

Mastering the Landscape?

Sisal Plantations, Land, and Labor in Tanga Region, 1893–1980s

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Nobody who would have visited German East Africa right before the war and had familiarized himself with its life, which visibly carries the imprints of sisal production, would have ever imagined that 22 years earlier no sisal agave nor any other fibrous agave existed in German East Africa.... It is my strong conviction that in no long a time East Africa will be the most important sisal producing area in the world (Richard Hindorf, 1925).¹

Hindorf's conviction came true, and sisal's rise to prominence in German East Africa (GEA) continued unabated for almost three-quarters of a century. The signs of this ascendancy were already visible during the 22 years mentioned by Hindorf. The number of sisal plantations rose from 1 in 1893 to 54 by 1913, and production jumped from a mere 0.6 tons in 1898 to 20,835 tons in 1913, comprising almost 30 percent of the total value of GEA exports.² Under the British Mandate, Tanganyika became the leading producer of sisal, contributing more than a quarter of world output. Until the late 1960s, "sisal was the gold of Tanzania."³ The first few years after independence the "mastery of sisal over the landscape," as Hindorf once noted, was still evident. In fact the year 1963–1964 marked the peak of the industry, when production reached 233,500 tons, contributing 35.6 percent of Tanzania's export earnings, employing 30–35 percent of wage labor, and covering 25.5 percent of total area under cultivation in the Republic. With 35 percent of total world output of sisal and 25 percent of world production of hard fibers, Tanzania was internationally acclaimed as the prime producer of hard fibers in the world.

However, if the beginning of the twentieth century marked the undisputed rise of sisal plantations in Tanzania, the end of the century witnessed their demise, or in the language of the industry's participants, their "slow death" (*kukufa baridi*).⁴ "When I joined the industry in the late 1960s people used to say that I am joining a dying industry."⁵ From the late 1960s and over three short decades, the dying industry became the "dead" industry

¹ Richard Hindorf, *Sisalkultur in Deutsch-Ost-Afrika* (Berlin, 1925), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 2; Adolfo C. Mascarenhas, "Resistance and Change in the Sisal Plantation System of Tanzania," (Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1970), 72.

³ Interview by author with the Executive Secretary of The Sisal Association of Tanzania, September 21, 1994, Tanga.

⁴ Interview by author with an old sisal worker, July 17, 1995, Tanga.

⁵ Interview by author with Director of Wigglesworth & Co., September 12, 1992, London.

for many of its participants as well as outsiders. By the 1990s sisal production plummeted to 26,000 tons, contributing a mere 9 percent of total world output of sisal, 1 percent of total exports of Tanzania, and less than 3 percent of the total employed in the country.

How could sisal—a foreign floral species from the Yucatan variably described as the “tree of wonder” and “an ugly but precious plant”⁶—master the regional landscape of Tanga in a few years and become the mainstay of the national economy for almost a century? Equally surprising, how could such a powerful industry be brought to its heels in a decade? I argue that the making and un-making of the sisal plantations in Tanzania was shaped by the multiple, and oft contradictory, agendas and actions of planters, workers, villagers and the state. In this paper I focus on the nexus of labor and land dynamics in Tanga Region. I argue that the colonial (German and British) attempts to establish European plantations as economic and sociocultural enclaves visibly marked off from the mass of nearby villages (i.e., markers of the divide between the so-called native and non-native domains), were challenged by the actions of workers and villagers who merged the village and plantation in numerous ways to retain control over land and labor resources. By the 1960s, and despite the institution of a radically different regime of governance after independence, workers’ and villagers’ challenges to private and state plantations continued unabated. Attempts to stabilize the plantation labor force in the wake of nationalization were met with increased casualization of labor as well as intensified “use” of state-run plantation lands claimed by indigenous communities and workers as rights to public resources. Access to land and labor on the regional level shaped the very making of sisal plantations, with reverberations on the national economy and international markets. Thus an appreciation of the actions at the local scene necessitates being cognizant of the effects of (and on) the national and international contexts.

A crucial node in this land, labor, and sisal nexus concerns the underlying tension between satisfying plantations’ needs for land and labor, while ensuring enough food production among villagers to meet the demands of the growing plantation work force. While planters amassed large tracts of land and transformed the landscape through infrastructure projects, they failed to turn local men and women into the stable, disciplined, and synchronized workforce they deemed essential to plantation production. The resistance of local communities to land alienation and rigid plantation work, the legal limitations of the Mandate and later Trusteeship Agreements, and the need of plantations for a regular supply of food, remained a point of contention between the so-called “native and non-native” domains during the colonial era, best symbolized in the blurred boundaries of village and plantation. Though the expropriation of land to plantations and infrastructure projects (especially the railways) entailed pushing large numbers of local men, women and children into wage labor, the rhythm of their work, the gendered, ethnic- and age-based division of labor on the plantations, the demands for food for the increasing number of workers, and oscillations in the international market of sisal, allowed villagers and workers to negotiate the use of land and labor on and near the plantations in ways neither imagined nor desired by planters and colonial administrators. The transformations occasioning

⁶ Abdul Hamid, “Sisal: The Tree of Wonder,” *Dawn*, July 26, 1955; Anonymous, “The \$130 Million Weed,” *Truth*, January 8, 1954.

independence in the 1960s brought about radical shifts in patterns of land and labor use in and around sisal plantations, culminating in the “death” of plantations. It is no surprise then that calls for the revival of the sisal industry in the late 1980s were premised on “going back to the history of sisal” as a means of regenerating patterns restructured during the decade of independence.

In the pages to follow I trace the effects of sisal plantations on the land and labor nexus in Tanga Region. I start with the introduction of sisal in German East Africa (1891–1916), a time when substantial tracts of land were alienated in favor of large plantation companies and settlers, migrant labor was instituted as a major source of labor on sisal plantations, and the legal machinery was used as a means to codify and sanction particular relationships to land. The second part of this paper examines the consolidation and growth of sisal plantations under the British Mandate (1917–1961). Despite recurring moments of crisis, the “British times” are recognized as the “golden days” of sisal plantations. It was also a time when struggles over land and labor magnified the effects of plantations on local land and labor relationships. The paper ends with the “death” of sisal after independence, focusing on the effects of nationalization on labor and land use.

GERMAN EAST AFRICA AND THE MAKING OF SISAL PLANTATIONS (1890–1914)

Sisal into East Africa

The importation of sisal into East Africa in 1893 and its subsequent development into a plantation commodity bespeaks the intimate relationship between the making of sisal plantations and the German colonial project. As the story goes, Dr. Hindorf—a German botanist employed by the *Deutsch Ost Afrika Gesellschaft* (DOAG) in the 1890s—was eager to experiment with different varieties of tropical plants for commercial production in the semi-arid plains of East Africa. Hindorf came across sisal while researching the Kew Bulletin. Described as a tough and resilient plant with a life cycle of 8 to 10 years, sisal was said to “grow economically only in sharply defined areas lying within some 10 degrees north and south of the equator.”⁷ The ecological conditions of the northeast of the territories, particularly Tanga, were ideal for sisal. Hindorf embarked on tracing the origin and geographic distribution of the plant, and was finally able to order 1000 sisal plants from a trading company in Florida. Only 62 plants survived the trip, and with these Hindorf started a sisal nursery at Kikogwe Plantation in Pangani. The plantings were successful, and the possibility of extracting further seedlings led to the growth of thousands of *agave* plants in GEA, thus setting the stage for the establishment of the sisal industry in East Africa.

Since Hindorf’s Kikogwe trials, sisal was considered a plantation commodity in GEA.⁸ It was known in popular discourse as a “colonial crop,” and was almost exclusive to big companies that had the financial and political capital deemed essential for its production and marketing. Scientific research was called upon to validate such a construction. Botanists like Hindorf and Lock, and later economists like Guillebaud were

⁷ Eldred Hitchcock, *The Sisal Industry of East Africa* (Tanganyika: Tanga Printing, 1957), 35.

