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EMPIRE, RACE AND THE INDIANS IN COLONIAL KENYA'S CONTESTED PUBLIC POLITICAL SPHERE, 1919–1923

Sana Aiyar

On 13 February 1922 Harry Thuku, a mission-educated Kikuyu, held a meeting in Kikuyu country where he announced: 'There is an Indian named Ghandi [sic] in India. At first he was rejected, now he has beaten the Europeans who no longer have any say in the affairs of India. . . . I shall be as he is.'¹ Coincidentally, within ten days of this statement, on 22 February 1922, Gandhi himself called off the 'non-cooperation movement' when a group of agitators turned violent and burnt down a police station in Chauri Chaura District in India (cf. Amin 1983). At the same time Mangal Dass, a member of the East African Indian National Congress, proclaimed at a public meeting in Nairobi: 'When we get self-government in India, we too can bring our cannons and rifles and fight for our rights in this colony.'²

Between 1919 and 1923 three political movements emerged across the Indian Ocean. Harry Thuku organized the first public political protest of Africans in Kenya against labour ordinances that made any infringement of labour contracts by Africans a criminal offence; Gandhi launched the first mass-based, anti-colonial, nationalist agitation in India in protest against a wartime ordinance that allowed colonial authorities to detain Indians without trial; and the East African Indian National Congress initiated a movement aimed at gaining political and economic parity with the Europeans in Kenya. These three agitations – different from one another in location, aims and the racial composition of participants – seemed, on first glance, to be disparate political articulations. Yet Thuku appeared to emulate Gandhi; Dass, wearing a 'Gandhi cap' – emboldened by the vision of Indian self-governance – threatened violence; and Gandhi himself derailed the anti-colonial movement in India on the grounds that his message of non-violence had not been internalized by his supporters.

This article explores the connection between these three movements that arose amongst Africans and Indians between 1919 and 1923. In doing so it explains how and why three seemingly separate political expressions amongst Indians in India, Indians in Kenya and Africans in Kenya were in fact intrinsically linked,

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¹The National Archives, Kew (henceforth TNA), CO/533/280, Despatches 1922, Vol. 6, Koinange wa Mbiu, headman Kyambu, statement regarding 13 February 1922 meeting recorded by magistrate Juxon Barton, 17 February 1922.

²School of Oriental and African Studies Library (henceforth SOAS), International Missionary Council Africa Papers (henceforth IMCA), Box 241, East Africa, Kenya Indians, File A Memoranda and Press Clippings, 1920–3, Memorandum on the case against the claims of Indians in Kenya, Nairobi, September 1921, Swift Press.

revealing a historical trajectory that has been lost due to an overwhelming focus on racial and territorial boundaries in colonial historiography.

Historians of South Asia have studied the non-cooperation movement to highlight the success of Gandhi's political ideology, resulting in Hindu-Muslim cooperation through appeals to Islamic universalism, and political tactics that freed the Indian anti-colonial movement from the confines of elite politics by making it the first mass-based protest of the subcontinent (Bose and Jalal 2001). Existing scholarly literature on the Indian anti-settler movement in Kenya has studied this political crisis from the perspective of 'high politics' to underscore the contradictory and complementary concerns of the Government of India, the India Office, the Colonial Office and the Kenyan Governor (Blyth 2003; Gregory 1962; Maxon 1993; Metcalf 2007). The Harry Thuku movement has been researched by historians who have characterized it in many different ways, though most available literature views it as a racially exclusive, primarily African agitation. Some scholars highlight the alliance between missionaries residing in the African reserves and the European settlers, both of whom refused to believe that Thuku's movement was a legitimate political protest – dismissing it, instead, as a 'native disturbance'. Others have examined the significance of African women's participation in the movement, while most recently historians have argued that Harry Thuku's politics demurred from embracing a radical critique of colonial rule that would include the demand for self-governance (Gregory 1971: 204–6; Kennedy 1987; Kyle 1966; Rosberg and Nottingham 1967; Twaddle 1997; Wipper 1989).

The area-studies focus of Kenyan and South Asian historiography has neglected the innovative interracial and interregional connections made by Indians and Africans during this time. Moving away from the territorial boundaries of these historiographies, this article uses the Indian Ocean realm – a space of economic, social and political interaction – as its paradigm of analysis, and traces the interrelated history of anti-settler politics that emerged amongst Indians and Africans between 1919 and 1923.³ It begins with the Indian demand for parity with Europeans on the basis of the sub-imperialist contributions of Indian merchants to the colonization of Kenya, and the success of the settlers in lobbying against them. The local concerns of Indians and Europeans in Kenya resulted in an extra-territorial imperial dynamic as India's position as the jewel in the crown triggered the interest of the colonial government of India. Fearing a backlash from the anti-colonial mass movement in India that broke out in 1919 and was critical of the discriminatory treatment of Indians within and outside the subcontinent, the Secretary of State for India supported the Indian ambition for equality with Europeans in Kenya, creating a public political realm across the Indian Ocean that connected India and Kenya. The article then traces the change in the political posture of these Indians in 1920 when, influenced by

³Recently, historians of the British Empire have begun to study the Indian Ocean realm to argue, on the one hand, that India, as the 'jewel in the crown', emerged as the nodal point from which imperial, administrative and expansionist ideas and people created a sub-imperialist sphere of Indian influence in the western Indian Ocean (Blyth 2003; Metcalf 2007). On the other hand expressions of expatriate patriotism amongst Indians who traversed the Indian Ocean have been highlighted by historians to underscore the importance of moving beyond the territorial concerns of anti-colonial nationalists in the early twentieth century (Bose 2006).

the Indian nationalists, they began to ally with the Africans in their agitation against the settlers. This finally enables a discussion of the debate that emerged amongst Africans in 1921–2 regarding the role of Indians in Kenya, and the dismissal of African demands by Europeans who claimed that Harry Thuku was merely the mouthpiece of the Indians with no legitimate grievances relevant to Africans.

Significantly, much of the debate between Indians, Europeans and Africans regarding politics, race and imperial responsibility took place in English-language newspapers and journals published by Indians and Africans in Nairobi. While the Europeans published pamphlets in defence of their anti-Indian politics, Africans voiced their opinion against Indians primarily in *Sekanyolya*, a newspaper edited by a Buganda expatriate in Nairobi. In 1920 an Indian, M. A. Desai, founded the *East African Chronicle*, which became an important space for the articulation of anti-settler politics by Indians and Africans who found common ground in their struggles against the Europeans. By analysing the debates that took place in these print media and highlighting the importance of the Indian Ocean realm in understanding the interracial and interregional concerns that shaped the political imaginary of Indians and Africans, this article shows that despite the initial organization of political protest in racially exclusive spheres, the overlapping contours of local, racial and imperial predilections created a deeply contested *interracial* public political space in Kenya after the First World War.

IMPERIAL CITIZENS AND THEIR QUEST FOR EQUALITY⁴

Centuries of trade along the littoral realms of the Indian Ocean had shaped the interactions between Africans along the Swahili coast and Indian merchants from the coastal areas of western India. From the late nineteenth century onwards these merchants began to push into the interior of East Africa, thereby transforming the geographical and material context of their interaction with Africans. Indian traders and labourers together with service-class immigrants from colonial India emerged as the economic middle tier that facilitated the entry of imperial trade, commerce and governance in East Africa. As these agents of empire traversed the Indian Ocean, they brought with them a range of political ideas and concerns which they modified according to the new and evolving structures of colonial rule.⁵

On account of Indian trade and enterprise, the colonial government encouraged Indian immigration, and envisioned the development of East Africa as ‘the America of the Hindu’.⁶ On the other hand, the Kenya highlands were seen as suitable for European settlement by the colonial state, which facilitated white

⁴The phrase ‘quest for equality’ is borrowed from the title of the one of the most authoritative narratives of the political history of Indians in East Africa during this period (Gregory 1993).

