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Historicizing Labour Migration: “Impact of Colonial Land and Labor Policies on Contemporary Uganda’s Migration Patterns”

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ABSTRACT

Uganda continues to witness a significant portion of its population migrating to the Middle East, particularly to countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. The media has labelled this trend as freedom of movement in search of better opportunities amid a growing population. These circumstances stem from Uganda’s agrarian landscape, marked by stark socio-economic disparities, with rural communities experiencing the brunt of poverty, inequality, and economic stagnation. Although agriculture employs a significant share of the population—especially women, the elderly, the uneducated, and youth—rural households remain trapped in subsistence farming, face limited market access, and endure systemic neglect. Colonial legacies, including identity formation, land tenure systems, and labour externalization models, continue to impact labour migration alongside agrarian realities. Meanwhile, post-colonial and neoliberal reforms have exacerbated vulnerabilities through land commodification, reduced state support, and exploitative market forces. These dynamics have marginalized rural communities and undermined peasant livelihoods, propelling labour migration to Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, framing migration as a critical aspect of Uganda’s socio-economic development. This paper investigates how historical and contemporary power structures—such as colonial legacies, neoliberal economic reforms, and globalization—have shaped current migration patterns, examining the connections between labour migration policies, land access issues, and the diverse livelihoods of peasants within the labour migration context. In this exploration, the paper engages thoroughly with how the postcolonial neoliberal era has introduced a new dynamic in land and labour discussions, driven by the structural power of global capital, particularly finance capital, aimed at mobilizing local labour for economic exploitation.

Among other things, the paper argues that colonial land and labour policies from the 1890s to the present have shaped the evolution of contemporary migration patterns in Uganda, along with land and agrarian issues. Colonial land dispossession subordinated “natives” to local administrative despotisms and forced them to survive on fragmented and less fertile communal land, compelling peasants to rely on a hoe and a migrant wage labour system sustained by self-exploiting women-headed rural households. These structures continue to underpin emerging contemporary migration patterns nurtured by “multi-occupational livelihood strategies,” influenced by an accumulation treadmill of land dispossession driven by finance capital. Thus, the enduring impact of colonial land and labour policies remains evident in Uganda’s agrarian and migration systems. Colonial policies, such as the establishment of labour reserves and the commodification of land, disrupted traditional livelihoods and entrenched patterns of labour exploitation. These historical dynamics have evolved under neoliberal economic policies, including privatization, deregulation, and marketization, which affect peasant communities and have further marginalized rural populations, particularly in regions like Busoga, which continue to be net labour exporters.

Keywords: Labour Migration, Colonial Land Policies, Neoliberal Economic Reforms, Agrarian Transformation, Peasant Livelihoods.

Introduction

The era of globalization has positioned Uganda as one of the countries significantly contributing to the global workforce through labour migration, particularly to the Middle East, including countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar. This phenomenon, often framed by the media as a pursuit of “greener pastures,” occurs amidst Uganda’s growing population and high rates of structural and seasonal unemployment (Nampewo, 2021; Guloba et al., 2022). The 1970s oil price boom in the Middle East further intensified this trend, as the region’s economic transformation created a high demand for foreign labour due to its small economically engaged population and low women labour force participation (Cammatt, 2018; Wilson, 2021).

Despite agriculture employing a significant portion of the population—particularly women, the elderly, the illiterate, and youth—rural households remain trapped in subsistence farming, limited market access, and systemic neglect. Colonial legacies, including identity formation, land tenure systems, and export-oriented agricultural models, continue to shape labour migration alongside agrarian realities, while post-colonial and neoliberal reforms have exacerbated vulnerabilities through land commodification, reduced state support, and exploitative market forces. Rural communities, which form the backbone of Uganda’s agricultural sector, bear the brunt of poverty, inequality, and economic stagnation. Here, poverty and economic stagnation have been deeply entrenched, compounded by issues like rural-urban migration,

labour externalization to the Middle East, and gendered distribution of subsistence agriculture (Galabuzi, 2022). These dynamics have entrenched rural communities and marginalized peasant livelihoods, leading to increased labour migration to the Middle East and framing the migration question as a critical issue in Uganda's socio-economic development. More recently, economic challenges at home have motivated a concerted effort to systematize labour migration or labour export as a strategy for human resource management and economic development.

Many individuals are driven to seek improved livelihoods as they confront the ongoing challenges of high unemployment and underemployment in their home countries. Many Asian countries, such as India, China, and the Philippines, have embraced labour exports to take advantage of the opportunities created by globalization. In Africa alone, one in every four migrations is labor-related, and about 150.3 million workers worldwide are migrants concentrated in Northern America and Northern, Southern, and Western Europe (83.7 million are men, and 66.6 million are women) [International Labour Organisation (ILO) 2015]. Likewise, the 2018 ILO reports that between 2013 and 2017, the demand for migrant workers in the Middle East increased by 5.2 per cent annually, attributed to the need for a workforce in the construction and services sector. Despite the annual expansion of Uganda's labour force, available jobs have remained stagnant, leaving many youths and women either unemployed or underemployed. Labour externalization has emerged as a practical solution in today's economy because it might not be viewed as the ideal option with a litany of human rights violations reported; it offers a valuable alternative for effectively addressing prolonged unemployment challenges (Nampewo, 2021).

In Uganda, youth and women in paid employment were 51.9 percent and 43.6 percent, respectively, while men were 60.5 percent (UBOS, 2021). Furthermore, most of this working labour force is vulnerable (52 percent), with women's accounting for a larger share- 62 percent. It is worth noting that youth unemployment is almost three-fold that of the adult population (31-64). On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the employment challenges faced by Ugandans. The 2021 study by the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPCR) estimated that vulnerable firms laid off 2.9 million workers temporarily or permanently in response to COVID-19. In addition, the pandemic affected labour productivity with an overall reduction in the duration of work per worker by 3 hours (EPRC, 2021). Such economic uncertainty has increased the desperation amongst the most vulnerable and prone populations (youth and women) to search for opportunities elsewhere. While Uganda's economy is struggling despite neoliberal reforms that were instituted in the late 1980s, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have experienced an oil boom that started in the 1970s sparking off demand for migrant workers, specifically for domestic workers in line with growing wealth and a new culture of conspicuous consumption (Malhotra et al. 2016). Migration is arbitrated by a bargain struck between the Gulf States and citizens

wherein the state guarantees a leisured lifestyle for its citizens (Sabban 2002) by facilitating controlled migrant flows that provide cheaper privatized forms of reproductive labour instead of public provisioned labour (Fernandez, 2021). Wealthy women in the GCC, through the benefits of their class position, can “hire a wife” (Parreñas 2000, 562 citing Romero 1992). Notably, 84.2% of these migrants were women, many of whom ended up in low-paying, exploitative jobs such as domestic work, caregiving, and cleaning (Nakaweesi, 2024).

Two dominant discourses have emerged to explain labour migration in Uganda. The first argues that labour mobility contributes to economic development, addresses youth unemployment, and ensures income security (Davidson, 2005; Adepoju, 2008). The second attributes the high migration rates to weaknesses in implementing labour migration institutions, policies, and laws. Other explanations point to Uganda’s troubled history, which has displaced many Ugandans, creating a sizable diaspora across the globe (Ssentongo, 2018). More recently, economic challenges at home have motivated efforts to systematize labour migration as a strategy for human resource management and economic development. However, women labour migration has received minimal attention, often being framed within the context of sexual exploitation and victimhood, despite women migrating for a variety of reasons (ILO-IPEC, 2007; ANNPCAN, 2008).

These explanations, while valuable, fail to account for the temporal shifts in the logic of power and capital and how emerging labour relations shape the migration question. They also overlook the structural agrarian and political transformations across Uganda’s history, particularly the enduring impact of colonial and neoliberal policies on land and labour dynamics. This study seeks to address these gaps by drawing on a heterodox political economy framework to illuminate present-day migration patterns. It explores the connections between labour migration policies, land access issues, and job distribution, tracing the historical development of these dynamics to produce an alternative narrative. The study argues that the postcolonial neoliberal moment has witnessed a new dynamic in the land and labour question, triggered by the structural power of global capital, particularly finance capital, which mobilizes local labour for economic exploitation. Rather than dismissing these perspectives entirely, it is crucial to critically engage with their theoretical and methodological foundations to address gaps and enrich the analysis of rural realities (Ferguson, 2006).

The study is situated within the broader context of Uganda’s agrarian landscape, which has been shaped by colonial land dispossession, post-independence reforms, and neoliberal policies. Colonial policies subordinated “natives” to local administrative despotisms, forcing them to survive on fragmented and less fertile communal lands. This created a system of migrant wage labour reproduced through self-exploited

women-headed rural households. Post-independence reforms partially indigenized commercial farming but failed to radically transform colonial landholding structures. These structures continue to underpin contemporary migration patterns, nurtured by “multi-occupational livelihood strategies” shaped by global agricultural value chains. The study challenges separatist analytics that compartmentalize class, gender, ethnicity, and locality, arguing that these dimensions are interconnected and mutually constitutive. It recognizes that the lived realities of migrant workers cannot be meaningfully understood through frameworks that isolate these elements. Instead, it engages with the entangled structures of global capitalism and local migration patterns, offering a nuanced understanding of the historical and structural forces that perpetuate exploitation. The project contributes to broader debates on agrarian change, labour migration, and the reconfiguration of land tenure and relations in an era marked by global capitalism and state repression. It offers insights for both scholarly discourse and policy advocacy, emphasising the need for a structural and historical understanding of labour migration exploitation.

Conceptualising Labour Migration: A Snap Shot. *Historical Perspective.*

The issue of labour migration is not a recent phenomenon, as some experts have claimed, but rather the result of a long historical transition period. This is supported by a variety of scholarly views whose perspectives on labour migration alter across different times of global transition. Scholars such as Steven Mithen and Jack D. Forbes trace labour migration back to the 3000 BCE-3500 CE period of ancient civilisation. According to Mithen, before the glacial maximum, which happened approximately 20,000 BC, humans simply continued to live as hunter-gatherers, just as their ancestors did millions of years earlier (Mithen, 2004). However, it is argued that due to drought and freezing temperatures that affected most of the world, many previously inhabited areas were abandoned in favor of new life settlements in newly established towns (ibid). Mithen employs an archaeological perspective to characterize climatic change as a significant component in the transition from hunter-gatherer to trade via labour migration, resulting in the formation of new cultures such as the Natufian culture (Mithen, 2004). This is akin to Forbes’s documented portrayal of Americans’ migration to Europe as active marine traders, which Christopher Columbus witnessed before he voyaged to America (Forbes, 2007). According to Forbes, the historical truth of migration has been disguised in several scholarly publications whose primary goal is to maintain the hierarchical position of Europe’s discovery of America.

Furthermore, as with the ancient period of civilization mentioned above, labour migration persisted during the 500-1500 CE medieval period of global transition. Christopher Dyer describes the Middle Ages as an era of growth marked by peasant labour movements throughout Britain (Dyer, 2005, p.10). Dyer shows that while Britain was suffering a deep crisis in the fourteenth century, highlighted by the

great famine (1315-17) and the Black Death (1348-50), viewing such reasons as the fundamental reason for its urban expansion is oversimplified. According to Dyer, as a feudal society, these changes are essentially the result of interrelated movements such as the simultaneous formation of lordship, villages, towns, and the state (Ibid). In other words, while peasants were exploited as slaves while paying tributes to feudal lords in the form of food, rent, and other goods, connections with the market caused them to flee such exploitation by relocating to cities, often permanently.

