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## Colonial Economy And Forced Labour In Africa: The West African Experience 1900 – 1960

Dominic A. Akpan

Department of History & International Studies  
University of Uyo

### **Abstract**

*The paper examined the colonial economy and the evolution of forced labour in Africa. Forced labour was a process of using the Africans by European to exploit African resources for the advancement of metropolitan states. That forced labour undermined African dignity, value and reduce an African again to slave state. It means violation of human rights of Africans with impurity. Just as in slave trade era, African chiefs were used against Africans. It is discovered that Africans resented even when wage – earning was introduced. Africans were contented with their level of development – which was farming, craft and entertainment. Though wage – earning was introduced, it was not attractive because of low pay. This of course led to incessant strikes such as the Asante goldfield mines of 1924 Enugu coal mines strikes of 1925 among others. These strikes led to the formation of labour unions to handle the issue of labour relations in West Africa. The abolition of forced labour came as a result of economic meltdown that engulfed the world between 1929 and 1933. This meltdown was responsible for job cuts, low production capacity and that had an impact on European economies with affected Africans negatively too. It was that economic situation that gave rise to European rethink about abolition of forced labour, and finally force labour was abolished in 1946. Whatever was the crime associated with forced labour, it assisted to lay the foundation to the African economic development through building of infrastructural facilities. It was also responsible for the formation of trade unions which today assist in labour relations between the employers and employees.*

### **Introduction**

The pillar for the development and growth of economies lie greatly on the labour force. Labour force become determinant

depending on the production power which is the accommodation of both the skilled and unskilled workers. According to Olaniyan, the word "labour" covers all types of workers from the most highly skilled to the most unskilled and hence the entire population of a country is its potential force<sup>1</sup>. In this connection, it is the labour that is needed in the laying of foundation, maintenance of infrastructural facilities; for production of raw materials; production of goods and services and largely as market for the finished products. Labour, therefore, is the epicenter of the nations well-being and a ladder towards economic progress. To say that the number of persons within a nation or territory constitutes labour force should be looked inwards. It may not be totally true to say that the entire population of a nation makes the labour force because the retired, old people, children, the infirm and the unemployed are part of the population, hence do not constitute work force. However, the interaction between the peoples of Africa and the European after the abolition of Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade produced colonialism. Colonialism and an agenda of exploitation came to play feverishly after the Second World War.

Labour problems in colonial territories: Colonization of Africa is taken to be 1900. Between 1900 and 1945, there were labour problems in African territories and many regions experienced some difficulties in recruiting people for manual labour or for public or private undertakings in the early part of the century. The problem led to sourcing of labour in other parts of the world and recruited to Africa. For instance labour of indentured Indians was used to develop the sugar plantations of Natal in South Africa and in the same manner recruited labour for the construction railway in Congo Free-State in the French Congo. In the same vein Asia labour was recruited for the construction of the Ugandan railway<sup>2</sup>. This local labour deficiency was of great concern to the colonial government in her exploitative drive especially at the time most development had to be done by manual labour. It is difficult to say why there was shortage of labour in Africa and indeed West Africa. Some schools of thought are of the opinion that there was

abundance of labour in West Africa and that its supply hinged on certain basic characteristics of indigenous African society. Before now, West Africans were accustomed to subsistence economy whereby over seventy percent of the population was engaged in agricultural production while the remaining were engaged in craft, petty trading and entertainment<sup>3</sup>.

Meanwhile, with the introduction of wage-earning labour and its regulations such as controlled by Europeans, Africans were prepared to hold on to their traditional Africa occupation – subsistence agriculture, craft, trading and entertainment. It should also be in memoir that Africans were then still suspicious of the activities of Europeans in West Africa who once punctured their economy through slave trade activities. The colonial wars in Africa and its attendant problems were still fresh in their memories, and by extension were unwilling to engage in cash inducing labour under foreigners and their command. In wage-earning employments, there are regulations binding the employees to the employers, the Africans were not prepared to tolerate the discipline of regular labour which involved compliance with the orders of employers. Indeed, the West Africans were not used to this sort of and ugly economic organization and manipulation had no foundation in the African society<sup>4</sup>.

