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Africa in World History

From Prehistory to the Present

Second Edition

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Chapter 14

Economic Change in Modern Africa: Forced Integration into the World System

Africa, like the rest of the world, has gone through dramatic economic change in the last 130 years. As the technology needed to create an integrated global economy has become available, places that were once almost immune to world market forces have become part of a global economy. An array of technologies from the telegraph to the fax machine and the steamship to the shipping container has made this degree of economic integration possible. Today farm subsidies in Europe and North America affect African farmers, who sometimes cannot compete against imported foods in their local markets. A global market for light manufacturing labor has made the island of Mauritius a center of clothing production. Nigeria produces large amounts of oil, most of which is sold to the industrialized countries of the West. Copper from the Congo, gold from South Africa, fresh cut flowers from Kenya, and tropical aquarium fish from the lakes of East-Central Africa all are fed into a global economy. At the same time, many Africans wear imported clothes, eat imported food, drive imported cars, and burn imported fuel. The economies of most African nations are utterly dependent on trade.

Trade is nothing new in Africa, nor is trade across continental boundaries a major innovation of recent times. Rather, trade has grown more or less steadily in importance for Africa, and over time Africa's incorporation in the world economy has increased. The advent of colonial rule in the last decades of the nineteenth century accelerated a process that had been going on for centuries. Prior to the advent of colonial rule in Africa, there were any number of means by which Africans participated in long-distance trade. West African gold had been exported across the Sahara for centuries in exchange for North African cloth. Salt, smoked fish, and kola nuts were traded over long distances within the continent. The East African coast traded cereals, ivory, and slaves for things as valuable as Chinese porcelain and as mundane as dried shark. Some West African states were deeply involved in an Atlantic trading system that included cloth, slaves, plant oils, gold, and other commodities. Trading canoes plied the waters of the Niger River carrying goods from the

dry Sahel to the wet forest country of the West African coast. Bobangi canoeists likewise traded up and down the length of the Congo River, while Douala traders did likewise on the rivers of Cameroun. The Zambezi saw gold, grain, slaves, and ivory move along its waters. In short, Africans were producing and consuming trade goods long before the colonial period began and continued to do so after the colonial era came to an end. However, the advent of colonialism marks, in a rough way, the onset of a period of intensification of Africa's incorporation into the world economy. This chapter will consider how these changes affected farmers, merchants, wage laborers, slaves, and ultimately the leaders of independent African nations.

The Cash Crop Revolution

In 1800, most Africans were subsistence farmers. Subsistence farmers typically strive to grow all of the food they need to support themselves and their families. They are in effect their own main customers. Thus, they would grow a mix of staples, such as sorghum, maize, yams, and vegetables. They might also keep animals and grow fiber crops as well. Of course, it is virtually impossible to produce locally everything that a family might need. It is also standard practice among subsistence farmers to grow more food than a single family requires. This is in part a safety measure. It is always better to have a surplus of food—even if some is wasted—than to go hungry. Furthermore, there are always a few things—salt, pottery, cloth, fish—that either limitations of environment or labor prevent being produced within the household. So the surplus that is normally generated by subsistence farmers rarely goes to waste. Instead, it is exchanged for essentials or luxuries that the household cannot produce.

By contrast, farmers who are cash croppers usually focus on a single crop that they then exchange for all the other things they need. For example, a cash cropper might grow nothing but cotton. The cotton would then be sold and the proceeds of the sale would be used to buy food, clothing, and whatever else one might need. For cash cropping to work, a number of other institutions and economic structures are needed. For example, there must be someone willing to buy the farmers' crops, and there must be some means of paying for them. Often there are systems of credit involved that allow farmers to buy supplies and to meet expenses before the harvest is sold. There must be a system for storing and transporting the cash crops, and a way of bringing food to the farmers who grow cash crops. And all of this must work smoothly and reliably or farmers will not be willing to grow cash crops. If for some reason one of these institutions fails, a farmer could end up stuck with more cotton than he could ever hope to wear and nothing but cotton to eat. In short, cash cropping can only take place in the presence of a developed and integrated economy.

