Africa in World History

From Prehistory to the Present

Second Edition

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Cotton and Groundnuts in Nigeria

British colonial authorities in Nigeria were just as anxious as colonial authorities in Ghana to have a taxable cash crop industry. In Nigeria the situation was made even more urgent because unlike Ghana—which had some mineral wealth in the form of gold—Nigeria was totally dependent on agriculture. That situation has changed with the discovery of oil in southern Nigeria, but those deposits were unknown in the early colonial period. In southwestern Nigeria the British successfully introduced cocoa. But in the north they saw the potential for the production of a crop dear to the heart of British industry—cotton.

Cotton has been cultivated in the Sahelian regions of West Africa for centuries. The northern Nigerian city of Kano is famous for dye pits where locally produced cotton cloth was dyed dark blue and then pounded to a smooth and shiny finish. That cotton cloth was traded in the Sahel, and some was sold into the trans-Saharan trade to North Africa. The climate and soil of northern Nigeria is well suited to cotton production, and the British reasonably concluded that large-scale cash cropping of cotton would be a sure hit in northern Nigeria.

In 1912 the railway to Kano was opened. Its principle purpose was to facilitate cotton production in the area around Kano. At the time the railway opened, the British Cotton Growers' Association (BCGA), a **marketing board,** had already laid the groundwork for increased cotton production. Marketing boards were devised originally in Europe, where their purpose was to set a price floor for agricultural commodities. The idea was to stabilize farm prices so that farmers would know in advance of planting that they would get at least the marketing board's price for their crops. Marketing boards were often a bit more coercive in the colonies. They not only set price floors, they sometimes required that farmers sell them their crops at a price—usually a low one—set by the board. Marketing boards were a standard feature of colonial economies and remain a part of the African economic landscape today.

The BCGA went to work in northern Nigeria, setting up ginneries (the factories where cotton is processed) and distributing seeds and fertilizer. In 1912, with the railroad opened and the BCGA ready and waiting for the cotton to come rolling in, they were disappointed. Most of the cotton grown in the region was sold locally just like it always had been. The BCGA was not offering better prices than the region's own merchants, so farmers did not sell to the BCGA. Over the next couple of years there was an increase in cash crop production in northern Nigeria, but it was not cotton. Rather, groundnuts became the cash crop of choice. Groundnut prices were higher than cotton prices, and if there were crop failures or other disasters, farmers could eat the groundnuts. In 1912 there was a major famine in northern Nigeria that killed almost 30,000 people. In the following years, farmers, chastened by their experience in the famine, planted more and more groundnuts and less cotton. So the railway the British built to stimulate one kind of cash cropping resulted in a major export industry in a different crop. The railcars went south heavily loaded not with cotton, but with groundnuts. This is not to say that cotton was not produced in northern Nigeria. Cotton was and is widely grown in northern Nigeria and the rest of Sahelian region. However, the colonial state failed to capture this sector of the economy.

The French also sought to capture the cotton industry in their Sahelian colonies. For the French, the drive to take charge of the cotton industry in the colonies was driven partly by the need to create a tax base, but also by the concerns of French industry. France had a textile industry, but it lacked a secure cotton supply. British industry could depend on cotton from India and Egypt in addition to cotton from the American South. The French were much more dependent on American cotton and wanted the sorts of secure cotton supplies the British had. Indeed, access to the raw materials needed for industry was one of the major justifications for colonialism. So in their West African colonies the French saw a tremendous opportunity to acquire a safe and dependable cotton supply.

They tried every possible approach, and nothing worked. They attempted to create large-scale, irrigated plantations. These had trouble getting the labor needed to make them work, so they tried to encourage small producers to grow cotton and then to sell it to the French. Small-scale producers were only too happy to grow cotton, but they typically sold it to local merchants who sold into a regional cloth market. In the end the French failed to take control of the cotton economy in their colonies. The regional cotton industry that had existed when they took over grew during this period, but it also remained outside state control.