I turn to the “modern labour migration” of the 1500-1800 CE colonial period, which has gained prominence in scholarly debates. In Africa, modern labour migration can be traced back to the slave trade. Walter Rodney (1973) locates it to the universalisation of development in non-European countries, which resulted in circumstances of global economic expansion. According to Rodney, millions of Africans were forcibly removed from their homelands to labour on plantations in America as a result of colonialism and capitalism’s desire for cheap labor (ibid). This period is exemplified in the violence and fear that Adam Hochschild (1999) locates in the Belgian Congo under King Leopold’s reign, as many Congolese were forced into slavery, resulting in the deaths of millions. In other words, labour migration became a regular phenomenon throughout the colonial period since capitalism became a colonial rationale for both expanding and maintaining colonial power over non-European countries. Such colonial logics that legitimize labour mobility has persisted to the present day, with economic liberalism serving as a major anchorage for organizing and preserving the current global economic framework (Arrighi, 2008, p.289).

While labour migration existed before colonialism, Mahmood Mamdani (1996 [2017]) highlights the advent of the modern state, which established rigid borders and created a global division between modern and non-modern societies. It was within this context that labour migration became institutionalized, as colonialism necessitated the crossing of these modern boundaries for its survival. Today, these modern distinctions persist, continuing to shape the dynamics of labour migration.

What are the key contemporary debates on labour migration from the colonial era to the present? How do we understand a nuanced understanding of labour migration within the interplay of individual agency and structural forces that have shaped global labour movements over time? On one hand, thinkers like Adam Smith (1776), David Ricardo (1817), Roncaglia Alessandro (2005), and Gary Becker (1987) emphasize individual agency and economic incentives. These place emphasis on individual rational choices, such as income differentials among others. On the contrary, structuralists advanced by neo-Marxist and post-colonial theorists such as Immanuel Wallerstein (1976), Andre Gunder Frank (1998), and Walter Rodney (1973) located the labour migration phenomenon as an outcome of systemic inequalities and historical processes rooted in colonialism and global capitalism.

Adam Smith's (1776) theory of free labour division locates labour migration as a rational choice, although implicitly. According to Smith, workers are free to migrate where they believe their labour force is more valuable. Smith argues about the intricate relationship between workers and their employers in terms of wages. Here, he clarifies that while the worker always wants to be paid well, the master prefers to provide as little as possible for him to maximize profits, thus free movement of labour is necessary because "a man must always live by his work, and his wages must at least be sufficient to sustain him. They must be slightly higher on most occasions, or he will be unable to raise a family." Simply put, a worker should only sell his labour power where he can earn enough income to survive. Smith's idea was carried forward by Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage, where he argues that nations can obtain an international trade advantage by focusing on producing commodities with the lowest opportunity costs when compared to other countries (Roncaglia, 2005). Here, countries were urged to focus on producing goods for which they have a relative cost advantage. As a result, free trade was framed as an assumption, as trade barriers were supported against the smooth operation of international trade. In other words, Ricardo argues that countries have to make rational decisions about which country to trade with based on the cost of production of the commodity, including labour costs.

Furthermore, regarding the United Kingdom's increased immigration controversy, unlike the dominant solution to the restriction of free immigration in the United Kingdom, Becker claims that because of the large wage differentials between poor and rich countries, immigration will continue because people from poor countries will always want to improve their economic circumstances. In other words, Becker (1978) argues that migration liberalization in the United Kingdom was never a problem driving increased immigration because immigration is important to both sending and receiving countries, but rather a lack of a fee policy that required a certain amount of money to become an immigrant.

Karl Marx (1978) describes the exploitative social class divides between the working class and the bourgeoisie, which is caused by the capitalistic mode of production in which profits become the primary goal. According to Marx, such exploitative labor-relations can only be ended by abolishing the capitalist structural system itself.

In his World Systems Theory, Wallerstein (1976) investigates the expansion of international trade, particularly the movement of cheap labour from "developing" to "developed" countries. Wallerstein locates international trade into three stages of capitalist development that defined the points of contact between Africa and Europe, ie, slave trade, colonialism, and the contemporary postcolonial era. Throughout these stages, he argues that Africa has been marginalized as a cheap raw material producer, such as cash crop cultivation and slave labor. This planned encirclement of Africa helps to sustain

European colonial goals since countries like France and Britain, among others, enhanced their industrial output in an attempt to subjugate others by making them raw material suppliers. In this situation, it is claimed that most African countries are becoming increasingly impoverished as a result of their incapacity to compete on the global market for industrial goods, transforming them into low-wage labour markets.

On the question of the dependent relationship between core and peripheral countries, Andre Gunder Frank (1977) opines that such a connection maintained the capitalistic exploitation of the workforce from peripheral countries through forced labor, benefiting the centre at the expense of the periphery. Frank argues that it is the colonial project's dependent accumulation that made Africa's underdevelopment question, as cheap labour continues to travel freely across international borders. Rodney (1973) argues that Africa's underdevelopment dates back to the slave trade. According to Rodney, Africa was making progress prior to European exploration, with ironworking being much more favourable and promising in some African societies, to the point where societies such as ancient Egypt became ruling groups or were near the top of the social pyramid. However, Rodney argues that it wasn't until the 15th century that the slave trade expanded to Africa and all able-bodied men were sent to American sugar plantation colonial ventures as slaves.

While labour migration has been attributed to personal rational choices, such as wage inequalities by both classical and neoclassical thinkers, structural analysis reveals that colonial structural projects are the primary driving force behind those choices. However, the second scholarship has gained prominence in political and economic debates, arguing that labour migration is essentially a combination of political and economic characteristics formed by the colonial framework. In other words, the popularity of the structural argument, which emphasizes the relevancy of structural analysis among postcolonial scholars championed by Mamdani (1996), shows that labour migration is part of the structural capitalistic logic that has been put in place to ensure the existence of the contemporary modern state.

Land, Labour and Agrarian Policies Nexus: A Historical Inquiry.

Here, I examine the long historical evolution of land and agrarian relations and labour movements and struggles in Uganda between the 1890s and 1990s within the framework of changing colonial and postcolonial land and agrarian policies and labour movements. The historical evolution of land and agrarian policies alongside labour usage in Uganda is conventionally organized into three broad phases: The first phase covers the precolonial period up to the early colonial period in the late nineteenth century (1890s) and the turn of the century when Uganda was first declared a British colony in the 1920s. The second phase covers the late colonial period from the 1930s to the 1950s, the declaration of the

Emergency, and the attainment of independence in 1962. The third phase covers the immediate 1962 post-independence period until the re-imposition of neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 1980s. The fourth phase treats the consolidation of neoliberal globalization. The latter phase was characterized by the dismantling of the post-independence dirigiste regime and the withdrawal of state support to the agriculture and rural sector, marking the return of the ‘spontaneous’ dynamics of the capitalist system. I dwell on the precolonial period as a basis for gauging the subsequent changes triggered by colonial capitalist penetration; on the colonial period, I emphasize the changes and continuities of the precolonial social organization of the economy, particularly in Southern /Northern Uganda.

Pre-Colonial Busoga Social Organization and Land Tenure System

The debate on the nature and dynamics of precolonial Busoga societies has received little attention; disagreements abound on how to characterize its dynamics. On the one hand, some studies have depicted precolonial Busoga society as a static society organized on a ‘communal’ basis and whose dynamic only emerged from an external impetus to change, particularly the imposition of British colonial rule (e.g., Basooma, 1961). On the other hand, some studies have shown that change was a constant feature of precolonial Busoga society (e.g., Mair, 1967, Kasango, 2024; Nattabi, 2009). They have argued that “demographic pressure, historical events, and changing land succession patterns” (K, 2024, p. 292), ecological factors, the outbreak of natural catastrophes, and changing production and trade patterns” were key social dynamics (Nattabi, 2009, p. 84). More specifically, Kasango (2024) has argued that “Malthusian pressures, such as rapid population growth, necessitated the adoption of land intensification strategies, leading to...production diversification...to its high heterogeneity—a manifestation of Boserup's theory on agricultural intensification” (p. 292). These dynamics were responsible for far-reaching “changes in gender, generational and political structures of the households” in present-day Busoga Sub-Region (Nattabi, 2009, p. 84).

Suffice it to note that, like most other African societies, Busoga society was riven by both cooperation and conflict. The land tenure system was the basis of the whole social organization. In terms of social organization, Okoth-Ayamo’s description neatly maps the structure of land control among the Basoga. According to Nattabi (2009) “the household, comprising a wife and children, and was the basic unit of a “larger homestead that consisted of several households, depending on the number of wives a man had” (p.93). The wife was recognized as the head of the household, or Omukyala wa maka, while the husband as head of the homestead was known as the Mukulu wa musiri, head of the homestead. In this unit, “Each wife was allocated a parcel or parcels of land by her husband or her grandfather (her husband’s father) to

cultivate” (p.93). But in cases where the husband (Mukulu wa musiri) died, then a close kinsman was supposed to inherit the widow, even though the homestead still belonged to the deceased including the children he produced with the widow”. The point to be grasped here is that in “pre-colonial Busoga land more generally, laws and rules governing relations within the homestead... were largely determined by seniority. For instance, the oldest surviving male was the head of the homestead and the final authority within the homestead. But if he was incompetent or incapacitated, then he was disqualified from his position and the second most senior man took his place.

The next level in the Busoga hierarchical social organization was the ebisoko (“birth group”) and the Abantu be’kisekulu kimu (literally, “people of one grandfather/ancestor”), who occupied contiguous geographical areas. Ebisoko ebirala mu buzaale bwa kitaawe is a “patrilineal descent group [which]” depended on the genealogical incidence of co-wives and uterine brothers [who became the source of the subsequent agnatic groups emanating from them (Nayenga, 1976; Nattabi, 2009, p.99). Ebibiina eby’obufuzi bw’ettaka eby’oluganda “were corporate landholding lineage units...organized on a territorial basis, and as units of primary settlement or multiples of them, [were] responsible for the acquisition, apportionment, and use of land” [that] “managed its political, jural, economic, ritual and other affairs through a council of elders representing its major segments and recognized one of its numbers as a leader” (ibid.). Obugazi bw’ebisekulu bibiri oba bina units “were fluid insofar as they spanned a generational depth of two or four generations. As contiguous social units occupying the same village, or Ebibiina eby’obuganda ebitambulira mu kyalamu kimu “were usually characterized by close bonds, which enabled them to cooperate during periods of crisis such as wars, death, and sacrifices... settled their internal disputes internally presided over by their elders,” (Nattabi, 2009, p. 96) or sought external arbitration higher up in the lineage hierarchy, among members of ekika, a clan.

After the clan or ekika, the next unit in the lineage hierarchy is the maximal lineage. It was “the largest social unit of cooperation on matters relating to hunting and raiding”, often existing as enclaves separated by Ebibuga ebyawukana, or “a forested area, inhabited by wild animals”. The Ebibuga ebyawukana was commonly used by different maximal lineages for common grazing, hunting, and cultural ceremonies. It was thus often the focus of competition between the maximal lineages that bordered it” (Nayenga, 1976; Nattabi, 2009, p.98).