From the perspective of a state, cash crops have some big advantages over subsistence farming. Cash crops are almost always sold for money at some point. Money transactions are much easier to document and hence to tax than barter transactions. A state composed entirely of busy and prosperous subsistence farmers would not have much of a tax base because the majority of its citizens would live outside the money economy. Cash crops also appeal to states because they can be

exchanged for commodities that elites find desirable, or in the case of colonial governments, cash crops may be desirable because they are needed by industry in the colonial metropolis. Thus, colonial states often encouraged cash crop production because the home markets needed cotton or palm oil or whatever. Independent African states find cash crops equally desirable because they can be exchanged for the hard currency needed to import necessities such as fuel, medicine, and food or luxuries.

The history of cash cropping in Africa is one of cautious innovation on the part of farmers and wildly overoptimistic enthusiasm on the part of states. States have encouraged and even coerced African farmers to produce for world markets, often before the economic institutions that would permit them to succeed were in place. African farmers have usually wisely rejected cash cropping in the absence of suitable transportation networks and markets and enthusiastically embraced cash cropping when the necessary economic structures were in place. Interestingly, the most successful instances of cash cropping have occurred where farmers rather than states took the initiative to introduce cash cropping or where farmers have used infrastructure provided by the state in unanticipated ways.

It is also worth noting that cash cropping did not begin with colonialism. Where water provided cheap transport, cash cropping thrived. Along the Senegal River farmers had been growing groundnuts (peanuts to Americans) for export

Harvesting sisal, a fiber crop used to make twine. Note the light gauge rail cars used to transport the sisal within the plantation.

since the late eighteenth century. Farmers on the East African coast produced grain for export to South Arabia from at least the early nineteenth century and probably long before. Plantation owners on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, where water transport is easily available, produced cloves for export for more than 50 years before the British seized their islands. **Palm oil** was produced all along the rivers and lagoons of West Africa. Thus, where there was suitable transportation Africans were enthusiastic cash croppers. We should not assume that it was an irrational resistance to change that made farmers sometimes reluctant to become cash croppers. Rather, it was usually a keen awareness of the risks involved.

Colonial Transportation Networks

If colonial governments caused a major shift in African farming habits, it was in part because they provided new types of transportation. Colonial states built these transportation networks for two reasons. The first was that they hoped that improved transportation would enable their colonies to yield enough revenue to support the cost of government. The second was an ideological commitment to "modernization" that was often expressed through the construction of modern forms of transportation. Obviously, these two motivations are related to each other, but it is worth examining each of them separately.

European powers acquired colonies in Africa for almost as many reasons as there were colonies. And once they had acquired colonies, European colonial states had an equally varied approach to governing their new possessions. But whatever reasons they had for acquiring colonies or methods of government they chose, colonial governments were all expected to meet the costs of administration locally. The French or British public might be willing to meet the cost of conquest and the occasional public works project, but colonial governments were expected to find enough revenue to pay government salaries and the cost of administration. Faced in many instances with colonies mostly populated by subsistence farmers whose involvement with the money economy was limited, colonial governments had to find ways of getting their subjects into the cash economy and then taxing them. To this end, most colonial states sought to compel people to enter the money economy through the imposition of taxes that were payable only with money. With the stick of taxation in place, they then provided the carrot of either wage labor on European-owned mines and farms, or support for cash cropping. On most of the continent European investment in farms and mines was limited, though in some places like southern Africa it was significant, so for most Africans paying taxes meant becoming cash croppers.

Taxation took many forms, some of them rather creative. One of the more common early means of taxing Africans was the hut tax. Tax collectors would visit a town or village, count roofs, and present the community with a tax bill based on the number of houses. This was quickly countered by building fewer but larger houses, so authorities switched to other types of taxes, such as the poll tax (a per capita tax)

and taxes on other things less subject to changes in scale. In Zanzibar, for instance, there was a canoe tax, meant to draw the fishing communities of the islands into the world of cash and taxation.

