School, have constructed a modern house, which is the one I am in now" (B. Chelulei, personal communication, February 26, 2015).

According to R. Malosoi (personal communication, September 14, 2015), they also sold some crops cultivated in small gardens, such as vegetables, to generate some income. The spirit of domestic hawking continued into the 1950s, when it gained momentum, and some women started earning a substantial income from this kind of trade. This strategy enabled these women to a reasonable extent, as some of them purchased plots in towns and even expanded their farms at home in the absence of their husbands, as narrated by informants. This kind of survival strategy was also used in other parts of Africa as seen between 1940s to 1950s in countries like Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon and Uganda where women established some form of collective increase group productivity and household mobilisation of resources during the migration of men to mines, plantations, and towns in search of wage labour (Snyder & Tadesse, 1995, pp. 22–23). The participation of women and children in domestic petty trading or hawking activities was a contemporary feature of capitalist societies.

Framed within the Push-Pull theory, domestic hawking emerged as a crucial coping strategy for Nandi women during the era of colonial male labour migration. The push factors, including economic hardship, spousal absence, and the decline of subsistence livelihoods, compelled women to seek alternative sources of income. Simultaneously, pull factors such as emerging market opportunities in trading centres like Kapsabet and Kaptumo attracted women into informal commerce. By selling food, clothing, and household goods, these women generated income that enabled them to sustain their families, invest in property, and improve their socio-economic standing. This rural-to-urban mobility and entrepreneurial engagement not only reflects the structural pressures of the colonial economy but also underscores the agency and resilience of women. Their responses paralleled broader patterns across colonial Africa, where women adapted to shifting economic landscapes by actively participating in trade and informal markets.

Traditional Beer Brewing

The utilisation of beer brewing as a survival strategy by the wives of migrant labourers was not unique in Nandi. Oral accounts revealed that the wives made traditional beer as a strategy to cope with their husbands' prolonged absences. As early as the 18th century, beer played a central role in Nandi culture, being an integral part of most Nandi rituals. It was used during marriage ceremonies, as well as for initiation and blessings of all sorts (Anderson, 2000; Huntingford, 1953). Beer drinking was part of the culture, but between the 1940s and 1950s, beer began to be commercialised as colonial economic pressures mounted and informal markets emerged (White, 1990; Bryceson, 1980). Communities brewed traditional beer using maize flour and millet. This brew resembles the common busaa known today (E. Simbolieny, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

Oral sources attest that, before this period, beer was not a commercial product but was reserved solely for ceremonial use and consumption by older individuals. It was drunk using pipes from a shared pot. It began to acquire commercial value after the Second World War, and those who had joined the war brought a different drinking fashion (Parpart, 1986). They began using small calabashes and straws similar to those used for soda and other soft drinks. These people viewed the new fashion as superior to the old method of using a communal pot, arguing that if disagreements arose, there was a likelihood of breaking the pot, as well as some drinking pipes made from a special stem of a traditional plant, rather than plastic. To

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avoid this kind of embarrassment, they began buying their beer and drinking in a manner deemed civilised, Western fashion, from a bottle or a glass (J. Kiplalang, personal communication, June 4, 2015). One informant reported that:

> The business of brewing traditional beer was a good business for me. I used to brew *busaa* here at home, which I could sell twice a week. It was every Wednesday and Sunday. The drinkers used to praise me for making the best *busaa* in the village. Per week, I could sell beer amounting to four hundred shillings. That was a significant amount of money back then. I was in this field for 14 years, and it proved helpful to my family and me, supplementing the little income my husband earned as a lorry driver. This money enabled me to pay the children's fees. As you can see, I managed to expand my family's six acres of land to add to the ten acres we already own. We now have sixteen acres, of which six are mine. I have a daughter whom I educated, and she managed to be among the first nurses to work here in Kabiyet." (B. Terigin, personal communication, January 8, 2015).

According to S. Chepng'ok, M. Kitur, T. Chepyego, and B. Jesang' (personal communication, January 17, 2015), this marked the beginning of commercial beer production. A few women engaged in this type of business to supplement their incomes while their husbands were absent. People sold commercial beer in homes rather than in clubs, a practice that became common during the post-colonial period. In 1978, then-President H.E. Daniel T. Moi later outlawed the practice in Kenya (Willis, 2002; Kibicho, 2007). Informants reported that this strategy enabled some women to expand their plots and others to purchase cattle in the absence of their husbands (B. Terigin, E. Birgen, A. Sonoi, personal communication, February 24, 2015).