In most segmentary lineage societies, elaborate procedures existed to incorporate ‘outsiders’ into clan membership. The most common method among Basoga was the institution of Obwannamawanga, tenancy (p.84). There were also instances when a group could join as ‘refugees’, known locally as abalunji or omulunji, people displaced by “wars, raids or even famine.” Mwavu et al., (2018) observed

that there were also cases of an individual, for instance, a young man, joining another lineage and becoming a junior partner in that lineage as a slave. Be that as it may, Nayenga (1976) observed that the” (p.100) “status of ebitambulira mu kyalamu kimu, carried with it rights of usufruct but not of disposal. bannamawanga (tenants) could always be asked by the host clan to vacate the land they had been allocated and return to where they had come from (p. 100). Tenants were perceived as “second-class” citizens in the lineage that hosted them. The practice of exogamy encouraged the existence of Okufumbirwa mu bika ebirala as it “meant that intermarriage could take place within the lineage” without the risks involved in “travel far into enemies’ lineages for marriage purposes” (p.101). Tenancies were exploited by the host community, especially when it came to payment of bridewealth” as “tenants often were not paid full bridewealth for their daughters” as the tenants “were in no position from which to bargain” (ibid.).

Generational seniority shaped relations between men and women, among women and men. Wives within the homestead were also similarly ranked according to seniority. It was normal for the senior wives to control the labour of junior wives. For instance, junior wives provided labour on the farms of the senior wives” (Nattabi, 2009, p.95). These seniority relations formed the basis for cooperation and conflict within homesteads, particularly about the distribution of resources. Inter-household relations revealed the inherent tension between patterns of cooperation and competition in the social organization” (Nayenga, 1976; Nattabi, 2009, p. xx). Busoga "elders (men) appropriated the surplus labour of junior men. Juniors cleared agricultural land for the elders who controlled the distribution of the product, or juniors raided cattle from the rival lineages, which were allocated by elders” (Nattabi, 2009, p. 104). The reality of low population density and constant migrations worked to check tendencies toward the exploitation of subjects. In this regard, “Relations between elders and juniors had to be redistributive since an elder who appropriated livestock might find himself without juniors, who in protest might migrate to another lineage and become ‘slave’ in the host lineage” (Ibid., p.105). This lineage hierarchy of Busoga kinship relations was embedded within a ‘communal’ land tenure system in which access to and control of land reflected the status of a person within the larger community.

The ‘Communal’ Land Tenure System

As in most precolonial African societies, the land and its products were valued and continue to be a source of multiple values to rural Busoga communities in Uganda. The land was “owned” by the extended family, maka-amagulu, which was composed of the grandfather, his wife or wives, and his son (s) together with their wives and children,” forming a solid territorial unit of households (Nattabi, 2009, p.107). Among the precolonial Busoga, the land tenure system was closely aligned with this nested

hierarchical social and political organisation. According to Patton's (1994) analysis of colonial land tenure systems:

“...indigenous land use communities recognised the harshness of the environment and sought to cope with it through many institutional structures, principles, and techniques. Over time, these communities also devised ways of addressing the population issue, especially as it approached critical dimensions in particular localities.... The purpose of vesting the control function in the political authority of the community—the head of the family, the common ancestor, or a council of elders—was generally three-fold. First and foremost, it was meant to guarantee the security of opportunity for all who had access rights to those resources. If there were a possibility that some of these rights would be taken away, the tenure system assured that this would occur only in exceptional circumstances and only upon a collective decision made at the highest level of social organization. Second, it was designed to ensure equity between and across generations. Thus, the control function determined the rate of expansion or contraction of membership in the unit by means other than birth, and the distribution or redistribution of access rights in response, inter alia, to increased demand for land.” (Patton 1994: 23–24, p. 11.)

Third, the pyramidal structure of lineage land control also shaped land use patterns on lineage land to ensure ecological stewardship by specifying when and where specific families were entitled to cultivation and grazing rights, weeding and harvesting times, etc. Furthermore, “equity among and between generations” in customary tenure systems could only be ensured by a system in which a household's relationship to the land varied with their assigned rights to particular land uses, thus entailing a cascading set of land rights depending on the level of the social organisation and a person's status within it. At this time, the land was abundant, and control was not about ownership but usage because, throughout the migration history of the Busoga people, there was no question of scarcity and/or ownership but only usage for various socio-economic and political activities.¹ As was the case throughout colonial Africa, the pre-colonial agrarian system provided for production for both subsistence and the market, but colonial extraction increased the level of market exchanges as the population was forced into cash crop production and payment of taxes in cash (Nayenga, 1976; Mamdani, 1987; Tosh, 1978).

The land tenure system, therefore, formed the material base of the entire pre-colonial Busoga lineage social formation. It was often the case that the “first person to cultivate such virgin land claimed ownership and would continue cultivating it as long as he wanted. But either as a result of long-term disuse, “committing a crime, such as murder or incest, which according to customs required that the

¹ Interview with Chief Nkono of Bunya Chiefdom, 20th June 2025, Imanyiro, Mayuge

culprit leave his homestead and seek refuge far away, then the piece of land he used to cultivate could be taken by his close relative” (Nattabi, 2009, p.109).

Beyond land use rights, land was allocated through regular inheritance, the transmission of land from father to son. “But upon the death of the father, the remaining sons who had no land would obtain land that their mothers used to cultivate. The allocation was to be done by the eldest son in the homestead, who acted as the head of the family. But if the sons were still young, the land could be held in trust for them by their uncles (their father’s brothers)” (p. 108). But at the level of the maximal lineage, the land was acquired primarily through conquest. This could be accomplished by an individual, clan or by the maximal lineage” (Nattabi, 2009, p. 109-10). However, universal access to land was rarely the norm. It has been found that more influential people in society, such as “chiefs, clan elders, diviners, grandfathers, and many other related influential people, had more access to land” (Nattabi, 2009, pp.108-9). Thus, the precolonial social organisation and land tenure system established the parameters of change within precolonial Busoga society, which would soon change with the imposition of colonial rule.

Within the colonial context, agricultural production in Busoga, like other parts of Uganda from the 1920s was promoted and triumphed as peasant agriculture, after the colonial state realized that peasant agriculture was more productive (due to cheap labor) compared to European plantation agriculture (Nabudere 1980, Mamdani 1976, Mutibwa 1976, Mafeje 1973). In the pre-colonial period, land in the Busoga region did not exist as a commodity but had a use value with complex regulations for managing the use of land (Mamdani 1987). The land was therefore only useful when in use, and once use ceased, it also ceased to be important to the user. Until the 1940s, whenever the Basoga people migrated to work in Buganda, they did not mind about the land they left behind, except for the part that their family relations continued to put in use². Colonial customary laws had facilitated the development of commodity markets but hindered the development of land markets, and the peasant was always assured of his customary access to land for both petty commodity production and subsistence production (Mamdani 1996[2017], 1987).

Transition to Settled Agricultural Production

Studies of Busoga society have characterized the nineteenth century as a transitional period. This transition involved the shift from predominantly cattle-keeping to sedentary crop cultivation. Hay and Butterman claim that pastoralism was the primary economic activity of the precolonial Busoga before 1800. He shows that “between 1600 to 1800” high population density among the Busoga increasingly

² Interview with the **Menha** of chief of Bunya, 28th December 2024, Imanyiro, Mayuge

rendered “pastoralism impracticable and forced the Busoga to turn more completely to cultivation to feed themselves” (Bhattacharya, cited in Nattabi, 2009, p. 110). Other writers (e.g., Nattabi, 2009), however, argue that by the “1880s and 90s, the Busoga had already shifted from pastoralism to crop production as a dominant economic activity” given the heavy toll of a rinderpest epidemic that wiped out over 90 percent of cattle in East Africa (p.112). Tsetse fly infestation was another epidemic that “may well have forced the people to shift from cattle keeping to crop production as a primary economic activity” as a result of the “precarious alternation of periods of expansion and prosperity and dearth and disaster, thus often leading to depletion of food stocks and periodic famines (Allan, cited in Nattabi, 2009, p.112). Colonialists introduced these diseases in part to enforce a wage labour economy.

Whatever the cause of the shift from cattle-keeping to sedentary crop cultivation, it has been shown that “one of the significant uses of livestock in pre-colonial South Busoga province and the rest of the Busoga, was for acquiring a wife or wives. They emphasize the importance of the Busoga attached to cattle for bridewealth. Some writers have, however, challenged this picture of pure pastoralism. It is more realistic, as found elsewhere among other Ugandan communities and in Africa (e.g., among Maasai and Chagga in Tanzania and Maasai and Kikuyu in Kenya), that big and small livestock also had a commercial role. The Busoga traded cattle and small stock “for Baganda commodities such as iron ornaments, bananas and fish and for the Samia iron hoes” (ibid.). As one contemporary observer commented on the external trade the Busoga had with other African communities in the late nineteenth century:

“The great object of a **Bakungu’s** [Busoga] life is to obtain cattle, or, failing that, sheep and goats, and all his trading was but a means to this end. The principal local trading was in hoe, cattle, and ivory...the price of ivory is quoted in the head of cattle, the price of cattle in terms of so many hoes” (Hobley, cited in Nattabi, p .117).

Apart from external trade, livestock was also usually obtained through exchanges of bridewealth or the “traditional practice known as **okuwola enshozi** (loaning a heifer to someone)” (Nattabi, 2009, pp.118-9). External trade with the neighboring Dika was also important “from whom the Busoga received finger millet and sorghum in exchange for livestock, milk, and fish”, the Arabs, Swahili, as well as the salt trade with the Baganda (ibid., 143). External trade was conducted in various currencies in the form of rupees, cattle, cowrie shells, beads, and copper wire (xxxx). This external trade had been a flourishing feature of the region until things began to change towards the late nineteenth century. Kudu has noted that the great rinderpest epizootic of the 1890s undermined the cattle-based economy in the region as it entered East Africa via Ethiopia and Sudan, decimating an estimated 95% of all cattle and unleashing devastating

famines across the East African region. British colonial administrator Lord Lugard drew a political conclusion from the devastation caused by the rinderpest when he made the following statement:

“In some respect...warlike as the pastoral tribes are, their pride has been humbled, and our progress facilitated by this awful visitation. The advent of the white man had also not been so peaceful” (p.123)

The rinderpest epidemic marked the beginning of a series of *natural* and *man-made calamities* that struck East Africa and the Busoga district in the terminal decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Nattabi, 2009), including “smallpox, the sand flea (jiggers), plague, famine, and sleeping sickness”. Philip Mitchell, the District Commissioner, Busoga district [present-day Busoga Sub-Region], assessment of the string of devastations in 1883 suggested that its impact was felt mainly in the fall in the “value of dowry”. Whereas twenty or more heads of cattle were offered as dowry in the past, today, “the price has been known to fall as low as one bull and twenty goats, though a heifer and a bull is the usual minimum” (cited in Nattabi, 124). The depletion of cattle wealth because of natural calamities forced Busoga society towards more sedentary agricultural lifestyles.