⁵For a detailed and concise overview of the role of Indians in the colonization of East Africa see Metcalf (2007), Chapter 6.

⁶Report by Sir H. Johnston, His Majesty’s Special Commissioner on the Protectorate of Uganda, July 1901, in Mungeam (1979).

immigration into the colony from South Africa and Europe. By 1905 these settlers began to ask for a share in government and demanded that Kenya be treated 'freely and frankly' as a white man's colony.⁷ In particular they wanted the exclusive reservation of the fertile highlands for themselves, and an end to Indian immigration into the colony. The Indians, on the other hand, fought for access to the highlands and elective legislative representation. The first two decades of the twentieth century thus saw the precarious balancing of Indian and European settlers' demands over land and governance.

In May 1920 the Secretary of State for Colonies, Lord Milner, rejected the Indian demand for elective representation. He came out quite decisively on the side of the settlers, announcing that the highlands would not be opened to the Indians, and concluding that the racial segregation of commercial and residential areas was advisable on the grounds of social convenience.⁸ As the Secretary of State for Colonies in London buckled under pressure from European settlers and rejected the Indians' demands, prominent merchants including A. M. Jeevanjee, a leading Muslim entrepreneur, began to protest. Born in Karachi in 1856, Jeevanjee arrived in East Africa in 1890. In 1891 he established a company in Mombasa that serviced British ships, and he soon became a key intermediary between the Imperial British East Africa Company and Indian labour. Having been appointed to the Kenya Legislative Council in 1909 in recognition of his economic contributions to the development of the protectorate, Jeevanjee became the main political voice against the encroachment by European settlers upon Indian economic activity in Kenya.

In 1914 Jeevanjee, along with other Indian merchants, formed a political organization – the East African Indian National Congress. The primary object of the association was to defend the interests of Indians in British East Africa against infringements by the Europeans. In particular, it demanded the right to franchise, removal of restrictions on land sales, and greater representation of Indians on legislative and municipal councils. Furthermore, it condemned the European settlers' demand for the restriction of Indian immigration that aimed at making Kenya a white man's country.⁹

Having worked closely with the Imperial British East Africa Company, and received land and political awards from the British Commissioner, Jeevanjee's political orientation was aligned with the imperial project. His political stand was based on a three-fold articulation of diasporic consciousness that made it possible for him to demand political and economic rights on the basis of three distinct affiliations. As sub-imperialists who had been equal partners alongside the British in the colonizing of Kenya, Jeevanjee stated,

it is we the Indians who have made and developed the deserts of East Africa. . . . It is the Indian traders who have been trading there for the last 300 years and it is they and they alone who have done the work of exploitation and

⁷Colonists Association to Secretary of State for Colonies, 13 November 1905, in Mungeam (1979).

⁸India Office Records, British Library (henceforth IOR), L/E/7/1328 E&O 336/1924, Milner to Governor of Kenya, 21 May 1920.

⁹TNA, CO/533/231, Despatches 1920, Vol. 3, East African Indian National Congress presidential address, 15 November 1919.

development of the country's resources. [Therefore] we advance our claim not as mere citizens of the empire but also as *first makers* of the land.¹⁰

As a loyal subject of the British Empire Jeevanjee reminded the colonial authorities in London that his politics was anti-settler, not anti-colonial. 'We are proud', he wrote, 'of being the citizens of an empire over which the sun never sets. We are conscious of the innumerable blessings that the British rule has conferred on India.' Finally, exploiting the position of India as the jewel of the crown, Jeevanjee went so 'far as to advocate the annexation of this African territory to the Indian Empire. It would be more beneficial to Great Britain', he argued, for Kenya to be placed 'directly under the control of the Indian government instead of the Colonial Office, with provincial government under the Indian Viceroy. If this is done East Africa will assuredly become a second India in no time.'¹¹ This decisively sub-imperialist orientation aligned itself with the imperial project in Kenya in the first two decades of the twentieth century, in spite of the growing nationalist movement in India where several economic and political grievances had resulted in the boycott of British goods and the demand for political reform in the *Swadeshi* ('own country') movement between c. 1903 and 1908 (cf. Sarkar 1994).

The First World War, however, precipitated several changes in the emerging anti-colonial critique amongst Indians across the Indian Ocean. The support of Indians during the war and Lloyd George's broken pledge with regard to respecting the immunity of holy places by 1920 had become the basis of a mass movement in the subcontinent under Gandhi's leadership: the Khilafat or non-cooperation movement (cf. Minault 1982). Having established himself as a formidable challenge to colonial rule within a similar diasporic setting in South Africa, Gandhi had returned to India a Mahatma in 1915, exemplifying the significance of the circulation of ideas and colonial subjectivity across the Indian Ocean. Indeed, within the Indian Ocean realm the territorial concerns of specific colonies and the extra-territorial aspirations of sojourners were mediated by diasporic colonial subjects who straddled the political public sphere in two colonies – India and Kenya. Gandhi's 'political genius in combining extra-territorial Islamic universalism with love for the territorial motherland' (Bose and Jalal 2001: 110–14) brought the plight of Indians in East Africa within the legitimate orbit of anti-colonial agitation in the subcontinent – a development that did not go unnoticed in Kenya.

The East African Indian National Congress emphatically stated that it would be a mistake for the imperial authorities to treat their grievances as a purely local concern. It warned that three hundred and twenty million Indians were anxiously watching the condition of their countrymen in British colonies and predicted 'that unrest and discontent both in India and Kenya was bound to spread' unless measures were devised to redress their grievances.¹² In March 1919,

¹⁰IOR, L/E/7/1623 I&O 814/1922, An appeal on behalf of Indian in East Africa by A. M. Jeevanjee, Foreword, British Indian Press, Mazgaon, Bombay, 1912. (Emphasis added.)

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Kenya National Archives (henceforth KNA), East African Indian National Congress (EAINC) Papers, Asian Records Microfilm 1, Mangal Dass, Vice-President Indian Association to Governor of British East Africa, 22 March 1919.

Mangal Dass, the vice-president of the Indian Association, warned the Kenyan Governor:

Why the Indians cannot freely come, acquire land, have representation on local governing bodies and live generally a peaceful and contented life without being subjected to daily insults in a country which they fought to acquire, in which they were largely instrumental in developing and for which they have shed their blood... will be the questions asked by the Indians in India, here and elsewhere.¹³

Indeed, under Gandhi's influence, the Indian National Congress within India included in its annual report in 1920 the demand for 'free and unrestricted emigration from India to East Africa and the full civic and political rights of the Indian settlers in East Africa' (Gregory 1971: 173).