Grounded on Agency Theory, the brewing and sale of traditional beer (*busaa*) emerged as a deliberate and strategic economic coping mechanism for Nandi women during the colonial and post-World War II periods. Confronted with the prolonged absence of their migrant labourer husbands and the resulting economic strain, these women exercised agency by actively entering the informal alcohol trade. Although pre-colonial cultural norms restricted *busaa* to elders and ceremonial use, the disruptions of colonialism and the changing consumption habits introduced by returning soldiers created new market opportunities. In response, women leveraged these shifts to generate income, secure household sustenance, invest in land, and support their children's education. Their participation in the *busaa* trade not only reflects economic pragmatism but also represents a subtle yet powerful challenge to prevailing gender roles and socio-cultural expectations. Despite the criminalisation of the trade in 1978, a state effort to regulate informal economies, oral testimonies underscore how deeply women embedded this activity within their everyday lives. These narratives illuminate the women's capacity to navigate structural constraints, demonstrating intentional decision-making, adaptability, and resilience. In doing so, Nandi women asserted themselves as active economic agents within a racially and gendered stratified colonial framework.

Cooperative Cultivation

The phenomenon of cooperative cultivation among the wives of migrant labourers in Nandi can be analytically situated within the dual theoretical frameworks of Positivism and Phenomenology, thereby enabling a complex and carefully considered understanding with

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multiple layers and shades of this adaptive socio-economic strategy. From a Positivist standpoint, cooperative cultivation emerged as a rational and empirically observable response to the labour deficit occasioned by widespread male outmigration to colonial labour markets (Durkheim, 1982 [1895]; Schutz, 1967). The exodus of non-disabled men resulted in a significant reduction in household agricultural labour capacity (Stichter, 1985a; Ferguson, 1999). In response, women organised themselves into reciprocal work groups known locally as *kipagenge*, a collective labour arrangement grounded in principles of solidarity and mutual aid (Moore, 1986; Thomas, 1994).

These rotational cooperatives enabled women to systematically cultivate each other's farms, thereby ensuring the continuity of food production amidst the labour shortfall. From a Phenomenological perspective, this practice also illustrates the embodied experiences and intersubjective meanings ascribed by women to their shared responsibilities, resilience, and survival strategies under conditions of structural constraint (Schutz, 1967; Scott, 1985). Thus, *kipagenge* represents not merely a practical response to economic necessity but also a manifestation of collective agency and social consciousness shaped by the socio-political realities of colonial disruption. This labour-sharing model functioned efficiently within the socio-economic conditions of the time when formal labour markets were still underdeveloped. Compensation was communal rather than monetary; each woman contributed labour and, in return, received the same amount for her farm. The provision of meals by the host household was the only requirement. Tasks such as herding livestock or scaring birds were delegated to children, optimising household labour distribution. As B. C. Mambuli, an 80-year-old elder, recounted, this strategy not only mitigated labour shortages but also enhanced food production, allowing some women to expand their farmlands (B. C. Mambuli, personal communication, September 15, 2015).

In contrast, a Phenomenological approach shifts the focus from external structures to the lived experiences and intentional actions of the women involved. Through this lens, cooperative cultivation is not merely a functional economic response, but a deeply embedded cultural and social act. It reflects women's agency, solidarity, and resilience in navigating the emotional and physical demands of domestic life during their husbands' prolonged absences. Oral testimonies reveal that the *kipagenge* system fostered a sense of purpose, dignity, and mutual care among women, who viewed their labour as a moral and social obligation, not just a necessity (Mikell, 1997; Schutz, 1932/1967; Crehan & Okely, 1987; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012).

Magdalene Melly, a participant in this system, noted that "working together brought joy and strength; you knew you were not alone." Her narrative illustrates how these collective efforts carried social meanings that extended far beyond mere productivity. Women found companionship, emotional support, and a sense of identity through shared labour. In this way, phenomenology highlights the intricate relationship between individual agency and collective cultural practices. Thus, cooperative cultivation was a strategy driven by structural constraints but also as a significant practice shaped by intention, identity, and shared experience.