As has already been noted, nature-induced devastations had meant that by the 1870s, agricultural production had become the dominant economic activity among the Basoga in the Busoga district. The devastating epidemics and consequent shift from pastoralism to crop cultivation had unintended consequences. The most important for our purposes is that the loose powers over people held by the Nkula (chiefs) who ruled the various clans were now increasingly becoming despotic”. This is because, as people turned to crop production and a more sedentary life pattern, chiefs’ powers now became more centralised as population density rose and the land became increasingly scarce. Not only chiefs, but other influential clan members such as “clan elders, diviners, grandparents, and others were able to allocate themselves more land than ordinary people...to utilise the labour of their dependents in agricultural production...[and so] could accumulate more agricultural produce in addition to livestock. This resulted in the emergence of a class of rich people in pre-colonial South Busoga, engendering an incipient process of social stratification between “those who were known as Abagagga (the rich) and Abakungu or Abakopi (the poor)” (xxxx cited in Nattabi, p. 131).

These emerging social strata could afford to buy the iron hoe to expand agricultural production as the iron hoe had proved to be “more effective in crop production than the wooden implement, Ntembe” (ibid., 131). Before the iron hoe, the wooden hoe was the most widely used in a “system of shifting cultivation and crop rotation since the land was abundant and the main scarce “factor” was labour. A few well-endowed clan members could now expand agricultural production by purchasing iron hoes and employing junior men on the farms. As Nattabi has pointed out, as the few “Abagagga (the rich), such as chiefs, war

leaders, diviners, and other related rich people could afford the iron hoe and accumulate more wealth through crop production,” it can be argued that “class differentiation” processes emerged well before colonial rule in among the Busoga people in Eastern Uganda (p.131-32). Indeed, it was the Abagagga who also could ‘exploit’ the communal work parties, or communal work, where “only food and traditional drinks (beer) were provided” to set in motion collective labour processes for the “peak of agricultural activities such as tilling land, weeding and harvesting” (p.138). What existed in the past as a form of labour based on “the principle of reciprocity” was increasingly being appropriated by a few rich families. (p.139). By reinserting these societies into the broader framework of the international capitalist economy through the mechanisms of the colonial state, colonial capitalism not only altered land ownership patterns but also redefined social and economic relations, creating lasting impacts that resonate to this day. Which I turn to shortly below.

Colonial Land Dispossession, 1895-1950s

The British declared the present-day Ugandan territory a protectorate in 1894 (Fallers, 1965). Three events unleashed the process of colonial state formation that set the political framework for current land questions and attendant agrarian crises: “the expropriation of land, the imposition of English property law as an instrument of land dispossession, and the systematic efforts to transform colonial ‘customary’ land tenure through engineering a form of indirect rule predicated on imposed chiefs ruling over ‘native reserves’ (Leys, 1975; Balaba, 2000). The policy ambivalences that characterised settler-colonial state land policy between tenure reform and redistribution reflected socio-political struggles pitting White agrarian capitalist interests and the state as an organ of settler-colonial interests versus ethnically differentiated African peasantries. These struggles, in turn, were occasioned by the social effects of the emerging settled capitalist economy in the form of an unequal distribution of the benefits and losses of the emerging agrarian capitalist economy and its articulation within international capitalist dynamics.

British imperial conquest of the territory now known as Uganda first found expression in the forceful acquisition of land from the indigenous people. This forced displacement went hand in hand with the construction of a railway line from Kampala to Mombasa to facilitate predatory export-led agriculture that would repay loans provided by the British treasury for the construction of the railway. This export-led agriculture, framed by an overarching superstructure of land laws beginning in 1901, 1902, and 1908, and culminating in the most important of 1915 with the Crown Lands Ordinance, rendered Ugandans as ‘mere tenants at the will of the crown’ (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2022). These ordinances set in motion processes that led to the massive dispossession of natives of their land and livelihoods in different phases, a process which has continued to define the land question under the neoliberal period in Uganda (Mamdani, 1996;

Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2022; Balaba, 2000; Republic of Uganda, 2002; Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2007). The colonial state acted as a mediator, reinserting local societies into the expanding dynamics of the international capitalist economy. This integration was achieved through the extraction of raw materials, the establishment of export-oriented economies, and the imposition of taxes that forced Africans into wage labour (Rodney, 1972).

Land dispossession in local communities had differentiated outcomes. Among the Busoga communities, land dispossession led to the establishment of sugarcane and cotton plantations and the installation of Indian landlords lording it over dispossessed local serfs and labourers. This plantation slavery (Cooper, 1997) was made possible by the acquisition of land along the Lake Victoria shores and was concessioned out to the British after negotiations between the Kabaka of Buganda Kingdom, under the Omanis, after the Imperial British East African Company went bankrupt in 1894 (Mamdani, 1996; Nabudere, 1987; Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2007& 2022). The 1908 Ordinance meant that Indigenous communities would no longer acquire title or have the right of access, as was increasingly demonstrated by the establishment in 1926 of native reserves in Bunya, Bugweri, and Bugabula. In Uganda's hinterlands, the land was declared "waste and unoccupied land" under the British Foreign Jurisdiction Act of 1890 effectively transferring its control to the British (Republic of Uganda, 2002:23). A subsequent East African (Lands) Order in Council of 1901 that granted settlers 21-year leases was later extended to 99 years when the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1902 and 1915 were adopted. Through these ordinances, absolute land ownership was secured on Ugandan territory, thus consolidating Uganda as a British colony.

These legal and administrative frameworks led to "the massive dispossession of local communities and transformation of customary land relations, the expansion that has continued to shape the land question in Uganda today. The three key elements of the land question in Uganda that became central in various land reform debates were the problem related to (a) the disruption of the social relation of production by cutting off natives from access to and control of land, particularly arable land; (b) 'containerizing' natives in less fertile colonially-contrived 'communal' land and land tenure systems, thus leading to land degradation and freezing ethnic relations; and (c) the elaboration of a bifurcated land administrative structure for land acquisition that subordinated African 'customary; law to European civil law (Okoth, 1976; Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 1998).

The 1915 Crown Lands Ordinance consolidated the strategy of separate development of colonial lands and native reserves and administered through a bifurcated land administration structure to stabilise colonial rule and set into motion the development of colonial capitalism in Uganda. The social relations over land among black natives were governed by state-enforced 'customary' land tenure; White settlers'

relations to land were governed by ‘civil’ privatised land rights regimes (Mamdani, 1996:145-165; Nabudere, 1980 and 1989; Lwanga-Lunyigo, 2022). The emergence of a landowning elite and a landless proletariat created new class divisions, while the commodification of land undermined traditional systems of mutual support and reciprocity (Mamdani, 1996). In pre-colonial Busoga, social hierarchies were often tied to lineage, land ownership, and political authority (Fallers, 1965). However, the introduction of colonial capitalism exacerbated these divisions by creating new economic opportunities for some while marginalising others. For instance, the commercialisation of agriculture and the establishment of cash crop economies favoured those who could access land and capital, leading to the emergence of a landed elite (Mamdani, 1996).

Native communities adjacent to the fertile lands experienced massive dispossession and, therefore, entered wage labour faster than those that lived in remote areas of the colony, such as Eastern Uganda, our present concern. Landlessness was advanced in present-day parts of the colonial cotton plantation lands in Eastern Uganda (Sorrenson, 1967 and 1968; Alila et al., 1985). Labour migration became a significant phenomenon as colonial capitalism disrupted traditional livelihoods and created the demand for wage labour. But it is also true that there was significant migrant labour already moving from Northern Uganda to South Busoga, driven by pre-existing economic pressures and the search for better opportunities. In Busoga, the expansion of cash crop production, particularly cotton and coffee, required a mobile labour force. This led to the migration of workers from densely populated areas to regions with labour shortages (Richards, 1954).

The historical shifts in labour migration patterns reveal a more nuanced narrative. While colonial policies accelerated the movement of labour, they also built upon pre-colonial and early colonial migratory trends. For example, the movement of labour from Northern Uganda to South Busoga was not solely a product of colonial capitalism but also reflected the region's historical role as a labour reservoir. This migration was further intensified by the colonial demand for labour in cash crop production, which disrupted traditional livelihoods and created new economic dependencies. The interplay between pre-colonial migration patterns and colonial economic policies highlights the complexity of labour dynamics in colonial Uganda, as well as the enduring impact of these shifts on the socio-economic landscape of regions like Busoga.

The railway built from the coast to Uganda had to repay itself from British loans. Thus, subsequent colonial development policy shaped land relations and use towards the emerging cheap labour, an extractivist colonial export agricultural-export model for the production of banana, coffee, tea, and sugar, estimated at 3 million hectares in the Busoga province, representing about 75 percent of the arable land at independence (Okoth, 1981), including gold mining enclaves in North-Southern Uganda. In this regard,

absolute and individualised security of tenure was guaranteed to whites as the pivot of the large-scale export economy. Natives' access to land on 'waste' lands was deemed a right of occupancy that could be set aside for 'development' purposes as and when the state required it (Mamdani, 1987). In short, land relations in colonial Uganda were therefore radically re-constructed to vest radical title (i.e., ultimate ownership) in the Governor of the colony, reducing natives to mere 'tenants at the will of the Crown'. This remains the relationship between the state and the rural peasantry in Uganda.

The Migrant Labour Question in Southern-Eastern Uganda Divide.

However, the Busoga district in Eastern Uganda experienced minimal land dispossession compared to the Central Province. The colonial state moulded the district as a cheap labour reserve for the rest of the Ugandan colony, as a quid pro quo to preserve the extant 'customary' land relations. The reason is that "land was abundant and labour scarce so that land with no labour on it had little value... the establishment of semi-feudal relations was the most effective short-term solution to the labour problem" (Arrighi, p. 208-9). Labour was in high demand in white farms/estates, copper and salt mining, banana and tea plantations, and the colonial civil-military service. In this way, the colonial capitalist crisis took the form of periodic migrant labour shortages correlated with the accumulation dynamics of colonial capitalism and state policy intervention to regulate migrant labour flows throughout the colonial period.

In this context, the colonial state pass system known as pass laws 'although not as formalized as the kipande system in neighboring Kenya, Uganda had passed laws that restricted the movement of African laborers and were the central regulatory device to control both movements into and out of the native reserves and act as a work record by which a reliable supply of labour from the native reserves would be guaranteed (Nattabi, 2009, 358). Colonial Governor Sir Fredrick Lugard expressed concerns with low labour supplies, "instructing district administrators to 'induce' an adequate supply of labour from the native reserves" (ibid.). The colonial state called on chiefs and headmen through circulars to ensure the availability of labour from their jurisdictions. This compulsory labour requisition was extended in the 1920s to include porters, tea pickers, copper miners, soldiers, construction workers, etc. Lwanga-Lunyiigo (xxxx) identified ideas that justified coercive labour recruitment measures. According to them, three assumptions underlie the ideological rationale for coercive labour practices:

"There are three assumptions in this line of thought [the ideology of labour control]: first, native labour by its nature is recalcitrant, and therefore requires authoritarian treatment; second, native labour lacks initiative, and therefore requires very detailed directives and instructions; and third, native labour can, within certain limits, be improved, and the 'civilizing' functions of authoritarian methods in some way legitimize those methods" (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2022, p. 106).

Suffice to note, however, that the supposed existence of "undisguised unemployment" among Basoga (and other Africans at this time) as justification for the deployment of coercive recruitment measures was a myth. The pre-colonial division of labour was such that men were not only in charge of heavy tasks such as clearing new land for cultivation, ploughing with oxen, building houses, hunting, trawl fishing, cattle herding, and long-distance trade (e.g., Munabi et al, 2009). They also often joined the women in land preparation, especially at planting and harvesting time, monopolised non-agricultural productive skills such as net-making, ironworking, etc., and socially necessary cultural activities such as Okwabya Olumbe (the commemoration of the death of an influential person through the mock fighting of evil spirits and dancing). Thus, "free" labour time, which existed, was merely seasonal.