⁸ In Mexico and Brazil (and later) in South Africa and China, sisal is primarily a smallholder enterprise.

crucial figures in fixing the “standards” of the sisal industry, which were passed on year after year as the “bible of sisal”⁹: 1) though sisal as a drought-resistant plant could grow in most of the lands of the territory, it was limited to Tanga, the eastern and southern coastal areas, and along the central rail line, where soils, rainy season, temperature, altitude, and humidity were said to provide the ideal growing environment; 2) proximity to and control over water sources for decortication (i.e., processing of sisal leaves), coupled with technological investments added another limitation to the spatial and economic distribution of sisal; 3) a solid infrastructure (machinery, storage units, roads, and rails) both on the plantation and between plantations, labor centers, and the ports were crucial to ensure the flow of commodities and laboring bodies, obtain higher quality fiber, and reduce transport costs; 4) the “economics” of sisal dictated the average size of a plantation be not less than 1000ha, to allow for a full sisal cycle, fallow land for soil regeneration, and an annual replanting of one-tenth of the mature sisal area; and 5) it was deemed essential to have a large, stable, highly disciplined labor force at the rate of 300 labor-days per year for every hectare of sisal in order to perform the year-round operations of cutting leaves, cleaning mature and immature fields, planting nurseries, decortication, drying, brushing and baling of fiber. A regular supply of leaves throughout the year was established as a necessary condition to maintain optimal utilization of processing machinery. A supervisory team was paramount to guarantee adherence to discipline and productivity standards. Once in the form of baled fiber, a connection to marketing agents abroad was essential to guarantee space on shipping lines and consumers on the world market.¹⁰

These parameters guaranteed indeed that sisal remained an exclusionary commodity, in spatial, socioeconomic, and political terms. Sisal plantations were to be marked off not only from “backward” village life, but also from unworthy (economically and politically unreliable) small investors. Sisal plantations became geographically concentrated and it was primarily only the big companies¹¹ like DOAG, Prince Albrecht, and the Schöllers that could economically and politically afford sisal. The concentration of sisal plantations had dramatic effects on the regional political economy. This was particularly so regarding land and labor relationships such as prevailing patterns of land use to produce food or cash crops, and the kinds of division of labor deployed on such lands between plantations and villages, and (despite all machinations by state and capital agents to keep them apart) across them.

Plantations and Sisal in the Political Economy of GEA

From the 1890s and until the eve of WWI, plantations—with sisal eventually becoming the leading commodity—were major sites in the reconstruction of GEA, a process that built on already existing relationships, while at the same time radically transforming them.

⁹ Interview by author with a retired sisal plantation manager, May 25, 1995, Tanga.

¹⁰ Hindorf, *Sisalkultur*, 12–26.

¹¹ Bigness and smallness of companies was defined mainly in terms of capital outlay, crops grown, the ability to combine cultivation with processing and trading, solid connections to shipping lines and markets, control over substantial tracts of land and numbers of labor, a team of European managers, and political links in the territories and the metropolis.

Plantations occupied an indispensable position in GEA (despite competition, tensions and failures) precisely because they were viewed by colonial agents as ideal sites for the political, economic, and sociocultural order desired. Plantations entailed sizeable tracts of land with clearly marked boundaries and a particular form of individualized ownership, all features that instituted different relationships among people, resources, and the state, and visibly signified a distinctive type of presence—one of civilization and progress—compared to what preceded or what surrounded it. The routines of the organization of production and the spatial layout of plantations also signaled a social modality different than the villages in the vicinity. Plantations produced raw material and commodities for home markets and industries. They were capital intensive and entailed investments in infrastructure, technology, and machinery; they were markers of *Kulturland* (civilized land) rather than *Urproduktion* (aboriginal agriculture).¹² Work education found its best expression on plantations, which also incorporated hospitals, schools, and missions, thus further educating African *men* (reflecting the gendered nature in the imagination of labor) in European concepts, values, and standards while saving *his* soul and caring for *his* body and mind. Plantations partook in administrative functions by enforcing punishments, sharing in tax collection, and participating in the general maintenance of law and order. In short, plantations were microcosms of the larger colonial society; their presence and practices (despite all the shortcomings) were fundamental to the extension of German social, cultural, and political influence as well as the economic exploitation of colonial appendages for the service of the fatherland. And although colonial policy backing for plantations oscillated at different times in favor of settlers and African cash crop production,¹³ plantations gained enough support to not only remain a cornerstone of the economy, but also expand over the two decades of German rule.

Statistics compiled by district officers from 1902 to 1913 give a snapshot of the GEA economic map, which indicates the growth of plantations, but with a limited distribution over the territory. In 1902 European plantations were concentrated in the northeast in Tanga, Pangani, and Usambara (Wihlemstahl) districts (referred to as Tanganital), and around old coastal towns such as Bagamoyo, Lindi, Kilwa, and Dar-Es-Salaam. By 1913, the number of plantations in these areas increased, and new plantation pockets appeared along the Uluguru Mountains and in the southern and northern highlands. A total of 320,036 ha were under European control, more than half of which were in Tanganital. Only 14 percent of this land was cultivated. Big companies held large units in Tanganital and coastal towns, while smaller holdings (mainly settlers) were concentrated in the northern, southern, and northeastern highlands. While in the beginning coffee,

¹² Thaddeus Sunseri, *Vilimani: Labor Migration and Rural Change in Early Colonial Tanzania* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 12–15.

¹³ Settlers were backed by pressure groups in the metropolis and sympathetic governors and district officers. African cash-crop production was promoted by governors like Götzen, Rechenberg, and Schnee, and the colonial director, Bernhard Dernburg to meet the needs of home industries, especially cotton for textile. Thaddeus Sunseri, “The Baumwollefrage: Cotton Colonialism in German East Africa,” *Central European History* 34, 1 (2001), 31–51; John Iliffe, *Tanganyika under German Rule, 1905–1912* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 57.

coconut, cocoa, vanilla, and cardamom were planted, by 1909 the situation shifted in favor of sisal (14,316 ha), followed by rubber (12,853 ha), cotton (6,367 ha), coconut (6,275 ha), and coffee (3,822 ha).¹⁴ In terms of workers, in 1902 the number of “colored” workers (*farbige arbeiters*) on each plantation was 150–350, while “white staff” (*weiße beamten*) averaged three. By 1909, the numbers jumped to 36,423 colored workers (by 1913 tripling to 91,892) and 332 “whites.”¹⁵ The establishment of plantations was premised on the provision of three key elements: land, labor, and infrastructure, with serious implications for ecology and prevailing practices of land and labor use on the regional economies in which plantations were established.

Infrastructure

The construction of railways is a case in point. In 1890 the *Eisenbahn Gesellschaft für Deutsch Ostafrika*, a subsidiary of DOAG, was given the right to construct the Usambara line, which is a small connection linking the coast to the foot of the mountains and serving the needs of northeastern plantations. Though the line was financed by a loan from the government, DOAG was still granted land concessions along the railway and was guaranteed a regular supply of labor that came mostly in the form of forced labor. By 1895 however only 40 km were completed, yet DOAG had already amassed over 3 km of so-called “ownerless” land on either side of the line in addition to 4,000 ha elsewhere for every kilometer built.¹⁶ In 1899 the government took over and the line was completed in 1905.

The construction of the line was not only about land dispossession—it was also about labor. Porters, mainly Nyamwezi and Sukuma men of the caravan trade, joined the rail construction crews and eventually made their way into plantation labor. In Tanga recourse to forced labor to build the Usambara line was not uncommon, nor was the use of labor in lieu of tax payment. Given the limitations on the availability of local labor (since many tried to escape forced labor and working conditions by moving further into the mountains or hiding during labor round-ups¹⁷) rail workers were also drawn from other provinces, some joining to gain cash to pay their taxes, or desiring the prospects of new commodities floating around the territories, or seeking possibilities for wealth outside of local orbits. Many of the latter, like porters, eventually became wageworkers on the plantations.

