The Role of Labour in Agricultural Production in Colonial East and West Africa.

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Abstract

The paper argues that the presence of a settler population of European extraction in East Africa paved the way for the enactment of discriminatory laws against Africans whose sole Purpose was to sufficiently render them vulnerable to sell their labour to Europeans; that British labour policies in West Africa appeared better than those in French West Africa and East Africa only because in the former, a settler population did not exist in the model of East Africa and an economic system suitable to the purpose of 20th century British colonialism in the sub region already existed to the extent that a drastic change was not necessary. Furthermore, the labour policies and regime in French West Africa were as oppressive as those in the settler colony of Kenya because most of her colonies were not as viable as they had anticipated. The researcher concludes that since exploitation of the land and its peoples for the benefit of the colonial powers and their nationals was the driving force of colonialism, differences were primarily circumstantial and not because Britain was particularly concerned about the welfare of the colonised peoples.

Introduction

The colonies existed for the benefit of the colonial powers and their nationals in terms of extremely cheap land, cheap labour, a steady supply of cash crops for industries in Europe, and a ready market to absorb European imports. While in British and French West Africa Africans were expected to produce on small and large holdings for export, in the East, the majority of Africans were expected to work as labourers in the agricultural sector as well as other European establishments as hired labourers.

Since the majority of Africans were self-employed at this point the colonial powers enacted several laws which combined together to coerce a large proportion of the West African population to produce for export regardless of their occupation; and render landless ones, especially in East Africa, sufficiently vulnerable to sell their labour at whatever price the settlers and the respective colonial governments were willing to pay. (Ochonu,2013:93). Taxation, the compulsory use of the colonial currency; the control by the colonial government of was produced for export and the control of price of produce by European firms combined to coerce the indigenous population in British and French West Africa, to produce for export. In East Africa in addition to the above, the mass appropriation of African land by the state for use by the settlers forced most Africans into the labour market. These regulations were less stringent in Uganda and Tanganyika than in Kenya

where in addition to the above the Kipande or pass system was used to keep track of workers.

Taxation had the dual purpose of revenue generation for the colonial government as well as forcing Africans into the colonial economy. (Austin;2010:19) The tax, which was imposed directly on communities, individuals and their properties was very high. (Austen; 1987:126) The tax regime in all the colonies was so harsh it induced compliance. It was however worse in French West Africa and Kenya where tax on individuals instead of property or trade was employed more vigorously to force Africans in non-producing areas such as Upper Senegal and Niger to seek for jobs in producing areas. This led to widespread riots around the 1890s. (Harrison etal; 1985:564) The hut and poll taxes in Kenya totalled about 25 Shillings, the equivalent of two months' wages at the time. (Richardson; 2012:2). In Uganda, a property tax was levied on hut and guns in 1900 (Wikipedia;2013:1).

The land laws, especially in East Africa, stripped most Africans in both sub regions of their prime means of economic endeavour (Zahir;2014:4) In Kenya a settler was given as much as 1,000 to 350,000 acres of land for a small fee and there were over two thousand settlers by the 1920s. (Rodney;1976:167) In Uganda, the 1900 treaties transferred ownership rights of most of the fertile land to the chiefs of the various kingdoms and their associates as well as the few settlers thereby forcing the rest into the labour market. (Okoth-Ogendo; 1999:2) In Tanganyika more Africans had access to land than in Kenya and Uganda only because it was ruled as a mandate territory by the British under the League and later United Nations supervision. (Okoth-Ogendo; 1999:2)

In British and French West Africa land was made available to the smallholder as well as those with large holdings though France gave greater land concessions to Europeans than did the British and the fact that the British had more fertile land than the French. (Aghalino,2000:23) (Austin;2010:19) This implied that more Africans were gainfully employed in British than in French West Africa.

The control of production through state specified crops became a determining factor for what produce had a ready market and what did not. Paired with the importation of erstwhile locally manufactured goods, most persons in arts and crafts suddenly became unemployed and had to work in the agricultural or other sectors to earn colonial currency. While the cash crops produced in British and French West Africa were many, in East Africa Africans were permitted to produce only cotton, (a very difficult crop with relatively low earnings) except for the 1920s and 1930s depression era to keep the colonial state from going bankrupt. This invariably meant that in East Africa, especially Kenya, there were more persons in the labour pool relative to the total population than there were in British West Africa. (Rodney; 1976:180)

In French West Africa, there were much more persons in the labour market than in British West Africa due to the unsuitable soil condition in most parts of the former. People in non-production centres (whose soil conditions were not suitable for the production of cash crops) constituted the bulk of hired labour (including migrant) in both sub regions. Some of these regions were officially designated labour districts by the respective colonial administrations. (Monitor; 2012:1)

TYPES OF AFRICAN LABOUR IN COLONIAL EAST AND WEST AFRICA

The categories of African labour in both sub regions included the sharecropper, hired labour, household, forced labour, indentured labour and slave labour.