What all of this demonstrates is that there was nothing certain or predictable about colonial efforts to shape and control the transformation of African economies. The availability of new markets and new crops caused all sorts of changes. Sometimes the colonial state was able to control those transitions. In Uganda the British introduced cotton through the BCGA. Although the BCGA had been singularly unsuccessful in northern Nigeria, it worked well in Uganda. There an all-new cotton industry was created, and most of the cotton was sold through BCGA. In other places, such as Ghana, African farmers took the initiative in adopting cash crops, and the colonial state just followed along. In many instances, though, colonial governments tried to force change on unwilling farmers, and they mostly refused to cooperate. Thus, we should remember that although colonial governments could be quite brutal, they had limited resources and could only enforce their will up to a point.

Africans as Wage Laborers

If there was a limit to the extent to which the colonial state could enforce its wishes in the vast world of farming, it could be much more coercive when it came to labor recruitment. Colonial governments got involved in labor recruitment for a variety of reasons. In some cases they needed the labor for their own projects. For instance, much of the early road and railway building was done with forced labor. Most colonial governments at some time in their history used forced labor of some sort, which says much about the colonial state. When colonial governments first arrived in many parts of the continent, wage labor was almost unknown. In the absence of money, it was difficult, though not impossible, to recruit voluntary labor. In some places labor was paid with post-harvest beer parties, in much the same way that you might buy pizza and beer for the people who help you paint your apartment or move. Big farmers might do this to recruit extra labor for the harvest, but as a means of permanently supporting a group of employees, it would not work. To get around this, African farmers relied on labor drawn from kinship groups and slaves. Neither of these options was open to the colonial state. States had no kin, and even if colonial governments did not rush to outlaw slavery, they were not willing to formally purchase slaves. So getting labor for projects like building a road or a bridge was often accomplished by requiring local people to work on the bridge. In some cases this would be done informally by low-level colonial officials who simply made demands of local chiefs or villages. In other places, there were formal systems of forced labor in which the state required of every man a certain amount of labor per year.

Another approach that colonial states might use to obtain necessary labor was to pay wages. This only worked, though, if people either needed the money or wanted it. Here, taxation could play a role just as it had with the transition to cash cropping. If colonized people had no use for the money issued by the state, collecting taxes in cash rather than in kind could compel people to work for wages. Bear in mind that in many places there was nothing to buy with money in the very early part of the colonial period. In East and Central Africa at the turn of the century, for instance, there were neither sufficient tax collectors nor enough of a retail market for anyone to want cash. So when the British built the Uganda Railway (1902) (the backdrop against which the movie *Ghost in the Darkness* takes place), which linked Uganda to the port of Mombasa, they had to bring in workers from India. They could neither entice nor coerce local labor. Interestingly, many of the Indians who came to work on the railways stayed on rather than going back to India when their contracts were finished. Some of these Indians then became small-scale retailers, opening shops in places where there had been no shops before. In so doing, they helped to create a reason for people to want cash. Their role as pioneers in the retail trade helped to monetize the East African economy and stimulate an interest in cash crops and wage labor. It is worth noting that this was not part of the plan when the British brought in Indian labor. Rather, it was an unintended consequence.

The other, and in many ways more important, source of demand for labor was European-owned business. In places where there were significant numbers of European settlers, colonial states were faced with the task of providing labor for their farms and businesses. Although almost every colony had some European business and farms, a few places stand out as centers of this type of activity. In the Kenya highlands there was a large population of mostly British settlers. Most were engaged in growing coffee or sisal (a fiber crop). In Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) settler farmers grew maize and tobacco. In the southern part of the Congo there were huge copper mines that required lots of labor—and skilled labor at that. In South Africa the gold mines of the Rand needed labor, as did the area's farms. In other parts of the colonial world, African farmers also needed labor, such as West African cocoa farmers and Zanzibari clove planters, who sought the help of the colonial state. In these regions colonial governments found themselves engaged in a sometimes frantic hunt for labor that often spilled across the colonial frontiers.

This scramble to find labor was complicated by the abolition of slavery. One of the ways that colonialism in Africa was justified to dubious voting publics in Europe was that imperialism was needed to stamp out the evils of slavery. However sincere this objective might have been, once in power colonial regimes were reluctant to abruptly end slavery. Colonial officials relied on the cooperation of African elites to rule their colonies. In many cases, they also depended on tax revenue from farms staffed by slaves. So despite the frequent demands of home-country public opinion, the people in charge in the colonies did not rush into abolition and when they finally got around to it, they tried to minimize the economic and social upheaval associated with abolition.

