2.3. Sub-saharan Africa

Before looking at labour systems in Africa south of the Sahara, it might be important to consider this proviso. Africa is a very large continent with considerable human variety, very different societies that have developed with some continuity of contact but with strong regional differences and sometimes markedly different economic systems based on environmental possibilities. As Valentin Mudimbe has written, the ‘idea’, or invention of Africa as he put it is itself a product of a Eurocentric imagination, still more one defined in racial terms. Sub-saharan Africa moreover has never been isolated from Eurasia. The Sahara is and was not a barrier to human movement and contact. If the Atlantic Ocean was difficult to navigate, monsoon winds opened up the East African coast to ancient contacts and the Red Sea is, of course, quite narrow. Both these factors need to be considered in generalizations about labour history in the very long and broad sense in Africa.

The literature considering the long-term evolution of African societies generally emphasizes the gendered division of labour because this has often been a notably distinctive feature of many of them. Within the household, and most societies are ideally polygamous, men tended to define their work as hunting, defence and the care of livestock, above all cattle. Cattle were prized in areas where they could be raised in good health as the basis of wealth and exchange. Migrations, long and short-term, reflected the search for available pasture land. However, it is generally thought that the domestication of livestock, and especially cattle, preceded the development of agriculture and might have taken place in South Sudan. There are peoples in eastern Africa such as the Nuer and Dinka speakers of South Sudan, the Oromo of southern and central Ethiopia, most of the Somali and the Maasai of Tanzania and Kenya, who farmed very little and were almost entirely focussed on cattle keeping. In West Africa, Fulfulde speakers were specialized cattle keepers who traded systematically with the agriculturalists amongst whom they found themselves.¹

In the southern half of Africa, however, a distinctive pattern developed that Ester Boserup called ‘female farming’.² Here men were stock herders and women cultivated grains which were probably first grown systematically in West Africa, especially millet and sorghum. These grains were not farmed intensively except where permanent sources of water existed; they were very hardy and could survive long dry seasons. Millet especially could be the source of nourishing beer whose manufacture was also a female specialty. In Namibia and South Africa, this kind of livelihood system tended to marginalize more ancient pre-agricultural patterns where men hunted

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and women gathered. Female farming systems could be associated with patriarchal social forms where households accumulated based on cattle wealth and exchanged women as wives. Such households agglomerated into lineage groups and so-called tribes. In general, households were also hierarchical in terms of age. Age was linked to fitness to time of life but so long as formation of a household depended on exchange of goods and the agreement of elders, youths were essentially dependent and for the time being exploitable labour.

The other phenomenon which has attracted a very large literature on pre-colonial Africa is the prevalence in many societies, but notably in West Africa, of different categories of what can be translated into English as slavery. In some form or another, slaves were captives, foreigners, who had few (albeit increasingly some, as time went on) rights. The interest in slavery inevitably has to do with the transport of millions of Africans from broader and broader areas of the continent across the seas to the Americas where they were essentially put to work on plantations aimed at capitalist profits secured through international trade. Sugar was the key commodity of this trade but in the nineteenth century, cotton from North America was equally important. The largest number of slaves were brought to the Americas in the century beginning in 1750 having built up from the earliest contacts in the 15th century.

It is difficult to prove the prevalence of slavery before the establishment of the Atlantic slave trade. However, there is no question that such a trade had been significant for many centuries back into classical times and particularly from early in the Islamic era. In the 8th century, a revolt associated with black slaves on plantations is reported from irrigated land in southern modern-day Iraq, for instance. It would be a mistake however to consign the slaves of West Africa into a systematically exploited class without further definition. Islamic societies in the West African interior (and on the East African coast) featured slaves who were used on a large scale as soldiers, trusted eunuchs and household women whose children did not necessarily inherit this status. In a typical successful household, slaves did not really do particular jobs apart from free members. The majority of slaves were women whose status was equally marked by their gender; indeed women slaves tended to have a higher market value than men. If we take it to be a typical West African forest society, Asante (located in modern-day Ghana) was characterized by several categories of un-