Squatter Labour

Squatter labour was predominant in the semi settler colony of Kenya. Increase in European population and the continued reduction of African reserves led to overpopulation which made land unavailable even for subsistence. In a bid to flee hunger and starvation as well as the squalor of the reserves, some Kenyans agreed to be squatters (an informal land use agreement) in settler plantations and were granted squatting rights in exchange for a certain amount of work. (Wolf; 1970:276). Squatters were

given between $1^{1/2}$- 2 acres of land in an arrangement which benefitted the settlers the most as some capital-poor settlers had additional benefits in terms of food crops from the squatter. (Source Watch; undated:4) Most of the early squatters actually squatted on land previously belonging to them. Kenyans who wanted to escape the restrictions of the reserves especially conscriptions during the war also became squatters in settler farms. (source Watch; undated:3).

Over time relations between settlers and squatters deteriorated as new rules were introduced to prevent squatter farms from "eclipsing settler farms". (Source Watch; undated:3) In the mid-1920s settlers began to expand into shifting and mixed farming, which required more land for the Europeans and more labour hours for the squatter. The 1918 Native Residence Ordinance pegged the number of working hours of the squatter to three months per year. (Zeleza; 1992:180) It increased to six months in 1925; eight in 1944; and nine after World War II (Source Watch; undated:3-4) giving squatters very little time to work on their own farms. In addition, squatters were forbidden to raise cattle on the land supposedly for fear that the local herd would contaminate the imported breed belonging to settlers. (Source Watch; undated:4). What followed was a near successful campaign by the settlers to eliminate the local herd. Cattle was shot at sight, seized, sold and relocated by settlers and officials of the Forestry Department. Finally, squatters were evicted and by 1939, there were 30,000 evicted, landless and homeless squatters (Source Watch;undated:4).

The response of the colonial government was to purchase a piece of land, about 52,000 acres, from the Massai in 1939 and acquired 35,000 acres from the Crown Forest Reserve to relocate the evicted squatters. (Zeleza;1992:180). In 1944 those same conditions were imposed on squatters in the Forest areas. (Zeleza;1992:180) These measures were designed to convert the entire squatter population into hired labour. At independence in 1963 squatters accounted for only 4% of agricultural employment in Kenya. (Source Watch;undated:4).

THE SHARECROPPER

Sharecropping, a feature of African labour organisation was dismissed as inefficient, irrational, an "iniquitous pre-capitalist semi feudal system". (Zeleza;2003:128). These views stem from a lack of understanding of how the sharecropping arrangement works. It is a mutually beneficial arrangement between the farmer/landowner and an individual whose labour is accepted as payment for a parcel of land (on which he has total rights or only for a duration of time) at the expiration of the contract. The farm inputs may be provided exclusively by the owner or shared. In addition, the individual may be given a small piece of land on which he may farm his own food to reduce his dependence on the land-owner. It made labour sourcing easier. (Zeleza;2003:128).

Sharecropping was used predominantly in British West Africa. It helped to increase output of cocoa in Southern Ghana and Western Nigeria from the late 19th century. (Zeleza;2003:128). After spending a substantial amount for the purchase of a large expanse of land it was financially burdensome to purchase slaves or employ only wage labourers. Thus farmers relied more on household labour, hired labour and the services of sharecroppers. Yields under sharecropping are as high as yields under exclusive hired labour. (Zeleza:128-132) The colonial land administration system adopted in British West Africa which gave Chiefs substantial authority over land matters created opportunities for landless individuals from non production centres to have "increased and liberalised access to land" through sharecropping arrangements. (Ochonu;2013:93) This implies that sharecropping arrangements increased significantly during colonial rule.

Wage or Free Labour

Wage or free labour was of two types, namely, the stabilised labour and migrant labour. Since labour was scarce in pre colonial times remunerations were high so it was quite profitable to work as a hired labourer then. Agricultural labour was not as permanent as mining labour since their work is seasonal. Migrant labourers were landless individuals or those from non production centres who migrated to producing areas to work. Wage labour became widespread during the colonial era and was more

prevalent in colonies where plantation agriculture was predominant such as Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika in East Africa. Wage labour was also common in British and French West Africa. In the Sokoto caliphate, wage labour known as Kwadogo was employed for rice production; and cotton production in Katsina respectively. (Zeleza;2003:137).

