

The Historical Perspective of Leisure in Colonial Kenya: The Making of Nanyuki Town

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Abstract: Leisure is probably the most nebulous idea subject to many interpretations. Some people view leisure as a period of time they call free or unobligated time. For others, leisure is related to recreational activities such as competitive sports, cooperative games, outdoor endeavors, and cultural pursuits and socializing. In the context of colonial Kenya, the dominance of Europeans over Africans was visible. This article seeks to elaborate on the concept of leisure as practiced by the inhabitants of Nanyuki who included; Europeans, Asians, Somalis and Africans. Some of the activities that men and women engaged in during their free time are the epitome of this paper. The effect of leisure to the development of Nanyuki such as the construction of hotels and restaurant and the golf club among other recreational facilities is also discussed. Alongside the physical development of Nanyuki came the negative effects of over-indulgence in sexual lifestyle, which led to the spread of venereal diseases. Conclusions are not drawn as to whether the development of Nanyuki was influenced by the various leisure activities, but it is observed that throughout the colonial period, the town stood out as one with many leisure activities and events.

Keywords: Leisure, Recreational activities

INTRODUCTION

The historical perspective of leisure in Africa can be traced to the earliest kingdoms and states that were established where the kinship were to be entertained through songs and dances by the kinsmen. It also entailed the celebrations conducted during weddings, circumcision, and good harvest. Leisure time was also spent by indulging in sporting activities for example wrestling [1]. The social structure that evolved in *Kenya* during the *colonial period* emphasized on race and class [2]. The dominance of Europeans over Africans to the development of social infrastructures such as schools, hospitals and *leisure* facilities was noticeable. In deed, many *Kenyans in the colonial period* occupied their leisure time with traditional music and dance.

In examining the historical perspective of leisure in general, Ambler [3] argues that the British controlled the alcohol consumption of Kenyan Africans in effect dates from the 1890 Act of Brussels. The act, among other provisions, forbade the export of spirits to East Africa, whereas large amounts of liquor were imported to satisfy the demands of the growing population of white settlers in Kenya.

By 1907, African chiefs had been empowered to impose temporary bans on drinking and on ceremonies such as circumcision, during which heavy drinking as a part of leisure occurred in most African communities. By 1912, this had advanced into permanent restrictions with the first offenders of the law being fined fifteen rupees, the second thirty rupees, and the third, seventy five rupees. These restrictions were adopted in North Nyeri in 1913 and in Embu and Machakos in 1916. In deed, by 1920, drunkenness in any circumstances was made an offense although these regulations were often ignored. In the case of North Nyeri, it is amazing to note that these rules applied quite early prior to the massive soldier settlement of 1919. This is because the area was inhabited by a number of communities such as the Kikuyu, the Meru and the Samburu. It was anticipated that this ban would go a long way in enabling the early settlers acquire labour for their huge farms [4].

Drinking liquor as a form of leisure among the white settlers in North Nyeri did not appear to interfere with the preservation of order. The assumption among Europeans was that “alcohol dissolved whatever rationality Africans possessed,” hence, Africans were meant not only to preserve order, but also to encourage the free flow of labor out of peasant communities. This

was based on the assumption that traditional liquor encouraged laziness [5].

In examining the historical perspective of leisure therefore, one would conclude that the Europeans believed that Africans were “barbaric” and they could not be entrusted to control their mannerism while engaging in leisure activities. This notion is disputable since prior to the coming of the Europeans in Africa, systems and forms of leisure such as the traditional liquor was taken in moderation. In fact, in some communities those who overindulged in drinking were punished. Similarly, leisure activities such as drinking, and dances were only carried out after the daily chores had been accomplished by the individual groups in society.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a historical research seeking to investigate and explain a phenomenon that has already occurred. Manipulative control of the factors under scrutiny and randomization was not possible as is the case with experimental inquiry. The study, therefore, adopted the *ex post facto* design. The design deals with the past and tries to reconstruct it. It looks at naturally occurring events and tries to figure out, after the fact what caused something to happen. As Sharma [6] (1992) observes, “this approach eliminates the possibility that participants will be influenced by awareness that they are being tested. The treatment is not manipulated as it has already occurred”.