4 Ralph Austen, Trans-Saharan Africa in World History (New York, 2010).
7 Claire Robertson and Martin Klein (eds), Women and Slavery in Africa (Madison, WI, 1983).
free labour and generally speaking slaves born in the household were not considered chattel that could be sold. An important category of unfree labour here and elsewhere are usually labelled as pawns. Pawns were placed into households to repay debts, very often for life but they were not considered as slaves to be bought and sold either and they were not generally forced out into the slave trade in some areas such as the Niger Delta, the lower Congo river and coastal Madagascar, the slave trade can be associated with rapid social mobility in which ex-slaves became leaders and small-scale rulers just as did elsewhere the children of European traders and African women. West African societies reached a more complex division of labour than most other parts of the continent south of the Sahara. Certain groups of people, perhaps in terms of their relationship to authority, such as blacksmiths and praise-singers, formed the heart of what have been termed castes, largely endogamous. Polygamous households which consisted of men, women and children, slaves and pawns, and which could be very large were typically involved as well in craft activity and participated in local and sometimes long-distance markets while men raided and went to war. Craft activity involved masters and apprentices. Participation in larger households offered security although smaller, less complex societies existed in environmentally more challenging areas—marshlands, plateau or broken hill country, etc.

Male involvement in farming was also crucial in the Ethiopian highlands where agriculture was based on the use of cattle-harnessed ploughs, with relatively high population densities and a distinctive repertoire of unique crops first domesticated locally. The level of commercialization was low and towns were historically virtually non-existent but the highlands early on accepted Eastern Christianity and harboured a large monastic population. The church was a large landholder and extracted pro-

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duce from the peasantry as did the aristocracy.\textsuperscript{12} Commerce and craft work was often carried on by Muslims who had no access to land. Inland Madagascar was another area where a ruling class from the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century made large demands for troops and foodstuffs from the rice-growing peasantry of the central highlands while raiding for slaves elsewhere.\textsuperscript{13}

By the nineteenth century, three tendencies should be stressed. The first is the impact of commodity trade. The African gold trade existed from at least the 8\textsuperscript{th} or 9\textsuperscript{th} century in West Africa and a couple of centuries later in south-central Africa, but the actual mining was not the product of a new distinctive working class. In what is today Zimbabwe, it is thought that most mining labour, including the sifting and separation of the ore, was performed by women in the dry season as an alternative to craft and other chores.\textsuperscript{14} In the nineteenth century, there is good evidence that gold mining in what is today Ghana and the Ivory Coast was also the result of activity, including migration, by households otherwise engaged in agriculture and essentially by individuals who were free. Profits accrued to the merchants with the state having some capacity to extract revenue.\textsuperscript{15}

However, in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, commercial life intensified. This led to the establishment of massive caravan traffic that engaged tens of thousands of workers. The ivory of the East African interior or the tin of the Jos Plateau in Nigeria called into life these cities on the move. Rockel has demonstrated that the caravan, with a complex social order of its own, consisted of entrepreneurial free individuals as key figures in which slave participants were secondary.\textsuperscript{16}

However, slaving itself expanded in many areas and incurred large-scale violence. So did the advent of guns. Caravan leaders were amongst those who created raw, new political units while older states such as the Merina principality in central Madagascar, the contested monarchy of Ethiopia, the gigantic domain of Muhammad Ali, the Albanian representative of the Ottomans in Egypt, and others began a partition of Africa. As the imperial era took off, Europeans depended on African recruits

\textsuperscript{12} Allan Hoben, \textit{Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia. The Dynamics of Cognatic Descent} (Chicago, 1975); Donald Crummey, \textit{Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the 13\textsuperscript{th} to the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century} (Oxford, 2000).

\textsuperscript{13} Gwyn Campbell, \textit{An Economic History of Imperial Madagascar, 1750 – 1895. The Rise and Fall of an Island Empire} (Cambridge, 2008).


such as the West African Frontier Force and the *Tirailleurs sénégalais*. Indeed, the French systematically developed an African army (which they would use in time in Europe itself) creating an important new class of workers. Slaves also were in some areas systematically put to work to produce cash crops such as palm oil in coastal West Africa or cloves in Zanzibar.