The major impact of the Kipande (pass system) enacted in Kenya in 1915, implemented in 1919 and abolished in 1947 (Source Watch;undated:2) was that it created a labour pool as distinct from a labour market from which the colonial authorities and officials distributed incredibly cheap and sometimes free labour to the settler farms and other European establishments. The Kipande required that all adult male from age 15 wore a tag on which the holder's name, thump print, employment history were listed. (Richardson;2012:3). This tag was so important that as at 1920s when the population of European settlers increased (approximately 2000) with a concomitant increase in the demand for African labour defaulters were arrested and punished to deter others. (Wolf;1974:32).

The Kenya labour regime featured the most bizarre and inhumane labour laws for this category of workers. The 1906 Master/Servant Ordinance was passed in 1910, and in 1918 the Resident Native Ordinance which defined the legal status and labour obligations of the squatter was passed. (Ndalila;2012:282). The former specified that: "desertion by workers, which ordinarily should be prosecuted by a civil court, was to be handled by a criminal court. The punishment for a breach of contract was classified into two, namely minor and major. (Zahir;2014:58) For minor offences such as "failure to work, intoxication, absence during working hours, careless or improper work, and use of rude language to the master or his agent" the punishment was the forfeiture of a month's wage. Major offences such as "deliberate action to break duty, drunkenness leading to loss or injury to animals and desertion from the service without convincing causes", attracted the forfeiture of two months wage or two months imprisonment. (Zahir;2014:58) The Ordinance left the workers with no rights and placed them completely at the mercy of their employer.

Uganda had a slightly competitive labour regime because the rich African farmers were willing to pay better wages to retain scarce labour. (Monitor;2012:1) The colonial government feared this would place its establishment and those of the settlers at a disadvantage. Consequently a law was enacted which ensured that Africans sold their labour at a price dictated by the state. (Monitor;2012:2)

By the end of the Second World War wage labour had become a regular occupation for Africans. (Austin,2010:15)

The incidence of migrant workers was higher in Uganda than anywhere else as Africans from neighbouring countries went there in search of better paying jobs and to flee arbitrary state taxes, oppression and famine. Between January and October 1925 about 11,771 labourers migrated to the economic centre from Rwanda and Burundi and a few to Kigezi and Ankole; 5,229 migrated from West Nile and DR Congo and 1855 from Lango. Some of the migrant workers were employed in the sugar plantations at Lugazi and Kakira. The majority were employed in the cotton plantations and shambers in Buganda. (Monitor;2012:2). In Tanzania, the colonial state also encouraged the immigration of labour from neighbouring colonies in response to labour scarcity. (Monitor;2012:2) In British Cameroon where plantation agriculture was successful workers migrated from Nigeria to seek employment there.(Lee&Schultz;undated14). In French West Africa, Upper Volta and Chad were made labour districts (Rodney;1976:182)

This indicates that labour remained scarce up to the last decade of colonial rule though not as serious as it was during the early decades.

The influx of migrant workers from non producing areas as well as from neighbouring colonies helped to keep the price of labour down. (Michiel;undated:1) This state was however short-lived because the migrant labourers eventually became a major source of anxiety for the colonial administration.

Migrant labour played an important role in the development of cash crop production in West and East Africa respectively. (zeleza:2003:130). It

intensified the commercialisation of labour. People migrated from the Western Sudan to the Coast of Senegambia to work in the groundnut industry; and from other regions into the forest region to participate in the palm oil business.(Zeleza;2003:130).

THE HOUSEHOLD

Rodney classifies the smallholder as a wage labourer due to the numerous disadvantages he suffered. (Rodney;1976:172) The household operated a smallholding in which in most cases no salary was paid. It was the most common form of labour where everything revolved around the head of the family whose responsibility it was to take care of the needs of other members of the household – immediate and extended. The smallholder, existed in all the colonies but was predominant in West Africa, especially in the British colonies. This category of cultivators is quite different from those with large land holdings such as the cocoa farmers of Western Nigeria. The holding as the name implies is significantly small. The returns are also very little, almost subsistence (Austen;1987:138). They are generally under the mercy of government regulations and the dictates of the produce marketing firms; having too little or no room to manoeuvre. While some Africans voluntarily became smallholders to enable them pay tax and purchase European manufactures; some others such as those in Tanganyika and French West Africa which had poor soil conditions were actually forced to produce for export regardless of how low the prices got. (Rodney;1976:181). In the former cotton production (very difficult to produce and very little returns) was imposed on Africans. (Rodney;1976:171) The profit margin was so small it could only be equated to a wage employment. (Rodney;1976:172).