Colonial authorities were aware that cash cropping was impossible if farmers lacked access to markets. Thus, the first post-conquest acts of most colonial states were public works projects meant to facilitate cash crop production. All over the continent there was a spate of railway building and port improvements. Rail lines, some of which were constructed at great expense and at the cost of many lives, were constructed primarily to link the interiors of the various colonies to their ports. One line linked the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa to Lake Victoria, another was built to bypass the rapids in the lower Congo River and allow goods to be brought by rail to the Atlantic port of Matadi. Even on the tiny island of Zanzibar the British built the mellifluously named Bububu Railway, a narrow-gauge railway that linked some of the island's clove plantations to its port.

Each colonial nation had its own national rail gauge, which they used in their own colonies. Because there were few attempts to link the rail systems in one colony to another, this rarely made any difference, but in some cases it resulted in independent nations inheriting bizarrely incompatible rail systems. The modern nation of Cameroun has the dubious distinction of having first belonged to the Germans, then being divided by the British and the French, and then at independence having some of the British-controlled regions reunited with the French-controlled areas. As a result, the independent Republic of Cameroun came into existence with some British-built railways, some French-built railways, and a few surviving German-built lines, all incompatible.

Virtually all of the colonial-era railways terminated at a port. Their purpose after all was not to facilitate exchange within the colony or between colonies, but to link the colonies to the world market, preferably through the domestic economy of the colonial power. So port construction and improvement was as much a priority as railway construction. Where ports or natural harbors already existed, dredges were soon at work deepening the channels and creating deepwater berths for steamships. Colonial states constructed new piers, built warehouses, and brought in cranes, all to speed the passage of cargo through the ports and off to the colonial metropoles. In places where there were no natural harbors, ambitious colonial officials built artificial harbors. The British colony the Gold Coast (later the independent nation of Ghana) had, despite its long history of oceanic trade, relied on canoes and surfboats to load and unload the steamers that called at its port at Secondi. In the 1920s the colonial state built, at great expense, an artificial harbor at Takoradi. In this case, local revenues paid for the construction at Takoradi, but in general these types of projects, whether rail or port, were funded either with loans or grants from the metropolitan governments. These always came with the expectation that increased tax revenues and increased trade between the colony and the metropole would ultimately justify the expense.

On one level, this investment by European nations in infrastructure in Africa was meant to improve the economies of the colonies. And for many Africans, work on the railroads or in the ports provided economic opportunity. For many others, the opportunity to sell their crops in exchange for imported goods was also beneficial. In

some colonies, farmers who produced certain cash crops—most notably cocoa—came to form a prosperous middle class. The fact that the Gold Coast could pay for its own artificial harbor was due to the revenues from cocoa. But there was another, less benevolent side to all of this investment. First, it usually took the economic interests of the metropole as the starting point for any development scheme. Thus, when the French began to encourage cotton production in their colonies, it was because they felt the French industry needed a safe supply of cotton. Most colonial regimes at one point or another in their history used neomercantilist schemes meant to use tax incentives to favor trade between the metropole and its colonies rather than trade with other nations. Thus, the British tried to encourage trade within their empire, whereas the Portuguese and French did likewise within their own imperial systems. The other complaint one might make about this apparently benevolent investment in infrastructure was that it was often meant to supplant preexisting transportation systems that were outside the control of the colonial state. So railroads were sometimes justified as a way of ending head porterage, whereas investment in modern ports and steamships in East Africa was seen by the colonial state as a means for undermining the local sailing ships called **dhows**.

This brings us to the ideological element of the colonial state's commitment to transportation technology. In addition to being a practical means of encouraging cash crop production, transportation technology was meant to bring modernity to Africa. Many of the features of late-nineteenth-century African life that the colonial state disapproved of were related in some way to transportation technology. Slaves were associated with the caravan trade where it was believed that they formed the majority of the porters, so colonial states built railways along the traditional caravan routes. The **canoe houses** of the Niger Delta transported palm oil, but they also transported slaves and indeed were comprised mostly of slaves; river steamers replaced them. The dhows of the East African coast were associated with the slave trade, so colonial governments went to great lengths to introduce and subsidize steamship service.