Cooperative Cultivation among Nandi women was a practical response to labour shortages resulting from male migration and a significant expression of collective agency. It met material needs through organised, reciprocal labour, embodying solidarity, resilience, and a shared purpose. Based on both primary and secondary sources, this practice demonstrates how women adapted to colonial disruptions by maintaining productivity and fostering social cohesion.

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Hired Labour

According to B. Terigin (personal communication, May 7, 2015), hired labour was another form of agency used by the wives of migrant men to cope with the absence of their husbands' labour. From a Positivist perspective, scholars interpret this practice as a material and rational response to a clear labour deficit in households. It was observable among relatively wealthier families whose migrant husbands regularly remitted money from employment in the King's African Rifles (KAR), European farms, or the Kenya Police (Stichter, 1985; McFadden, 1978). These remittances introduced a new stratification within rural households, allowing some women to become employers in their own right, effectively reorganising domestic labour economies in response to structural absences (Bryceson, 1995).

Oral sources reveal that these few families acted as African employers, particularly women who used remitted wealth to employ other women to provide agricultural labour. These women assumed supervisory roles, coordinating work on their farms and within the household, and performed managerial tasks traditionally reserved for men (Snyder & Tadesse, 1995; Mikell, 1997). One informant stated:

> While my husband was away working with KAR, he would remit money back to me, which I would always receive through the District Commissioner's office in Kapsabet. I was the manager of the day, and surely, I exercised my freedom and power, which no woman of my calibre would enjoy. I had money, and I spent it wisely without wasting even a five-cent piece. I purchased more cattle, employed skilled workers to build this iron sheet house, bought barbed wire, and fenced the farm. I also secured two plots in the shopping centre and managed to construct houses, which I rented out to people who wanted to open up shops. Women brought firewood to my doorstep, and I paid them for their work. Local men and women who sought employment also completed the farm work early, before the onset of rains, enabling me to harvest maize and millet on time. I was like a local settler of my country until I was branded *chumbin*, meaning 'British'." (J. Talam, personal communication, July 7, 2015).

This testimony reveals how remittance economies altered not only labour relations but also social perceptions of gender and class. From a positivist standpoint, these economic actions are measurable indicators of changing household dynamics under colonial capitalism.

According to B. Tapkurgoi (personal communication, July 7, 2015), young boys, girls, and other women were paid after tilling the land, fetching firewood, or performing other domestic tasks. The availability of cash and commodified labour increases both efficiency and social differentiation within Nandi communities. These findings support the view that women's participation in wage-based economic activities was not merely incidental but systematically linked to broader socio-economic transformations during colonial rule.

Therefore, the use of hired labour by the wives of migrant men among the Nandi during the colonial period reflects a significant form of female agency and socio-economic adaptation to structural labour deficits. Enabled by regular remittances from husbands employed in colonial institutions such as the King's African Rifles and European farms, some women emerged as rural employers and domestic managers, roles traditionally held by men. These women not only reorganised household economies but also contributed to the commodification of labour and increasing social stratification within their communities.

From a positivist perspective, these shifts illustrate rational, material responses to colonial disruptions, with measurable impacts on gender roles, class dynamics, and labour relations. The evidence underscores that women's economic participation was central to broader colonial transformations, challenging conventional gender hierarchies and redefining power within the domestic and community spheres.

Firewood Gathering

Firewood gathering was one of the key survival strategies adopted by the families of migrant men during the colonial period. While the practice was observed across social strata, including both wealthier and low-income households, its subjective meaning and socio-economic significance varied, shaped by the lived experiences of those involved. Ethnographic accounts by Routledge and Routledge (1910) illustrate that Kikuyu women often undertook arduous journeys of several hours to collect firewood, carrying loads as heavy as 30 kilograms, underscoring the intensity and necessity of this daily activity. Similarly, Kilonzo, Gumo, and Omare (2009) emphasise that the energy burden placed on women through firewood collection in Kenya has historically constituted a central component of household survival, especially in rural settings.

Based on a phenomenological perspective, firewood collection was more than a routine economic task; it embodied deeper intentions, struggles, and aspirations tied to survival, dignity, and even social mobility in a challenging colonial landscape (Schutz, 1967; Scott, 1985). The act of gathering firewood, therefore, cannot be understood merely as subsistence labour; it was an experiential and symbolic practice embedded in broader socio-political contexts and shaped by colonial labour patterns and gendered responsibilities (A. Kerich, personal communication, December 17, 2016; Ferguson, 1999; Stichter, 1985).