The reliance of the British on the small landholder (Ajayi&Crowder;1985:515) in West Africa implied that the majority of Africans were gainfully employed within the context of colonial objectives and that labour condition was more favourable in British West Africa than in French West Africa and British East Africa.

During the 1920s price slump, the 1930s depression, and the Second World War the labour regime in all the colonies became extremely unfavourable though it was worse in Kenya and in French West Africa. The French government "subjected French West Africa to economic exploitation and overt racism". Farmers were forced to meet production quotas to supply the armed forces. (U.S LIBRARY;undated:1). Those who could not meet the quotas had to purchase the commodity from nearby colonies with their own money to avoid being punished by the colonial authority. (Faluyi;1996:147)

Forced Labour

Forced labour was used in all the colonies but was worse in French West Africa where it was given names such as corvee, indignat and prestation. Most of the colonial infrastructure especially railways were built using forced labour. (Richardson;2012:2) Police men, colonial officials and chiefs were authorised to round up Africans who were forced to work in European establishments without pay, most of whom died as a result of starvation and disease. (Rodney;1976:228)

The British used forced labour in all their colonies up to the 1930s especially in cases of political emergencies such as World War II. (Ochonu,2013:98) In 1909, the Kasamvu, a system of compulsory labour in which every adult male had to work for the state for one month each year was established in Uganda. (Monitor;2012:1). In 1925 Ugandans demanded and were granted the right to pay the compulsory labour tax (known as luwalo) in cash. In the French colonies each adult male was required to work for 10days each year without compensation as part of his obligation to the state. The system became subject to extreme abuse as officials easily diverted Africans to work in European plantations without pay. (Rodney;1976:181).

In British colonies the abuse of the system was so high that in 1923 a Native Authority Ordinance was enacted to restrict the use of forced labour to porterage, railway and road building.(Rodney;1976:181). Most times the colonial officials and chiefs found ways to circumvent the law.

(Rodney;1976:181) The British reintroduced forced labour in Kenya and Tanganyika during World War II to protect the settler plantations from collapse.(Rodney;1976:182)

The French made greater use of forced labour primarily because their colonies were from the start, financially un-viable. In French reasoning, the only way the colonies could be self sustaining, was to reduce the cost of production by removing the cost of labour. The French tricked Africans to enlist in the military and then diverted them to work in plantations as unpaid labourers especially in the timber companies in Gabon and Ivory Coast. This practice continued till 1948. (Rodney;1976:182) Labour administration of the French was so brutal that death rate averaged 60 per thousand workers. (Lee&Schultzs;undated:14). Africans from the French territories fled to the British colonies in large numbers. Those who were caught were brought back and punished. Chiefs and officials used kidnapping and corporal punishment to meet the labour supply targets and they were so powerful they could divert workers to private farms and plantations.(Lee &Schultzs;undated:14)

Forced labour was repealed under international pressure in 1930 by the International Labour Convention, (Ochonu;2013:94) though the law was flouted in practice. ((Rodney;1976:181)

In Cameroon where the British abolished the labour tax imposed by the Germans, the French retained the labour tax with a new name, the pretestation. It continued in various forms until 1952. (Lee;undated:14)

THE INDENTURED LABOURER

When an individual or a household is unable to pay money owed, a son of the household was held by the creditor to work for him for a certain period without pay or until such a time when the debt is paid in full or forgiven. This condition was gradually abolished as earnings improved, and better credit institutions became available. (Austin,2010:17).

Slave Labour

Despite the abolition of slave trade the use of slave labour in the domestic economy intensified with the expansion of the export economy of West Africa. However, with the cessation of intra and inter-tribal wars, the prime source of slaves, the rise in cost of slaves, domestic slavery almost became extinct. (Zeleza;2003:137).

Specialisation, Welfare and Remuneration for Labour in the Colonies of East and West Africa

Marxist historians insist that the very survival of the traditional mode of production in an economy operated and controlled by capitalists who had experienced industrial revolution indicates a deliberate and calculated attempt to prevent any further evolution in technology either by autochtonous means or through diffusion to give Europeans a continued and sustained advantage over Africans. (Austen;1987:138)

Specialisation in East Africa was primarily according to households, namely, commodity producing households, labour exporting households, squatter households and working class households" (Richardson;2012:3).

In British and French West Africa specialisation was according to produce such as Cocoa producing, palm fruit gathering, palm oil processing, groundnut producing and cotton producing individuals or households.