¹⁴ A sharp decrease in coffee prices by the turn of the century and the collapse of the international market for rubber shifted interests towards sisal. Though still limited in terms of international demand, the prices that sisal fetched, the higher value of exports, and the dividends paid to shareholders were strong enough reasons to increase production and consolidate sisal as *the* plantation commodity of the territories.

¹⁵ *Plantagenstatistik, 1902–1903*, G8/22, Tanzania National Archives (hereafter TNA); *Plantagenstatistik, 1908–1909*, G8/24, TNA; *Plantagenstatistik, 1912–1912*, G8/26, TNA.

¹⁶ Juhani Koponen, *Development for Exploitation: German Colonial Policies in Mainland Tanzania, 1884–1914* (Helsinki: Tiedekirja, 1995), 189.

¹⁷ Frans D. Huijzendveld, “Changes in Political Economy and Ecology in West-Usambara, Tanzania: ca. 1850–1950,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 41, 3 (2008), 383–409.

The completion of the Usambara line was soon followed by demands for a central line (Dar es Salaam to Tabora) to connect plantations in Tanga to the main areas of labor supply, as well as inland plantations to the ports. Planters in the southern parts of the territories also called for a Dar es Salaam to Lindi Line. With backing from the Colonial Department, the Central Line reached Tabora by 1912. The existence of such infrastructure not only facilitated the working of plantations, but also contributed to the opening up of new areas for plantation agriculture and eased the movement of labor and commodities to and from plantation areas. It also dramatically closed the social space between the coast and the interior, allowing migrant workers to construct a dense social network marked by mobility around plantations and between them and their home areas in the interior. Regionally, the railway construction and opening up of new plantations and settler farms entailed a gradual shift to the production of food crops for cash among local communities, especially those who could afford avoiding forced labor in rail construction and on plantations.

In addition to railways, Tanga Region—as the plantation area par excellence—witnessed further infrastructure installations that transformed its landscape. Prime among these were the upgrading and building of a network of roads as well as the upgrading of Tanga harbor to a port with various facilities to support international shipping lines and additional storage to cater to increased volume of exported commodities, primarily sisal fiber. Visible infrastructure marked sisal plantations as idiosyncratic and distinctive units in the midst of prevailing peasant fields and villages. These ranged from fences delimiting the borders of plantations, to bridges, rail lines, and roads crisscrossing the lands of plantations. The orderly spacing of plantation fields, along with centrally located factories, sheds, and storage areas connected to water pumping stations, decorticators, drying grounds, brushing and baling machines, were an indispensable part of the production process, but also provided the unequivocal visible sign of power and difference associated with plantations. Despite this orderly and distinctive landscape, the boundaries between village and plantation collapsed around the labor camps, signified in the constant movement of men, women, and children between village and plantation, as well as socially in the dense social networks of work and sociality that linked the two.

Land

Land use practices surrounding plantations in Tanga took shape within the context of land policies in GEA. Article I of the 1895 Imperial Land Decree divested African land rights: all land was declared ownerless (*herrenlos*), and ownership was invested in the Empire (crown land), except when proof of ownership could be shown. The question of “showing” ownership crystallized in the 1896 Imperial Circular that distinguished between ownership and rights of occupation. While the former had proof of documented titles, those without title were constituted first as a collective entity (the tribe) whose presence was recognized by virtue of laboring on the land (cultivation and use), and who were absorbed under the colonial state that acted as their guardian (power of representation, preserving rights, requisition and retention of land). Preserving “native” land rights was legally defined as “present rights,” which were recognized on the basis of physical occupation, while future rights were four times the present area under occupation. In the same way the 1895 Decree

sanctioned land alienation in favor of European plantations and settlers, it ensured the dispossession of many communities and thus pushing them into wage labor on possibly the same lands they used to hold. Further, the law endorsed individualized contractual private property as the main denominator of value, treating so-called communal native land holdings and their cosmological underpinnings as icons of backwardness. The decree also entitled the colonial state to expand its sphere of control in land matters: the government surveyed land, counted landholders, sanctioned boundaries, granted access to alienated land, set the length and terms of lease rights, mediated any land transactions between natives and Europeans, and regulated land prices.

By the time the decree came into effect, DOAG was already in control of large tracts of land along the coast, which it parceled among prospecting planters, especially big plantation companies.¹⁸ Most of this land, especially in the densely populated Tanganyika, became the hub of sisal plantations. DOAG and plantation companies used different means to gain access to land, ranging from force and intimidation, to agreements with Arabs or Indians, to capitalizing on political rivalry among African chiefs, as well as negotiating with a hierarchy of chiefs and patrons.¹⁹ Land moved from local communities to planters through sale, mortgage, lease, exchange, or simply appropriation. The frenzy of land speculation, the massive concessions granted to some big companies, and the influx of migrant workers intensified conflicts over land in sisal areas. In response to local resentments and pressures from leftwing politicians in Berlin, under Governors Wissmann and Götzen the demands for more land by plantations and settlers were cut and land speculation was brought under state control.²⁰

In practice however, these regulations did not result in less land moving into the hands of plantation companies and settlers. Land alienation was indeed land dispossession, which increased the vulnerability of local communities economically, socially, and morally. Those who lost their land also lost the dignity of being able to refuse working for others. “They lost their independence and became sucked into plantation work,” as Asha, an Mzigua sisal worker explained. She was proud that neither her father nor late husband “was forced to work for an Indian or a European. He would never hire himself out. We had our *shamba*, our house and we only went to farm our own land. We remained free and secure on the land.”²¹ That planters and settlers very soon recognized this safeguarding mechanism of land is evidenced in their systematic demands to challenge Africans’ access

¹⁸ DOAG conditions of sale were biased to big plantations. Land had to be 1,000 ha at the price of four marks per ha. For those purchasing more than 1,000 ha the condition for cultivation of 5–10 percent of land within two years was removed (Mascarahnas, *Resistance and Change*, 63–65).

¹⁹ See Michael J. Sheridan, “The Sacred Forests of North Pare, Tanzania: Indigenous Conservation, Local Politics, and Land Tenure,” Working Papers in African Studies, no. 224 (Boston: Boston University, African Studies Center, 2000); Huijzendveld, “Changes in Political Economy and Ecology.”

²⁰ Koponen, *Development for Exploitation*, 191–92.

²¹ Interview by author with Asha Ibrahimu, an old and retired sisal worker, September 20, 1994, Tanga. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms. Asha became a sisal worker after the death of her husband, and since she had no children the land they farmed reverted to his kin group.

and rights to land in order to ensure the flow of laboring bodies. Equally important was their recognition of the value of food production for the growing plantation labor force. During its embryonic stage, sisal plantations already had experienced the tension between their needs for land and labor on the one hand, and the need for the supply of food to plantations from neighboring villages. For planters and the state, keeping the two domains apart was the strategy for ensuring their control over each separately. For villagers and workers, merging village and plantation, food, cash and work, was the tactic for maintaining their control over land, food and labor. This conflict became more acute with the establishment of more plantations, which meant an escalated demand for laboring bodies.

Labor

Forced and slave labor prevailed on GEA plantations since their inception. To make chiefs comply with demands for labor, coercion was used directly (e.g., guns and flogging) and indirectly, usually in unison with local state agents. In Tanga, for instance, the district officer divided the district into 8–15 huts, each having to provide one worker at prescribed intervals to work on the plantations.²² When this failed, the district officer in West Usambara issued “each Shambaa with a card obliging him to work for a European for thirty days every four months at a fixed wage.”²³ Collaboration with headmen to send workers to plantation areas earned local authorities the disgrace of having “sold their people for a rupee a head,”²⁴ or in the language of a sisal worker, “Arab brokers sold people to plantations like cows.”²⁵ District officers collaborated with planters and settlers in setting the terms for labor engagement. “There is no such thing as an open labor market, where wages are adjusted according to the laws of supply and demand. The wages paid were fixed by the official concerned with the labor administration.”²⁶

Planters and settlers also hired slaves from Arab and Swahili planters, rented them from labor brokers, or ransomed slaves and obliged them to work on their plantations until full payment of the price of purchase. DOAG resorted to importing Asian indentured labor, though the experiment was short lived, while the use of convict labor reached about 10–20 percent of all workers by the turn of the century.²⁷ However, none of these options solved

²² 1927 *Annual Labor Department Report*, Tanganyika: Government Printer, 1927, 7.