A third phenomenon was the emergence starting in the seventeenth century of a geographically extensive Dutch settler colony from the southern tip of Africa. Through the eighteenth century, thousands of slaves were imported here. In the Cape Colony slaves and landless indigenous people were the crucial workforce; they outnumbered the European minority in the population and, after the abolition of slavery, formed the basis of the Coloured population which basically was excluded from land ownership. Affluent whites tended to combine commercial and service activities at the Cape with the ownership of vineyards, grain farms and, in the deeper interior, cattle and sheep ranches. By the later nineteenth century however, urban life was well-established with a variety of European colonial institutions of every sort and very economically diverse activities, albeit an unspecialised working population. Another slave-based colony of some importance was the French, then British, colony of Mauritius, where a plantation society based on sugar production emerged in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

In the age of abolition, Mauritius and Natal, the second British South African colony, both sugar producers, came to depend as did the other Mascarene island of French Réunion, on indentured labour organized from India. Indentured workers were paid and came under the protection of a government official, of the sort appointed in the later days of slavery but in fact under harsh conditions while slaves freed from ships at the Cape were put to work in the colony for a fixed period. However, notably in Natal, indentured workers found opportunities to farm small pieces of land and establish market gardens near the towns and sugar plantations. Most chose not to return to India when their time for indenture was over.

The eruption of colonial rule in the final quarter of the nineteenth century related to economic shifts that made huge new demands on African labour using both economic and non-economic means. The historical literature on colonial Africa contains a virtual library about labour. One aspect of this lay in the complexities of labour governance by business and especially by the state. Colonial legislation permitted forced labour and Africans were obliged to fulfil demands for taxes in colonial

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currency. The most characteristic new form of labour use lay in mining and transport but agrarian systems also came to use massive amounts of dependent labour paid in cash or kind.²⁰

After colonial conquest, labour demands on the African population increased and altered to feed the restructuring of economies so as to produce raw materials desired in Europe. The massive caravans gradually gave way to railway and then road traffic which freed up large numbers of workers for other activities. Railway construction, for instance the Congo-Océan railway in the forests of French Equatorial Africa, proceeded at considerable cost to human life²¹. However just as in Europe the railways created a distinctive working class with particular skills and expectations, often transferred far from home and settled in created neighbourhoods.²² Port workers also grew as a workforce although here the role of migrants shifting between wage labour and other activities was more significant.²³ Sailors from certain communities, notably the Kru from coastal southern Liberia, crossed the seas and occasionally settled in other continents.

Slavery died a slow death. If enslavement ceased, no laws prevented the continued holding of slaves whose presence only diminished markedly as the cash economy expanded and allowed for alternatives.²⁴ Settlements such as the French villages de liberté allowed for considerable use of compulsory labour from ex-slaves, important especially where population densities were low.²⁵ In general, the first couple of generations of colonial rule saw extensive use of compulsory labour, often organized through the agency of chiefs and other traditional authorities, beneficiaries of colonialism who fitted the needs of a system that did not have sufficient subordinates. This compulsory labour ranged from the construction of colonial administrative buildings and roads to crop cultivation in order to meet the cash needs promoted by taxation. Compulsion and the imposition of chiefs were critical, for instance, in

²⁰ Y.M. Ivanov, Agrarian Reforms and Hired Labor in Africa (Moscow, 1979).
the running of the government coal mining industry in eastern Nigeria. ^26^ This in turn was one important feature that fed the massive scale of labour migration in colonial Africa. This labour had antecedents but now took on massive proportions all over the continent. ^27^ One important aspect of these migrations, which often crossed territorial boundaries, was that they captured individuals’ sense of adventure and potential opportunity. Workers would keep a crucial social platform in their own societies while accumulating cash or even new fields to cultivate far away. ^28^ Another was that instances of cruelty and hardship were balanced for some by calculations as to where it was possible to earn the most and organize a life on the most advantageous terms. In Senegal and the Gambia, the navétanes were workers in the peanut economy with antecedents being slaves brought from the interior in caravans; now they were free migrant workers. ^29^ Vail and White created a remarkable hierarchy for Mozambican and Malawian workers as to a pecking order of jobs within the poorly-paid local economies on plantations and in colonial towns, as workers on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt and the Southern Rhodesian farms and on the goldfields of South Africa where the best wages could be found. The tin mines of Northern Nigeria and the gold mines of the Gold Coast were largely worked by cash-poor peasants in the dry season: long-distance migrants, many from across the borders in French territory escaping the onerous tax system imposed from Paris. ^30^ In Southern Rhodesia, the initial system of semi-compulsory labour in mining gave way throughout the cash economy, even in towns, to dependence on men from across the borders while Rhodesian men preferred to earn money through the sale of cattle and crops nearer home. ^31^ Mining was the biggest destination of European investment capital in colonial Africa by far and the most important mines of all were the gold mines of the Witwatersrand. ^32^ Reconstruction after the Anglo-Boer War war had to proceed through the