Remunerations were higher in British West Africa than in French West Africa and British East Africa. (Hopkins,1973:218-9) This is not to say that the income earned was commensurate with labour effort. Most Africans in all the colonies had to augment their income from cash crop with food crops (Rodney;1976:172) as a result of the very low price the produce firms paid for their crops as well as low wages respectively. In Nigeria a tin of palm oil in 1946 was purchased from African farmers for ***Pounds15.16S by the Nigerian produce Board which it sold through the Ministry of Food for ***Pounds 95 close to the World market price. (Rodney;1976:185) In Sierra Leone the price offered for coffee in 1952 was so low that Kenyans smuggled their crops neighbouring French colonies where the price was slightly higher. (Rodney;1976:185)

Capital accumulation for all categories of labour was almost impossible. (Rodney;1976:168) The income for Kenyan wage labour up till 1945 was pegged at Shs 40 per month which was far below their individual expenditure level and very insignificant when compared to the European who earned 24 times as much and Asian workers as much as ten times. (Zeleza;1992:188).

Except for a few, expenditure of most Africans equalled or exceeded income. Savings was determined by the size of the income of the head of the family; the size of the immediate and extended family dependent on him for their upkeep; his ambition for his family within the context of 20th century colonial experience of Africans as regards education and new-income-consuming acquired tastes. For the big farmers the net incomes from cash crop covered major expenses with a significant amount left for savings. However, not all Africans earned such incomes. A study conducted on 187 families in Western Nigeria showed that net receipts ranged from less than 20pounds to more than 2000pounds with 8% of the families receiving 38% of all income and savings amounted to no less than 40% of disposable income."(Jones;1977:219)

TRADE UNIONISM

Labour union activities in the agricultural sector were not as effective as those in the mining and manufacturing sector. The primary means of dissent in the agricultural sector was desertion. It was in the 1960s that agricultural labour began to organise itself along more formal lines in East Africa. For the first time in East Africa in 1959 three unions were formed in the sisal, coffee and tea industries. (Zeleza;1992:196). In 1961 the coffee and sisal union amalgamated to form the General Agricultural Workers Union (GAWU). Two years later GAWU was joined by the tea union and the Kenyan Plantation and Agricultural and Workers Union(KPAWU) was formed. (Zeleza;1992:196). The Kenya Union of Sugar Plantation Workers, which remained separate, was formed in 1960. Strikes in the agricultural sector escalated during this period. Between 1961 and 1963 agricultural strikes accounted for about a third of the total number of strikes. Eventually

the government introduced minimum wages for agricultural workers as it did earlier in the mining and industrial sectors. (Zeleza;1992:196)

Gender Roles: Women in Production

Colonialism revolutionised the family division of labour and the family itself. (Zeleza;2003:145). The intensification of production for exports and domestic consumption as a result of population expansion significantly altered women's role and work load. (Zeleza;2003:145).

Men's wage earning jobs took them away from the farms and home from the 1920s (Snyder;undated:22). Women had to do both what society specified as women's work as well as those which were once men's responsibilities. They managed their husband's cash crop farms in addition to their own food crop farm.(for the household and surplus for sale). Wives of pastoralists had to take care of the herd assisted by their young sons. (Snyder;undated:22). She was usually left with very few or no adult worker since her daughters who traditionally married early were in their own homes saddled with the same responsibilities.

From 1945 women in Kenya began to enter wage employment in steadily increasing numbers; from 35,000 in 1946 to about 40,000 in 1952 and almost 67,000 in 1963. The majority of women were employed in the agricultural sector. (Zeleza;1992:183). In West Africa, women were also employed in the cash crop economy right from its inception especially as collectors of palm fruits and later as owners of small holdings. Women in West African colonies had easier access to cultivable land and control over it than those in East Africa. (Amanor-Wilks;2002:33)

CONCLUSION

Labour was not efficiently utilised whether for public or private enterprise. Nearly whole populations were forced to produce exclusively for export either as farm owners or as labourers.

Nearly whole populations were forced through legal instruments into one sector of the economy (agricultural) precluding specialisation and forward linkages; forcefully creating a wage earning class with no corresponding inherent mechanism for upward mobility into the middle class. The

devaluation of labour in the respective colonies impaired worth of workers and impeded the emergence of a viable middle class which would have championed industrialisation as was the case in Europe. Africans who benefitted from the system were few and the income gap between them and those who the system did not favour was very wide, engendering social inequality.

While the cheap labour made European goods competitive in the international market, the low cost of labour only impoverished the majority of Africans in all the colonies though worse in Kenya and French West Africa

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