²³ John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 153; Koponen, *Development for Exploitation*, 400; Louis Mihalyi, “Characteristics and Problems of Labour in the Usambara Highlands of East Africa During the German Period, 1885–1914,” *East Africa* (May 1970), 20–25. Labor cards were known as *kipande*, and after WWI the *kipande* system (i.e., a specified number of cards corresponding to daily tasks that had to be completed within a specific time) was instituted as the landmark of sisal labor until its abolition in 1963.

²⁴ 1928 *Annual Labor Department Report*, Tanganyika: Government Printer, 1928, 8.

²⁵ Interview by author with Michael Temu, a sisal cutter from Burundi, July 24, 1996, Tanga.

²⁶ 1926 *Annual Labor Department Report*, Tanganyika: Government Printer, 1926, 5–6.

²⁷ Sunseri, *Vilimani*, 55–56; Huijzendveld, “Changes in Political Economy and Ecology,” offers a detailed account of different types of labor forced to work on European plantations.

what planters perceived as a “labor calamity.” Local labor was physically available, yet planters and administrators—despite all coercive measures—failed to secure enough bodies to meet their labor demands. The alternative was tapping the labor power of people from the interior, i.e., relying on migrant labor (constructed in colonial imaginary fundamentally as male migrant workers), a practice that became an inseparable, though highly contentious, facet of sisal plantations until the present.

To recruit workers, plantations relied on Arab and Indian contractors and merchants, on headmen, and on workers returning home to mobilize others to follow suit. In addition to recruited migrants, many walked to plantations on their own (non-contractual migrants) to retain a degree of autonomy over their working and living conditions. Porters, mainly Nyamwezi and Sukuma of the western parts of the territories, formed the genesis of migrant labor on European plantations. They sought work on plantations while awaiting the departure of their caravans, and soon planters started calling upon contractors to tap this resource mainly for seasonal plantation work and settler farms. Further, the government set up porters’ depots in coastal and caravan towns to channel labor to plantations in the vicinity. While some porters converted to plantation work, others retained both forms of wage labor, thus providing a temporary source of labor to plantations.²⁸ In addition to porters, by the early 1900s people from the south of the territories (especially the Ngoni) also moved into plantation work to pay for heavy taxes.²⁹ Makonde migrants from neighboring Mozambique, escaping the turmoil of armed resistance to Portuguese colonial penetration, also found their way to northern plantations.³⁰ From 1908 the effects of the Maji Maji Rebellion, famine, ecological disasters, land alienation, the ease of transport and movement afforded by roads and railways, intensive recruiting, and the burden of tax payments expanded the groups involved in plantation labor. Despite conflicts among employers of labor, the discourse of labor shortage, and workers’ resistance to being converted into a stable, disciplined work force, the number people moving into plantation work actually increased. While at the turn of the century the numbers were within the range of 10,000, by 1908 they reached 36,423 and tripled to 91,892 by 1912–13.³¹ As Iliffe argued, “So wide was the migration network by 1914 that the illuminating question is which peoples were not involved.”³²

“Working in sisal means discipline and control.”³³ This idiom was inscribed on the landscape, the social organization of production, and the corresponding classification of

²⁸ Steven Rockel, “Wage Labor and the Culture of Porterage in Nineteenth Century Tanzania: The Central Caravan Routes,” *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 15, 2 (1995), 14–24.

²⁹ Iliffe, *Modern History*, 161.

³⁰ Edward Alpers, “‘To Seek a Better Life’: The Implications of Migration from Mozambique to Tanganyika for Class Formation and Political Behavior,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 18, 2 (1984), 367–88.

³¹ *Plantagenstatistik, 1902–1903*, G8/22, TNA; *Plantagenstatistik, 1908–1909*, G8/24, TNA.

³² Iliffe, *Modern History*, 162.

³³ Interview by author with a manager of a sisal estate, March 23, 1995, Tanga.

labor since the inception of plantations. Visually, the orderly landscape of the sisal plantation is reinforced by a rhythmic organization of production that is year-round, timed, and sequenced; an organization that was also mapped onto the layers of classification of workers. On the one hand, labor was divided by their location in the field or the factory: field workers were involved in clearing of land, cutting of leaves, cleaning of mature and immature sisal fields, nursery planting and cleaning, and replanting of fields; factory workers were involved in decorticating, drying, brushing, pressing, and baling. Auxiliary tasks were performed by mechanics, drivers, rail layers, and a host of clerks for bookkeeping; *askaris* and reporters toured the fields, factories, and camps to keep workers under tight surveillance. Layers of supervisors from the level of gangs (groups of 10–15 workers) to the top level of management controlled the whole operation. Ethnicity, gender, age, and skill were key parameters in distributing labor among the various categories. Thus, while contracted migrant Nyanwezi men were mainly engaged as cutters, men from indigenous communities in plantation districts predominated in the cleaning of mature sisal fields. Women were concentrated in the cleaning of immature fields (symbolized by the hoe as opposed to the cleaning of mature fields with the *panga*, which was reserved for men), while children worked the nursery fields. The gender, age, and ethnicity nexus that governed the distribution of workers was ultimately shaped by the overall division of plantation labor into local vs. migrant (particularly recruited) labor.³⁴ This all-encompassing classification reflected concerns central to the administration in managing the native and labor questions, namely the problems of recruiting, the potentially unregulated movement of natives around the territories, and the effects of labor migration on both home and employment areas (in terms of payment of taxes in home areas, the absence of men from local food and cash crop production, the mixing of tribes and the imagined immoralities associated with it).

It was precisely this set of concerns that was articulated in the 1909 regulations, where the absence of migrant men from their home villages was limited to nine months, recruiting was brought under the supervision of the state, and the unregulated movement of men was addressed. Further, the classification reflected planters' concerns about provision of housing and food for workers, as well as the competing demands between local labor farming their own fields and laboring on plantations. It was not uncommon for men and women to leave plantation work to attend to the planting and harvesting of their *shambas*, a practice that was perceived as disrupting the flow of plantation work, and for which regulations were later passed preventing the production of cash crops in the vicinity of plantations. Food production—usually perceived as undertaken by women—was tolerated and encouraged, especially since no fields for food production were carved out on the plantations. Rather, relying on food provisions from neighboring villages was becoming more of a norm, bringing in its wake, as Conte, Huijendveld, and Kimambo have noted, a

³⁴ “Labor was divided into day (or casual) labour and contract (or recruited) labour. The day labourers were not bound by any master, and worked on plantations near their homes. They were usually given piecework and paid for it the same day. Contract Labourers were recruited up-country, and were signed on for 180 or 240 working days” (cited in the 1926 Annual Labor Department Report).

shift in regional economies towards the production of food for cash.³⁵ Equally important was the prevailing belief that men (particularly recruited migrant men) comprised the majority of sisal labor. The figure of the single male migrant worker stood out (and continues to the present) as a “fact” of sisal labor, despite all evidence to the contrary.

With the outbreak of WWI the general contours of sisal plantations were laid down: large-scale land appropriation with investments in infrastructure, dispossession of local communities and devaluation of so-called communal holdings in favor of private property and documented holdings, use of land and taxes as means to force the local population into plantation wage labor, the shift to the production of food crops as cash crops for sale to plantations, and a gradual but massive influx of so-called “alien” migrant workers to plantation areas. By 1914 sisal had mastered the landscape of what became Tanga Region, turning it into the sisal lands par excellence, marked by plantations, migrant alien labor, and local communities servicing the food and labor needs of plantations. This uneasy symbiosis between sisal plantations and local economies continued for years to come.