Slavery and Labor in Zanzibar

When the British took over Zanzibar in 1890, they decided to rule through the preexisting structures of government. They left the sultan's government more or less intact and used its institutions for their own purposes. They did this partly out of habit—this was how most of British India was governed—but also because Zanzibar was a "protectorate," and they felt some need to keep a protected government in place. Because Arabs politically dominated the state they took over, the British usually took the interests and perspective of Arabs into account when making policy. Thus, because the main source of income for the Arab elite was clove growing and the state's main source of tax revenue was a tax on clove exports, the colonial state did nothing that might jeopardize the clove planters' labor supply. It was not until 1907 that slavery was formally abolished in Zanzibar, a full seventeen years after the British took over.

When they did get around to abolishing slavery, they still made every effort to keep former slaves under control and linked to their former owners and to keep up a supply of new labor. Most of the former slaves became "squatters" on the land of their former owners. They lived and farmed on that land, and as rent for their land they harvested cloves. They got to keep a small portion of the cloves they harvested as payment. A critical difference between this and slavery was that the squatters could not be forced to weed the plantations. Laborers recruited from the colonies on the mainland did the work of weeding the plantations. Most came from Tanganyika or Nyasaland (now Malawi) and from precisely the same areas that most of the slaves came from. These "Nyamwezi," as they were called, were recruited by colonial officers in the rural areas on the mainland and brought to Zanzibar at a reduced fare on the Zanzibar government's steamships.

Colonial states worked to provide labor to African farmers as well as European farmers. When critical income from cash cropping was threatened by a labor shortage, they took action regardless of the ethnicity of the planters. Colonial states sometimes seemed to work harder on behalf of white farmers and industrialists. This usually did not reflect the preferences of colonial officials, who often found settlers to be a troublesome bunch. Instead it reflected the much stronger political voice that white settlers had. When European settler farmers or industrialists felt that governments were not doing enough on their behalf, they could make themselves heard in ways that no African planter could.

Controversies in African History: Coltan Mining

Not all of Africa's mining operations function on the scale of the Union Minère pit mines in Congo or the deep shaft mines of the South African Rand. Some mining takes place in areas so war-torn and unstable that no sane mining company executive would risk an investment there. Deep in the forests of eastern Congo, in an area where as many as four million people may have perished since 1994 because of a war that has provoked what is arguably the least publicized humanitarian disaster of the late twentieth century, freelance miners dig up coltan.

Coltan is an earth that is rich in tantalum. Tantalum is valued in the manufacture of capacitors. It is especially useful because it helps make electrical components smaller. That it is now possible for us to carry devices like cell phones and laptops with us on a regular basis is due in part to the miniaturization that is possible because of the labor of coltan miners. We tend to think of the tech industry as a "clean" industry in that it does not involve smokestacks belching soot, but it does rely on some products that have messy origins in one of the most troubled regions of the world.

Though much of the world's coltan comes from big commercial mining operations in places other than Africa, the high-tech explosion of late 1990s and early 2000s drove demand up to the point that coltan miners in Congo were getting $80 a kilo for coltan. Considering that a diligent miner could dig a kilo a day and that most people in eastern Congo get by on less than $1 a day, coltan mining was the best job in eastern Congo (other than warlord).

Under these conditions it should not come as a surprise that people began mining coltan in earnest. Unlike copper mining, where it takes tons of ore to make a day's work profitable, or diamond mining where the shafts run hundreds or thousands of feet underground, coltan can be profitable on a very small scale. Coltan miners need little more than a shovel and bucket to go into business. The coltan is usually near the surface and mixed in with other material of lesser or no value. The muck that is dug out of the ground is mixed with water and panned like gold. The coltan is denser than the dirt so it eventually settles out. Thus, coltan mining can be done on a sort of artisanal level, with minimal capital investment and without much technical expertise.