Mounting pressure by Indians in East Africa through a press campaign in Kenyan and Indian newspapers in 1920, and a visit from Gandhi's close associate C. F. Andrews in 1921 brought the attention of the government of India to the Milner decision that had rejected the Indians' demand for elective representation and supported the Europeans' desire to impose racial segregation in Kenya. The Indian Overseas Association that had lobbied successfully to bring an end to the Indian indentured labour system which many believed was a 'new system of slavery' (Tinker 1974) put pressure on the Colonial Office in London: 'Indians at home under the stimulus and surge of nationalism... are more acutely conscious of these disabilities than they have ever previously been. ... [T]he general belief prevails in India that the disabilities suffered by Indians overseas are due to racial superiority, colour prejudice and political domination.'¹⁴ The Association warned that unless the Colonial Office recognized 'the meaning of the new spirit in India and the aspirations now animating the Indian people', the imperial government would be 'hopelessly compromised and discredited'.¹⁵

The 'surge of nationalism' in the subcontinent was reaffirmed by the Secretary of State for India, Lord Montagu. He announced that the government of India had a responsibility towards Indians suffering from any sort of racial discrimination in a crown colony. Indeed it was during this time that the government of India had championed the cause of Indian indentured labour in South Africa, Fiji and elsewhere in the British Empire on humanitarian, 'liberal' grounds (Tinker 1976). Montagu feared that the growing national consciousness in India, which took a keen interest in the welfare of Indians overseas, 'would gain point from the apprehension that this welfare was jeopardized in the latest of all the Crown Colonies' especially since a number of 'free' Indians lived in Kenya and maintained close relations with their homeland due to its geographical proximity across the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ Underscoring the united political realm that had emerged across the Indian Ocean between Kenya and India, the

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴IOR, L/PO/1/1(A), Private Office Files 1914–1945, East Africa, Kenya, Indian Overseas Association to India Office, 1 April 1921.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶TNA, CO/533/242, Despatches India Office 1920, Vol. 14, India Office to Colonial Office, 17 August 1920.

government of India came out emphatically on the side of the Indians in East Africa and opposed the Milner decisions on the three key issues of the Indian question – political representation, racial segregation and ownership of land.¹⁷ Lord Milner's acquiescence to racial segregation was seen by the government of India as a reversal of British imperial principles. Invoking the greater cause of the British Empire, the Indian Viceroy warned: 'Legislation on racial lines . . . will stimulate hostility and ill-feeling. It will, we fear, gratuitously provoke a conflict which may have grave political consequences in this country [India] and throughout the empire.'¹⁸

The involvement of the colonial government of India on the side of the Indians in Kenya evoked the most emphatic criticism of Indian nationalism amongst the white settlers. Elspeth Huxley, a vociferous writer who belonged to the European farmer community, claimed that 'it was not until nationalists from India took a hand in the matter than any real political feeling was created' amongst the Indians in Kenya (Huxley 1968: 110–47). Kenneth Archer – another prominent settler and member of the Convention of Associations, the main political organization of the Europeans – objected to the 'inappropriate interference of India' in local matters. He too claimed that Indian agitation arose not from the local Indians themselves but from political circles in India. Pointing to the anti-colonial nationalism of Indians in the subcontinent he argued:

Britain cannot surely tolerate the introduction of a state of affairs into Africa which risks Indian predominance there if there is even the slightest chance of India choosing to follow the wrong path some day and to break away from the empire. . . . And surely Britain cannot consider sharing her responsibility of government over the native races of Africa with Indians who may some day not be British subjects at all.¹⁹

Winston Churchill, who replaced Lord Milner as the Secretary of State for Colonies, also stated that he would not break up East Africa for the sake of Gandhi.²⁰ While it appeared, rather ironically, that the colonial administration in India was supporting Gandhian nationalists by taking up the cause of its Indian subjects in Kenya, in fact this was not the case. Officials within the India Office in London argued that the Indian nationalists' aim was to draw the Indians in East Africa into the non-cooperation movement as a bargaining tool with the colonial government in India to highlight the extra-territorial resonance of the nationalist movement, something the Indians in East Africa had in fact fought hard to prevent. Rather than fomenting anti-colonial agitation, the India Office argued that it was simply upholding the cause of those diasporic sub-imperialists in Kenya who desired that India remain in the British Commonwealth.²¹

¹⁷National Archives of India (henceforth NAI), Department of Commerce and Emigration, February 1921, Nos 4–36, Government of India to Montagu, Secretary of State for India, 21 October 1920.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹C. K. Archer Papers, Rhodes House, Mss Afr s584 Convention of Associations Papers. Memo on the claim to equality of status in Kenya, n.d. (probably 1923).

²⁰TNA, CO/533/270, Despatches 1921, Vol. 16, G. L. Corbett to Churchill, 4 August 1921.

²¹*Ibid.*

Though the Indians in Kenya certainly exploited the nationalist uprising taking place in India, they maintained a distance from it and never indicated their support for the specific political, territorial aims of the non-cooperation movement. Rather, it was the India Office – fearing a backlash from the Khilafat movement – that put pressure on the Colonial Office to appease the moderate demands of the Indians in Kenya and avoid adding fuel to Gandhi's movement. While the government of India was worried about rising anti-colonial national consciousness, Indians in East Africa stopped short of taking up the Khilafat cause. They were careful to emphasize the specific nature of Indian concern with *local* issues of racial and political parity with the Europeans in Kenya. Using the universalizing language of equality merely enabled them to allude to the non-cooperation movement in India without actually supporting its anti-colonial tenor.

As the nationalist movement gathered momentum in India, however, the political imaginary of Indians in Kenya underwent a subtle but irrevocable change. Once their cause was taken up by the Khilafat agitators in India, the political activities of local Indians gained legitimacy, and they used their Indian connection to leverage their position within Kenya. While the Indian merchants in the period from 1910 onwards viewed themselves as sub-imperialists, and therefore had deliberately avoided political collaboration with the nationalist leaders of the subcontinent to strengthen their anti-settler agitation, by 1919 they began to realize the potency of the anti-colonial movement taking place across the Indian Ocean. The Jallianwallah Bagh tragedy, when General Dwyer opened fire on an unarmed, peaceful gathering of men, women and children in Amritsar in April 1919, for example, was universally denounced not only in India but also in Kenya where the large Punjabi Sikh community issued leaflets describing the massacre and reporting, incorrectly, that damage had been done to their holy temple in Amritsar – the Golden Temple.²²

By 1920 it was evident that the events taking place in India had a significant impact on the political imagination of Indians in Kenya when the Indian Association in Mombasa observed a 'National *Mukti* [salvation] day' on the first anniversary of the 'bloody murders of unarmed innocents' in Punjab by holding meetings throughout Kenya in 'honour of the dead'. The aim of the Association was to 'prove to those who are mourning the loss of valuable lives . . . that they have our deepest sympathy . . . and to prove also that we are worthy of the name of Indians in the truest sense'.²³ As the dark side of colonial rule began to reveal itself in India, within Kenya the racial underpinnings of the colonial administration became apparent as the Governor remained consistently on the side of the settlers. This resulted in an emerging critique of colonial rule amongst Indians. As argued by a member of the East African Indian National Congress, M. A. Desai:

if those governing the empire are following a policy of refusing to recognize the rights of certain of their peoples because of the colour of their skin, we are

²²KNA, EAINC Papers, Asian Records Microfilm reel 1, Indian Association to District Commissioner, Nairobi, 31 July 1919.

²³KNA, EAINC Papers, Asian Records Microfilm reel 1, Indian Association Mombasa, 24 January 1920.

afraid the British empire will prove to be a failure. . . . [E]ither the British empire must admit the equality of its different peoples . . . irrespective of the colours of their skins and the place of their birth, or it must abandon its attempt to rule a mixture of peoples. There can be no half way.²⁴

The critique of empire that had emerged in India travelled across the Indian Ocean to Kenya as the Indians' quest for equality with the Europeans was abandoned and nascent anti-colonial articulations such as Desai's began to be heard. Significantly, the diasporic critique of colonial rule expressed itself in racial terms, emphatically rejecting the racial hierarchy of Kenya and demanding, instead, the 'equality' of colonial all subjects irrespective of the 'colour of their skin'. This shift in the political imaginary of Indians opened up the way for their engagement with the anti-settler struggles of the other racially defined colonial subjects in Kenya – the Africans.

