

**Book Review:**

## **Uganda: An Indian Colony, 1897–1972**

*Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyiigo, Kampala: The African Studies Bookstore, 2022. Paperback ISBN: 9789913623070, 50,000 UGX*

**William Musamba<sup>1</sup>**

Makerere University

Since 1958, when Kenneth Ingham authored the *History of Modern Uganda*, diverse historical topics on Uganda's past have been studied. Yet historians have been less keen on exploring the economic history of Uganda despite the centrality of the economic factor in the historical development of East Africa. Trade links between the interior and the coast of East Africa from Benadir to Cabo Delgado were robust from 1000 CE, when the very first Indians and Arabs arrived on the coast, up to the advent of European imperial rule at the close of the nineteenth century. Indian Banyans, residing on Zanzibar, especially under Seyyid Said Ibin Sultan's reign, played a fundamental role of money lenders to the Arabs, Swahili, and Persian merchants. By extracting the Indian factor in Uganda's economic history, Lwanga-Lunyiigo stresses the significance of the economic factor in shaping the history of East Africa.

Lwanga-Lunyiigo's book highlights the position of the Indians in Uganda's economy as economic agents from the 1890s up to the fall of their economic empire in 1972. Lwanga-Lunyiigo analyses East Africa's economic industry before the era of European intrusion, showcasing the diverse inter-trade relations based on the varied resource endowments across the diverse communities. His analysis upholds that the abundance of diverse resources, particularly the salt works at Kibiro, black-smithing and iron works in Bunyoro and Buganda, ivory hunting, and the Kajjansi clay works, as well as food production, which were antecedents of East Africa's entrepreneurship sadly stifled by the advent of European imperialism.

Lwanga-Lunyiigo offers an informative analysis of the growth of Indian economic power in colonial Uganda. Most of these Indians came to East Africa, largely as casual labourers on the construction of the Uganda Railway, and as a mercenary force for the colonial state. However, by the 1930s, many of them had emerged as 'economic moguls' of the Ugandan economy. Notably, Vithaldas Madhvani, who left India in 1893 for Africa in 'a leaking wooden boat,' was by the 1960s, among those referred to as 'the Rockefellers of Uganda.' Despite British attempt to compete

---

1 The author can be reached for correspondence at: [musamba.william@mak.ac.ug](mailto:musamba.william@mak.ac.ug)

with Indians in economic entrepreneurship, such as the cotton industry in the 1920s, Indians still gained an upper hand. Ugandan ‘natives’ also tried to resist Indian exploitation by rallying trade unions as their competing machinery. For instance, ‘the co-operative movement was born out of the grievance of exclusion from the native involvement in the cotton industry beyond growing it,’ (67). Lwanga-Lunyiigo offers some examples including the Kinakulya Growers Cooperative Society in 1913 in Kiboga, the Baganda Growers Association in 1923, and the Bagisu Coffee Scheme. To support African interests, the government in 1937 introduced to the Legislative Council the Cooperative Societies Bill, which was strongly opposed by the unofficial members (both Europeans and Asians) who wished to continue benefiting from the ‘nonparticipation of the natives in the ginning and marketing of cotton and in the curing and marketing of coffee,’ (70). However, after the WKH Campbell Report of 1944, the same bill was reintroduced and passed in December 1945.

This account tends to show that the protectorate government was in support of African economic interests, and yet most of the post-war reforms prioritized curtailing the growing wave of African resistance to imperialism. Then came the sudden change in colonial economic policy under Governor Andrew Benjamin Cohen in 1954, particularly his amendment of the 1946 Co-operative Societies Ordinance aimed at addressing the grievances of the natives. The amendment provided for ‘enough autonomy to make registration of co-operative societies acceptable, compulsory acquisition of ginneries to pass on to co-operative unions, elimination of discriminatory pricing policies, and offer private Africans access to coffee processing in Buganda,’ (93). Cohen’s policies augmented the co-operative movement which empowered the Africans’ economic initiatives, particularly in the coffee and cotton industry.

Lwanga-Lunyiigo observes that the plan to expel the Indians was a long-conceived ambition of Milton Obote and that the Indian community leaders were aware of the possible predicament that would befall them. They, therefore, decided to invest their capital outside of the country, including the Mehta and Madhvani families. ‘By 1972, one of the British banks had 240 million pounds belonging to East African Asians, and yet there was an acute shortage of development funds in East Africa,’ (115). The Indians were quite sceptical of the African elite of independence, more so, given the fact that their social structure had remained racially, economically, and religiously impenetrable by the Africans.

However, Lwanga-Lunyiigo uses the identities, Indians and Asians, interchangeably throughout the book, as if to mean the same community. He further refers to ‘the Indians’ as if it is one socio-historical group, yet most of the Punjabi workers who constructed the railway returned to India at the expiry of their contracts. The Gujarati entrepreneurs who went into business had no substantive connection (linguistic, cultural, or economic) with the railway workers. It is the colonial state that made the Gujarati ‘Indians’ into Uganda’s economic giants. Lwanga-Lunyiigo also refers to Uganda as an ‘Indian colony’ rather than what it was: a British colony, which de-emphasizes the fact that ‘the Indians’ as an economic and racial category in Uganda were a product of the colonial state.

There are also several other limitations that need attention. For example, sources of certain primary source documents are not identified, such as the footnote

on page thirty-nine. Finally, the book should engage more with primary and secondary sources to support its claims and also correct certain factual errors, such as the incorrect dates it cites for the tenure of successive governors of Uganda, Sir James Hayes Sadler (1902-1905) and Sir Hesketh Joudoul Bell (1905-1910).