The study used both primary and secondary sources. Secondary data was collected from books, journals, and seminar papers. The secondary sources were obtained from both private and public libraries in Nakuru and Nairobi. Primary data was obtained from the Kenya National Archives (KNA) in Nairobi, Museums and private archives such as the Karen Blixen and the East African Natural History Library at the Kenya National Museum in Nairobi. Data was also obtained from the field research. Archival materials examined included; newspapers such as the *East Africa Standard*, and the *Daily Nation*, for the period of study. *The Kenya Weekly News* (a colonial magazine), and reports on the annual Nanyuki shows were also examined in addition to the Annual and Quarterly Reports of Laikipia District. Literature available through the internet was also used in the research.

Oral sources were used to supplement archival and secondary sources. A minimum sample of fifty informants living in Nanyuki was interviewed. Interviews were carried out to complement the larger percentage of data collected from the archival sources. Each objective was treated as a theme. Documentary data was text analysed while tape-recorded information and collected historical materials was analysed based on the study objectives and research questions. Data

collected from interviews was analyzed through narrative inquiry and written in form of a story. Individual transcripts were coded to check the adequacy and consistency of the themes. Thereafter, the full interview transcripts were used as a basis to classify the data into several categories and sub-themes in relation to the research questions and study objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Social Amenities and Leisure in Nanyuki

Starting from the major towns various services were put up to cater for the settler communities. These social amenities included luxuries such as golf clubs, hospitals with Nairobi and Kenyatta hospital being known as King George hospital to remind the settlers of their King back in England. There were hotels such as the Norfolk and the Stanley Hotels, which became the meeting, points of the settlers from upcountry that came to socialize in Nairobi. Indeed, this was replicated in other settler towns where social amenities were set up during the colonial period. In Nanyuki various social amenities were set up such as; the Fairmount Mount Kenya Hotel in 1930, the Nanyuki Sports Club in 1945, The Silver Beck Hotel in 1946, and the Sportsman Arms Hotel in 1950 [7]. Other hotels that were set up later include: The Trout Tree Hotel-which was opened south of Nanyuki and was built inside a huge tree, its main attraction being the trout fish which was prepared in various ways, the Marina Grill Hotel and the Ibis Hotel [8]. The setting up of these amenities was done using European architectures that were a part of the military personnel living in Nanyuki. The Italian soldiers in Nanyuki were accredited with ensuring that all the social amenities were well connected by the 1940's by setting up the telecommunications network within Nanyuki town and its surroundings as explained by one informant [9].

A song is sung of Nanyuki being *mwishowareli* (Meaning: The end of the rail road.) In this song, Nanyuki is described as the epitome of all fantasies and leisure activities. It was believed that a journey to Nanyuki was a journey to a place where one would have the most enjoyable moments due to the recreational facilities available. Nanyuki also had a lane known as Lunatic lane a famous residential lane where the European settlers were allowed to act in a disorderly manner [10]. The lane was famous during the colonial period for inhabiting men who would become very rowdy after taking alcohol and they would scream and shout along the lunatic lane area. More precisely, the settlers in Nanyuki were notorious for their urban cowboy life as depicted by Fox [11].

Other recreational facilities that were set up in Nanyuki from the colonial period included the children's club, literacy classes, the Nanyuki Social Hall, the *Makumbusho* Grounds, and the Nanyuki Stadium. These amenities were set up as meeting places

and also places where the settlers would engage in sporting activities. Embroidery classes which was an initiative of the *MaendeleoYaWanawake* established in the 1940's was also started. It was meant to teach the women also known as *Memsahib* and even the *yaya* show to knit, and make household items during their free time. This was carried out by members of the East African Women's League such as MesdamesHinde, Patterson and Lewin among other settler women in Nanyuki. The funds used to purchase the embroidery materials were made available every year by the County Council. These funds were collected from the social events held in Nanyuki and were divided for sports and general welfare work equally. As observed by one informant, "The only amenity at the start of the year 1930 was the social hall, which was practically unused, and the beer halls which were always full." This was a clear indication of the social origin of the settler community. Later, the County Council through the initiative of the East African Women's League agreed to make all profits from the beer halls available for African welfare in Nanyuki. Ironically, another welfare centre was also set up in Nanyuki town to cater for the European settlers. This meant that the funds collected from the leisure activities had to be divided to some "needy" settlers in Nanyuki alongside the allocation for the African welfare [12].