All this led to classic gold-rush-like conditions. Prices for anything the miners required, from shovels to beer, were wildly inflated and paid for in coltan. Prostitutes flocked to the area. One *New York Times* reporter noted the surreal quality of following trails to the coltan diggings deep in the forests, miles from the nearest road of any sort, and encountering groups of giggling young women dressed in their best dresses and high heels, headed for the mining camps. Naturally, this wealth coming out of the ground attracted the attention, as it always does, of the guys with the guns. Soldiers from the various armies that had invaded eastern Congo charged the miners "protection fees." Some of the militias in the region funded themselves by controlling the coltan trade.

For coltan miners the opportunity to make a living outweighed the nuisances of paying inflated prices and protection money. But the effect on the region's wildlife was disastrous. Much of the coltan mining was done in areas designated as reserves or National Parks. The Congolese state has not been strong enough to really protect these places for a long time and the war has been hard on Congo's wildlife, but coltan mining has been a major disaster. To feed the miners, who have money to spend on luxuries like meat, hunters killed lots of bush meat. The region's lowland gorilla population, hunted as food, has been reduced to the point where it is in danger of disappearing altogether. The Pygmy population of the reserves has also been threatened by coltan mining. The Pygmies rely partly on game in the reserves for their food and competition from market hunters for that game, as well as the presence of extra people in the forest, puts them at risk of murder and exploitation, something that has been common during Congo's civil war.

In 2002 the UN issued a report on coltan in Congo and suggested that not only was coltan mining environmentally destructive and the source of exploitation of miners, sex workers, and children; it mostly benefitted the nations to Congo's east through whose territories most of the coltan is illegally exported. These countries have the governmental capacity to tax these exports, a capacity the nearly powerless Congolese government lacks. The result is that though Congo suffers the hardships associated with coltan mining, the benefits mostly accrue to the neighbors. A number of organizations have launched boycotts against Congo coltan, though these are difficult to enforce because it is nearly impossible for consumers to look at a cell phone or DVD player and determine the origins of the coltan in it. Meanwhile, most Congolese—and not just coltan miners—are scandalized that people in the West would hinder the efforts of people trying to make a living in one of the most desperately poor corners of the one of the world's poorest nations.

The situation has been further complicated by the Iraq war, which has increased military demand for tech products and hence for coltan. Then, only a year after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Sons of Gwalia, an Australian company that mines coltan and is one of the world's major coltan ore processors, went through an Enron-like accounting scandal that drove it into bankruptcy. The fates of Central Africa's artisanal miners and of the lowland gorilla remains up in the air.

Settlers in the Kenya Highlands

The Kenya Highlands became a major locus of white settlement in the first decades of the twentieth century. The mountains of central Kenya are just high enough that temperatures are cool year-round. Thus, many of the tropical diseases that inhibited white settlement in other parts of Africa are less prevalent there. It also means that some European crops and livestock survive there. It was and is a perfect place to grow coffee, which thrives in tropical highlands. The most valuable varieties need to be grown at altitudes over 6,000 feet. European settlers could grow coffee to support themselves while also producing grain and dairy products that were familiar to them. They could keep horses, which was important to their sense of upper-class dignity. (This was oddly important to colonial self-esteem. In Nigeria, it was considered much better to work in the north where one could keep a horse than in the south where horses did not survive long.)

Settlers began to move into the Highlands in large numbers only after the Uganda Railway was finished in 1902. Once there, they took over land that had previously belonged to the Kikuyu and Kamba, farming people who lived in the Highlands. Kikuyu and Kamba land was taken in a series of land alienations, on the grounds that it was not being used to its full potential. It was then sold at nominal prices to settlers. Some of the Kikuyu and Kamba were relegated to "Native Reserves," and some remained on the land that had once been theirs as "squatters." Squatters were expected to work for the new landowners in lieu of paying a cash rent. People living on the Native Reserves were also expected to work for settlers, though in their case, they were wage workers who initially worked primarily to satisfy government-imposed taxes. Later they worked to feed themselves as the Reserves became overcrowded and it became nearly impossible to make a living on them.