Again, among the West Africans existed the close knit indigenous communities in which there were strong tribal loyalties among communal members. Tradition had shown the negative parameter that new – labour would not be part of the culture. This was so because traditional chiefs and elders regarded the new economic organization of wage – earning as a threat to their indigenous authorities, because their thinking was that the new economic field would have disruptive influences in family relations and the economy of the family life when members departed to new areas or localities in search of money. In the corollary, attempts were made by the traditional leaders to discourage members from sourcing or migrating for economic rewards. On the contrary, in some places like Hausaland and Iboland, traditional leaders encouraged the migration of wage – earners for economic reward<sup>5</sup>.

Other factors which accounted for labour shortage was the nature of tropical lands which were noted for being greedy users of labour. African labour was always utilized as the age in which colonization was invoked was a non-mechanised: almost everything had to be done by hand. Agricultural production was almost the activity of all, for tangible outcome in farming a lot of labour needed to be consumed in this sector thus little was left for wage earning employment. Besides, working in the tropical environment with great heat and rising temperatures was likely to affect the output of energy, thus most people were not prepared to subject themselves not to that harsh condition and supervision, hence made themselves not available to – wage earning jobs. Also in the age when there was inadequate medical facilities and good nutrition were scarce, the people easily broke down owing to fatigue caused by tropical condition. In such scenario, and in the absence of adequate voluntary labour, colonial authorities were forced to adopt the system of compulsory labour for projects in colonial territories such as roads, railways, telegraph, and public buildings<sup>6</sup>.

### **Colonialism and Forced Labour in West Africa**

The basic factors for the development of economies lie on improved transport and communication. This being so, there was no doubt therefore that at the start of European administration and exploitation of Africans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, transport and communication difficulties were among the most challenging. It was necessary for the European powers to have effective control over the relatively new lands they have acquired. The movement of the administrative officers up and down the country, and the regularity of effective communications between the administrative centres, were indispensable to any good government. This could be made possible only with improved and modern system of transport and communications. This was grossly lacking in Africa and indeed West Africa at this period. As far as exploitation of African economies and economic development of vast territories acquired were concerned there was need to introduce better transport and

communications systems in order to quicken the pace of the transition from a predominantly subsistence economy to a modern exchange economy. Indeed, West African states at least each had an important commodity she had comparative advantage over others. Those countries in the Forest and Guinea Savannah and those in the Sudan and Sahel regions produced different cash and food crops. For instance Southern Nigeria on the forest region produced palm oil and kernels, rubber and cocoa, while groundnut and cotton were produced in the Sudan and Sahel regions. In Ghana, cocoa was produced mainly in the South while in Senegambia groundnut was the main crop. In Sierra Leone and Liberia rubber were the main commodities. However, some of the main producing centres to the coast were far ranging from 220 kilometers to over 1,000 kilometers. Similarly, imported goods from Europe were expected to reach the consumers who were scattered over a wide area in West Africa. In another corollary, any industrial or commercial establishment would expect their products to reach the widest markets possible, since production is not complete until the products have been effectively distributed to reach the consumers. In this connection, the quality of transport to a large extent determines the overall efficiency and by extension limits the volume of the state<sup>7</sup>. In the above discussion, there was inadequate labour to man all the expected departments for economic development. It was against this background, and to lay the foundation of virile economic development in the 'primitive' society with scarcity of labour necessitated the use of force labour.

The disadvantage in the recruitment of labour for use in the building of infrastructural facilities and exploitation of the rich resources of West Africa led to the adoption of forced labour in West Africa. Forced labour aided colonial governments to secure manpower for public undertakings. Since voluntary wage – earning labour was difficult to procure, compulsory labour could to a large extent, be justified on the ground that it provided the manpower for the infrastructural development. Impressed labour featured prominently in the construction of railways, roads and harbours at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

How was force labour conceptualized? According to the International Forced Labour Convention of 1930, forced labour has been defined as "work or service exacted from any person under the threat of any penalty and of which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily". Certain categories like compulsory military service, convict labour, civic obligation, work done in national exigencies and communal services that is, the building of markets or community centres were not regarded as force labour<sup>8</sup>.