Another initiative mentioned above was the creation of children clubs. This came about as a result of the population growth both among the settlers and the African laborers living in Nanyuki. In an effort to take care of several hundred children, a recreation group with swings, see-saw and slides was constructed adjacent to the Nanyuki social hall. This venture was met with great success. In addition a girl's club was formed by Mrs. Delaforce, and the members of the club used a former church location as a clubhouse. Meetings were held weekly under European and African voluntary supervision. A similar boy's club was also formed in Nanyuki. Boy scouts, Girl guides club and Brownie groups were also formed [13].

Another children's club was formed during the 1950's with meetings being held every Saturday mornings at the social hall. The club was originally formed to give those children not attending school an interest and a measure of discipline. The children would draw pictures on the slates, do pottery and sisal work. These activities were carried out with the supervision of the male community development officers who were appointed by the Nanyuki council. On the same, a centre was opened in the B.P Hall on 9th May 1957, where clinics were held each Thursday afternoon run by European and African volunteers. The objective of these clinics was to apply simple medical treatment for the children. These services were charged at 10 cents per child and they were carried out to impress upon the mothers the value of hygiene and correct feeding of the

children. The volunteers worked in close cooperation with the African District Hospital. Whenever necessary, children who needed special attention were forwarded to the Nanyuki District Hospital. The military hospital also played an important role in Nanyuki during the colonial period by providing the personnel who would provide the residents with the smallpox vaccinations, cholera vaccinations among others [14].

Notably, little or no social welfare was carried out in the Nanyuki District during the emergency before 1955 other than that done by the individual farmers. For example, early in the year, Africans living in Majengo and Likii slums were fortunate to obtain the services of Miss Hardman of the probation service, who undertook to foster what social welfare activities she could in Nanyuki native location and amongst those who had been placed on probation. Shortly before this, after operation Scaramouche, a capable administrative assistant, and a first rate chief were posted to the Nanyuki location. A chief's center was built, and for the first time personnel were available to carry out the closer administration and welfare in the location.

Sports were also taken seriously in Nanyuki by the settlers. A football league was formed and the Nanyuki Sports Club donated a cup. A second cup was given by Mr. Benes on behalf of the Duchess of Luxembourg, and finally a third cup was donated by the Nanyuki Cycle Mart. Two football leagues were played in which twenty two teams completed, the winners in each case being the Kiganjo police training school and the runners up being the Northumberland Fusiliers and Donnelly motors. Great interest was shown on football by the military with the attendance growing from a few men to thousands during the cup finals [15]. Apart from football, a netball pitch was built adjacent to the social hall and several matches were played usually on Saturdays afternoon. The netball games were followed by tea and snacks given by the home team [16]. The other social events in Nanyuki were its gymkhana, the three days of horse races and the polo. These major events attracted people from all over the colony. The games were founded in 1921 by J.A. Pollock who was a soldier settler in Nanyuki.

The uniqueness of some leisure activities in Nanyuki was the synchrony it had with the economic development of the town. Such was the case especially during the Agricultural shows when the farmers would display their best breeds for competition and award winning occasions. The Agricultural Show was organized as an annual event in Nanyuki [17]. It attracted framers from other districts and provinces in Kenya. Awards were given those who had the strongest breeds of sheep, goats, cows, donkeys and horses. It attracted settlers who would travel from far and wide in the Kenyan colony to learn the best practices necessary in the development of the farms and farming activities.

The Show ground was built next to the British Barracks after the Nanyuki River and adjacent to the Sport Club. The settlers were henceforth assured of both their security, the security of their products and a few drinks after work to seal the business carried out at the Nanyuki Sports Club, a common tradition among the white settlers [18].

According to a report on the district development of Nanyuki Township in 1957, free literacy classes in Kikuyu language were given by the location leaders who were also qualified teachers at the time. The classes were officially started in June but had to be revised in September to conform to the education department regulations. The teachers were paid Shs. 35/- per month by the pupils for four hours per week tuition. In fact an observation made by the researcher during the interviews was that some of the settlers and their children who were interviewed could converse fluently in Kikuyu language having been taught and mastered the language over time. Although treated as a leisure activity, it was also vital in the understanding of the Mau Mau Revolt since the majority of the settlers wanted to grasp the mechanism and strategies used during the emergency [19].