Settler farmers typically grew their crops on large and labor-hungry plantations. Their search for labor was complicated by a number of erroneous beliefs they held about African workers. One was that Africans, coming from an environment that supported them with little effort on their part, were naturally disinclined to hard work. Thus, their labor was worth little, and their pay should be correspondingly low. If, in their sloth, they failed to be attracted to low-wage work, means other than raising wages should be used to get them to work. Frequently, settlers simply demanded that the colonial government make the Africans work. Although the settlers' belief that Africans were naturally conditioned to laziness by their environment was the purest of nonsense, another settler belief about African work habits had more merit, at least in the early decades of the colonial period. This was the belief that Africans were "target workers." That is to say that they did wage work with an earnings target in mind, and when they had achieved that target they stopped working. From the perspective of people who are only doing wage labor because the state has informed them that they must pay taxes in cash but who otherwise have little use for money, working after you have satisfied your tax obligations made little sense. So if you were taxed 5 shillings, you worked until you had earned 5 shillings, then you went home and lived off farming like you did before someone demanded that you pay taxes. As long as the subsistence economy survived alongside the cash economy, workers could move back and forth between them, earning money when they needed to and living off their farms the rest of the time. According to this logic, if settlers raised their workers' wages, the workers would just reach their earnings targets sooner, and their workers would disappear.

So coercion rather than attractive wages was the order of the day. A Masters and Servants Ordinance gave employers a variety of powers over their employees. Employees could be jailed for leaving before their contract expired, for breaking tools, for being drunk on the job, and even for being disrespectful to their employers. To ensure that there were enough employees available, government-appointed chiefs were told they had quotas of workers that they must furnish. Workers were coerced into entering into wage labor and coerced into staying at least for the length of their contracts. To be fair to the colonial state, many colonial officers in Kenya made some modest efforts to ensure that workers were not mistreated. The government also required that employers feed their laborers and that they be provided with blankets and housing. However, they more often turned a blind eye to employer negligence than they did to worker negligence.

Perhaps the most significant way in which the colonial state favored settler farmers in the Kenya Highlands was to prevent African farmers from competing with them. Whereas Kenyans often had to be forced to work on coffee plantations, many Kikuyu and Kamba farmers found growing coffee themselves to be much more appealing. The colonial state quickly stepped in to ensure that local people did not grow cash crops, lest they should cease to need work from white farmers. In some places the colonial state was doing everything in its power to coerce African farmers to grow cash crops, but in other places it feared that cash cropping might hinder the labor supply needed by white commercial farmers. There was no single approach that colonial states took toward agriculture. In some places, such as Ghana, they were mostly content to let African farmers choose their own crops. In others, like Mozambique, the colonial state went to destructive lengths to force cash crops on unwilling farmers. In still other instances, Kenya and Rhodesia for example, the colonial state tried to stamp out cash cropping and supported white commercial farmers instead. As both Rhodesia and Kenya approached independence in the 1960s, the majority of the best land was in the hands of a white minority, and most Africans were either employed by white farmers or eking out a meager living on subsistence farms on overcrowded reserves.

Perhaps the biggest user of African labor was the mining industry. Mines in the Congolese Copper Belt and the South African Rand had a voracious appetite for labor. In both instances, the mining companies' access to labor was complicated by politics and geography. The Copper Belt had a relatively low population density, so there were few people available locally to work in the mines. Much of the labor that was available was found in other colonies ruled by other European powers. Thus, the Belgian companies that ran the mines in a Belgian colony found themselves looking for labor in British and even Portuguese colonies. In the Rand, the mining companies had to work with the prevailing racial ideology of South Africa. One of the premises of apartheid was that most of South Africa was to be inhabited by whites. If any Africans or Asians were there, they were visitors, not permanent residents. Thus, the mines were allowed to bring in workers as long as the workers were there only temporarily. The mining companies not only learned to live with this ideology, they embraced it as a means of controlling their labor force.