However, since colonies had to be self-sufficient, and yet large sums were needed for the building of harbours, railways and roads to get export crops out, and European goods into the interior, costs were reduced by the use of forced and unpaid labour. The French conquest the vast territories in West Africa, but later discovered that the territory has no human capacity they expected for development. They saw the new acquired land as "West Africa was a country without Negroes". For this desperate need for labour, slave labour for African masters was replaced by forced labour for the new French masters. The French therefore adopted a system of keeping their captors in what they called 'villages de liberte', meaning a kind of control within their watchful eyes. The freedom to a large extent among the Africans were curtailed, it was a crime for the slave labourer to leave the 'village' de liberate. If any slave labourer leaves the village de liberate pursued and recapture he might be imprisoned for one month. Forced labour, was seen not only as an instrument of servicing the administration but also as the means of forcing Africans to increase production of crops which were needed by Europe<sup>9</sup>. French relied more than the British because French empire was larger in area and smaller in population; French colonies on forced labour also had smaller revenues because the turn-over from cash crops developed slowly and on a smaller scale, and the French merchants invested less in their colonies than British merchants. In this connection for instance by 1936 British merchants had invested 117 million pounds in West Africa, while the French in the corresponding period invested 30 million. With this scenario and the disadvantages on the part of the French's, more ports and more kilometers of railway and roads were required to build than the British because of the larger size of the empire<sup>10</sup>.

The British government constructed Baro-Kano to start with and the Eastern railways in Nigeria through the use of "political" labour; each province was ordered to send a certain number of men for the projects. This demand was made compulsory. In the French West Africa, impressed labour was used right from the colonial era until after the Second World War. The French government considered it as a necessary method of getting work done. Under French colonial labour laws, there were three categories of force labour. The "corvee" or prestation labour required all able-bodied male between 18 and 60 years of age was compelled to contribute a certain member of days of labour to the state without any pay. The second type of impressed labour involved the conscription of men into the army not for military service, but for work on public undertakings. Thus, between 1927 and 1936, over 15,000 able-bodied were forced to labour on the Niger project and railway building and other projects. Penal labour was the third category of forced labour which required provisions, jailed on trivial civil offences to serve in various capacities<sup>11</sup>.

#### **Africans Reaction to Forced Labour**

Conditions under which forced labour operated were obnoxious. Forced labourers worked were often very bad, the food was inadequate, the housing poor, disease frequent and the death-rate high. Especially cruel were the conditions in the Cameroon's under German rule, where men recruited in the high plateau free from mosquitoes only to be forced to work in the mosquitoes infested plantations of the lowlands. These group of people lacked immunity because they were not born on malarial areas, only very small number survived<sup>12</sup>.

African labourers under the British system was unlike the French. Africans suffered less, because wages were offered though occasionally the pay was too low to attract labourers and the government then recruited labourers through the chiefs. The chiefs acted as middlemen in labour recruits because of the benefits derived – thus their subjects openly hated them and by extension the British. For instance, originally the Enugu coal mines paid

certain chiefs so much for every labour supplied. In the scenario the chiefs forced their people to work, but in 1914 some of them were so hated that they were driven out of their towns. The British army intervened and those responsible were fined and later requested to supply 2,000 labourers for railway construction. In Ghana, nearly the same phenomenon occurred in the gold mines, but the chiefs were reluctant to do this, especially after the influenza epidemic of 1918-19 that resulted in the death of over 25,000 people, thus reducing the farming labour force in the north of Ghana<sup>13</sup>.

#### **Justification of resentment of Forced Labour by African Labourers**

Besides a number of Africans did not look forward to a life of daily paid labour, and indeed most hoped to settle down and farm. In fact, ample evidence justified that high wages attracted labourers. One of the problems of the Asante mines was that labourers preferred to work on the Asante cocoa farms where the money and living conditions were better. Europeans were slow to see that they had to pay more to attract workers not merely paying a subsistence wage as many Africans could get that from their farms. Perhaps, and to a large extent the low pay was responsible for the Asante's goldfield's strike of 1924 and Enugu coal mines strike of 1925<sup>14</sup>.

#### **Abolition of Forced Labour in West Africa**

The 1930's witnessed the most severe economic depression of the century. Every part of the world was engulfed. It affected the colonial government adversely. This was so because prices of raw materials fell disastrously, and government customs dues were therefore reduced with a consequent reduction in revenues, and in government services. In fact capital projects came to a halt, many civil servants were discharged from their posts and others had their salaries reduced. Indeed money was scarced.