Wealthier families, who received regular remittances from migrant husbands working in the King's African Rifles (KAR) or colonial police forces, often hired local women and children to gather firewood for a small wage. For the labourers, however, the activity was not simply about income; it was an act of agency, a path toward autonomy and social empowerment. As one informant, B. Matero (personal communication, August 2, 2015), recalled:

> When life became harsh and unbearable, I decided to visit my neighbour, whose husband worked as a soldier under the KAR. I requested that she let me do household chores for her, such as fetching firewood and arranging it on the loft, as well as others behind the granary. She later paid me one shilling for this job. At that moment, one shilling could do more than what one hundred shillings could do now. I could buy soap, salt, kerosene, and matches, each of which was less than ten cents per measure. I could also buy maize and other personal items. In the same vein, I could also save enough to buy a sheep, which later translated to a cow. Through this means, I could own fifteen heads of cattle and about fifty sheep. It was a blessing for a hardworking wife. Others expanded their farms after selling part of their animals when the herd was large enough to cut a portion and turn to land.

This narrative reflects how women imbued their labour with personal meaning, transforming a seemingly menial task into a stepping stone toward economic independence and social recognition. Rather than being passive victims of male absence, women like Matero

intentionally navigated their circumstances**,** leveraging available opportunities to rebuild their livelihoods and identities. The act of gathering firewood thus carried emotional and symbolic weight**,** representing resilience, resourcefulness, and the redefinition of womanhood under colonial rule.

Additionally, the act of exchange**,** labour for compensation, was experienced by participants not merely as an economic transaction but as a relational dynamic within the community. The sharing of labour, the trust involved, and the pride derived from self-sufficiency all contribute to a richer understanding of firewood gathering as an act of lived agency**,** shaped by intentional choices and social consciousness**.** Viewed through a phenomenological lens, firewood gathering among Nandi women is best understood not merely as a functional economic response but as a lived experience imbued with personal meaning, illustrating how marginalised individuals assign value, purpose, and dignity to everyday acts of survival within a context of social and structural disruptions.

Socio-Cultural Coping Strategies

In response to the challenges posed by male labour migration, the wives of migrant labourers adopted various socio-cultural survival strategies.

Prostitution

Colonialism brought about socio-economic and cultural disruptions that deeply intertwined with the history of prostitution among the Nandi in Kenya. Traditionally, the Nandi sub-group of the larger Kalenjin had well-defined sexual and marital norms embedded within their cultural institutions, such as *tumdo* (initiation), *koito* (marriage negotiation), and age-set systems. Prostitution, as defined in the Western sense (i.e., the exchange of sexual services for money or material gain), was grossly absent or extremely limited in pre-colonial Kalenjin society, where sexuality was regulated within customary systems (B. Jebichii, S. Jepkirong', personal communication, January 16, 2016; Kipkorir, 1973; Hollis, 1909).

The phenomenon of prostitution among the Nandi began to emerge more prominently during the colonial period (early 20th century) as a response to new economic realities and gendered social dislocations. The colonial state recruited large numbers of African men, especially from the Kalenjin highlands, for wage labour in settler farms, urban centres, and the railway. Nandi men were absent from their households for extended periods (Stichter, 1982). This conscription left women economically vulnerable and socially isolated. Colonial land policies dispossessed many Kalenjin families of fertile land, diminishing traditional subsistence agriculture. This alienation led to increased poverty and a need for alternative income, particularly for women left behind (Kanogo, 2005). Cities like Eldoret and Nakuru became centres for African labourers and colonial administration. These urban spaces created new socio-economic dynamics where women from rural communities, including the Nandi, migrated to earn a living, sometimes through sex work (A. Cheplel, E. Sigei, personal communication, July 2, 2015; White, 1990).

Among the Nandi, prostitution took multiple forms, not always openly commercial. Women exchanged sexual services for food, money, or protection, often in informal arrangements. In the absence of their husbands, some women formed alternative relationships that were socially frowned upon but provided economic support. Frequently used as a front, beer halls (known locally as *chang'aa dens*) sometimes facilitated sexual encounters, particularly in peri-urban areas (Silberschmidt, 1999; A. Kirwa, personal communication, March 7, 2016).