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import of tens of thousands of Chinese workers.³³ The Chinese were sent home before
the Union of South Africa was established in 1910. By then the labour force was ap-
proaching 200,000 in size; at the very peak in the 1980s, the gold mines would em-
ploy half a million miners.

Over time, and marked by important shifts in sources of labour, a system was
worked out that resembled the organization of a huge army. This system derived in
turn from the one that developed when DeBeers secured a monopoly by the 1880s
in diamond mining at Kimberley, an industry that preceded the massive gold discov-
eries.³⁴ Before that already in the middle decades of the 19th century large numbers of
African workers from what is today South Africa and surrounding countries were al-
ready slipping into Kimberley, the docks at Port Elizabeth and farms in order to earn
cash to purchase guns, horses and livestock.

At peak, African workers confronted a superbly well-organized agency spread
through rural areas that structured transport to the mines and oversaw contracts, al-
beit with the use of middlemen. Advances as well as deferred payments (held by the
Portuguese authorities in Mozambique) were a key part of the system.³⁵ Younger men
used the mines to get round the authority of fathers and to accumulate money to buy
cattle in order to marry. Once on the mines, workers lived in compounds (although
there were phases, for instance in the 1940s, where the open compound system al-
lowed many to live outside) where health care and food together with grain beer
and forms of entertainment were made available on a huge scale. This modern sys-
 tem co-existed with what appeared to be a traditional way of life to which miners had
to return. The mines were increasingly deep and incurred not only many fatal acci-
dents but also insidious dust prevalence that led to large-scale prevalence of tuber-
culos is and silicosis before watering systems reduced the danger after World War I.
The basic welfare system of course did not extend to miners once they ceased taking
contracts.

The mines also employed many thousands of whites. Originally these were typ-
ically immigrants, often with the experience of California or Canadian gold mining
and sometimes with the radical syndicalist or anarchist politics that went with
those labour forces. However, especially after the defeat of the first major strike of
white miners in 1907, local whites, particularly Afrikaner farmers unable to survive
on the land or made landless by the war, started to take their place. In the early de-
 cades, their death rate from accidents exceeded that of blacks and they also succum-