The Asians in Nanyuki also engaged in leisure activities although as a result of their culture and the element of racism, they interacted with their fellow Asians only. Leisure interactions were majorly during wedding occasions and birthdays. As observed by one informant:

The Europeans depended on the Asians for their daily supplies during the colonial period and as a result Asians were able to develop Nanyuki Town by setting up of more buildings and other social amenities along the main street. During Christmas celebrations, almost all the Indian shopkeepers in Nanyuki would give each of their regular customers a present. The gifts varied from: a bottle of spirits, fresh fruits, and cigars for the men and chocolates for ladies. However, the hospitality of Indians to be rarely reciprocated [20].

Most Asians living in Nanyuki therefore had a difficult time interacting with the Europeans as a result of the color bar and even more difficult was the interaction between the Asians and Africans. The Asians provided the commodities mentioned in the above quote to the Europeans although their interaction was limited to business. Much later though with Kenya attaining independence, they began to take a leading role in organizing the Safari Rally competitions in Nanyuki.

The subject of leisure for the Somali inhabitants of Nanyuki in the colonial period was controversial. While most Somalis claimed that they did

not involve themselves in any leisure information activities based on the argument that Islam condemns leisure activities, more specifically the drinking of alcohol, the research proved otherwise. A part from their trade in livestock and other commodities, the Somali men and women living in Nanyuki were known to have multiple sexual partners. An interview with one of the Somali traders in Nanyuki during the colonial period stated as follows:

We are polygamous in nature and a man is free to marry many wives. Similarly women are allowed to interact secretly with other men provided they do not get pregnant. Although the punishment for adultery is implemented to a woman and not a man, the woman would be stoned to death if found committing adultery [21].

The above interview revealed the biasness of the Somali culture towards women. The Somali also had another form of leisure which distinguished them from the other inhabitants of Nanyuki. This was the consumption of *Miraa*. It was believed that eating *miraa* was healthy as compared to drinking alcohol. The sale of *Miraa* amongst the Somalis in Nanyuki in the colonial period was not only profitable business, but their form of leisure activity.

Venereal Diseases in Colonial Nanyuki

Macharia discusses the origin of women's migration from the rural areas in the colonial period. He states that unlike men, the women's "push factors" from the rural areas were not always economic. That while the men left their rural homes and reserves primarily to go and work in the urban areas, women often left without the promise of a job since most Europeans at the time employed men. Macharia explains that women were pushed out of their rural setting as a result of various reasons such as marital unhappiness. Conceiving from a man that was not one's husband was also enough reason for some women to run away to the urban areas where they would not be found and punished. Daughters who refused to accept marriages arranged by their parents were more likely to migrate to urban areas. Incestuous relationships were also embarrassing and punishable this was in addition to accusations of theft and witchcraft [22]. The women migrants were however not received well in the cities even in the case of those who came in as traders for example from Kikuyu.

According to Robertson the women traders in Nairobi tended to double up their legitimate trade with the illegitimate services of prostitution and commercial sex. Robertson observes that the proximity of Nairobi to Kikuyu contributed to women's early migration such that by 1923, when a census was carried out in Nairobi, nearly half of the women were from Kikuyu. In addition, they were using trade as an excuse to get to

Nairobi, while prostitution was a supplementary source of income to their trade. Despite African men especially from Kiambu objecting to women's movement to Nairobi, this continued especially from those with bad marriages, the widows and the divorced. What contributed to their easy movement was because women during the colonial period did not require passes like the men especially if they disguised themselves as traders.

Stitcher [23] argues that in the early colonial period, 1907-1909, there was an attempt to "clean up" Nairobi by arresting and repatriating 300 prostitutes among a total of the 12,000 women living in Nairobi. The repatriation reflected the idea that women did not belong to the urban areas. This became the unofficial policy and understanding even amongst the African men. This was despite the fact that prostitutes were valuable assets for town inhabitants who were overwhelmingly male because they provided domestic services of all kinds especially to the men who had migrated from long distances to come and work in Nairobi [24].

Notably, in the case of Nanyuki, the status of African servicemen increased during wartime, as they were particularly well paid and fed in comparison to African civilians. During the First World War, a combination of drought, increased food exports and a drain on civilian labor supply led to famine in rural Kenya. It is most likely that these economic hardships drove many women and girls to seek the company of relatively affluent soldiers. According to Parsons, when the KAR servicemen returned to Kenya on leave, they often carried hundreds of shillings and some desperate or ambitious women who frequented trains and ferries coerced the soldiers with drinks and later robbed them of their clothes and money. This was a common phenomenon in Nanyuki where we had the KAR military base [25].