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Prostitution was, and remains, a socially sensitive issue in Nandi culture. Women who engaged in it were often stigmatised, seen as violating communal norms of femininity, chastity, and family honour. However, within feminist and historical perspectives, these actions can also be seen as forms of agency and survival strategies in a colonial system that marginalised African women economically and politically (Obbo, 1980; Thomas, 2003).

Huntingford (1953, pp. 70–71, 74–75, 106–107) and Fosbrooke (1948) both provide insights into the subject that the earliest female participation in wage-earning was through prostitution, in which women sold sexual rights to a ready market among Europeans, Asians, and a growing number of African citizens. Predominantly among early prostitutes were Nandi and Maasai women, both pastoral tribes in which women had traditionally experienced a great deal of sexual freedom. Several other tribes, such as the Kipsigis, had similar traditional customs but did not experience the same economic pressures as the Nandi and Maasai did, particularly in terms of prostitution, at the turn of the century. Thus, scholars cannot ascribe participation in prostitution solely to traditional patterns of male-female relationships. The Maasai also had a tenuous political alliance with the British at this time, of which the '*trade'* reported by Meinertzhagen may have been an outgrowth.

Prostitution flourished in Mombasa from the time of early explorers and among the railway camps in the 1890s. Every railway official in Nairobi by 1902, according to Meinertzhagen, 'kept a native girl' (Meinertzhagen, 1957, p. 12). Nevertheless, strictly speaking, such concubinage, which is not free paid labour, should be distinguished from prostitution. Many government officials also kept African women as enslaved people.

According to the Kenya Colony and Protectorate (1913), by 1909, Nandi prostitutes were said to have been 'notorious from Mombasa to Kisumu'. On European farms, Nandi women often formed semi-permanent relationships with male settlers, acting as domestic servants and sometimes as 'virtual farm managers' (Meinertzhagen, 1957, pp. 192 and 231–232), as noted by Clayton and Savage (1974, pp. 67-68, note 9).

Both oral and written sources revealed that Nandi women became prostitutes as a means of survival (M. Samitui, L. Mong'ony, & J. Kaos, personal communication, September 28, 2015). White (1990) examines the role of prostitution in colonial Kenya. When Christian missionaries began to impose Western moral values on African tribal structures in colonial Africa, they introduced foreign moral values, thereby creating instability, including the need for men to spend extended periods away from home. Following this context, prostitution ascended, providing home comforts away from home or for men unable to afford the bride price. According to T. Tiony, S. Toretet, and G. Koras (personal communication, March 11, 2015), when these women returned to their villages with money and attractive items of Western material culture, they motivated more women to follow the calling of urban prostitution. This kind of prostitution was not motivated by oppression or exploitation, but by a combination of forces which were a result of colonial transformation.

According to C. Mambuli (personal communication, July 3, 2015), prostitution among the wives of migrant men was common during the Second World War. Researchers claim that during the period under review, colonial authorities recruited most men into the King's African Rifles (KAR), leaving their families without economic support. In response, many women earned a living by engaging in sexual relations with men other than their husbands. They conducted these transactions in tea farms, tall grasslands, maize fields, and other secluded areas suitable for such encounters. Prostitution did not exist in pre-colonial Nandi society. Still, it emerged during the launch of the colonial capitalist project in Kenya, as seen in the development of military service and commercial enterprises. This business spread

quickly, along with venereal diseases. During this period, some of the wives of migrant men engaged in prostitution to earn money, and it became a booming business, as stated in the Kenya Colony and Protectorate (1913) that the 'Nandi women were notorious in camps and towns between Nairobi and Mombasa'. This strategy was largely successful, to the extent that some of the wives could boast of being rich enough to buy cows and even expand their plots in their husbands' absence. However, some individuals never returned from town life, leading communities to assume they had died there (C. Leu, C. Mase, & J. Talam, personal communication, March 5, 2015).