THE BRITISH MANDATE AND THE GOLDEN DAYS OF SISAL PLANTATIONS (1917–1961)

The years of the British Mandate are usually described as “the golden days” of sisal. At the eve of independence the area under sisal covered more than 269,000 ha, production reached over 208,000 tons, sisal labor comprised more than 35 percent of the total employed in the territories, and sisal exports contributed more than 30 percent of export earnings. The property complex of plantations solidified, and planters’ associations developed in Tanganyika and in London (the Tanganyika Sisal Association and the London Sisal Association, respectively) that exerted power far beyond the realm of plantations and markets, to the very governance of the territories. A Sisal Labor Bureau (SILABU) was established to recruit and regulate labor, while the role of planters in governing local populations (both workers and villagers) was a recognized reality in plantation districts. The primacy and power accorded to sisal, however, was not always a tale of glamour. On the contrary, plantations experienced several moments of crisis, each one almost threatening a total collapse of the sisal sector. These crises highlight the intimate relationship between shifts in global markets, national policy, and their effects on local practices and institutions. On the local landscape, the crises were magnified in discourses on threats of blurring the boundaries between village and plantation, or more abstractly the racial divide between native and non-native domains.

Crises amidst Glory

The War years triggered the first “narrative of crisis” for sisal plantations. Shipping lines stopped, stores were overstocked and ransacked, while sisal leaves were rotting in the fields for lack of transport facilities. Plantations were ravaged by troops and European staff

³⁵ Huijzendveld, “Changes in Political Economy;” Isara Kimambo, “Environmental Control and Hunger in the Mountains and Plains of Northeastern Tanzania,” in Gregory Maddox et al., eds., *Custodians of the Land: Ecology and Culture in the History of Tanzania* (London: James Currey, 1996), 71–95; C. Conte, *Highland Sanctuary: Environmental History in Tanzania’s Usambara Mountains* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

was interned or deported. Alien up-country natives were “floating” in villages and towns, others settling permanently in plantation areas, “swamping” the local population, and refusing to abide by local authority structures. Villagers and plantation workers were squatting on plantations and turning rows of sisal into rows of food crops or pastures for cattle. Several indigenous communities (especially in areas where land alienation was most intense, as in Tanga District and the Usambara) settled on abandoned properties, reclaiming them as their own tribal lands that were taken away by Germans. In order to halt this “assault on properties” and to guarantee some kind of regularity of laboring bodies, plantation managers and political officers permitted “natives to occupy Europeans holdings.”³⁶ To bring plantations back into production, former German properties were placed under the Custodian of Enemy Property and then starting in 1921 were auctioned to prospectors. The bulk of property ended up in the hands of Greeks, Indians, and other European (British and Dutch) nationals. Yet, a wide class and nationality gap marked the ownership structure of sisal plantations: many small producers (Greek, followed by Dutch) controlled dispersed small estates, while a few big companies (British and Indian) controlled large tracts of land, and were indeed “the barons of sisal,” a title earned in local discourse.

The sale of plantations, coupled with further land alienations and with only lip service paid to “retention and restoration” of land to “natives,” heightened disputes over land among local communities, “alien natives,” and European planters. Officers complained, “There is no end” to family land disputes and warned that “native land difficulties ... [were] getting acute.”³⁷ In Tanga District, by 1924 almost 33 percent of land was alienated and only 28 percent was “available for natives.”³⁸ Given the scale of alienation, land scarcity was becoming a serious concern in Tanga, especially since “there were plantations which were overstocked with native squatters and there was no room for them on Crown lands.”³⁹ The intensity of land alienation forced many Africans to move around in search of land. In the Usambaras, alienation and warfare resulted in “insufficient pastures for natives’ cattle, in some areas arable land at natives’ disposal is not adequate for food requirements. Many natives left their homes and settled in foreign villages to mutual dissatisfaction of both inhabitants and immigrants.”⁴⁰

A similar pattern of intense disputes over land followed the collapse of the sisal market in the mid-1920s. This resulted in slowed down work on the estates, non-payment of outstanding debts and wages,⁴¹ and increased land disputes when natives infringed on

³⁶ Acquisition of Ex-Enemy Properties for Restoration to Native Tribes, 1921–22, ES/3033/8/Vol. I, TNA.

³⁷ 1923 Tanga District Annual Report, TNA; Secretary of Native Affairs’ Tour Report, Tanga Province, 1929, V16/13815, TNA.

³⁸ 1925 Tanga District Annual Report. TNA; Acquisition of Land, 1921–1940, 45/457/LC, TNA.

³⁹ Native Squatting on Mission Land, 1923, ES/2970/Vol. I. TNA.

⁴⁰ Acquisition of Ex-Enemy Properties for Restoration to Native Tribes, 1921–22, ES/3033/8/Vol. I. TNA.

⁴¹ Sisal, Tanganyika Territory, CO/852/30/9/15010/2, Public Record Office (henceforth PRO).

the boundaries of plantations. The late 1920s brought short relief to the plantation sector and the governing of so-called “native” subjects. Prices slightly improved, allowing plantations to resume a degree of normalcy in operations, only to be hit by the depression of the 1930s when prices fell from £35 in 1929 to £14 in 1931. In Tanga, where sisal was “the social and economic life of the Province,”⁴² the drop in prices resulted yet again in non-payment of wages, serious discharges of workers, and for the first time strikes appeared on some estates. The lack of monies generated from sisal wages had a negative affect on Native Treasuries and the provincial revenues territory-wide, resulting in slackened hut and poll tax collections and a sharp decrease in wages. The drop in sisal reverberated in all the territories, to the extent that a district officer in Central Province reported that he was scanning sisal prices anxiously each week, since cattle prices fell sharply, food prices increased and migrant workers were returning to find no jobs.⁴³ Regionally, the non-payment of wages to workers resulted in up-country men “loafing” around the districts, squatting and settling on what was considered “tribal lands,” “Crown lands,” and abandoned “non-native lands.” Several opted for *kaffir farming* (labor for land) on alienated non-native lands, others paid rent (either cash or a share of produce) to the non-natives for the use of their lands, and a few local men even managed to buy acres of non-native alienated land. To maintain production and guarantee tight controls over African subjects, land, and labor, estate managers enforced a system of registration for “alien natives’ use” of plantation lands. Written permits (*cheti*) were issued by managers and supervised by administrative officers. The permits detailed the terms of use, including type of crops grown, huts built, movement around the land, use of water resources, practices in clearing the land for cultivation, length of stay, as well as terms of laboring on the estate.⁴⁴ In some cases managers added labor cards to such permits, thus compelling squatters to work on the plantations. The Depression also augmented the need to have more direct control over African production in order to allow for more surplus extraction. The move materialized in the “plant more crops” campaigns, focusing primarily on cotton, coffee, groundnuts, and food crops. Given the tension between the labor and food needs of plantations, planters adamantly objected to cash crop production among villagers in their vicinity to ensure the regular flow of food and labor to the plantations. The planters’ agenda materialized in stipulations to district officers regarding “native labor.” Constructing “native labor” as an obligation to the state, district officers with the help of native authorities were to instruct Africans about “their options” depending on locale and tribal affiliations. The options were as follows: 1) in areas vulnerable to drought and famine the native was to produce foodstuffs since “to save a native community from famine is more important than the export of many bales of cotton”; 2) among industrious natives, the options were “growing economic crops under conditions which are entirely suitable from the point of view of climate, soil, transport facilities, etc. and going out to labour”; 3) in the vicinity of plantations or settler farms, natives were encouraged to grow foodstuffs for the latter or seek wage labor; and 4) in areas where growing economic crops

⁴² 1929 Annual Report of Tanga Province, TNA.