The social and economic implications of these material changes in South Busoga were profound, as the phenomenon of migrant labour fundamentally reshaped traditional gender roles, labour dynamics, and community structures. The migration of men to seek wage labour in colonial industries, plantations, or other economic opportunities created a new socio-economic reality in which women were compelled to assume responsibilities historically designated as men's tasks. As noted by Tamale (1983, p. 79), "women [were] doing many tasks formerly known to be men's tasks (**Okwolima embiro**) [which]...include clearing bush, ploughing and even constructing granaries, or even supervising hired labourers who are often male". This shift had several significant implications for South Busoga. This redefinition of gender roles disrupted the traditional division of labour and necessitated a renegotiation of social expectations within households and communities (Mudoola, 1983; Mamdani, 1996). Women in South Busoga not only continued to perform their traditional roles, such as childcare, food preparation, and household management, but also took on additional labour-intensive tasks. This dual burden placed significant physical and emotional strain on women, often without corresponding recognition or support from the broader community (Munabi et al, 1994; Richards, 1954).

Hence, the Busoga (and other less populous communities elsewhere in Uganda, Bakingwe, Bagwe, Bahehe, Banyole) "had not entered the labour market despite taxation since they were able to expand sales of produce or stock to meet colonial demands." Increased agricultural production was preferred to wage labour because "the effort-price of cash income earnable through the sale of produce was lower than that earnable through wage employment" (Arrighi, 1973, p. 203), and certain cash crops, like banana, coffee, and cotton, could not be eaten as food (Mudoola, 1993, p. 109).

Another factor beyond effort-price of cash income, low population densities, and cultural taste was that labour recruitment faced stiff opposition from the Busoga men and women (Barya, 1997). Barya (1997) noted that resistance against labour recruitment first exploded in 1898 "in connexion with the supply of

porter labour for military operations elsewhere in Uganda. A few years later came the first refusals to pay tax” (p.855). A Busoga District Annual Report for 1940 reported the recalcitrance of the local population to migrant wage labour. The report noted the difficulty in getting people to work outside the native reserves “chiefly owing to the opposition, sometimes openly avowed, of the elders” (Nattabi, 2009, p. 363-64). Indeed, those few Busoga men who yielded to the pressure often “preferred a six-month contract,” a changed preference influenced by increasing “financial needs” in the 1920s. The economic depression of 1919-1920 seemed to break this resistance as labour force participation rates went up, checked only by the ability of households with large livestock herds to sell these to pay taxes as a substitute for participation in wage labour. Similarly, it was reported in the **Busoga** District Annual Report for 1940 that:

“The Busoga had not offered for work outside the reserve to any appreciable extent except during Hut Tax collection, when approximately 2,947 contracted themselves for work to realise their hut and poll taxes. It appears almost impossible to get the Busoga of this district to enter the labour field except under dire necessity.” [quoted in Nattabi, 2009, p. 365-66]

The reluctance of the Busoga district to enter migrant wage labour contrasts with the early entry of Busoga men in Busoga District (Jinja), where “almost 50% of the able-bodied male population between 15 and 40 years of age” had massed the colonial labour market by the 1910s (Nattabi, 2009, p. 367). The extent of forced labour was pervasive to the extent that “old men, women, and children” were drafted into working for private employers in a bid to match supply to demand (Van Zwanenberg 1975, p.145, quoted in Nattabi, 2009, p. 369-70). The Busoga Provincial labour officer, Mr. P. de V. Allen, noted in his Annual Report of 1941 that children were forced to work as far as “the sisal estates in Kamuli, Jinja and Fort Portal Hall Districts (Eastern district), also in the fuel and ballast camps on the main [railway] line [to Uganda]” (ibid., p. 369).

The employment of old men, women, and children was an indication of increased semi-proletarianization as the Busoga “was gradually ceasing to become agricultural laborers,” and according to Wolff, the coercive labour recruitment measures were finally yielding the desired match between supply and demand during the 1920s (Wolff, 1974, p. 113, cited in Nattabi, 2009, p. 370). Migrant wage labour also found its way into the new copper and salt mining activities in the 1940s in neighbouring Kasese native reserves, such as those in the Kasese area and other parts of Buganda. In Kasese, copper “prospectors complained of the difficulty of obtaining labour, and that the labourers in some cases had difficulty getting their wages” (Nattabi, 2009, p.378). Tea plantations in the neighbouring Mbale district also employed Busoga migrants. Three tea plantation companies had, by 1930, dominated the demand for Busoga wage labour:

The African Highlands Produce Company Limited, Uganda Tea Company Limited, and Uganda Tea Company. Among these companies, they employed more than 7,000 hands housed in permanent workers' quarters and were enticed with “rations of meat and milk” to stay longer (Fearn, quoted in Nattabi, 2009). We have noted pressures to pay taxes, but Busoga migrants were also motivated to obtain cash to buy livestock to pay bridewealth and other Western consumer goods like clothes. Monetised bridewealth was becoming popular because, as we noted earlier, the colonial commodity economy was emergent at a time when the Basoga had lost the cattle population to the severe rinderpest epidemic that had swept the region in the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, increased population pressures in the native reserves made it increasingly difficult to rely alone on household agricultural production to pay Poll taxes (Heyer, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 380-81).

World War II and Changes in the Migrant Labour System, 1930 to 1945

The onset of the worldwide Great Depression in the 1930s marked a significant turning point in the economic and social dynamics of the Eastern Province districts of Uganda, reflecting the intricate linkages between global economic shifts and local realities. This period was characterised by a profound transformation in the region's economic structure, driven by the interplay of external and internal factors that reshaped livelihoods, trade, and colonial policies (Mamdani, 1996; Iliffe, 1987). At the global level, the Great Depression (1929–1939) triggered a catastrophic collapse in international trade, commodity prices, and financial systems. As a primary exporter of cash crops such as cotton and coffee, Uganda's economy was deeply integrated into the global capitalist system, making it highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global demand and prices (Brett, 1973). The Eastern Province districts, which were key contributors to Uganda's agricultural output, experienced a sharp decline in income from cash crops as prices plummeted. This economic shock disrupted local economies, exacerbating poverty and undermining the purchasing power of rural households (Tosh, 1978). Additionally, the colonial state intensified its focus on cash crop production to generate revenue, often at the expense of food security and subsistence farming. This shift reinforced the dependency of local communities on volatile global markets, leaving them increasingly susceptible to external shocks (Mamdani, 1996).

The 1930s also witnessed a shift in colonial labour policies, as the economic pressures of the Great Depression prompted the colonial administration to exploit local labour more intensively. Forced labour and coercive practices became more prevalent, particularly in the construction of infrastructure projects aimed at stimulating economic recovery (Walube, 1973). These measures generated widespread discontent and resistance among local populations, laying the groundwork for later anti-colonial movements (Mamdani, 1996). The crisis also disrupted traditional social structures and labour patterns, as

many individuals were forced to seek alternative livelihoods or migrate to urban centers in search of work (Iliffe, 1987).

Busoga households sought more distant and lengthier wage labour contracts to face the depressed economic conditions affecting household needs. From the 1930s onwards, a significant proportion of rural households in Eastern Province placed more and extended emphasis on wage labour and less on crop production in the native reserves (Nattabi, 2009, p. 382). Forced taxation appeared to have slackened as a driving force behind the involvement of Basoga in wage labour participation. The increased involvement in wage labour also reflected changing needs and wants in the 1940s. As is typical of the semi-proletarian condition everywhere, most “civilized” Busoga households increasingly “wanted cash to pay bridewealth and to buy western imported goods” (Nattabi, 2009, p. 398) that had become part of their “necessary” consumption basket (cf. Arrighi, 1973).

This process of market civilization was to have far-reaching consequences for the attitude of households towards wage work, white settlers, gender and elderly authority, and political participation not only locally but also at a colony-wide level. The characterization of Busoga as pathetic was a widely shared notion in early studies (e.g., Munabi, 1988) and in the colonial administration. As the 1940 Busoga District Annual Report noted: “It was the custom of early district reports to write descriptions such as ‘the apathetic Basoga, ...the natural laziness of these people... the inherent lethargy of the Basoga made him a backward unprogressively type of native’” (quoted in Nattabi, 2009, p. 398-99). Now after years of increasing involvement in migrant wage labor, district colonial reports acknowledged Basoga men and women’s avid responses to market opportunities, to the fact that as a result of exploiting those opportunities, the Basoga were found working in all occupational forms throughout the colony, facilitated by the construction of roads and communication networks into their native reserves; the Basoga could be recognized as “progressive industrious people” (ibid.).

In short, the Basoga had become economic men expected to participate in the expanding colonial wage labour market without the “prodding” of the colonial state as “free” wage laborers. As Nattabi has noted, this process of “civilization” “was achieved through the process of forced women peasantization (of women) and proletarianization” (of men) characterized by predominantly male wage labour and women-dominated agricultural household commodity production expanded noticeably from the 1930s” (Nattabi, 2009, p.399). Migrant labour was the basis for the incipient process of rural socio-economic differentiation as remarked by Bisaso (1997, p.28). Nakaweesi (xxx) also noted the emergence of a rural petit-bourgeoisie as the outcome of this rural socio-economic differentiation” process (p.399).

Labour formation and struggles under colonialism until Independence (1962)

Suffice it to note that the rise in labour demand that followed the outbreak of World War II was for military purposes. Unlike the early 1910s, the colonial state initiated an all-out mobilization of colony-wide resources for war purposes. In a 1942 Busoga District Annual Report, the Colonial Office in London was alerted to the possibility that intense military labour recruitment could disrupt local agricultural production for use and distort the local social structure (Nattabi, 2009, p.401). According to some researchers, "nearly 30,000 men...in the army alongside approximately 110,000 in civil employment outside the native reserves" were drafted for military service (ibid., p. 402). Out of about "262,000 adult males in the native reserves, 60,274 were ineffective for reasons of ill health and disablement, only the balance being capable of engaging in agricultural production" (ibid., 402). From a situation of labour shortage at the outset of colonial rule, the advance of colonial capital accumulation had yielded its locally characteristic reserve army of labour in the form of a pauperized population segment among the Basoga, confirming Arrighi's study of labour supplies in Rhodesia that the capitalist sector creates its surplus labour rather than the supposed original existence of 'disguised unemployment' in precolonial African societies.

Acute war-induced labour shortages meant that Basoga society was experiencing a drain of its labour resources, so much so that the sugarcane, cotton, and tea plantations that had earlier absorbed much of the labour were equally concerned about labour shortages. The recruitment of women and children returned with devastating effects, particularly on food production, implying a crisis of social reproduction. Between 1905 and 1945, Basoga land was hit hard by "four main colonial famines in 1906-7, 1917- 19, 1928-29 and in 1942-43, [including] severed localized food shortages in various parts of Eastern district" (Kafuuko, 1988, p. 21). As a result, a Busoga District Annual Report observed in 1941 that cotton and sugar cane Estates in Kakira and the District Council "discharged some labour early in 1943 on account of food shortage" (Nattabi, 2009, p. 404). The situation was so dire that colonial employers cast a region-wide net in their attempts to get a hold of laborers as far as the Belgian Congo for laborers! (ibid.). Overall, dire labour shortages saw the resurgence of "forced (conscript) labour which had been discouraged in the 1920s...indicating that the drain on the population had been too intense," entailing the forced drafting of a large number of Basoga young men, as high as 12,000 in 1944 alone, at the expense of labor-time in the peasant sector (Busoga District Annual Report, 1941, pp. 7-8, quoted in Nattabi, 2009, p. 404-5).