According to one informant, K. Kaptigoi (personal communication, September 10, 2015), aged 97 years, interviewed at Sarora, testified that:

> I was privileged to work for *Msungu* those days when my husband was away on his farm. After working as a house help for five years, I decided to leave that job and rented a room in the shop near Msungu's farm. Throughout the five years, I had got along well with other workers on the farm and occasionally had private relationships with some of them in exchange for two shillings. This exchange was a significant amount of money for my son. As soon as I rented my room, I had already established relationships with the farm workers who visited me frequently at my house. I could cook for them when they visited me and accommodate one overnight, or even during the daytime, as one could see me over lunchtime and stay until evening. I occasionally visited the local bars in the evening, and there I met my clients. This business continued for over ten years, during which I managed to accumulate a substantial amount of money, which later enabled me to become wealthy in my village upon my retirement there. I never separated from my husband, but I would visit his home when I heard he had arrived. I was richer than he was. When we tabled the money, I was able to buy more cows than he did and even expand the family farm by twenty-one acres. The diseases you hear today were unheard of; otherwise, we would have perished all of us. I commanded much respect in the village till other women sought advice from me. I secretly recruited a few women who began engaging in this business, which the community did not recognise. Most individuals involved in this field came from the Kavirondo group.

Based on the findings above, the emergence of prostitution among Nandi women during the colonial era should not be seen as a continuation of indigenous cultural norms, but rather as a gendered and strategic response to the far-reaching socio-economic disruptions imposed by colonial rule. Prostitution, previously absent in traditional Nandi society, arose as a coping mechanism in the context of male labour migration, land alienation, taxation, and the disintegration of subsistence economies. Drawing on agency theory, this development reflects the capacity of women, particularly those left behind by migrant husbands, to exercise decision-making power within constrained structural conditions. Their engagement in sexual labour, often informal and discreet, was not merely passive victimhood but a calculated survival strategy that maximised limited opportunities for economic sustenance and social mobility.

Observed through the push-pull theoretical lens, several "push" factors, such as poverty, food insecurity, and social isolation, compelled women to seek alternative

livelihoods, while "pull" factors, like the presence of cash economies in emerging colonial towns, the demand for female companionship among male workers, and the prospect of material gain, drew them into sexual economies. Though prostitution attracted social stigma, it also offered some women access to land, livestock, and local prestige and resources that colonial policies had otherwise rendered inaccessible.

Therefore, the turn to prostitution among Nandi women during this period was not merely a manifestation of moral or social deviance, but rather a deeply embodied expression of gendered agency and adaptive resistance to structural marginalisation. Viewed through a phenomenological lens, this practice reflects how women interpreted, gave meaning to, and actively responded to their lived experiences under colonial disruption. As colonialism reconfigured economic and social realities, these women navigated exclusion and dispossession by asserting autonomy in ways that challenged normative expectations. Their choices, rooted in personal and collective experience, reframed the discourse on African women's roles in colonial economies, not as passive victims, but as conscious agents negotiating survival, dignity, and social recognition within an oppressive system.

Concubine Relationships

Concubinage, as described by Meinertzhagen (1957, pp. 192, 231–232), was a relatively common yet socially delicate phenomenon among the Nandi, particularly involving women referred to as *baetagei*, those whose husbands had migrated to participate in colonial wage labour systems. While Nandi cultural norms tacitly permitted such arrangements, they were typically conducted in secrecy to avoid public scandal and social reprisal. This practice gained considerable momentum during and after the Second World War, a period marked by the widespread recruitment of non-disabled Nandi men into military service and the colonial capitalist economy as wage labourers (Stichter, 1985a; Parsons, 1999). The prolonged absence of these men from their households created emotional, economic, and social voids, which some women navigated through forming extramarital or non-marital unions.

These unions reflected more than just sexual autonomy or infidelity; they embodied broader colonial and gendered power dynamics. Archival sources from the colonial administration (Government of the United Kingdom, 1920, p. 340) indicate that on European farms, Nandi women frequently engaged in semi-permanent relationships with male settlers. In such contexts, women not only served as domestic workers but, in some cases, assumed roles of authority as informal farm supervisors or managers. These arrangements often blurred the lines between concubinage, labour, and survival strategies in the absence of traditional family structures (Moore, 1986; Thomas, 1994). From a phenomenological standpoint, scholars understand such relationships as complex negotiations of agency, vulnerability, and adaptation within a highly racialised and gendered colonial environment (Schutz, 1967; White, 1990). They reveal how African women's intimate lives were shaped not only by indigenous cultural norms but also by the structural dislocations introduced by colonialism and labour migration. An extract of the district report of April 13, 1905, reports that:

> It is all a bit difficult, as Mayes has half a dozen Nandi concubines in the house. I left them to fight it out among themselves. Moreover, later, I have had many complaints from natives about how Mayes is robbing them of their cattle, sheep, goats, and even girls. Women are extremely moral with strangers but not with their people. Perhaps because non-disabled men go to work, leaving the women behind (Kenya Colony & Protectorate, 1912).