⁴³ Iliffe, *Modern History*, 344.

⁴⁴ Native Squatting on Mission Land, 1923, ES/2970/Vol. I, TNA.

was not possible, officers were to encourage natives to leave their home areas in search of work on plantations and farms.⁴⁵

Land, Labor, and the Matrix of Power in Tanga Plantations

In the midst of this chaos, the Land Ordinance came into effect in 1923. Within the span of twenty-eight years, indigenous rights to land were nullified twice: once as “unowned lands” under the German Imperial Decree of 1895, and again as “public lands” under the Land Ordinance of 1923. In both instances, the state had the right to radical title in all land. Europeans—except those who already had freehold titles from German times—had rights of occupancy for ninety-nine years, their leases regulated by terms specifying rent and development conditions pertaining to the title. As for African land rights, “paramountcy of native interests” in the land and the recognition and enforcement of native customs with regard to land holding and use were enshrined in the law in line with Article 6 of the Mandate.⁴⁶ The nature of African (labeled native) rights remained use rights marked by a tribe’s occupation of an area through cultivation and residence. They were fundamentally communal and regulated by codes of access and distribution according to customary tribal traditions. As Lord Cameron elaborated, “It is a right to the use of the land and not to its ownership which is vested in the Governor for the benefit of the tribe.”⁴⁷

The Land Ordinance, the administrative inauguration of Tanga as a Province in 1926, and the official institution of indirect rule as a policy laid the groundwork for delineation of different layers of authority in charge of regulating land and labor relationships. Given Tanga’s social make-up of precarious tribal institutions,⁴⁸ sizeable areas of alienated land, and a “very large alien floating population working on sisal estates,”⁴⁹ the Province ended up with a mix of indirect and direct rule. Despite the rhetoric

⁴⁵ Government Labor, Recruitment, Employment and Care, 1933, CO 691/130/5125, PRO.

⁴⁶ “In the framing of laws relating to the holding or transfer of land, the Mandatory shall take into consideration native laws and customs and safeguard the interests of the native population. No native land may be transferred, except between natives, without the previous consent of the public authorities, and no real rights over native land in favour of non-natives may be created except with the same consent” (British Mandate for East Africa). The Trusteeship maintained the same provision in Article 8 of 1946 Agreement.

⁴⁷ Legislative Council, His Excellency’s Speech, 1926, ES/7339/12, TNA.

⁴⁸ Those tribes identified as Tanga indigenous (Bondei, Zigua, Digo, Segeju) were described as “already detribalised and in a state of change before the European era began; there was also much immigration of people of one tribe into the country of another.” Arab and Swahili rule, Islam, the presence of slaves and freed slaves who worked on coastal plantations, meant that the Digo were “adulterated,” the Bondei turned into an “amorphous group with no overall political unity and with a language and way of life taken from the neighboring tribes,” and the Zigua “have lost a great deal of their own identity and early way of life.” Aliens in Tanga, 225/PA/8/33/028A, TNA.

⁴⁹ Maps, 1926–1929, 4/704/Vol. I, TNA; 1929 Tanga District Annual Report, 1929, TNA. For instance, alien natives comprised 33 percent of total Tanga District population in 1928, a percentage that jumped to 49 percent by 1957. In Pangani alien natives rose from 19 percent in 1928 to 65 percent in 1948 (Census, Natives, 1928–1935, 4/183/2/Vol. I & II, TNA; African Native Census 1948 and 1957). The picture was further augmented at the level of divisions. In Kiomoni and Mwera divisions in Tanga and Pangani

of premising native administration on the “natural” forms of native life, in practice administrative boundaries were much more malleable. The presence of sisal plantations necessitated the re-working of boundaries to accommodate planters’ land needs, the maintenance of sisal estates as contained enclaves, and administrators’ desire to manage the “alien” factor. To halt what they believed to be the “detrribalization of alien natives” and to create a semblance of governing through tribal authority, plantation managers organized their work force by tribal affiliation. Relying on these pseudo-tribal units on the plantations, managers assisted local government in tax collections, tracing of natives, the administration of justice, the control of liquor production and consumption, the regulation of *ngoma* dances and other ritual practices, the enforcement of hygienic codes and quarantine regulations, the distribution of food, the allocation of land for food, and the provision of social services to their workers as well as residents in the area.⁵⁰ Plantation managers also regulated and issued permits for land use that involved their own workers, alien permanent settlers, and villagers in the vicinity of estates. In short, the uneasy symbiosis between plantation and village in terms of movement of food, labor and commodities that was established during German times was now further consolidated through an administrative set-up that in practice blurred the lines between plantation and village, workers and villagers, alien and local “natives.” The demarcation of the territories along the distinct lines of native and non-native domains was challenged on a daily basis by access to water resources and land for food and permanent crop production, the flow of local labor back and forth between the plantations and villages according to the rhythm of agriculture cycle on local *shambas*, and the social networks between villagers and workers. In the same vein, workers and villagers in the vicinity of plantations had to navigate three different structures of authority: district officers as agents of the mandate state, native authorities as embodiments of tribal rule, and plantation managers. These three structures upheld a diverse (at times complementary and at other times conflicting) body of regulations ranging from legal codes passed by the mandate authority to customary laws of the respective tribal units, and codes of conduct issued by plantation managers.

It is not surprising that this maze of regulations, codes, and laws, as well as the agents who were enforcing them, left much room for maneuvering. With respect to the planters’ class, Europeans amassed sizeable portions of land and were able to pressure for more despite the Mandate Clauses, the legal guarantees to native rights, and the closure of the Province in 1928 against land alienation. Similar to the situation in German times, nationality conjured with class such that the two largest firms were Swiss-British and British. In Tanga District for instance, those who held 1,000 ha or more had control over 83 percent of non-native property, mostly as freehold. Greeks and Indians held less than 1,000 ha, mostly as leasehold.⁵¹ The Depression, followed by the WWII disposal of enemy

districts, respectively (both are inhabited by large sisal estates) the percentage of alien natives reached 88 percent.

⁵⁰ Correspondence with Tanganyika Sisal Growers Association, 45/981, TNA; Census, 1948, 45/572, TNA.

⁵¹ By 1935 territory-wide a total of 1,930,992 acres were alienated, of these 37 percent were held by British (650,221 acres) and 23 percent (450,529 acres) by Germans. Indians held 16 percent, Greeks 11

properties and the shift to largescale commercial agriculture as a development model, consolidated the grip of big companies over the land. Small companies and planters were pushed out, their lands purchased by big companies, while failure to pay rents on leases resulted in surrender of land to the government.⁵²

With the boom in sisal plantations and the institutionalization of labor recruitment under the auspices of SILABU, members of almost every tribal group in the territories were present in Tanga,⁵³ especially subjects from neighboring territories such as Nyasaland, Portuguese East Africa, Belgian Congo and Kenya.⁵⁴ Additionally, the involvement of local men and women in sisal work also increased, following the pattern of combining wage work with laboring on their own farms already established under German times. The classification of workers reflected systems devised prior to WWI, and the Master and Native Ordinance of 1923 enshrined the local versus recruited migrant labor classification. In 1926 the *kipande* (labor card system)⁵⁵ was legally sanctioned, and the numbers of so-called non-recruited migrant workers (also labeled voluntary workers) increased. In addition to men, women and children appeared first as “dependents” among recruited migrant labor and later, since the early 1950s, as separate categories of workers on plantations. During WWII sisal was declared an essential commodity, and hence conscripts for sisal plantation work were a new classificatory category on the plantations, constituting 12 percent of the labor force during the period 1944 to 1946.

