

Asians in Kenya: an urban minority

A brief overview based on the 1989 Census

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This paper is an introduction to the following article (pages 49–57) by Pheroze Nowrojee, “Asian-African Business—the national perspective”

The data analysed in this introductory paper is compiled from the 1989 Census of Kenya¹. The results of the 1999 census are available neither by ethnic group (referred to as ‘tribes’ in the census) nor by nationality. However we think that if the absolute number of Asians has changed over time, the repartition of Asians across the country has not changed much and provides a good basis for the statistical analysis of Asians in Kenya today.

Because the data is compiled from tables available in the census reports, it was not possible to cross-classify Asians according to interesting social variables such as level of education, activity status, etc. Only tables crossing sex and ethnic origins were used here, thus limiting the scope of analysis to a brief description of the repartition of Asians in Kenya by sex, area (urban versus rural) and provinces. This introductory paper will give some food for thought for a better analysis of this urban minority.

In overall, inhabitants of Asian origin, Kenyan or otherwise amounted to a total of 89000 in 1989, i.e. 0.42% of the total population of Kenya. The population was about 2.14 million at the time of the census. Considering a growth rate of 2.5% per year (possibly an inflated rate), the Asians should be at most 114000 living in Kenya in 1999 and 120000 in 2001.

According to the 1989 Census, most of the Asians (53000, i.e. 59%) were Kenyans. The largest number of Asian foreigners are the Indians (29000, i.e. 33%). There were 112 males for 100 females among Asians, the figure being

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¹ This data was collected with the help of Michel Adam, who is currently undertaking a study on Asians in Kenya.

lower for Indians (105%) than for Kenyan Asians (113%), Pakistanis (115%) and other Asians (137%).

Such high figures are quite usual among the international migrant population but they are surprising concerning Kenyan Asians, who cannot be considered as new international migrants. Two main factors could explain why there are more males than females among Kenyan Asians: first, Kenyan Asian females could migrate in higher numbers out of the country; second, Kenyan Asian females might be underestimated in the census. However, more data would be required to validate those figures.

Table 1: Asians in Kenya by sex and nationality (Census 1989)

	Male	Female	Total	% among Asians	% in the total pop. of Kenya	Sex ratio (M/F)
Kenyan Asians	28113	24855	52968	59.39%	0.25%	113%
Indians	14925	14166	29091	32.62%	0.14%	105%
Pakistanis	997	865	1862	2.09%	0.01%	115%
Other Asians	3044	2220	5264	5.90%	0.02%	137%
Total Asians	47079	42106	89185	100.00%	0.42%	112%

Among all Asians, 85% (76000) lived in an urban district, not even considering the smallest towns. As a consequence, Asians formed 2.3% of the urban population as compared to only 0.07% in non-urban Kenya. The percentage living in urban districts was the highest among the Kenyan Asians (more than 91%) and the lowest among the Indians (75%). Contrary to conventional wisdom, therefore, it is not nationals who are best integrated in the countryside. In fact, 64% of Asians living in urban districts were Kenyan whereas 55% of Asians living in non-urban Kenya were Indians.

Most Asians living in urban districts resided in the two main cities of Kenya, Nairobi (45000, i.e. 3.4% of the total population of the city) or Mombasa (25000, i.e. 5.3% of the total population, the highest percentage in Kenya). Only 6000 lived in other urban districts (Kisumu, Nakuru). The structure by nationality in Nairobi and Nakuru was comparable to that of the entire country, whereas in Mombasa, most Asians were Kenyans (76%), as was the case in Kisumu (70%). Indians were better represented (around 70% of all Asians) in small remote towns like Garissa and Meru.

Table 2: Asians in Kenya by nationality and area of residence (Census 1989)

	Urban Districts		Non Urban Districts	
	% among Asians	% among the same category in the country	% among Asians	% among the same category in the country
Kenyan Asians	63.85%	91.4%	34.15%	8.6%
Indians	28.68%	74.7%	54.92%	25.3%
Pakistanis	1.97%	80.2%	2.75%	19.8%
Other Asians	5.50%	79.2%	8.18%	20.8%
Total Asians	100.00%	85.0%	100.00%	15.0%

Noticeably, in Mombasa, the sex ratio of Asians was more balanced (104%) than for Nairobi (114%), and the entire country (112%). It is the only place where Indian females were more numerous than their male counterparts (95 males for 100 females). It is also where the Kenyan Asians had the more balanced sex ratio (105%). The sex ratio was particularly imbalanced for Kenyan Asians in Eastern, Nyanza (including Kisumu) and Rift Valley (including Nakuru) provinces (around 125 males for 100 females), but less so in Central and Western provinces (between 115% and 119%). On the contrary, among the Indians, sex ratios were more imbalanced in those two provinces (124% and 113%) than on average for Indians in the whole country (105%).

In conclusion, Asians are mainly an urban minority, represented mostly in Nairobi and Mombasa. In the rest of the country, where Asians are few (in small towns and also in rural areas), there were usually more often foreigners (mainly Indians) than Kenyan Asians. There is a noticeable discrepancy in the sex ratio by nationality across the country, indicating varying family structures that need to be explained.