³³ Peter Richardson, Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal (London, 1982).
³⁴ R.V.Turrell, Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields (Cambridge, 1987); William Worg-
er, South Africa’s City of Diamonds. Mine Workers and Monopoly Capitalism in Kimberley (Johannes-
burg and Cape Town, 1987).
³⁵ William Beinart, The Political Economy of Pondoland (Cambridge 1982); Alan Jeeves, Migrant La-
bour in South Africa’s Mining Economy (Montreal, 1985); Ruth First et al., The Mozambican Miner. Pro-
letarian and Peasant (Brighton, 1983); Patrick Harries, Work, Culture and Identity. Migrant Labour in
bed to lung diseases to a large extent. Some of these men were genuinely very skilled workers; others were really just overseers and individuals whose sense of mining, just as with black Africans, was tacit rather than learnt. A set of very large strikes culminating in the Rand Revolt of 1922 had a strong racial bias, no doubt overshadowed by the structural insecurity of the white miners who feared replacement by blacks.\footnote{Jeremy Krikler, \textit{White Rising. Insurrection and Racial Killing in South Africa} (Manchester, 2005).} After the arrival in power of the Pact government in 1924, a system was worked out which kept a restrained but still very significant white minority of workers who had the vote and were employed at a vastly higher rate of pay than the black migrants in supervisory or skilled roles.\footnote{Robert Davies, \textit{Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa} (Brighton, 1979); David Yudelman, \textit{The Emergence of Modern South Africa} (Westport, CT, 1983).} On the contrary the strong unions whites set up (but not on the gold mines) in South Africa as their numbers expanded were focussed on organizing genuine skilled workers in the British tradition and were sometimes flexible in terms of the colour bar when it suited their purposes\footnote{Jon Lewis, \textit{Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa 1924–55} (Cambridge, 1984); Martin Nicol, “Riches from Rags: Bosses and Unions in the Cape Clothing Industry 1926–37”, \textit{Journal of Southern African Studies}, 9 (1983), pp. 239–257; Eddie Webster, \textit{Cast in a Racial Mould} (Johannesburg, 1985).}. Black mineworkers also struck frequently in the early days although the stories about these strikes are almost hidden in the records.\footnote{Peter Limb, \textit{The ANC’s Early Years. Nation, Class and Place in South Africa Before 1940} (Pretoria, 2010).} Not much is known about the 1920 strike where 70,000 workers went out for almost a week, the largest example. In South Africa generally, a racially demarcated labour force grew extensively with oppressive conditions notable not merely on the mines but on farms which often had a somewhat feudal character.\footnote{T. Keegan, \textit{Rural Transformations in Industrializing South Africa: The Southern Highveld to 1914} (Johannesburg, 1986); J. B. Loudon, \textit{White Farmers and Black Labour-Tenants} (Cambridge and Leiden, 1970); Stanley Trapido, “Land and Labour in a Colonial Economy: The Transvaal 1880–1910”, \textit{Journal of Southern African Studies}, 5 (1978), pp. 26–56.} Helen Bradford discussed the most notable resistance movement, the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union, which had its main strength in the countryside. The ICU inspired many farm workers but never organized actual strikes or practical resistance.\footnote{Helen Bradford, \textit{A Taste of Freedom. The ICU in Rural South Africa 1924–30} (New Haven, CT, 1987).} At the same time, radical currents brought from white workers to the increasingly large black urban population, increasingly under the aegis of a small Communist Party, waxed and waned in this period.\footnote{H. J. Simons and R. Simons, \textit{Class and Colour in South Africa} (Harmondsworth, 1969).} The oppressive side of labour in underground gold mining has to be coupled with mention at least, as elsewhere in such situations in Africa, with some grasp of the way Africans bargained and turned elements of the system to their advantage.
through informal relations with white miners and supervisors and internal interactions.⁴³

The mine world for blacks was a male world. Women were not welcome on the compounds. Many men preferred to confine their sexual prowess to their own sex, with senior miners making use of newcomers, in good part as a means of saving money that could build homesteads at their point of origin rather than looking out for women in mining settlements.⁴⁴ Petty capitalist enterprise could emerge out of pilfering valuable materials.⁴⁵

Perhaps two further aspects of the colonial labour scene deserve some mention. It would for instance be a mistake to see labour migration as being directed entirely to white employers. Very large numbers of Africans migrated to the cotton fields of the Gezira in the Sudan, to the peanut harvests of Senegambia, to the cocoa tree plantations of African planters in the Gold and Ivory Coasts and the cotton and coffee farms of Uganda.⁴⁶ Africa became, in Amin’s schematic view, divided between labour-rich and cash producing feeder zones.⁴⁷ In favourable cases, notably amongst cocoa producers, where cocoa was par excellence Amin’s example of a rich crop, the chances for migrants to establish their own farms with time were considerable.⁴⁸

Moreover, Africans continued to work in diverse ways that reflected older patterns and often eluded government statistics. In Nigeria, craft production of cloth, household shelter and foodstuffs continued on a large scale, making use of the new forms of transport to reach wider markets.⁴⁹ Commerce expanded in these goods as well as in imports while the cash nexus developed or expanded.⁵⁰

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⁴⁴ Moodie with Ndatshe, *Going for Gold*.


⁴⁷ Amin, *Modern Migrations*.

⁴⁸ Austin, *Labour, Land, and Capital in Ghana*.