The depression, followed by the scarcity and hardship of the Second World War, produced widespread disillusionment with colonialism. It intensified the struggle between the grands

comptoirs and African farmers. A mono-export nations, which meant almost all West African colonies, were particularly hard hit, and African demands became louder for a wider economic base, for more emphasis upon food crops, and above all for industrialization, with the aim to produce locally consumed items such as soap and building material<sup>15</sup>.

Forced labour was invoked in West Africa until the world economic depression set in between 1929 and 1933. The economic depression dislocated the economic and social activities in West Africa. For instance constructional activities declined owing to shortage of funds and this result in a gradual discontinuance of forced labour for public projects. In spite of that scenario, forced labour continued to be used only in emergency circumstances. Conscripted labour was used to produce the commodities need during the Second World War. In Nigeria, the labour force required for tin mines was lacking hence conscripted labour of 16,000 men was recruited for nineteen months between 1942 and 1943<sup>16</sup>.

By the end of the Second World War, forced labour was finally discontinued. It was at the beginning of the Second World War that colonial governments started to have a rethink about the position of forced labour in their colonies. It is difficult to explain the situation, but it was thought in certain quarters that forced labour was greatly resented by Africans; it was uneconomic and produced mediocre results. For instance, it is considered that in the French West Africa, prestation labour did more harm than good. It reduced the territory's agricultural products, though statistics have not been provided. The French government therefore substituted cash payment for work done on public schemes<sup>16</sup>.

However, the British government enacted ordinances in 1931 with regards to the position of forced labour in her territories after she had ratified the provision of the International Forced Labour Convention of 1930. In this connection, forced labour was prohibited in the Cameroons and Nigeria except that compulsory portorage of District Officers was still legally authorized. The Native Authorities were also empowered to call for labour required as the need arises for communal interests. It means, the

development of communities labour for such projects were compulsory. In Ghana, the ordinances empowered Native Administrations to recruit paid labour of able-bodied workers for not more than 24 days for the maintenance of roads. In Sierra Leone, the Forced Labour Ordinance of 1932 provided for compulsory labour for the construction and maintenance of roads. Equally, personal services to chiefs were recognized. Forced labour came to an end in Gambia, in 1952 except in national emergencies such as war. Compulsory labour was abolished in the French West Africa in 1946 and by 1950, prestation labour was everywhere commuted for cash payment. The use of conscripted military labour was also abolished.

### **Impact of Forced Labour in Africa**

Many scholars of economic and political history of Africa see forced labour as an indirect way for control and effective occupation of African territories. It was a measure to take over the control of African economy and political administration unchallenged. That the colonialists appropriated the surplus African labour for their own profits and development. In the process Africa labour force was dehumanized and incarcerated<sup>18</sup>. On the contrary Boluwaji Olaniyan puts that no matter what one's view may be on forced labour, that forced labour in its various forms provided the manpower required for public purposes.

Indeed, it was the forced labour that manpower was provided for the foundation of infrastructural facilities such as railways, roads, harbours in which the modern African economies strive. It was also the forced labour that some administrative infrastructure facilities such as cabinet offices, Banks, insurance, courts were built in which the modern business of government and private undertaking are built. Forced labour also produced staple commodities and minerals that linked African countries to international economy, which till date is our nucleus for economic and political development.

Migratory labour evolved from the desire of people to escape forced labour and military conscription during the World

Wars. With the new economic system which greatly altered the subsistence economy to money economy, there was a growing desire for workers to travel long distances in search of work which could yield cash income. Today, migratory labour is still a common phenomenon of West African economy. It is contended that over 70 percent of West Africans are engaged in agricultural production in one form or the other. During the slack farming season, some workers seek employment in other occupation which may involve travelling some distances. For instance, from about 1900 migrant workers from the Northern Territories of Ghana and from the French colonies to the North and West formed the nucleus of unskilled manpower required for the mining industries in Nigeria and Diamond in Sierra Leone. It is estimated that over 100,000 migrant workers were likely to have been absorbed into the mining industries in Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone between 1900 and 1935. Many Nigerian sought employment on the Spanish cotton and coffee plantations of Fernando po island. Gambia on the other hand drew her migratory labour supply for farming the groundnut plantations from the French Sudan or the French Guinea<sup>19</sup>.