The universalizing aspirations of the demand for racial equality that created the opportunity for an interracial alliance of Indians and Africans coincided with a campaign by Europeans to discredit Indians by claiming that their presence in Kenya was unfavourable to Africans. In order to counter Indian sub-imperialist claims to parity, Europeans brought arguments regarding the political and economic interest of Africans into the debate. In September 1921, two prominent leaders of the Convention of Associations, Kenneth Archer and Lord Delamere, published a pamphlet entitled 'Memorandum on the case against the claims of Indians in Kenya'.²⁵ The basis of the settlers' criticism of the Indian demands was fourfold. First, they claimed that the agitation in Kenya identified completely with 'Gandhism'. Archer and Delamere stated that Indians wore 'Gandhi caps' – white homespun *khadi* (cotton) caps that had become one of the most visible symbols of anti-colonial agitation in India – at the mass meeting in Nairobi where Mangal Dass, a member of the East African Indian National Congress, had announced, 'When we get self-government in India, we too can bring our cannons and rifles and fight for our rights in this colony' (see p. 132). Such proclamations, the Europeans feared, would stir up 'disaffection' amongst the Africans. They warned: 'Acting under cabled instructions from one of the Indian leaders, the majority of Indian traders and shop keepers are engaged in poisoning the minds of the native against the British Administration.'²⁶

Second, and related to this, the pamphlet stated that unrestricted Indian immigration would be economically disadvantageous to Africans because the bulk of Indians in Kenya were artisans, clerks and small traders who created unfair competition for Africans who could perform these jobs. An Economic Commission Report published in 1919 supported this claim.²⁷ Third, Delamere and Archer objected to the circulation of Indian trade and money across the

²⁴M. A. Desai, letter to *East African Chronicle*, 27 August 1921, in East African Standard Ltd. (1922).

²⁵SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 241, East Africa, Kenya Indians, File A Memoranda and Press Clippings, 1920–3, Memorandum on the case against the claims of Indians in Kenya, Nairobi, September 1921, Swift Press.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷IOR, Economic Commission Report, 1919, quoted in C. F. Andrews, 'The Indian Question in East Africa', Swift Press, Nairobi, 1921.

Indian Ocean, pointing out that instead of investing their profits locally, Indian traders sent their money to India. Finally, and most significantly, they argued that the Indians were a danger to the Empire and to Christianity. 'If the East is permitted to penetrate Africa and the trusteeship of the vast native population be transferred to other and alien hands, then gone is the dream of a series of Christian African States, created and linked together by the genius of British colonization. . . . Is England to be marked with the stain of betraying the African native to Eastern rule?'²⁸ Indeed the resolution of the Indian question was urged by the settlers as one of utmost importance to the future of the British Empire in East Africa.

HARRY THUKU AND THE INDIANS

While by 1921 the Indians had abandoned their sub-imperialist claims to parity with Europeans and begun to talk of equality irrespective of race – thus finding a way to ally with Africans – and the Europeans had justified their anti-Indian position on the grounds that they were protecting African interests, Africans themselves were not simply silent spectators. In 1921–2 a short-lived agitation took place amongst Africans in protest against forced labour ordinances and high rates of taxation. Led by a young Kikuyu who had been educated at a mission school, Harry Thuku, this movement was the first mass-based political agitation of Africans, anticipating all the contradictions and tensions of later anti-colonial protest in Kenya.²⁹ Inspired by Gandhi and the non-cooperation movement in India, Thuku sought an alliance with the Indians who had thus far been centre-stage in the public anti-settler agitations in the political sphere. He was criticized for this by Africans who were sceptical of Indian political and economic aspirations, while the European settlers and the colonial Governor delegitimized the specific African grievances articulated by Thuku by dismissing him as simply a mouthpiece of the Indians.

The settler-oriented administration pushed Africans into racially demarcated reserves from where they were expected to sell their agricultural produce and enter the colonial economy. Overcrowding and high rates of taxation forced Africans to leave their land and work on European farms for very low wages (cf. Berman 1990). Several legislative changes during the First World War regarding labour laws and taxation precipitated Thuku's protest. The *kipande* law, introduced in 1919, required all African men over the age of sixteen to be registered at their local district office. There they were issued with an identification certificate showing personal details such as their thumb impression, name, district, tribe and employment history – complete with signatures of their employers attesting to their release from employment. Every African male was expected to carry this certificate (*kipande*) and produce it at the demand of a police officer. Copies of the certificate were sent to a Central Registration Office in Nairobi, kept as a permanent record, and used as 'evidence' of their labour contracts, so keeping

²⁸SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 241, East Africa, Kenya Indians, File A Memoranda and Press Clippings, 1920–3, Memorandum on the case against the claims of Indians in Kenya, Nairobi, September 1921, Swift Press.

²⁹The Kikuyu were the ethnic group most displaced by the onslaught of colonial rule in Kenya.

track of the employee's movements. Any African man without a *kipande* could be prosecuted and no one could employ him if he didn't produce this certificate (cf. Singh 1969). Effectively this meant that the colonial state could ensure a constant supply of labour to European employers irrespective of wages, since no African could escape from his labour contract without the consent of his employer. Consequently the *kipande* became the most detested symbol of colonial power for Africans. At the same time the European settlers began to push for legislation that would lower African wages by one third by 1921, while the poll and hut tax levied on Africans was increased from about six to sixteen shillings after the First World War. With the changes in labour ordinances, and the threat of lower wages and increased taxation, Africans began to protest against what they believed to be unfair legislation.³⁰

Having completed his education at a mission school in Kambui, in 1911 Thuku arrived in Nairobi where he held several jobs including one at the press office of a newspaper run by European settlers called *The Leader*. By 1918 he had managed to secure a coveted position as a telephone operator in the government treasury. Exposure to the workings of the colonial administration through the newspaper and government office, residence in the new colonial capital of Nairobi, and the everyday lived experience of politics, colonial economic policies and race all framed Thuku's political orientation. In 1921 he founded an organization called the Young Kikuyu Association, later renamed the East African Association in order to develop a 'great voice' that represented not only the Kikuyu but also other African communities including the Masai and Kamba (Thuku 1970: 22). Thuku's demands were fairly moderate – rather than being anti-colonial or seditious they protested against proposed legislation that would be unfavourable to African interests, and criticized those Africans who acted as intermediaries between the colonial state and Africans in the reserves for refusing to join the protest.³¹ Indeed it was these intermediaries who were the immediate face of colonial authority, as they were responsible for enforcing the new labour legislation. One of Thuku's main complaints was against the Tribal Retainer Waiganju wa Ndotno for forcing girls and young women to work on European plantations. He also demanded the issue of title deeds to *githaka* (land) holders as a way of ensuring land rights, and objected to the *kipande* laws, increased hut tax and the proposal to lower wages.³²

Interestingly, refuting the Europeans' claims that Indians were an obstacle to the economic progress of Africans, Thuku argued that in fact since Africans were in close contact with Indians in their everyday lives, they had the opportunity to learn from them masonry, carpentry and other kinds of skilled work. He pointed to the experience of Africans who had come into contact with Indians in offices and workshops, and concluded that the Indians guided them and showed them

³⁰SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 236, East Africa, Kenya, File D, Native Unrest, Harry Thuku, Memorandum of grievances, 24 June 1921.