Despite the variety of migrant labor and the increase in their numbers, local labor (variously listed as alien, native, casual daily, permanent local) prevailed during the

percent, Dutch South Africans 3 percent, and missionary societies 4 percent. Of the total alienated, 42 percent came under freehold and the rest were leasehold properties, with British owners holding 34 percent of freeholds, Indians (20 percent), Germans and Greek each 15 percent (Statistical Information on Land Holdings, Population and Export Trade, 1938, L1/26521, TNA; *Land* 1925–31, 4/651/Vol. I., TNA). By 1939 this pattern was almost exactly the same. C. K. Meek, *Land Law and Custom in the Colonies* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), 105.

⁵² The Tanga Provincial Commissioner reported in 1933 on the “difficulties with lease collection. A few leaseholders have been surrendered to Government” (1933 Annual Report of Tanga Province, TNA). In 1934 again “numerous holdings have been surrendered, mainly the small estates where no economic development is possible” (1934 Annual Report of Tanga Province, TNA).

⁵³ Which provinces supplied labor to plantations varied over time, depending on closure of provinces and districts to recruiting to control spread of diseases and the decrease in numbers of men, the availability of alternative options for cash earning, the rate and practices involved in tax collection, and the willingness and ability of district officers and native authorities to regulate recruiting as well as “voluntary” labor movement. Thus, while migrants from the Lake and Western provinces prevailed prior to WWII, the pattern shifted in favor of workers from the Southern Highlands, followed by the Western and Lake Provinces after the war.

⁵⁴ The numbers of non-Tanganyika recruited subjects oscillated between 26,884 in 1949 and 58,389 in 1959. Annual Labor Department Reports, 1945–1965, TNA.

⁵⁵ The *kipande* system entailed that each worker had to complete a specified number of tasks (usually thirty tasks) for duration of a contract. The period for the completion of a labor card varied and was subject to negotiations between workers and managers. Eventually the length of a *kipande* was legally set at forty-five days.

interwar years as the predominant form of labor on the plantations. In terms of overall numbers, sisal plantation workers increased from 54,363 workers in 1929 to 151,800 workers in 1953 (the peak year), dropping slightly to 121,619 by 1960. Of these only 19 percent and 25 percent in 1929 and 1953, respectively, were recruited migrant workers; the remainder were non-recruited migrants and local labor. In fact, according to Annual Labor Department Reports from 1926–1965, TSGA annual reports (1945–65), and Annual Plantation Returns, the percentage of recruited migrant workers oscillated on average between 15–20 percent, reaching a peak of 26 percent in 1953, then dropping back to 14–20 percent of total sisal workers. A closer look at 1952 provides an interesting picture of the different categories of workers. In that year sisal plantations employed a total of 114,190 workers (25 percent of total wage employed in Tanganyika), of whom only 20 percent (21,937) were recruited workers on contract, the rest were “non-contract” labor, of whom 66 percent were local (including alien natives) and 14 percent voluntary. In addition to the male workers on the plantations, there were 23,485 listed as dependents engaged in some form of work on the estates. This division of plantation labor, though at odds with prevailing official discourse and policy, reflected realities on the ground. More than two thirds of sisal workers (men, women, and children) were crossing the boundaries of village and plantation on a daily basis seeking work, food, and services, while building on complex relations of kinship, friendship, and ethnicity.

These numbers attest to the intensity of engagement of local men, women, and children in plantation work, despite the prevailing myth of the migrant male workers constituting the mainstay of sisal labor. The evidence also shows that the “local” category included a variety of workers in terms of ethnic background, gender, and length of stay in plantation areas that renders any generalizations in terms of the local vs. recruited classification erroneous and misleading. Many “alien” workers settled permanently in plantation areas while others moved back and forth, and yet others married in local tribes, acquired land and residence, without severing their ties with the home areas from which they initially came. Aliens did not “detrribalize,” nor did locals lose their tribal ethos and become swamped by “alien natives.” Rather, a reworking of the bounds and meanings of ethnicity and gender shaped the patterns of social life and its organizing principles around plantations. As one old cutter succinctly put it: “The boundaries between the fields of the estate and villages were always clear. In the camp, it is different. The camp and the village grow into each other.”⁵⁶ Workers gained access to land in a variety of ways: through marriage; being adopted first as a stranger and later as kin; through kin ties with other workers who already settled in the villages; through negotiations with headmen; or through lease from villagers. Regulations regarding land use varied by location, tribal codes, type and process of negotiating access, as well as pressures on the land. For instance, while in some areas plantation workers were allowed to grow only annual crops on village lands, others permitted the cultivation of permanent crops and trees, with some regulations regarding which parts of the tree belonged to whom, along with shares of the proceeds, and labor exchange agreements. As much as workers accessed village land (i.e., native and tribal) through networks of kin, ethnicity, and marriage, relations between villagers and

⁵⁶ Interview by author with Francis, a sisal cutter, August 21, 1996, Tanga.

workers allowed the former access to non-native plantation land, in the form of access to plots allocated for workers to grow their own food, as well as lands on the margins of the plantations which workers used to grow their permanent and annual crops. In fact, the very multitude of workers' categories, the *kipande* system that allowed workers a degree of flexibility over time and hence over space and movement, and the boom the sisal industry witnessed made it possible for workers and villagers to negotiate working and living conditions in a manner not desired nor planned by planters and state officials.

Land use patterns on the sisal plantations, however, shaped patterns of land use of workers and villagers alike. Following the aforementioned "bible of sisal," sisal fields covered only one-third of plantation lands, while one-tenth was devoted to replanting. Fallow areas prevailed in many sections of the plantation (shifting in location every 8–10 years following the life cycle of the plant) and hence affecting the areas where workers were allowed to grow food for their own consumption. The latter was regulated by *cheti* (permits) given to workers. To ensure control over the land, the location of each worker's plot had to change every year. On the margins of plantations and on fallow areas (unless the latter were used for diversification, such as growing sunflower, trees, cattle herding) workers—although restricted by managers—could and did grow trees and permanent crops. Conflicts among managers, workers, and villagers erupted over clearing of land, especially the use of fire to clear bush, which threatened neighboring sisal fields. In addition to regulations regarding which crops to grow and where, managers also restricted passage to waterways (a central component of decorticating) and the movement of "native cattle" around the edges of plantations. Additionally, they raised alarms about the spread of diseases and hence possible contamination of trees, leaves, and soil devoted to sisal that came from workers' and villagers' fields, corps and cattle as a result of using "poor" seed varieties, unregulated movement of cattle, and unhygienic practices of livestock keeping.

The struggle among planters, villagers, and workers over the control of land and labor peaked during the last few years before independence, especially with the move towards instituting an aggressive economic development agenda. This took the form of endless strikes on plantations, chronic unrest in villages, and even law suits brought before the UN against the British Mandatory Authorities for excessive land alienation and forced soil conservation programs. However, what remained undisputed was the fact that sisal plantations were the mainstay of the polity and economy. Reflecting on the situation in Tanga, a resident described:

There wasn't even one inch that was not under sisal. Estates were lined back to back and the villages simply disappeared inside the sisal. In a way that's what they were, homes to sisal workers and sources of food and casual labor to the estates. You will not find one person in the whole region that was not involved one way or another with sisal.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Interview by author with a Tanga resident mechanic, November 14, 1994, Tanga.

Death and Revival: The Ultimate Death of Sisal

As mentioned earlier, the 1960s witnessed the slow death of the sisal industry and with it, as reflected in the discourse of many Tanga residents, the death of the town and the region. Tanga lost its acclaim on the national scene, and the town and region that was once running the territories turned into “the ghost town.”⁵⁸ One major blow to the industry came from the international market. A decline in consumption and competition among producing countries (Brazil selling below East Africa) resulted in a heavy build up of stocks and a sharp drop in prices. By 1967 the FAO International Group for Hard Fibers—a global forum regulating the relationship between producing and consuming countries—enforced the international quota system on producing countries to check further declines in sisal prices. Production and replanting were restricted and costs were cut. These measures resulted in the gradual stabilization of prices by the early 1970s, but by the end of the decade prices plummeted again in response to the closures of spinning mills in Europe and the spread of new harvesting methods. However, the prime effect on the sisal market was the introduction of synthetics (polypropylene) that pushed sisal and natural hard fibers off the world market, absorbing more than 55 percent of market share.⁵⁹ This was coupled with a global shift in raw fiber and end-product producing areas, with the movement of spinning to less developed countries instead of Europe.