In the French West Africa, many young and able-bodied men migrated from Sudan and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) to the coffee and cocoa plantations of Ghana and Ivory Coast. Some found themselves in the European plantations and the forest concessions. Although there is no reliable statistics, it was estimated that by 1956 over 320,000 people from the Sahel region of West Africa were working in Ivory Coast and thousands more in Ghana. In 1961, the developing groundnut plantations in Senegal absorbed about 42,000 migrant workers from Sudan and French Guinea. Forced labour therefore created economic opportunities for West African and non citizens thus improving their stand of living in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

Forced labour meted to the Africans by the European colonialists in itself human rights abuse with impunity. It was a bad form of enslavement – exploitation of the resources and abuse of fundamental human rights of the people. This was not the first time the Europeans would do that to the Africans. The same Europeans

did devour, destroyed and exploit the Africans for over four hundred years of slavery and slave trade between 1500 to 1800. What a cruel relationship that existed between the 'whites' and the 'blacks'. When Europeans had labour problems in their move to exploit the rich resources of the Americas, they turned attention to Africa. At the end of slave trade and the beginning of colonization of Africa, not only did they exploit the rich resources but abuse the rights of Africans in Africa.

### Summary and Conclusion

The paper has attempted to discuss the role of colonial economy and the evolution of forced labour among the Africans during the era of colonization and exploitation of African resources. In the process of conquest of the vast territories in Africa, the Europeans were faced with labour problems – those to assist them in the process of exploitation. The population problem hinged on the fact that Africans were contented with their subsistence living. Besides, the lessons of the slave trade were still very fresh in their minds. They were not prepared to take command from the white overseers. Closely following that was the harsh climate which increased the burden of hard labour in which the Africans were not prepared to tolerate.

However, when wage – earning labour was introduced by the European, the Africans were still unwilling to succumb to the antics of wage – earning. However, forced labour was justified by the Europeans on the basis that Africans would not work without compulsion, and low wages on the grounds that African labour, regardless of its wages was unproductive.

Meanwhile, the Africans saw dispensing their labour to the Europeans as human rights abuse though at that time such expression did not gather momentum, Africans resented because they did not look forward to life of daily paid labour, and indeed most hoped to settle down and farm. High wages attracted labourers. But Africa were not highly paid. This low wages was responsible for strikes.

The strike included the Asante's goldfields of 1924 and Enugu coal mines strike of 19025 among others. Perhaps these strikes were responsible for the formation of labour unions. Again the economic doldrums that engulf the world brought about stagnation – hence production fell, salaries were difficult to pay to workers couple with African resentment to forced labour thus the Europeans had a rethink about abolition of forced labour. However, whichever way one sees forced labour, though it undermined human value, abuse the Africans and European treatment with impunity, it was the forced labour that was responsible for the foundation of African economic development through infrastructural facilities. Again the process of forced labour made the commodities available that link the Africans with international economy which is the basis in laying the foundation to modern economy. Forced labour was altogether not evil as seen by some scholars.

The paper concludes that if we were treated by Europeans harshly, our value as human being reduced, many African leaders of this age have treated a fellow African worse than the Europeans – in Nigeria, Mozambique, Uganda, Tunisia, Egypt etc the same poor treatment. It is time we change and keep to the rule of law and respect human dignity and by extension human rights.

### Endnotes

1. Boluwayi Olaniyan, *Economic History of West Africa*, Ibadan: Educational Research Institute, 1971, p. 152.
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3. Boluwayi Olaniyan, *Economic History of West Africa*, Ibadan: Educational Research Institute, 1971, p. 153.
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  8. Boluwayi Olaniyan, *Economic History of West Africa* p. 155
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  10. J. B. Webster and A. A. Boahen with H. O. Idowu, *The Growth of African Civilization: The Revolutionary Year, West Africa Since 1800*, London, Longman: 1967 p. 287-288 See also Boluwayi Olaniyan, *Economic History* p. 155 See Michael Crowder, *West Africa under Colonial Rule* p. 185
  11. J. B. Webster p. 288
  12. J. B. Webster p. 288–289
  13. J. B. Webster p. 290
  14. Boluwayi p. 288–289
  15. Boluwayi p. 290
  16. Boluwayi p. 156 see also J. B. Webster and A. A. Boahen with A. Idowu *The Growth of African Civilization* p. 288
  17. Boluwayi p. 156
  18. C. E. Emezi and C. A. Ndoh, *African Politics* Eds. Owerri, Achugo Publications p. 36
  19. Boluwayi p. 157