³¹Rosberg and Nottingham place the rise of Thuku and rural disturbances in the context of the post-First World War economic policies that created frustration in the African reserves. They are careful to point out that Thuku's demands were not for self-governance. See Rosberg and Nottingham (1967), Chapter 2.

³²SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 236, East Africa, Kenya, File D, Native Unrest, Harry Thuku, Memorandum of grievances, 24 June 1921.

much sympathy.³³ Indeed a common target of resentment – the white settlers – and the involvement of the Indian, Kenyan and British governments in the Indian question gave Thuku the opportunity to collaborate with the Indians in the public political realm.

Though Thuku appeared to side with the Indians against the Europeans, in July 1921 evidence appeared in support of the Europeans' claims from a section of the African community itself. A Luganda monthly newspaper with a Kiswahili edition, *Sekanyolya*, edited by Zefiniya Sentongo, an expatriate Buganda clerk who lived in Nairobi, published an English supplement entitled 'Indian versus Native Claims', which was considered an authentic indictment of Indians by Africans themselves. The supplement stated:

We, the educated natives of this country view with alarm the fact that an Indian deputation is going to England to lay their claims before the responsible authorities. . . . Indians have done nothing in the way of Native education . . . our education and training has been carried out on western lines, as being the best for our advancement. . . . Can this be possible under two opposing civilizations one eastern and the other western?³⁴

Though claiming to represent 'natives of this country' – Kenyan Africans – in fact the views represented in the supplement were those of Buganda expatriates who were hostile to the Indian business community.³⁵ Sentongo himself feared that in the absence of the necessary skills needed Africans could not compete with Indians in trade and industry, and by deliberately publishing the supplement in English ensured that it would attract the attention of the colonial government and the European settlers.

Significantly, the Young Buganda Association in Buganda distanced itself from the anti-Indian claims of the *Sekanyolya* supplement (Scotton 1973: 218). Moreover, within days a counter-claim was put forward by Harry Thuku's East African Association announcing: 'This mass meeting of Natives of Kenya puts on record that in its opinion the presence of Indians in the colony and protectorate of Kenya is not prejudicial to the advancement of natives . . . and is of the further opinion that next to missionaries the Indians are our best friends.'³⁶ At the same meeting, arguments were made against the Registration of Natives Ordinance that had created the *kipande* system, increased poll and hut tax, and decreased wages. Furthermore, the East African Association asked the Indian delegation going to England to represent the Africans' case against the Europeans to the Colonial Office.³⁷

³³SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 236, East Africa, Kenya, File D, Native Unrest, Harry Thuku, Harry Thuku to Acting Colonial Secretary, Colony and Protectorate of Kenya, 19 July 1921.

³⁴SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 241, East Africa, Kenya Indians, File C, Indians in East Africa, Correspondence and memoranda 1921–3, 'Indian vs Native Claims', Supplement to *Sekanyolya*, 1 July 1921, Nairobi.

³⁵For a detailed discussion on the *Sekanyolya* supplement and Sentongo's politics, see Scotton (1973) and Twaddle (1997).

³⁶TNA, CO/533/262, Despatches 1921, Vol. 8, Resolutions unanimously adopted at the mass meeting of natives under the chairmanship of Harry Thuku on the Kyambu Road Sports ground, Nairobi, 10 July 1921.

³⁷See 'Document V, Resolutions of the East African Association' in Thuku (1970: 82).

Thuku's pro-Indian stand came from the realization that both Africans and Indians 'were fighting for equal rights in Kenya with Europeans'. He took particular offence at the European settlers' claims that Africans did not want Indians to be in Kenya. According to Thuku, Africans had no grievances against the Indians. 'After all,' he reasoned, 'Indians had not taken any of our land by force; they had no power and were only traders' (Thuku 1970: 24). Having met M. A. Desai and several other Indians in Nairobi, he built up a strong alliance with them, impressed by the Indian associations that had been formed to 'combat inhuman behaviour'. Their mutual preoccupation with political agitation became the foundation for an intimate friendship between Thuku and Desai (Thuku 1979: 18). Desai became an adviser to Thuku and assisted him in drafting a memorandum of grievances that was sent to His Majesty's Government by the East African Association. He introduced Thuku to C. F. Andrews in 1921, a meeting Thuku greatly appreciated for he believed that Andrews was 'an influential man in India and England, and a close friend of Gandhi' (Thuku 1970: 29). Thuku asked Andrews to carry a message to England: 'Ask the King of England to stop the European settlers using the *kiboko* (rhino whip) on their Africans.'

The English-language print media in Nairobi became a public and prominent space in which the debate over African interests unfolded. While the Europeans had been publishing pamphlets such as the 'Memorandum on the case against the claims of Indians in Kenya' and C. F. Andrews attempted to bring forward the Indian case through a pamphlet that circulated in Kenya, India and Britain on 'The Indian question in East Africa', pro-Thuku editorials and letters to the editor from Indians and Africans alike began to appear in the Indian-owned English daily newspaper edited by Desai, the *East African Chronicle*. Through his paper Desai launched a vigorous criticism of the pro-settler policies of the colonial government and supported the African aspirations Thuku represented. Moreover, Thuku used the office of the *East African Chronicle* as the headquarters of his association and Desai's press printed his pamphlets (Gregory 1993: 40). The *Sekanyolya* meanwhile continued to be an outlet for anti-Thuku African opinions. The emergence of a public political realm through mass meetings and newspapers highlighted the interracial dimension of the debates taking place in Kenya between 1919 and 1923. The use of English-language papers, rather than vernacular mediums that circulated in the colony, indicated a desire to build and break alliances across the racial divide. In an attempt to counter the public campaign that the Europeans had launched against the Indians, the East African Association published a letter in the *East African Chronicle* signed by over thirty Africans that emphatically rejected the claims made in the *Sekanyolya* supplement discussed above.³⁸ In it, they accused European settlers of wanting to exploit the country for their own gains which 'left Africans starving', and reduced to a condition 'worse than that of dogs'.³⁹ Indeed the rise of anti-settler opinion amongst Africans resulted from the usurpation of the Kenya highlands by Europeans and their extraction of African labour, matters with which the

³⁸SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 236, East Africa, Kenya, File D Native Unrest, Harry Thuku, An unsolicited letter, *East African Chronicle*, 16 July 1921.

³⁹*Ibid.*

Indians had nothing to do. European hypocrisy in framing their arguments against Indian political claims in terms of African economic interests was exposed by Thuku and his followers, who argued that in fact Indian shopkeepers operating near the African reserves stimulated the African economy.