The clearest articulation of this ideology comes from the **Brussels Treaty** of 1890. This treaty is best known for helping to justify the Belgian King Leopold's exploitation of his Congo Free State by casting his efforts there as an antislavery effort. But there is another element to the Brussels Treaty, and this was a call for other colonial powers to help to stamp out slavery and the slave trade in Africa by introducing river steamers and railroads and carefully tracking the movements of dhows. Thus these technologies, which were symbols of modernity as much as they were practical means of transportation, were often built in places where they were inappropriate to the scale of the economy. An excellent example of this comes from Zanzibar where the colonial government decided that steamships should supplant dhows on the short, 50-mile run between Zanzibar and her sister island of Pemba. This in turn required the construction of three ports on the 50-mile-long island of Pemba and major port improvements in Zanzibar. Despite all this investment, local merchants continued to use dhows because they better fit the needs and scale of the local cash crop economy. So although one may occasionally read disparaging reports about independent African governments doing apparently irrational things such as constructing eight-lane highways to nowhere, you should know that they

were not alone in this habit. Colonial governments showed an almost superstitious belief in the power of modern technology to modernize other aspects of the colonial economy.

Cocoa Farming in Ghana

The move from subsistence farming to cash cropping took place many times in different parts of the continent, and the nature of that transition was highly variable, so there is no way to look exhaustively at all the permutations. The rise of cocoa farming in Ghana makes as instructive case study. Cocoa farming was a tremendous success in Ghana, and many of the reasons it succeeded help to explain the failure of imposed cash cropping schemes in other parts of the continent. The success of cocoa farming also brought great social strains, as farmers sought to get access to the labor and capital needed to grow the new crop. Foremost among these social strains were struggles to define the extent to which married women were obligated to provide labor to their husbands' cocoa farming ventures.

Cocoa, the plant from which chocolate is made, is not native to the African continent. Rather, it is one of the American crops that only became available in the Eastern Hemisphere as a result of the Columbian Exchange. However, unlike many New World crops, cocoa was only slowly adopted outside its homeland. It is a tree crop that thrives in tropical forest environments. Because it is a tree crop, it takes several years to reach maturity. The earliest a cocoa farmer can hope to see his, or often her, first harvest is three to four years after planting. Even then the trees are not at full productivity for several more years. The beans also require processing once they are harvested, so cocoa farming is a capital-intensive form of farming. One must have the capital to clear land, buy seedlings, plant them, keep the field weeded for three or four years until the trees shade out all the weeds, and finally to harvest and process the beans. A cocoa farmer needs lots of cash to start up the business and then does not get any income for at least three or four years. An aspiring cocoa farmer also needs some means of recruiting the labor needed to perform all of these tasks. Thus, cocoa farming requires a complex set of social and financial institutions for it to succeed in a new place.

In the nineteenth century the Spanish introduced cocoa to the island of Fernando Po (now renamed Bioko), which lies just off the coast of Cameroun. How cocoa arrived in Ghana is uncertain, and it looks as though three separate groups may have introduced cocoa almost simultaneously in the 1890s. One was the British colonial governor, another was a group of missionaries, and the third was an African blacksmith. The governor oversaw the opening of the Aburi Botanical Gardens, which in addition to being a scientific research station was also a cocoa nursery. But Teten Quashie, the blacksmith, also opened a nursery and it is he who seems to have done the most to sell the cocoa seedlings to local farmers.

Indeed, the most interesting thing about cocoa farming in Ghana is that the local farmers always seem to have been a step ahead of the British. Whereas in other parts of Africa, colonial governments tried to push Africans into cash cropping, in

Ghana the British mostly found themselves supporting and encouraging initiatives already begun locally. Governor Sir William Griffith's nursery at Aburi, for example, probably provided fewer than 10 percent of the seedlings planted in the 1920s, the decade when cocoa farming went through its most dramatic expansion; the other 90 percent were provided by Ghanaian entrepreneurs. Likewise, the expansion of cocoa farming preceded the creation of a railway system in Ghana. In most cases colonial states built railways hoping that their existence would stimulate the transition to cash cropping; in Ghana the opposite happened. Ghanaian farmers started growing cocoa, so the British decided to build a rail system that linked the cocoa farming regions to the ports.