The sexual interactions between the KAR soldiers and the women led to the spread of venereal diseases such as gonorrhea and syphilis. The British officials blamed the alarming increase of Venereal Diseases (VD) amongst the colonial army in Kenya on these unsanctioned women. Approximately 350 of the 9000 men in 1/6 KAR were infected and the battalion formed a special 'VD company' to allow them to continue training while undergoing treatment [26]. Military authorities therefore tried to control women who had sexual relations with servicemen. The East African Community pressured the East African government to force civilian women to undergo medical treatment by enhancing legislation similar to the Contagious Diseases Act in Britain. The Pre-war Kenyan Public Health Ordinances empowered the government to order the examination of any person suspected of infection. The Ordinance was used in 1935 to compel women living near the 3 KAR lines in

Meru to submit to medical inspection [27]. Medical officers required patients to describe the conditions under which they were infected, including the name, race and address of the woman involved. If they were married but infected they also had to provide their wives names and addresses. This was to enable the medical team to make a follow up and provide treatment of those not yet examined. It was also a measure that was used to ensure that the disease prevalence and spread was curbed.

Reports by the medical department showed that women living near major military installations in Nanyuki aggravated the problem. For example, by 1943 medical officers found that 86% of the 398 African women examined in Nanyuki Township were infected [28]. That is to state that of the 398 examined, 342 were infected leaving only 56 women uninfected [29]. The military authorities consequently established their own VD clinics and tried to coerce other women to accept treatment. In the Kenyan township of Kitale and Kisumu women were reported to have welcomed the VD treatment and even offered to pay rent for the caters. However, in Nanyuki, the Somali and other Muslim women are said to have locked themselves in their houses to avoid the inspections. In other cases it was noted that Nanyuki prostitutes tricked *askaris* into sleeping with them by using a rented medical inspection certificate to prove they were free from Venereal Diseases. Conversely others who valued medical treatment demanded that the government cracks down on these illegal tactics. Nevertheless many evaded the inspection and treatment programs [30].

The statistics of how many men and women continue to be infected in the post independence period in Nanyuki is a subject of further investigation. The town has been noted to harbor large number of women soon after the arrival of the *Johnnies* the British soldiers who have continued to train in Nanyuki every year.

CONCLUSION

As observed in this study, leisure was a major component of the socio-economic development of Kenya as a colony. The irony of leisure in Nanyuki was the belief that all recreational facilities and activities were a preserve of the white settlers only. It is important to note that even the African laborers in Nanyuki were able to create time for leisure activities despite the many restrictions put in place for them.

Women can be said to have been the greatest beneficiaries of these leisure activities as a result of the contact they made with the soldiers. Although denied by many people, the statistics of the spread of venereal diseases in this chapter are a clear indication that there were a high percentage of sexual interactions among the British men and African women in the colonial period in Nanyuki. There was no evidence recorded with

regard to sexual interactions between African men and the European women in Nanyuki. Therefore, the increasing number of *mullatoesin* Nanyuki in the colonial period and even after independence was as a result of the sexual relations between the African women and the European men; more precisely the British soldiers.

On sports, it was also noted that the matches were never played between the Africans and the Europeans, but they were strictly created for the Europeans living in Nanyuki versus others from outside the town. The Agricultural Show exhibitions were similarly a preserve of the European community. The Africans who participated in these occasions only came in as laborers and servants of the Europeans.

The social welfare department assisted the Africans by training them in the various formal classes such as embroidery, knitting, housekeeping, courtesy, reading and writing held in Nanyuki social hall. However, these were done at a fee which translated to Africans getting deeper into their pockets to pay for the services provided. The Europeans similarly offered this basic training in order to ensure proper education; the researcher observed that the older European children from Nanyuki district were all educated in schools outside the district. In Nanyuki, there was the beehive school. This was a small boarding school for children up to 12 years, Mrs. Malison's day school and an army school for children of army families stationed in the area. A large primary boarding school on the district boundary at Nyeri for boys and girls was also set up. The Asian communities also had a primary school at Nanyuki. In summary the leisure activities conducted in Nanyuki had both positive and negative effects to the people living within Nanyuki during the colonial period. The effects of these activities have continued to influence the urbanization process in post - independence Nanyuki.

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