Having proclaimed his public support for the Indians, Thuku precipitated a debate amongst Africans that exemplified three overlapping political and economic concerns that determined the contours of the relationship between Indians and Africans. A clear divergence in African opinion regarding Indians emerged in the public political sphere. First, a split occurred along generational lines, with protests emanating from current and past 'chiefs' who were appointed by the colonial government and thus implicated in the imperial project. Consequently, they opposed any anti-settler or anti-government political articulations, coming either from Africans or Indians. The main targets of Thuku's protest were African middle-men who were loyal to the government since they owed their status and prestige to the Governor. It was therefore no surprise that older chiefs were his main opponents.⁴⁰ Thuku urged his supporters not to listen to the headmen, since they were 'paid servants' who did not dare to quarrel with the government. In retaliation, his detractors announced that they did not want Harry Thuku to be their leader because he was involved with the Indians in their anti-European propaganda.⁴¹ Chiefs Mbiu and Kinanjui criticized Thuku for lying and inciting Africans to fight with Europeans.⁴² Significantly, Mbiu noted that while the young and 'headstrong' men supported Thuku, the older chiefs and headmen distanced themselves entirely from his movement.⁴³ This split amongst the Kikuyu and competing political imaginaries between older and younger generations of Kikuyus shaped the political landscape of agitation in Kenya until the 1950s.⁴⁴

A second dimension that entered the debate about Indians in Kenya centred on the apprehension that the agitation being carried out in Nairobi by the Indians might result in the political domination of Indians over Africans. The belief that Thuku had petitioned His Majesty's Government to allow Indians to rule Kenya evoked the most articulate protest and discussion amongst Africans (Thuku 1970). Indeed historian Michael Twaddle concludes in his essay on Sentongo that it was this fear that had been the catalyst for the English supplement published in *Sekanyolya* (Twaddle 1997: 324). At a meeting of the Kikuyu Association in Thika several chiefs distanced themselves from the East African Association in Nairobi on the grounds that it did not represent the

⁴⁰TNA, CO/533/280, Despatches 1922, Vol. 6, Warohuja wa Kungu, sub-headman Ruiru District, statement regarding 26 January 1922 meeting recorded by magistrate Juxon Barton, 15 February 1922.

⁴¹TNA, CO/533/280, Despatches 1922, Vol. 6, Waweru wa Mahoi, headman's statement, Kyambu District, recorded by magistrate Juxon Barton, 15 February 1922.

⁴²TNA, CO/533/280, Despatches 1922, Vol. 6, Koinangi wa Mbiu, headman Kyambu, statement regarding 13 February 1922 meeting recorded by magistrate Juxon Barton, 17 February 1922.

⁴³TNA, CO/533/280, Despatches 1922, Vol. 6, Warohuja wa Kungu, sub-headman Ruiru District, statement regarding 13 January 1922 recorded by magistrate Juxon Barton, 15 February 1922.

⁴⁴For a detailed study of the causes, significance and consequences of the generational conflict see Berman and Lonsdale (1992).

Kikuyu.⁴⁵ Many Africans refused to support the Indian claims, arguing that the country belonged to the Kikuyu. Therefore it was the Africans' and not the Indians' birthright to demand equal rights in the colony.⁴⁶ Indeed these chiefs believed that the Indians had no legitimate right to political representation at all.

The anti-Indian discourse that emerged amongst Thuku's detractors articulated a third concern of some Africans, who developed a critique of the economic monopoly of Indians over internal trade in the African reserves. Significantly, this was juxtaposed to the alleged civilizing benefits of the Europeans. Inevitably the argument against Indian presence was based on an emphatic approval of European influence and civilization, and a refusal to criticize white settlers. For example, Gideon Gatere, an apprentice carpenter who was in government employ, accused Indians of being people of 'lies' and listed several grievances against Indian shopkeepers who 'stole' from Africans when they sold goods to them, and deceived African employees in their mills. Europeans on the other hand were seen as having ended warfare, built bridges, roads and hospitals, taught Africans to wash themselves, wear clothes and cover themselves, and shown them the way of God.⁴⁷

Rhetoric aside, the existing monopoly of petty Indian shopkeepers in the African reserves enabled them to control buying and selling prices, thus making them a dual target of African resentment. On the one hand African farmers were forced to sell their produce to the Indians at low prices since the latter had a monopoly over trade and fixed low buying prices. On the other hand they bought from the Indian shops everyday goods like cooking oil that were set at high prices, again due to the entrenched position of the Indian trader. This double whammy caused Africans to be suspicious of Indian shopkeepers with whom they interacted on a daily basis. Indeed the allegedly questionable ethics of *dukawallahs* and their profit-oriented business made them inherently dislikable to several Africans who were already feeling the pressure of the post-war economic structure and thus accused the Indians of keeping them in poverty.⁴⁸

A series of meetings held on 26 and 27 February 1922 around Fort Hall District caused the chiefs and colonial authorities to demand Thuku's deportation. At these meetings Thuku accused Europeans of wanting to steal Africans' land and claimed that he was 'the snake who would bite them' in order that they leave Kikuyu country. He implored Africans to ask what had become of the taxes they paid and urged them to throw away their *kipandes*, pay a lower hut tax and to refuse to do any unpaid labour.⁴⁹ He accused missionaries of coming to the country ostensibly to teach the word of God when they merely taught the word of

⁴⁵TNA, CO/533/562, Despatches 1921, Vol. 8, Minutes of meeting convened by the Akikuyu Association at Thika, 25 July 1921.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*

⁴⁷SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 236, East Africa, Kenya, File D, Native Unrest, Letter from Gideon Gatere, Tumutumu, 17 March 1923.

⁴⁸TNA, CO/533/562, Despatches 1921, Vol. 8, Resolution No. 1 passed unanimously by natives at mass meeting held in Nakuru on 24 July 1921.

⁴⁹TNA, CO/533/562, Despatches 1921, Vol. 8, Mahoho wa Kuthechy, headman Kibichichi, statement to magistrate Juxon Barton recorded 16 February 1922 and Richard E. Dent, sworn statement, 7 March 1922.

Satan.⁵⁰ Meanwhile his Kikuyu opponents demanded that the government punish him for abusing European district commissioners and missionaries.⁵¹ Alarm bells were sounded by district commissioners who reported that Thuku's following had begun to display an element of religious fanaticism. They pointed in particular to one prayer whose tenor was said to have stimulated enmity between black and white by convincing Africans that they were in a state of slavery imposed on them by Europeans.⁵² These speeches became the basis for the Chief Native Commissioner to recommend his deportation.⁵³

Harry Thuku was arrested and brought to Nairobi on 14 March 1922 under the dubious Removal of Natives Ordinance on the grounds that he was dangerous to peace and good order. Over the next two days a large group of over 8,000 protesters gathered near the police lines demanding Thuku's release. Kikuyu men formed the majority of the crowd although several Indians and African women were also present.⁵⁴ The crowd, that had been quiet and relatively peaceful, was said to have become hostile when six of their leaders returned from a meeting with the Governor's deputy. Inflammatory and seditious speeches were made and the gathered women accused the dispersing groups of being 'cowards', causing the crowd to surge to the police fence.⁵⁵ The police retaliated by opening fire, killing sixteen men and two women, and injuring twenty-two men and nine women.⁵⁶

Refusing to believe that Thuku's following had ever been large or influential enough to have facilitated a large-scale agitation, colonial authorities scrambled to find an explanation for the outbreak. The Governor announced that the 'native riot' had not resulted from any real grievances. Rather, he claimed that the large majority of the crowd had attended the meeting out of curiosity or compulsion.⁵⁷ Furthermore, both the Governor and the Christian missionaries who had been in close everyday contact with Africans in the reserves concluded that Harry Thuku was the mouthpiece of Indians who had played a 'very hazardous game' by disseminating ideas from Nairobi which the bulk of Africans were 'all too ready to swallow, without the power of digesting them'.⁵⁸ Thuku himself refuted this allegation arguing, 'I am quite sure that natives do not need to be told by the Indians that they are not masters in their houses, as they have learnt this from

⁵⁰TNA, CO/533/280, Despatches 1922, Vol. 6, Jacob wa Makeri, Kikuyu headman, and Joshua Karuri, statements on 27 February meeting at Weithaga, recorded by magistrate Fred Gamble, 6 March 1922.