Some wives of migrant men resorted to having concubine relationships with settlers and eventually managed to inherit farms and other valuable properties left behind by White settlers. This concubinage relationship enabled such women to remain rich to date, during the post-colonial period. Currently, there is a woman who owns up to three hundred acres of land in a farm which initially belonged to a white settler. This woman had a relationship with a white settler and even managed to get two white daughters from the settler (M. Tabusambu, personal communication, February 14, 2015).

Concubinage among Nandi women during the colonial period emerged as a strategic response to the emotional and economic voids created by the absence of migrant husbands. Although these relationships were socially sensitive, they showcased women's agency and ability to adapt to the disruptions of colonial rule. Some women, especially those who entered into relationships with settlers, reaped considerable material benefits, including land ownership. Ultimately, concubinage reflects how Nandi women navigated gendered and racial structures to secure their survival and autonomy.

Elopement

Elopement, though relatively uncommon, represented a significant, if understated, coping mechanism employed by certain wives of Nandi migrant labourers during the colonial era. When examined through a phenomenological lens, elopement transcends simplistic interpretations of deviant behaviour or moral transgression. Instead, it emerges as a complex expression of lived experience, reflecting the emotional deprivation, sexual needs, and socio-economic precarity that characterised the lives of women left behind in the wake of colonial labour migration. These actions were frequently rooted in deeply personal motivations, responses to the cumulative burdens of prolonged marital separation, social isolation, and the intensifying responsibility of sustaining households in the absence of male support (A. Bett, personal communication, January 12, 2016; Stichter, 1985a; White, 1990).

While Nandi customary norms strongly emphasised monogamy and lifelong marital fidelity, oral histories and ethnographic accounts suggest that elopement, though socially frowned upon, did occur in specific contexts, especially when women were unable to reconcile the economic and emotional challenges of solitude (T. Selia & C. Barng'etuny, personal communication, November 13, 2015; Hollis, 1909). Interestingly, cultural practices exhibited a certain degree of elasticity, wherein women who had eloped could later return to their natal homes, particularly in old age, when their actions no longer carried the same degree of social threat. This practice highlights the nuanced moral economy and cultural flexibility within Nandi society, enabling the reintegration of women who had temporarily deviated from normative expectations (Moore, 1986; Thomas, 1994; E. Birech, personal communication, January 27, 2015).

From the standpoint of lived experience, elopement was not necessarily an outright rejection of communal values, but rather an intentional, adaptive strategy employed in response to acute emotional and material dislocation. As L. Mengich (personal communication, January 20, 2015) notes, many of the men involved in such elopements were also migrant labourers who had experienced parallel forms of absence and estrangement. The mutual recognition of shared hardship, both emotional and economic, often created the grounds for these transient unions. Viewed in this light, elopement becomes meaningful not as moral failure, but as a form of inter-subjective survival, rooted in the search for companionship, relief, and dignity amidst the fragmentation of colonial domesticity (J.

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Birgen, personal communication, January 20, 2015; Parsons, 1999; Hodgson & McCurdy, 2001; Heidegger, 1927/1962).

Even though less widespread than coping mechanisms such as cooperative cultivation or traditional beer brewing, elopement illustrates how agency was exercised subtly, often outside formal structures and beyond the gaze of community oversight. Unlike concubinage, which permitted covert intimacy within the bounds of the marital home, elopement entailed a more visible and deliberate disruption of domestic arrangements, signalling a stronger assertion of personal will and discontent (McClintock, 1995; Arnfred, 2004; E. Tapluley, personal communication, January 20, 2015). Nevertheless, a phenomenological inquiry reveals that these women were not passive victims of structural constraints; instead, they were active moral agents, navigating complex emotional, social, and material terrains with the limited choices available to them (A. Seronei, personal communication, January 20, 2015; Kandiyoti, 1988).