Other scenarios explaining the death of the industry contended the main reasons were national and local. In their varied constructions they cite “failures” alleged to prevail in public sector institutions, and socialism as a system stifling development and progress.⁶⁰ Others critiqued the technological stagnation of the industry, specifically the lack of agronomic and end-products research, low mechanization, reliance on old machinery, and low productivity per worker. In short, the industry was said to have stopped developing, hence losing its competitive edge in a world dominated by technological advance. However, the conviction that “nationalization killed sisal” was the most common phrase heard in Tanga and Tanzania at large. In contrast, in the 1960s, “For socialism to have worked, the industry had to come under government control ... We were like foreigners on our own land.”⁶¹ At independence in 1961, there were 172 producing sisal plantations covering a total area of 400,466 ha, none of them owned or managed by Africans, with the exception of hedge-grown sisal in the Lake Province that contributed a meager 6 percent of

⁵⁸ Interview by author with retired sisal estate manager, May 25, 1995, Tanga.

⁵⁹ Tanzania Sisal Authority, Tanzania Sisal Authority Corporate Plan, 1996–2000, 1996 (Tanga: Tanzania Sisal Authority).

⁶⁰ See C.E. Barker et al., *African Industrialization: Technology and Change in Tanzania* (London: Gower, 1986); Fernie L. Kweka, “Sisal Supply Response: A Case Study of Selected Estates in Tanga Region, 1967–85” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Dar es Salaam, 1987); Hassan Omari Kaya, *Disarticulation and Poor Incentives Programmes in African Economies: The Case of the Sisal Industry in Tanzania* (Berlin: Verlag Schreiber Publishers, 1989); Dianne Bolton, *Nationalization—A Road to Socialism? The Lessons of Tanzania* (London: Zed Books, 1985).

⁶¹ Interview by author with the Executive Secretary of The Sisal Association of Tanzania, September 21, 1994, Tanga.

total production.⁶² Further, sisal then was the prime earner of foreign exchange and the biggest employer of labor. The sisal industry was nationalized in the name of land and people: to redress the racial/foreignness imbalance of sisal growers, include citizens in running the main economic sector, and liberate workers from the yoke of foreign domination. African smallholders were encouraged to participate in the production of sisal on a communal basis. By August 1965 Tanga Region had 442 smallholders' schemes and 554 individual African growers covering a total area of 16,188 acres.⁶³ However, within a decade these efforts collapsed and almost all of the *ujamaa* sisal schemes were declared a failure. The second move came in October 1967. The sisal industry was nationalized and a public corporation (the Tanzania Sisal Corporation [TSC], later the Tanzania Sisal Authority [TSA]) was formed to run the nationalized estates and control international marketing. By 1968 TSC was controlling about 43 percent of the total area under sisal and 51 percent of sisal output. Three companies: Amboni Estates Limited, Lugongo Estates, and Karimjee Group escaped nationalization altogether, which meant that in practice the private sector continued to have a leading role in the industry in terms of volume of production, area under sisal, number of workers employed, and contribution to export earnings.⁶⁴ In fact, Amboni not only was not nationalized, but the company entered into partnership with the socialist government to establish the only sisal nucleus settlement scheme: Kabuku-Kwaraguru. The scheme meant that Amboni acquired a new plantation (Kwaraguru, totaling 4,000 ha) in return for assisting in the planning, production, and marketing of sisal grown among smallholders on an equal area of land of Kabuku.

The transformations brought in the wake of nationalization and the institution of smallholder sisal schemes had serious effects on patterns of land and labor use in plantation regions, particularly in Tanga. For one, the collapse of the international market for sisal starting in 1967 (the same year of the first move of nationalization) meant that thousands of plantation workers were laid off. Similar to the crises that prevailed in the early 1920s and 1930s, the effect was dramatic: workers squatted on the "public lands" nationalized by the state and discursively held in trust by the government on behalf of its citizenry. Boundary encroachments, seeking casual work in villages, and non-payment of wages entrenched a local economic crisis that was beginning to manifest itself in terms of lack of commodities, increase in prices and shortages of foodstuffs, and gradual casualization of labor on sisal plantations. The gravity of the economic situation was intensified with the institution of new work regulations on the plantations, under the rubric of the Disciplinary Code and the Security of Employment Act of 1963. Instead of labor cards (*kipande*), workers were made to engage on an individual and monthly basis, hence the new designation *wakalenda*, in reference to months on the calendar by which workers are marked on the estates. Both of these regulations entitled managers of plantations to sack workers after three days' absence. Additionally, recruitment of contract labor was

⁶² 1961 Annual Report of the Tanganyika Sisal Growers Association, TNA.

⁶³ Sisal, 1941–65, 304/A3/28, TNA.

⁶⁴ Bolton, *Nationalization*, 93; Peter Lawrence, "Plantation Sisal: The Inherited Mode of Production," in Lionel Cliffe et al, eds., *Rural Cooperation in Tanzania* (Dar es Salaam: Tanzania Publishing House, 1975), 103–30.

abolished, tax regimes were altered, and the plethora of labor categories on plantations was reduced to two: permanent and casual. Women and children totally disappeared from the books of the estates, confining their labor engagement to day work. Initially strikes—similar to those that erupted in the 1930s and later in the late 1950s—hit the plantations until they were declared illegal. In practice these changes denied many workers a sense of security in work and the possibilities for reproducing themselves, physically and socially. While the cost of the physical reproduction of labor was pushed more and more onto the workers, the spaces and practices they have devised to reproduce themselves were disrupted. Cost cutting, particularly on nationalized estates, eliminated block farming to grow their own food, entitlements to food rations, medical care and housing, and significantly reduced these on the remaining private plantations. The new terms of monthly engagement meant that the social boundaries between village and plantation, once blurred and merged daily in the movement of labor and use of land, also came to solidify, with the movement of many workers into villages. Many workers “opted out” or “exited” sisal, settling in neighboring villages and keeping their involvement with the industry mainly as a casual supplement. From 128,928 workers employed in sisal in 1961, the numbers dropped to 38,025 by 1970.⁶⁵ Between 1979 and 1984 the difference between the number of cutters required and those available jumped from 14.5 percent to 60 percent.⁶⁶

In villages, economic and social life faced many of the constraints manifest on the plantations. The institution of state-controlled marketing, the regulation of prices, and the formation of cooperatives curtailed the ability of many to move aggressively into cash production and gain sufficient financial rewards. Deterioration in infrastructure and regulations regarding the movement of crops (and people) between districts added other limitations to the circulation of food produce, cattle, and labor. Intensive land use by villagers and former plantation workers, failure of rains, and shortages of seeds and fertilizers magnified ecological problems in terms of soil exhaustion and poor harvests. The decline in the economy of Tanga was reduced to a narrative in local discourse that causally linked the death of sisal to the death of the region.

Attempts to “revive” the sisal industry after the implementation of structural adjustment packages resulted in the gradual privatization (1986–1998) of the once nationalized estates. The shift marked another phase in the struggles by local communities and workers to ensure access to land and control over their labor. While alternative sources of employment made possible by a free-market economy temporarily gave workers some leverage in negotiating working conditions and use of land on plantations, periods of drought, increased levels of poverty, and the influx of refugees from neighboring countries resulted in the general conviction that *mageuzi* (liberalization) is nothing but a reversal to colonial times, and that sisal and Tanga are finally dead once and for all.

⁶⁵ 1962 Tanganyika Sisal Growers Association Annual Report, TNA; United Republic of Tanzania, Annual Manpower Report (Dar es Salaam: Government Printers, 1970).

⁶⁶ Kweka, *Sisal Supply Response*, 57.