In 1911, the Union Minère, the company that ran the biggest mines in the Copper Belt, was competing with the railways and other employers for labor. The government's response to this was to create the Bourse du Travail du Katanga (Katanga Labor Exchange), a body that was meant to recruit labor and then see that it was equally shared among the labor-hungry employers of the region. The Union Minère, like most mining companies, sought to put its employees on short-term contracts and to prevent them from bringing their families to live with them. The idea was that miners who were there on contracts of a year or less could always be sent home if they did something like organize a union, and if their families were elsewhere the mines could claim that the miners' wages were meant to pay only for their labor and not to support their families. The presumption was that the miners' families would support themselves by farming and that when the miners themselves were away from the mines, they too could live off the income of these farms. The subsistence economy was supposed to support the majority of the population and provide a labor surplus that could be used by the mines, but the mines were not going to pay for anything beyond the actual labor of the miners. In economics jargon, the mines sought to externalize the costs of reproduction of the labor force.

Although mining companies in South Africa succeeded at externalizing these costs—at a great social cost—the scheme failed in the Copper Belt. This was partly due to the nature of the work in the copper mines. These mines required more skilled than unskilled labor, so the short-term contracts that the Union Minère hoped to impose on miners turned out to be counterproductive. Rather, it made more sense to keep skilled workers once they had been trained. In the 1920s, physicians working for the mining companies pointed out that if the miners were allowed to live with their families, there would be fewer prostitutes around the mines and hence less venereal disease among the miners. So in the late twenties, the mines in the Copper Belt started to build housing for the miners and allowed their families to join them. Ultimately, miners in the Copper Belt came to enjoy some of the best living standards of workers anywhere in Africa. They had schools, clinics, homes, and decent wages. Miners were recruited, though as conditions improved they were often volunteers, from places as diverse as Northern Rhodesia (later Zambia) and Mozambique. Authorities in these colonies often sought to send people to the mines in the Copper Belt in the hopes that they would repatriate some of their income.

On the mines of the Rand (one is said to work "on the mines" in South Africa rather than "in the mines"), labor conditions could not have been more different. There the short-term contract was the norm for Africans. White miners demanded that the best jobs be reserved for them and that they should get long-term employment while African miners got short-term contracts. African miners, who were considered temporary visitors to white South Africa, were compelled to live in hostels. The hostels were more or less all-male barracks, often fenced with barbed wire. The workers were herded from the hostel to the mine and back each day. Workers were also expected to return home to their families periodically to ensure that they did not put down roots near the mines.

The result was a system of often brutal exploitation wherein black miners made a fraction of the wages earned by their white counterparts. They often traveled long distances to get to the mines—some coming from as far away as Mozambique or Rhodesia. They were then forced to live in the harsh world of the hostels. This system was possible because there was less skilled work to be done on the mines of the Rand, and what skilled work there was, was reserved for white miners, so the companies could treat workers as disposable.

The mines of the Rand set up a pattern of labor migration that was unique to southern Africa. It has sometimes been described as "oscillating migration" because workers went back and forth across the subcontinent going between their homes and the mines. They lived part of the year on the mines and part of the year at home. The result was the movement of all sorts of things from religious ideas to germs between the mines and the rural hinterlands of southern Africa. Mine workers from Rhodesia/Zimbabwe brought home with them knowledge of the teachings of the Zion Church. This was an independent church that was popular in South Africa. Miners returning from South Africa in the 1940s and 1950s set themselves up as leaders of the church in Rhodesia. The Zion Church still exists and is a major religious force in modern Zimbabwe.

A miners' hostel in South Africa. African miners were required to live in the hostels. Their short term labor contracts did not permit them to live in the communities in which they worked.

Another thing that followed miners home was disease. The conditions in the hostels favored the spread of tuberculosis and sexually transmitted disease. These were then spread into rural areas by miners. This remains a problem today in southern Africa. Today in Mozambique, miners returning from South Africa often bring HIV infection with them, which then spreads to their sex partners. Thus, seemingly isolated parts of rural Mozambique have been plugged into labor migration networks for decades and are as exposed to the global HIV pandemic as people in the world's major cities.

The Cities of Africa

Although there have been cities in Africa for centuries, one of the notable features of the colonial period was the creation and rapid growth of cities. Colonial authorities had to compel Africans to work in mines or grow cash crops, but they had no trouble getting them to come to cities. In fact, colonial governments were more often concerned with