Although relatively rare, elopement was a significant coping mechanism for some Nandi women during the colonial era, especially in the context of male labour migration. It represented a strategic response to emotional deprivation, sexual needs, and economic hardship, rather than an act of deviance. Viewed through a phenomenological lens, elopement reflects women's active agency in navigating structural constraints. Rather than passive victims, these women exercised moral agency, adapting to their circumstances in pursuit of companionship, dignity, and survival.

Nandi society, while valuing monogamy, exhibited cultural flexibility, allowing women who eloped to return to their natal homes eventually. This return suggests a moral economy that accommodates forgiveness and reintegration after deviation from norms. Unlike more discreet strategies such as concubinage, elopement was a visible challenge to established domestic norms, highlighting resistance to colonial and patriarchal limitations. Therefore, elopement among Nandi women during the colonial period can be analytically interpreted as a complex coping strategy that reflected gendered agency, highlighting their resilience and adaptability in response to the economic and emotional dislocations engendered by colonial labour migration.

Conclusion

Migrant labour, while historically rooted in colonial economic exploitation, inadvertently created spaces for Nandi women to redefine their roles within the domestic and socio-economic spheres. The absence of men opened up opportunities for women to engage in modest yet vital income-generating activities, many of which had been traditionally gendered and undervalued. This article has explored the multifaceted coping strategies employed by the wives of migrant labourers, highlighting their agency and resilience in navigating the structural disruptions of colonial labour migration.

This article has examined the diverse coping strategies employed by the wives of migrant labourers, underscoring their agency and resilience in navigating the structural disruptions occasioned by colonial labour migration. From a positivist perspective, scholars interpret these strategies as rational responses to material conditions, where women adapted to changing household economies by engaging in supplementary employment, leveraging husbands' remittances, trading, brewing traditional beer, organising cooperative farming (*kipagenge*), hiring labour, and gathering firewood. These observable patterns reveal a clear cause-and-effect relationship between labour migration and the restructuring of household labour dynamics.

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Conversely, a phenomenological lens reveals a deeper layer of meaning behind these adaptations. The choices women made, whether engaging in domestic trade, eloping, or entering concubine relationships, were not merely functional or economic but were also imbued with emotional, social, and cultural significance. These acts reflected intentional responses to the lived realities of absence, longing, and socio-economic precarity. The narratives show that women did not merely cope; they interpreted, negotiated, and redefined their identities in the face of adversity.

In a comprehensive sense, the strategies utilised by Nandi women were not only effective in sustaining their households but also facilitated notable economic mobility for some, including the expansion of landholdings and the accumulation of livestock. This dual perspective, which combines the structural clarity of positivism with the experiential depth of phenomenology, fosters a holistic understanding of how women in Nandi communities adeptly responded to the challenges posed by colonial labour migration.

Recommendations

The study recommends that future scholars should conduct comparative ethnographic studies across Kenyan communities, such as the Kikuyu, Luo, and Luhya, to assess whether the coping strategies of Nandi women during colonial labour migration were unique or part of broader, gendered resilience patterns. Longitudinal studies are necessary to investigate the post-colonial effects of these strategies on gender relations, land ownership, and women's political participation. Emphasising life histories and oral narratives will capture the lived experiences and identity shifts related to women's survival strategies. It is also essential to explore indigenous knowledge systems, including customary law and local spirituality, to understand their influence on women's agency during colonial times. Including the perspectives of male migrant labourers could offer a fuller view of household dynamics. Additionally, research should explore whether women's wartime coping strategies led to lasting changes in gender norms. Quantitative and mixed-methods studies could assess the economic impact of remittances and the intergenerational effects of women's coping mechanisms on daughters in post-colonial Nandi society.

These recommendations aim to deepen the understanding of gendered resilience in colonial and post-colonial Kenya. An interdisciplinary approach, incorporating history, anthropology, gender studies, economics, and philosophy, is vital for analysing these dynamics. Understanding the historical context is crucial to grasping the complexities of labour migration, while insights from anthropology and gender studies highlight the resilience of communities. Economic analysis assesses women's strategies, and philosophical frameworks enhance discussions about agency. This collaborative approach can advance scholarship on female agency and socio-economic adaptation, providing valuable insights for contemporary policy on migration, gender equity, and sustainable livelihoods linked to colonial labour legacies.

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