⁵¹TNA, CO/533/276, Despatches 1922, Vol. 2, Joshua Karuri and Reverend Paulo wa Mbatia to Fred Gamble, n.d. (probably February 1922).

⁵²TNA, CO/533/276, Despatches 1922, Vol. 2, G. V. Maxwell, Chief Native Commissioner to Governor Kenya, 9 March 1922.

⁵³TNA, CO/533/276, Despatches 1922, Vol. 2, G. V. Maxwell to Governor Kenya, 13 March 1922.

⁵⁴His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 'Papers relating to Native disturbances in Kenya', Parliamentary Paper, May 1922, J. C. Bentley, Acting Commissioner Kenya Police to Colonial Secretary, 16 March 1922.

⁵⁵For details on the participation of women in the 'native riot' see Wipper (1989).

⁵⁶His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 'Papers relating to Native disturbances in Kenya', Parliamentary Paper, May 1922, J. C. Bentley, Acting Commissioner Kenya Police to Colonial Secretary, 16 March 1922.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸TNA, CO/533/280, Despatches 1922, Vol. 6, Reverend Father Cayzac, Mangu Mission to Juxon Barton, 10 March 1922.

Europeans.⁵⁹ The missionaries, the Governor and Thuku's African opponents, however, placed blame on the Indian alliance that Thuku had made, and some suggested that he received up to £30 a month from Indian sources.⁶⁰ More significantly, just as the members of the Indian Congress were accused of bringing the anti-colonial agitation of the Indian subcontinent to the shores of East Africa, as described in the previous section, so Thuku was accused of distributing leaflets on civil disobedience that came from India. Though he had no definite proof of 'Indian direction', Christian missionary H. D. Hooper pointed to 'evidence' of this such as Thuku touring the country in an Indian car, having an office in the Indian Association building in Nairobi, and the *East African Chronicle* press's printing of Thuku's pamphlets.⁶¹ Indeed at various meetings in the African reserves, Thuku had been accompanied by representatives of different tribes including a Kikuyu, a Kavirondo and an Akamba – but most importantly by 'men wearing turbans', presumably Indians. Moreover, just as the Indians had exploited the non-cooperation movement taking place in India to legitimize their demands, so Thuku articulated a similar political expression that exemplified the universalizing aspirations of resistance that transcended territorial and racial boundaries. On 13 February 1922, in the speech quoted at the beginning of this article, he had told his African followers that 'I shall be as he is.'⁶²

Though Thuku did not elucidate specifically on the issue of the Khilafat/non-cooperation movement, focusing instead on a basic but universal message regarding resistance, Hooper announced that the Khilafat party was making a bid for a big anti-white combination throughout Africa and indicated that the representative of the Khilafat movement in Nairobi was the main supporter of Harry Thuku.⁶³ The unnamed supporter was of course M. A. Desai. In Hooper's presentation, Thuku's association with Desai and his *East African Chronicle* clearly implicated Indians in inciting this 'incident'. Photographic evidence was put forward to show that Indians were 'continually in conversation with the mob' and walking up and down in 'considerable numbers' outside the police lines.⁶⁴ Two Indians even sustained wounds when the police opened fire and four Indians with three rifles had been seen proceeding towards Thika along the Fort Hall Road the night before the largest crowd had gathered in Nairobi.⁶⁵ Several members of the community including Desai were kept under observation by colonial administrators, who reported that he held several meetings with Africans from all over the country. Meanwhile the Chief Native Commissioner ordered a search of the premises of the *East African Chronicle* for seditious material. In an

⁵⁹Thuku to Desai, 2 May 1922, reproduced in Thuku (1970).

⁶⁰SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 236, East Africa, Kenya, File D, Native Unrest, H. D. Hooper, note entitled 'Development of Political Self-Consciousness in the Kikuyu Native', n. d.

⁶¹*Ibid.*

⁶²TNA, CO/533/280, Despatches 1922, Vol. 6, Koinange wa Mbiu, headman Kyambu, statement regarding 13 February 1922 meeting recorded by magistrate Juxon Barton, 17 February 1922.

⁶³SOAS, IMCA Papers, Box 326, East Africa, Kenya, File D, Native Unrest, H. D. Hooper, note entitled 'Development of political self-consciousness in the Kikuyu Native', n. d.

⁶⁴His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 'Papers relating to Native disturbances in Kenya', Parliamentary Paper, May 1922, Governor Northey to Churchill, 16 July 1922.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, Diary of events during civil disturbance 14–15 March 1922, J. Latham, Major, 3rd King's African Rifles, report.

attempt to clamp down on the public political realm created through newspapers and printing presses that published Thuku's pamphlets, the Commission hoped that such evidence would be enough to arrest Desai.⁶⁶ No concrete proof was ever found. Subsequently, however, due to a libel suit the *East African Chronicle* was forced to close down (Gregory 1993: 169).

Given his close connections with the Indians, it was no coincidence that Thuku modelled his movement on Gandhi's non-cooperation movement in India. Moreover, Thuku's relationship with M. A. Desai was no secret. Even after his arrest Thuku continued to rely on Desai for information and assistance.⁶⁷ Politically, Desai and the East African Indian National Congress supported Thuku because the Indians had begun to formulate their demands for parity by criticizing the Europeans' treatment of Africans. Indeed from as early as 1919 the Congress had begun to denounce the *kipande* law, voraciously advocated by settlers, arguing that it favoured 'semi-slavery principles' by forcing Africans into discriminatory labour contracts that they could not break.⁶⁸ Without any doubt, an alliance had been formed between Desai and Thuku in 1921. But this did not mean that Thuku was simply a mouthpiece of the Indians.

Historians who have studied the relationship between Harry Thuku and Kenya's Indians have tended to emphasize the opposition to such an alliance that came from missionaries and some groups of Africans (Gregory 1971: 204–6; Kyle 1966: 16–22; Twaddle 1997: 309–36). Keith Kyle argues that Africans were merely being used as pawns by Indians and Europeans, neither of whom were sincerely concerned over African land rights, while Michael Twaddle emphasizes the anti-Indian feelings that were articulated by Africans and missionaries during this time. Based on an analysis of the Buganda expatriate clerk Sentongo's *Sekanyolya* supplement, discussed earlier in this section, Twaddle concludes that Africans 'generally' considered *Indians* their real enemies, not Europeans (Twaddle 1997: 319). By focusing on this supplement rather than exploring the varied responses to the Indian question amongst Africans, he flattens out the complex political and economic concerns of different communities that constituted the Kenyan African population. Moreover, without any concrete evidence, both Twaddle and Kyle conclude that Thuku's willingness to collaborate with the Indian campaign was 'crucially qualified' and limited (Kyle 1966: 45; Twaddle 1997: 332).

The analysis of the deeply contested public political realm presented above has shown that in fact it was quite the opposite, as Thuku himself argued in his autobiography. At a political level, the Indian agitation in India as well as Kenya provided a model on which Africans organized their first mass-based protest that cut across tribal and racial lines. While Thuku referred explicitly to Gandhi and the Indian anti-colonial movement, he silenced his opponents not with the threat of an African–Indian anti-colonial collaboration, but rather by drawing attention

⁶⁶TNA, CO 533/276, Despatches 1922, Vol. 2, G. V. Maxwell to Governor Northey, 11 March 1922.

⁶⁷See Thuku–Desai correspondence, March–April 1922 in Thuku (1970), Documents X–a, b, c.