The drain of labour resources in Basoga society had unintended consequences in various forms. One was the marginalization of women by relegating them to the unprecedented burden of "subsistence" peasant production on account of changes in the sexual division of labour from the 1930s. Studies (e.g., Hay, 1972; Francis, 1995) have observed that as men spent increasingly long stints (more than six months) as

migrant wage labour from the native reserves, women increasingly bore the burden of household agricultural work, even as their husbands and male relatives occasionally remitted money back home, often to pay extra hands to assist women in tasks that were previously performed by men or in cooperation with other homesteads, as in *saga*, or communal work parties in the past (Nattabi, 2009, p. 409-10). The male-dominated colonial migrant labour system in Uganda was, therefore, the prime cause of the increased work burden on Basoga women (Hay, 1972; Mudoola 1993; Francis, 1995; Nattabi, 2009). In addition, there was, according to Pala (1983), “a growing differentiation among households in rural Basoga land between those who [had] the cash to hire labour as opposed to those who needed cash and had to sell their labor. In other words, there was emerging a group of women who had access to their husband's cash and thus had the option of contracting work out to others” (p.81). Changing social differentiation trends reinforced male Victorian attitudes towards women that found their way into the heads of Basoga men. Women’s increasing involvement in wage labour is associated with promiscuity. Indeed, research has found that Basoga elders and colonial administrators collaborated to assert their control over young Basoga women under suspicion of prostitution (Okuro, 2010).

Along with changes in the sexual division of labor, one other common denominator is that “lineage hierarchies” began to crumble under the weight of proletarianization as young men were increasingly able to break out of the tutelage and control of the family, village elders, and chiefs. **Ayamo** observers of the contemporary scene claim that “propertyless young men gradually lost their dependence on elders for access to means of production and women...[because] they could create their income by selling their labour power...[and] had less and less need of elders in putting together a bride price. According to the observation of one colonial administrator in Busoga Eastern district, an observation that was typical of reports during this period, young men were increasingly defiant of their sub-chiefs and elderly members of their families since they had no control over the wages paid to the male migrant worker family member thus leading to a fundamental reconstitution of the social relations of production and reproduction. Erstwhile control over youth, women, and bridewealth was increasingly eroded, leaving “the chief and his headmen with merely their dignity and personal influence bereft of their original powers” (Nattabi, 2009, p. 407-8). Attitudes towards personal autonomy were spreading fast among the newly returned young men after long stints in the colonial labour markets. Indeed, one of the most important impacts of the massive involvement of young men in colonial labour markets was the potential they had, for they held “threatened ethnic unity and control,” a disposition which was reinforced by those who had converted to Christianity and therefore “wanted to alter some of the traditional customs and introduce new ones that met the more advanced (Western) ideas that they had acquired from the places where they were employed” (Ibid., p.406-7). In general, studies of Busoga (as elsewhere in Africa), found that

“detrribalized” natives were blamed for the perceived generalized decline in tribal morality and authority, which were thought to govern Busoga society before colonial rule (Kitimbo, 2010).

The cumulative result of these changes in Busoga society meant that the relatively well-off migrant households were increasingly associated not only with migrant wage labour incomes and individualistic attitudes but also with urban lifestyles, or Ab'ebisolo, meaning one who could establish themselves as ‘independent’ rent-paying households and individuals in urban centers away from the native reserves. The colonial wage economy, particularly in Eastern Uganda, was structured around the exploitation of cheap labor, with migrant workers often leaving their rural homes to work in urban centers, plantations, or infrastructure projects (Richards, 1973; Mamdani, 1996). This system created a clear divide between those who could access wage labour and those who could not, leading to the emergence of distinct social classes within rural communities. Wealthier households, often headed by individuals with access to wage employment, were able to invest in land, education, and other assets, while poorer households remained reliant on subsistence farming and occasional labour opportunities (Tosh, 1978). This differentiation was further exacerbated by the colonial policy of paying individual wages rather than family wages, which placed the burden of social reproduction—such as childcare, food production, and household maintenance—on women and the elderly in rural areas (Iliffe, 1987).

The rural-urban linkages established during the colonial period have persisted and evolved in post-colonial Uganda. Migrant labour continues to play a crucial role in the economy, with many Basoga and other Ugandans moving to urban centers such as Kampala, Jinja, and Mbale and abroad in the Middle East to countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar in search of employment opportunities. These movements have created a complex web of economic and social connections between rural and urban areas. Remittances from urban workers remain a vital source of income for rural households, enabling them to invest in agriculture, education, and small-scale enterprises (Ellis, 2000).

It established men as mobile proletarians and women as peasants tied to rural land and under the reactionary influence of “institutionalized” patriarchal Busoga traditions (Kitimbo, 2010). Busoga rural class formation across precolonial and colonial history affirms the contention that “the process of growing African dependence on exchange with the capitalist sector tended to be cumulative” (Arrighi 1973, p. 212). He further observed that “As cash payments became an essential part of society, traditional transactions, such as marriage payments, began to assume a cash value, further increasing the necessary character of participation in the money economy,” including the pursuit of missionary education as a prerequisite for successful participation in the expanding colony-wide labour markets (ibid, 2120). But as alluded to in this paper, the semi-proletarianization of Busoga households threatened rural social order. It

is unsurprising, therefore, that after massive colonial land dispossessions and the drain on labour resources, a central preoccupation of the colonial state up to the end of colonial rule was the ‘native question’ (Mamdani, 1996).

Colonialism as an instrument of imperialism went beyond mere appropriation of resources. It was also intimately tied up with mechanisms to address the ‘Native Question’ (Mamdani, 1996), i.e., "how to organize the labour process while maintaining geographic, political and moral control over the ‘natives’" (Moyo and Yeros, 2005, 36). The constant threat of widespread peasant revolts in the context of colonial white minority despotism led to the establishment of ethnic native reserves governed according to "their" ‘customs’, to ‘protect’ natives from dubious ‘treaties’ with white settlers and to create a buffer against the invasion of white settlements by nomadic pastoralists (through the creation of ‘closed’ districts mainly in the arid and semi-arid areas (ASALs) of Northern Uganda), and to institute repressive labour recruitment regime serving the needs of the colonial economy through the 1906 Master and Servants ordinances to regulate movement, imposition of the hut and poll taxation in 1918, forced recruitment into British imperial armies and forced cultivation of cash crops to service the urban capitalist sector and the British metropole. In reality, these colonial extractivist and containment policies were resented and thus sparked policy reversals. Furthermore, “pockets of rebellion” had been occurring here and there in the colony, including the 1913-1914 Nankno revolt (Arama, 2007); the 1947 Bugweri women’s revolt, the Lamogi Rebellion of 1911–1912 (Anderson, 2005); and the 1907 Nyangire revolt that occasioned by the Nyangire famine (Arama, 2007; Omwoyo, 2015). The squatter population residing in white settler farms had also ballooned between 1918 and 1928 and emerged as the nucleus of the first open and sustained peasant resistances under colonial rule, not least.

In light of these responses by the natives, colonial policy reversals sought to step up agricultural production to meet metropolitan needs through the promotion of expanded peasant production (Cowen, 1982). First, the Uganda Morris Carter-led Land Commission was set up in 1932 to address peasant grievances against the state land policies (Balaba, 2000). The commission initiated late colonial state land “improvement” programs under social pressures induced by land degradation and the declining food production in the native reserves (Fearn, 1961; Heyer, 1971; Nabudere, 1987 & 1989; McWilliam, 1976). In the white highlands, British aristocratic and South African white settler landowners had established themselves in the 40s and 50s, as large-scale plantation owners controlling land sizes ranging between 400 and 800 hectares (Sorrenson, 1968:67-68). This contradictory policy stance took the form of trying to preserve the customary land tenure system yet also holding the possibility of setting aside customary lands for ‘development’ purposes. The latter possibility meant the looming threat of renewed dispossession of peasant producers.

In the Busoga district, the Carter Commission considered the question of increased population density and the state's native reservation policy. The key question it set itself to answer was, "Whether the Native reserves of the three Kavirondo Districts [former name of Western Uganda],...are adequate to the needs of a population,... and how the land could be intensively exploited to yield incomes for capitalization of the land given the assumed relative "abundance" and "unutilization" of the land?" (Lwanga-Lunyigo 2022). Unlike the smallholder cash crop "revolution" that followed land consolidation in the Busoga province lands among the in Jina in Eastern Uganda, the Commission superimposed the establishment of a sugar plantation economy on top of the existing 'customary' land tenure system. According to Lwanga-Lunyigo (2022), "The establishment of a sugar industry to expand commodity production among the Busoga found a largely 'subsistence' peasantry unprepared for intensified commodity production. In any case, the new agricultural policy assumed state-owned sugar plantations would absorb the rural surplus labour among Basoga households. The land tenure system was presumed a major hindrance to expanded commodity production and an agrarian revolution similar to the fertile central lands of Buganda until the neoliberal period in the 1990s. However, the extent of social differentiation in Buganda was different from that of Basoga land. In Busoga land, class antagonisms assumed gender, generational, and clan dimensions because landlessness is minimal. Some scholars have argued that at the height of struggles over land resettlement schemes in the 1960s, Busoga political struggles were oriented towards protecting and preserving the customary land tenure system from state consolidation programs for fear of losing land rights and clan elders' fear of losing their authority with the entrenchment of colonially-appointed chiefs through reproducing the ganda colonial system. Chiefs in Busoga did not take advantage of their administrative positions to accumulate land and enter into commodity production like their counterparts in Buganda."

It appears that peasant struggles among the Baganda reversed the Carter Commission's recommendations. The outbreak of the "Women's Revolt" or " Busoga Women's Riot" peasant uprising in the 1930s emerged from the internal class struggles that landed Baganda elite colonial collaborators and the landless. In consequence, another Swynnerton Commission was set up in 1954 that made a recommendation for the intensification of agricultural development in the crown lands and native reserves to address peasant grievances once more, but this time to stem the tide of radical nationalist mobilizations through the cultivation of a class of smallholder farmers (Okoth, 1991; Mbazira et al., 1994). In South Busoga Province, however, opposition to land consolidation never met the same policy response from the state as it did in Central Uganda, perhaps as a result of "a relative absence of landlessness as a political issue" among the Basoga in colonial times. The Swynnerton plan affected this political strategy for calming the countryside by promoting land titling for expanded cash crop farming to boost the colonial

economy's internal and external war needs. In the strategy of the plan, the point was to encourage the "consolidation and registration of land to encourage the emergence of a class of commercial farmers who would gradually buy out the smaller subsistence-oriented production units of 'uneconomic' size: rich Africans will be able to acquire more land and bad or poor creating a landed and a landless class. This is a normal step in a country (Swynnerton, 1954: 10, cited in Nabudere, 1987, 1989, p.63-64). The surplus labour ensuing from this process was to constitute a reserve for the large commercial farms and growing industrial sectors (Haugerud, 1989, p.63-64).