The enthusiastic adoption of cocoa by Ghanaian farmers was most likely the result of a prior history of cash cropping in the region. Ever since the abolition of the slave trade, West Africans had been producing more and more palm oil as a way of staying involved in Atlantic trade. Thus, farmers in southern Ghana had a tradition of growing oil palm as a cash crop. By the early twentieth century the price of palm oil was declining, and farmers were looking for other crops. Cocoa came along at just the right time to fill this need. Cocoa farming also benefitted from a prior history of kola nut farming in the region. Many of the skills and tools used in kola nut farming could be applied to cocoa farming, so although the cocoa tree was alien to Africa, it was a near-perfect fit for Ghanaian farmers.

Cocoa farming spread like wildfire in Ghana. By 1911, Ghana was the world's leading producer of cocoa. By the 1920s there was a full-scale boom in effect. Cocoa prices were high, new land was still being brought into production, and labor was

Cocoa drying in the colonial Gold Coast. This was a seven-to-ten-day-process, during which the beans had to be stirred hourly by hand.

becoming scarce. Though slavery was outlawed in Ghana in 1874, the British had, at the same time they outlawed slavery, passed a law called the Masters and Servants Ordinance. This was a fairly common way for colonial governments to formally end slavery without totally upsetting the social and economic conditions that had prevailed when slavery was legal. Masters and Servants Ordinances usually required former slaves to accept labor contracts with their former owners or someone else. These contracts placed great power in the hands of employers, and the courts usually leaned toward the employers when enforcing these contracts. Thus, in the early years of cocoa growing, even though slavery had ceased to exist as a legal institution, many of the workers involved in the cocoa industry were either former slaves or wage laborers whose contracts made them easily controlled by the growers. Family labor was also used. There was, however, much crossover between former slaves and family members. When slavery was legal, it was common for men in southern Ghana to take slave wives. After slavery was abolished, it was still acceptable to have pawns as wives. (Pawns were people given as collateral and interest on a loan; see Chapter 8 for more detail.) Not surprisingly, wives who were former slaves had many fewer rights than free wives. Free wives could, for instance, keep any property they brought to a marriage separate from their husbands' property. Any income they earned from their property was likewise theirs to keep. They were expected to provide their husbands with farm labor, in exchange for which they expected to be provided with "subsistence" by their husbands. Note the use of the word "expect" in the last sentence. As demands for labor grew in the 1920s, a period of what historian Jean Allman has called "social chaos" ensued. Both men and women began to try to redefine the expectations of marriage.

By the 1920s male cocoa farmers seem to have been trying to use marriage as a means of obtaining labor. They would marry women, insist that they work on their farms, and often not provide the subsistence that had previously been part of the deal. Women resisted this by either using the failure of their husbands to feed them as a reason to avoid working on their husbands' farms and putting more effort into their own farms, getting into cocoa farming themselves, or avoiding marriage altogether. This latter strategy became so common that local courts, dominated, as you might expect, by men with an interest in cocoa farming, in some places ordered all unmarried women to be rounded up and placed in custody until someone could be found who was willing to marry them. When a potential husband arrived, he paid a fee to the court that was comparable to normal bridewealth and took home his bride. If the woman refused to marry the man, she had to pay him the amount he had paid the court.

In effect, these courts were trying to force women into providing labor through the institution of coerced marriage. Women used many strategies to circumvent these roundups, such as getting a male friend to come and claim them as a wife or paying their own bridewealth. Such was the social upheaval of the 1920s that bedrock social institutions like marriage were being challenged and manipulated during this time. Although the Akan farmers of southern Ghana adopted cocoa of their own accord and profited more from it than most other cash croppers in colonial Africa, the new crop brought great social strain.