⁶⁸TNA, CO/533/231, Despatches 1920, Vol. 3, East African Indian National Congress presidential address, 15 November 1919.

to the actual conditions that had led to African distress – high taxes, the usurpation of land by Europeans and unfair labour ordinances. The universalizing political impulse against the gross inequalities of the settler-oriented colonial economy created the political space for interracial collaboration between Indians and Africans. The latter's grievances were different – though not contradictory – to the Indian concerns regarding franchise, segregation and the highlands. Moreover, the main opposition to Thuku and his alliance with the Indians came from a very specific group of Africans – an older generation of African 'chiefs' who owed their legitimacy and loyalty to the colonial government. At the economic level, the Indian shopkeeper was the most immediate and visible obstacle to Africans' economic aspirations. As a result there was very real – and ultimately unresolved – tension in the everyday relationship between Indians shopkeepers and Africans in the reserves.⁶⁹ A careful examination of the political and economic impulse behind Thuku's detractors in fact shows that the particular economic grievances of Africans did not preclude the formation of political alliances, though it limited these possibilities. Indeed within the public political realm of nascent anti-colonial nationalism, the common experience of living in towns like Nairobi, being at the receiving end of an economic structure that was unapologetically biased in favour of white settlers, and being part of the first public agitation over political rights served as a foundation for intimate personal friendships amongst common-minded public figures like Thuku and Desai.

CONCLUSION

The deportation of Thuku was followed by the closing down of both the radical *East African Chronicle* and the East African Association. Meanwhile the Indian question became the focus of public political activity in late 1922. While the India Office continued to warn the Colonial Office about the extreme bitterness in India that acquiescing to settler demands would create, especially as the non-cooperation movement was at its height, the European settlers threatened a coup if Indian demands were conceded.⁷⁰ Having reached an impasse where the contradictions of a global British empire were exposed, the Colonial Office finally took shelter in an innovative declaration of African 'paramountcy' that was meaningless in practice but had long-lasting consequences. With Thuku safely away in exile, having exposed a deeply contested public political realm in Kenya, it became ever more legitimate for Europeans and the colonial government to talk about African interests – though the Thuku incident had shown that in fact the local colonial authorities would not hesitate to snuff out any kind of political agitation.

Taking over from Churchill, the Duke of Devonshire finally presented a white paper in 1923 that came to be known as the Devonshire Declaration. A new policy was elucidated which noted that in the face of irreconcilable points of view

⁶⁹For accounts of the resentment against Indian traders amongst Africans in the reserves see Furedi (1974) and Spencer (1980).

⁷⁰IOR, L/E/7/1174, File I & O 11/1921, Viceroy to India Office, 1 February 1922, Policy regarding Indians in Kenya, correspondence with Colonial Office.

between the European and Indian communities, the one point that both agreed to was the importance of safeguarding the interests of the Africans. It stated:

Primarily Kenya is an African territory and His Majesty's Government thinks it necessary definitely to record their considered opinion that the interests of the African natives must be paramount and if and when those interests and the interests of the immigrant races should conflict, the former should prevail.⁷¹

With this declaration of 'African paramountcy', an imperial principle emerged, at least in theory, that would create neither an 'America of the Hindu', nor a 'white man's colony' in Kenya. Though in effect this declaration had no real significance for Africans, the 1923 white paper effectively checked the Europeans' ambitions of self-governance on the pattern previously established in South Africa.

An overwhelmingly territorial focus on the significance of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement and studying both the Indian struggle for parity with Europeans and the African agitation against labour ordinances through the lens of racial exclusivity ignores the different connections, relationships and alliances that were made possible by the interaction of people and ideas who mediated the Indian Ocean realm between India and Kenya. By anchoring the history of political agitation from 1919 to 1923 offshore – within the Indian Ocean – this article shifts the historians' gaze away from the territorial and racial concerns of the anti-colonial nationalism in India, and the anti-settler critique amongst Africans and Indians in Kenya.

As has been convincingly argued by Frederick Cooper, 'the story of colonialism and the challenges to it should reserve a large place for political struggles that crossed lines of geography and of self-identification or cultural solidarity, partly through the mobilization of political networks, partly through the coming together of different strands of political action in critical conjunctures' (Cooper 2005: 232). Exemplifying exactly this connection, Gandhi, in his weekly English-language journal *Young India*, remarked that Thuku was a 'victim of [the colonial] lust for power' who might 'find comfort in the thought that even in distant India many will read the story of his deportation and trials with sympathy'. Gandhi further highlighted expressions of mutual solidarity hoping that Thuku 'would find solace in the fact that many perhaps as innocent as Harry Thuku are today locked up in Bengal without any trial or hope of it in the near future'.⁷² Indeed the shared public political realm of the Indian Ocean created through mass meetings and the English-language print media enabled Harry Thuku, M. A. Desai, Mangal Dass and Indians living in the subcontinent to adopt and adapt the Gandhian language of equality and resistance, resulting in a 'critical conjuncture' that arose in 1919–23 from universalist aspirations to resistance in Kenya and India that transcended the boundaries of race and territory.

⁷¹IOR, L/E/7/1264, File 867/1922, Parliamentary Paper draft by Duke of Devonshire, 20 July 1923.

⁷²*Young India*, 18 December 1924. In *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 16 (16 August 1924–26 December 1924). Available online at <<http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/cwmg.html>>, accessed 12 October 2010.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the connection between three political movements that broke out amongst Africans and Indians within the public political realm across the Indian Ocean – the Khilafat/non-cooperation movement initiated by Gandhi in India between 1919 and 1922, the 'quest for equality' with European settlers amongst Indians in Kenya from 1910 to 1923, and the anti-settler movement launched by Harry Thuku in protest against unfair labour ordinances between 1921 and 1922. Moving away from the racial and territorial boundaries of South Asian and Kenyan historiographies, it uses the Indian Ocean realm – a space of economic, social and political interaction – as its paradigm of analysis. A variety of primary sources from archives in Kenya, India and Britain have been studied to uncover a connected, interregional history of politics, race and empire. In an attempt to highlight the importance of the Indian Ocean realm in understanding the interracial and interregional concerns that shaped the political imaginary of Indians and Africans in Kenya, the article reveals the emergence of a shared public political space across the Indian Ocean that was deeply contested.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine le lien entre trois mouvements politiques apparus de part et d'autre de l'océan Indien, parmi des Africains et Indiens de la sphère politique publique: le mouvement Khilafat de non-coopération engagé par Gandhi en Inde entre 1919 et 1922, la « quête pour l'égalité » avec les colons européens des Indiens au Kenya de 1910 à 1923, et le mouvement anti-colons lancé par Harry Thuku en réaction à des ordonnances injustes sur l'emploi entre 1921 et 1922. S'éloignant

des frontières raciales et territoriales des historiographies d'Asie du Sud et du Kenya, l'article utilise comme paradigme d'analyse la sphère de l'océan Indien, espace d'interaction économique, sociale et politique. Une étude de diverses sources primaires d'archives au Kenya, en Inde et en Grande-Bretagne a permis de révéler une histoire interrégionale connectée de la politique, des races et de l'empire. En cherchant à souligner l'importance de l'espace de l'océan Indien dans la compréhension des questions interraciales et interrégionales qui ont façonné l'imaginaire politique des Indiens et des Africains au Kenya, l'article révèle l'émergence d'un espace politique public partagé de part et d'autre de l'océan Indien, vivement disputé.