The colonial state's consolidation of a rural conservative small farmer class altered African land relations and set the stage for the present land problems bedeviling post-colonial Uganda. The population density in native reserves tended to weaken households' ability to adopt technologies aligned with the evolving market economy. Hence increased population pressures led to Uganda's huge number of her population labour migration in the Middle East to countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar for livelihoods in the form of jobs most especially women and young mothers, demand for food, intensified the competition for resources between classes, ethnic groups, clans, and families, and unintentionally cultivated a growing number of disgruntled land-hungry peoples as the social basis for the struggles for independence. The point is that the state was willing to concede to a limited form of land redistribution to contain radical challenges from below, but within parameters that preserved the policy of individual land tenure, a policy which was also to be re-confirmed following the adoption of the East African Royal Commission report of 1953-55. The report recommended similar land titling and privatization policies. Place this argument to the broader imperialist structure as a framework for making sense of these policies of the colonial state.

The Post-Independence Period and After

The incoming post-independence government under Obote and Amani came to embrace the extant colonial land policies and continued to treat 'customary' rights to land as subordinate to the titled and individualized land rights (Ojambo, 1975; Okoth, 1991; Arama, 1984; 2000; Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2007). The Obote regime did not resolve this long-outstanding bifurcated land question but extended colonial land tenure reformism centered on piecemeal land resettlement as a strategy to contain social unrest and protect the White large-farm export sector, most extensively in the **settlement and** land redistribution scheme (Ojambo, 1975; Kinkumu, 1985; Masagazi, 1978). Uganda's bimodal agrarian structure inherited from the colonial period comprised a large-scale commercial landed property and an impoverished smallholder sector located predominantly in customary land tenure regimes (Kayeyera, 1989; Oloka-Onyango, 1988). As such, more continuity than change characterizes Uganda's neocolonial transition. The transitional pact included landed property clauses in the independence constitutions to guarantee

capital and colonial privilege and as part of “negotiations” with imperialism for concessions towards the local ruling classes and groups controlling the postcolonial state.

Fearful of destabilizing the central prop of the settler-colonial political-economic framework, the Obote regime skirted around the problem of landlessness and social justice to embrace wholesale the colonial agrarian structure, albeit deracialized through “wiling-buyer, willing-seller” modes of land acquisition which benefitted the powerful classes and groups with control of the nascent independence regime. Most literature points to this continuity in colonial agrarian structures as the basis for the perpetuation of unequal land ownership and use structures (Mamdani, 2020, 1996, 1987; 1975; Wasserman, 1973; Nabudere, 1987; Arama, 1984; Okoth, 1976 and 1991). The inherited agrarian structures were also the basis for the ideologically polarized politics that was to ensue, pitting a liberal wing led by Milton Obote and John Kakonge and radical nationalists led by Akena p’Ojok, Chris Rwakasisi and Paulo Muwanga, who advocated for radical land redistribution policies (Harberson, 1973:90-101). These class struggles over land shaped national and local political processes until the repression of radical dissent under the de jure one-party state after an attempted coup against the Obote regime in 1971. Increased landlessness among growing land-based inequalities continued to exist as a threat to the changing regimes.

To be sure, the post-independence resettlement schemes established the basis for an agrarian-led economic growth period for slightly over a decade until the late 1970s, registering impressive indicators on health, education, employment, and forex earnings. The country's economic performance earned it the status of a model of “successful” capitalist development in Africa, including the stability established. However, things began to change for the worse with externally-induced setbacks such as the oil crisis of 1973 and the drought of 1974. These events led to mounting national debt obligations the country never recovered from. In the 1980s, structural adjustment programs were imposed as policy conditionalities for external IFI financial support. Correspondingly, with the decline of agriculture-led growth, the road was set for reversal of the little gains since independence in the rural sectors. In short, the neocolonial transition in Uganda entailed the continuation of the settler-colonial mode of dominating the rural areas long after the granting of independence from the British colonialists.

The Museveni/NRM/NRA Regime and Neoliberal Transition (1986 to present).

Under the Museveni regime, the land question was instrumentalized for similar reasons. Like the Obote regime, attempts were made to address the colonial land question. The regime appointed a Parliamentary Select Committee to probe the land problem of the Lake Victoria basin of Uganda including Basoga, Buganda, and other regions (Onyango, 2000; Okoth, 1981). The Basoga land question takes the form of the dominance of Indian and Asian landlords with sugar cooperations and plantation farming and

squatters on these lands alongside lowering sugarcane prices for the out-growers schemes. This question has been a central issue that has animated regional politics under Museveni and has occasionally exploded into local native/settler ethnic violence around electoral cycles, particularly since political liberalization in the 1990s.

According to Guloba et al., (2009), the Museveni regime emulated the cultivation of Obote's sociopolitical power base around allocating "land grabbing". Thus, in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, Museveni embarked on a similar process of using public land for political patronage. But the regime embarked on patronage politics of land at a time when the Ugandan economy was under stress from SAP conditionalities, the economy was on a downward spiral and opposition to the regime was cumulating around dissatisfied regime elites who had gradually defected from the ruling party to found new political parties. In this context, *the National Management Land Paper No. 1 of 1989*, the most important policy document to address the land issue under Museveni, affirmed the continuity of the colonial land tenure policy and legal framework as the basis for the neoliberal reforms underway (Republic of Uganda, 1989). Given the large-scale agrarian capitalist development and the property relations underlying it had reached their historic limits, the Museveni regime resorted to a frenzy of "land grabbing" through which the regime built its support bases among the Basoga and Baganda elites and other regional political bosses. In this context, class formation assumed a violent process that culminated in the instrumentalization of ethnic identities by political and economic elites fighting to survive under the harsh environment of neoliberal policies that gradually eroded the material basis of the large-farm export sector dominated by the Baganda elites (Kanyinga, 1998). Another attempt in the recent neoliberal period to address the land question under the Museveni regime, still in 2022 has been the renewed focus on contemporary Uganda land reform in the context of constitutional reforms (Mwavu et al., 2018).

Neoliberal Land Reform Policy and Migration Experiences in Uganda's Neoliberal Age

Neoliberal structural adjustment policies have complicated the crisis of agrarian accumulation in Uganda it ostensibly set out to resolve. The extraverted mono-cultural basis of the economy tends to reinforce the external imbalances of the economy and the structures of dependency instituted under colonial capitalism. The traditional and non-traditional cash crop boom expected to boost rural have stagnated in the face of declining terms of trade, the escalating costs of agricultural inputs, rural social services, and poor rural infrastructure. As a result, neoliberal macroeconomic and agricultural sector policy incentives introduced in the 1980s and dramatically in the 1990s had regressive impacts on the evolution of Uganda's land tenure reform towards individualization and titling, thus reinforcing colonial land reform patterns. Increased population growth has also led to disproportionate outcomes that affect rural women.

According to Wambuzi (2002), “In the absence of alternative sources of off-farm livelihood, women and men face the prospect of gaining access to ever-diminishing patches of land, with little or no developmental benefit to them beyond the affirmation of their rights and the (not insignificant) advantage of residential security” (Wambuzi, 2002, p. 66). Thus, depressed agricultural production, rising land scarcities, and diminished urban job opportunities to absorb the rapidly expanding rural population have meant that, until the 2000s in Uganda, redistributive land reform had remained a potential rather than a real instrument of broad-based rural socioeconomic and political change in Uganda.

The empirical evidence of changes in land tenure and distribution of landholdings suggests that neoliberal land policy reform ideals are rarely achieved. Long-standing evidence in Uganda has rejected the myth of “a strong connection between individualization, increased smallholder credit consumption, increased private investment, and more 'efficient' land allocation” (Nabwiso-Bulima, 1992, p. 60). One of the earliest well-known criticisms of land tenure reform by Barrows and Patton (1990) states that in Uganda land became a marketable phenomenon - even in an irredeemable purchase form - before the introduction of legally individualized property, that legal individualization led to a rush for land titles only in areas of high population pressure and that even where land titling was highly advanced, most holders of customary rights retained recognizable claims to land in practice. On the other hand, land titling excluded certain categories of customary tenants from occupation rights (married sons, and women). Most subsequent successions have gone unregistered” (Nabwiso-Bulima, 1992, p. 60). Another unintended consequence of titling is that land markets failed to emerge (; Mwanika et al., 1989, p. 20); land consolidation has also been checked by equally centrifugal forces of pervasive subdivisions (Nabwiso-Bulima, 1992, p. 60). Another consistent finding is that titling efforts have benefitted mostly those uninterested in farming; most land buyers are non-farmers: “Their purchases tend to be underutilized. While land titling has led to greater formal and informal credit availability for large landholders, it has not done so for smaller ones. Moreover, even amongst larger holders, it has not been associated with any significant increase in agricultural investment;” most new investments have been off-farm enterprises (Nabwiso-Bulima, 1992, p. 60).

Neoliberal land tenure reforms have also tended to curtail women’s land rights. In Uganda, the land titling and adjudication process “excluded women, undermining their security on plots to which they formerly held secure use rights, and their access to credit was curtailed because lenders required land ownership as collateral (Wambuzi, 2002a; Nadiope, 2000). The changing balance of relations between the patrilineal sub-clan and individual clan members conditioned by colonial agricultural development has led to privatized, male ownership of land, disadvantaging women” (Musamba, 2007, p. 55). Firstly, land adjudication committees were male-dominated; in Basoga land, for instance, all adjudication committee

members were male (Lubogo, 1988). Moreover, although all land rights, including under customary law, had to be recorded during adjudication, adjudication committees lacked the skills and time to do so. Registration was usually made to male household heads, thereby undermining women's unregistered secondary rights. In Zibondo, in South Province, for instance, only 7% of the plots were registered to women as joint or exclusive right-holders and 4% as exclusive owners" (Lubogo, 1988).

Another pillar of the recent neoliberal land reform policy proposal through the Land Act relates to the issue of "historical injustices; pastoral land issues; Victoria Lake basin region land issues; the land rights of minority and marginalized groups, women, inhabitants of informal settlements, and children; land used for informal activities; and the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on agricultural production and access to land rights" (Musamba & Rukooko, 2008, p. 166). The proposed mechanisms for dealing with them centre around a proposed "land redistribution program aimed at providing the disadvantaged and the poor with access to land for residential and productive purposes" (ibid.). Another mechanism is the need to institute "land restitution measures to restore rights to those who have been unjustly deprived of their land. The restitution proposal recognizes that the lack of access to land may be due to past colonial and post-colonial state land alienations of community land. To this end, the government proposes to develop a legal and institutional framework for handling land restitution claims that have arisen since 1895, when Uganda became a colony" (Musamba & Rukooko, 2008, p. 167). The point is to recognize that "conflicting rights to land, claims of lineage, and the role of traditional leaders should be taken into account in the creation of Uganda's land restitution program. The diversity of ethnic communities and the extent to which narratives of land dispossession have gained political resonance among key political actors as a conduit to building political alliances with their constituencies are bound to complicate the program" (Musamba & Rukooko, 2008, p. 168).

Although past land redistribution "provided for economic stability during the transition to independence and ensured that the stability of the Ugandan economy remained unaltered, land redistribution through resettlement schemes did not address the problem of landlessness" (Kayaga et al., 2007). Increasing land scarcity has meant that land available for resettling landless and land-short households is inadequate to resolve landlessness and help meet reproductive needs. Instead, "land concentration has proceeded without any appreciable superior performance of large-scale farms and agrarian revolutions as happened elsewhere. It is also apparent that the government opted to maintain the existing structure of land ownership except those alterations effected through land markets to provide natural alterations" (Kayaga et al., 2007) in the structure of land ownership and access. The alteration in land ownership structures that has taken place has primarily been through "subdivisions of large farms acquired from Asian capital by land buying cooperatives or companies. Sensibilities around land redistribution and the ethnic overtones it

acquired over time led the government to put the program under the carpet. These ethnic divisions reproduced several complex dimensions that continue to make land distribution issues a complex political and legal matter today” (Kayaga et al.).

One of the most visible dimensions of the land question in Uganda today is the issue of the use of land for political patronage purposes, or “redistribution from above” (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2007). Thus, post-colonial regimes have turned to expropriating public land to reward loyal groups and individuals. This form of political patronage deepened in tandem with the declining capacity of the state to provide development since the mid-1980s. With dwindling political legitimacy, the state turned to rewarding loyalists by giving them land which they in turn sold at inflated prices to public institutions. Political patronage rapidly led to land grabbing of public land including land on which squatters were settled. Grabbing of public land meant a reduction in the amount of land that would have been used to resettle the landless. Land allocations to strengthen political patronage thus ignored landlessness and reduced attention on the settlement schemes altogether. This confirms that elite-led land grabbing expresses the dominant tendency towards primitive accumulation under neoliberal SAPs. Neoliberal land reform policies have deepened this tendency instead of addressing issues of agrarian accumulation at the heart of the political-economic crisis.

The Second dimension of the land question in Uganda today is the significant reduction of interest in settlement schemes as a means of addressing the land question (Lwanga-Lunyiigo, 2007, 2007; Kayaga et al., 2007). In many of the settlement schemes established after the settlement and land redistribution scheme, beneficiaries often included people who were not bona fide members of the landless. Government officials took the opportunity to acquire more land, while politicians saw the schemes as an opportunity to reward their supporters. The schemes thus became an avenue for land concentration rather than a means for resolving landlessness. “Third has been ethnicization and subsequent politicization of the land question. The ethnic structure of land ownership that followed the establishment of the settlement and land redistribution scheme meant continued ethnicization of land in multi-ethnic areas. The politics of this structure came to the fore with the re-introduction of multi-party politics in the early 1990s when the ruling elites picked on the land question to mobilize ethnic support. Ethnicity and politics intertwined to shape the character of the political transition from a one-party regime to a multi-party democracy. The transition has been violent; inter-ethnic conflicts over land in which many groups of the Banyala, Ndorobo, Baruli & Banyoro ethnic communities were evicted from some of the settlement schemes in the south-Busoga Forest Reserves have increased (Kayaga et al. 2007).

The findings of this study disclose two important characteristics of the contemporary agrarian structure in the Busoga region. The trend toward commoditization of household agricultural production under the neoliberal policy and institutional context is examined throughout the paper. Neoliberal economic policy incentives have tended to condition the commoditization of production inputs but also labor, as farm households in the district are increasingly forced to include the population's labour migration in the Middle East to countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar away from the countryside. Attempts by farming households to intensify production are highly differentiated based on unequal access to land and labor.

On the other hand, the reproduction of the household and the farm enterprise is based on the deepening of household straddling of farm and off-farm occupations which have set in motion differentiated rural class formation processes. The variation in rural class formation can be ascribed to the unequal socio-economic preconditions (land, labor, implements, for household agricultural commodity production. Furthermore, because the state policy and institutional context establish differing linkages with class-differentiated farming households in the district, the level of reproduction of farms and families differs widely under current crisis conditions. Therefore, the rural farming population in the Mayuge district can neither be regarded as a homogeneous group of producers nor assumed to deploy homogeneous farming strategies to survive.

As alluded to before, the introduction of sugarcane as a cash crop in the district shifted land use patterns away from food crops. Similar shifts occurred with labour time allocations. Empirical studies show that “labour inputs differ between sugar-growing households and non-sugar-growing households. The amount of household and hired labour is similar for local maize, sorghum, and peanuts. For hybrid maize and tobacco (commonly thought of as cash crops), the sugar households consistently use less household and total labour per hectare but about 25 percent more hired labour than non-sugar farmers. Many of the functions required for sugarcane production are carried out by the [local Kakaire sugar] factory at a source of the Nile and Lake Victoria to the farmer” (IFPRI, 1987, p. 20). Roughly 126 days of hired labour per hectare was generated because of the introduction of sugarcane production. Thus, the total demand for wage labour by sugar producers is 32 days of labour per hectare hired directly by the farmer and 126 days of occasional labour provided and charged for by the factory. The amount of factory-provided labour implies that wage-earning opportunities for the landless in the area served by the sugar scheme are substantial” (IFPRI, 1987, p.20).

The sugarcane out-grower model is characterized by a rigid sexual division of labor. Women are responsible for cultivating and trading household food crops, whereas men are responsible for cash crop

cultivation, particularly sugarcane. The pattern and amount of family hired, and total labour employed in food production is more or less similar across different agricultural households. Although this study does not have disaggregated labour data disaggregated by gender, gendered labour time allocation for food crop cultivation is likely similar for women across sugarcane and non-sugarcane-producing households. Thus, household labour in this case is rarely substitutable for food and sugarcane cash crops.

Thus, in the expansion of livelihood diversification, one major finding of this project is the trend toward declining viable land sizes in the district; land sizes are too small for sustainable ‘subsistence’ production. This trend has forced most households to combine agricultural production and off-farm economic activities. An IFPRI survey already pointed to the importance of “outside sources of income” in the late 1980s including the population’s labour migration in the Middle East to countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar away from the countryside. The bulk of neoliberal policy incentives have been hijacked by the brokers, and external recruitment agencies in neoliberal globalization and policy-oriented towards export-oriented employment. They found that very few households could manage to reproduce farm and household solely by selling agricultural commodities.

The gendered effects of rural class formation are such that women are also increasingly forced to seek extra work in the rural non-farm sector. However, those well-endowed households with land, tractors, access to credit, and social networks tend to derive above-average agricultural and non-agricultural incomes. Thus, patterns of off-farm employment have tended to be gendered as women seek work opportunities that are closer to home and mesh with their household routines. In contrast, men can seek work far away from home and for long periods, including the population’s labour migration in the Middle East to countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar away from the countryside. Due to the high demand for domestic labour in the GCC states and other Middle Eastern states, many Ugandan migrant workers in the Middle East are women working as domestic workers³. As per the above narrative, this is how capitalism produces and reproduces labor– power and house activities include domestic work, child-raising, and sex work – as well as subsistence forms of farming that in many countries are an integral part of housework. Fraser (2014) constitutes people as social and cultural beings and entails the work of ‘socializing the young, building communities, producing and reproducing the shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation.

Thus, in Uganda just like elsewhere in the world, women play an integral role in social reproduction processes, and now their movement to the Middle East in huge numbers to work as domestic laborers has affected domestic work in agriculture in the countryside since many of the women who go to the Middle

³ Interview with Eastern regional coordinator from Uganda External Recruitment Agency, 27th December 2024, Iganga.

East tend to come from rural areas where agriculture is the main source of sustenance. While working in Saudi Arabia, I washed clothes, cooked for the children, cleaned the house and the compound, and generally took care of the household. I also ironed the children's clothes⁴. Thus, this departure of women from the countryside led to a chilling effect on how households or even communities manage agricultural activities. Fraser's (2016) notion that every form of capitalist society harbors a deep-seated social reproductive crisis tendency or contradiction. On one hand, Fraser says, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation whilst on the other capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies.

The bulk of neoliberal policy incentives have been hijacked by the brokers, and external recruitment agencies in neoliberal globalization and policy-oriented towards export-oriented employment. These unequal patterns of access to land, labor, and implements that shape farming outcomes and the benefits obtained tend over time to shape the processes of rural class formation.

Numerous Marxist feminist theorists assert that the exploitation of women has been a fundamental driving force behind capitalist accumulation. The shift from feudalism to capitalism marked a pivotal moment characterized by the institutionalization of a deeply oppressive sexual division of labour (Federici, 2014). This framework not only sought to exacerbate inequality but also played a crucial role in reinforcing patriarchal structures that continue to impact society today. By distinguishing between work done at home and work done outside the home—a distinction that was not as pronounced during feudalism—capitalism reshaped gender relations. It did this by devaluing women's roles in society while simultaneously controlling their unpaid labour through the predominantly male wage system.

Based on the foregoing analysis, two patterns of 'straddling' appear typical in this district. The first type of straddling consists of engaging in petty trade, migrant labor, and agricultural work and is characterized by persistently low incomes which are used largely for both buying household needs and farm inputs. These livelihood activities require minimal skills and capital to establish oneself but are often irregular. Accumulation here is elusive and money obtained from one occupation is used to sustain agricultural production of food staples. Therefore, this stratum demands more and better land access to land primarily for the survival and reproduction of the farm and family at low living standards.

Conclusion.

This paper has undertaken an exploratory and in-depth examination of labour migration, its conceptual meaning, and how capitalism, power, and gender inequities have shaped its current gendered patterns

⁴ Interview with women migrant returnee from Qatar, 27th December 2024, Iganga, Mayuge

globally. The findings, based on scholarly evidence, demonstrate that labour migration is deeply embedded in systemic capitalist power relations, which perpetuate gendered and racialized hierarchies. These dynamics are rooted in colonial legacies and reinforced by neoliberal policies, creating a global labour migration system that sustains inequalities between core and periphery countries. Labour migration relies on colonial factors such as gender and race to ensure its continuation, with capitalist material relations sustaining hierarchical relationships between distinct colonial identities. This has resulted in the current gendered labour movement patterns observed worldwide. In Uganda, the neoliberal land reform policies represent more continuity than change from colonial land reform patterns. The country retains a bi-modal agrarian structure, evolving into a tri-modal system dominated by large commercial farmers who control larger landholdings, high-value crops, productivity, technology, infrastructure, and income. Neoliberal land and agrarian reforms, characterized by minimal agrarian reforms, limited land redistribution, and market-led land titling programs, have exacerbated rural inequalities and tensions. The semi-proletarianization of rural households, coupled with state repression, has deepened contradictions in land tenure reforms. While early post-independence struggles for land redistribution achieved limited success, the 1980s neoliberal Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) halted these efforts. Today, land reform is dominated by central government bureaucracies, politicians, and business elites, leading to elite land grabbing, ethnic conflicts, and the individualization of farm ownership. Customary norms and practices continue to influence land and social relations, particularly in regions like Busoga in Eastern Uganda, even as rural class formation progresses. Colonial legacies and neoliberal reforms have also established the conditions for new migration patterns in Uganda. The postcolonial neoliberal moment has witnessed a dynamic shift in rural areas, where semi-proletarianization is accelerating. Rural farming households, unable to sustain themselves due to declining soil fertility, land fragmentation, and population growth, are forced into multiple low-paid, precarious off-farm occupations, including labour migration to the Middle East (e.g., Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar). Neoliberal policy incentives have been hijacked by brokers and external recruitment agencies, prioritizing export-oriented employment over local development. These trends are likely to persist, with surplus populations becoming a ready source of cheap labour for capitalist firms in the Middle East, driven by the structural power of global capital, particularly finance capital, which exploits local labour for economic gain.

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