Secondly, the workplace was not entirely filled by low-skilled men from rural areas. Colonial economies also required subaltern participation and leadership. Educational systems, at first largely created by missionaries, were developed so as to create opportunities for skilled and clerical workers, first and notably in West Africa. The best schools in Nyasaland, now Malawi, sent such workers all over the mining and commercial world of southern Africa. If whites were all too successful in closing out participation by others at desirable levels of work in South Africa, the situation was different in other areas. In Kenya there was considerable scope for Indian skilled workers. In the Katanga province of the Belgian Congo where militant South African white miners were replaced by more pliant and cheaper Belgians from the coal mines after 1920 and black labour was ‘stabilized’ with opportunities for miners, at least while in service, to bring their wives to settle and garden outside the provided housing, and to acquire skills. The emerging educational system, the churches themselves, the police and the army, the health system, all were sites of growing numbers of employment hierarchies. The Katanga system was very different than the Rand (lung disease was not an issue in open-cast mining) but also highly articulated with one big corporation dominant.

Women were gradually becoming a feature of urban life too, as highlighted by Luise White in her path-breaking study of prostitutes and their many-faceted provision of ‘the comforts of home’ and their acquisition of urban property in East African towns. Some women found employment in the intimate circumstances of the colonial household where they replaced men over time in many parts of Africa. Not every worker went home from sites like Katanga when the Great Depression struck. The future, where a growing population of Africans not employed by Europeans, came into a new and often urban economy, began to unfold. This is what Furedi was to term an African ‘crowd’ in the case of Nairobi.

The Second World War marked a significant new departure in the world of work. The post-war years saw a hunger for African agricultural goods and enabled the ideology of development to take off as a marker of late colonialism. This represented

an intensification of earlier trends to some extent. Roads and harbours were extended while mining now included base metal export operations such as the bauxite mines of Guinea, the iron ore of Liberia as well as the diamond industries of the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone. However, secondary industry created sometimes by resident European and Asian immigrants and sometimes directly by the state, also took off on a small scale in the countries with bigger markets. On the one hand, colonial governments were more willing to provide worker housing and medical care, the beginnings of welfare. The British even imported labour union organizers to help structure orderly labour relations. On the other, the encouragement of new and larger waves of white settlement, for instance in the Portuguese colonies and the Belgian Congo, intensified racism at the workplace and elsewhere while development specialists created new kinds of pressure on African cultivators, often out of ignorance that pretended to be scientific wisdom such as with the notorious Groundnut Scheme in Tanganyika (the mainland of modern-day Tanzania). Fred Cooper has shown, both with regard to the dockers of Mombasa and the railway workers of French West Africa, however, that reforms aimed at creating some kind of industrial democracy with legal trade unions and social benefits typical of European conditions, were not necessarily desirable to Africans who had a foot in households with other economic rationales and activities. Workers were apt to resist being turned into proletarians of the classic sort.

This, plus the politically opener climate which gingerly permitted the beginnings of African representation, intensified the potential for resistance. The labour historiography of this period, much of it written in the generation after independence, is dominated by political questions. The 1940s saw big strikes in virtually every colony, notably the great railway strikes in Southern Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe) and French West Africa, dock strikes in cities such as Mombasa and general strikes in Nigeria and the Gold Coast. Trade unions now took on autonomous existence and


58 Frederick Cooper (ed.), The Struggle for the City (London and Beverly Hills, 1984); Cooper, On the African Waterfront; Cooper, Decolonisation; Baruch Hirson, Yours for the Union. Class and Community
intense political salience; pressure from workers obliged colonial regimes to move farther and faster in political reform than was at first intended.°° The rising nationalist movements made use of labour strife to build momentum and accede to power with some labour leaders rising themselves such as Sékou Touré in Guinea, Rashidi Kawawa in Tanzania and Tom Mboya in Kenya.

The hopes of workers that independence would improve their lives markedly proved largely vain. The new regimes felt threatened by independent unions which they tended to take over into state controlled structures with strikes repressed harshly. This was the history of organized labour in Nkrumah’s Ghana, the model Pan-Africanist and nationalist state.°° The Senegalese government under Senghor made it clear that industrious peasants were its first support base and workers making excessive demands could only cripple the economy, as did Nyerere in Tanzania.°°° Moreover, the economic demands on these governments were excessive; it was not possible for Nkrumah, as the typical Ghanaian package of exports—minerals and cocoa—stagnated in value after 1960, to give a better life to employed formal sector workers.

South Africa in the generation after World War Two, however, was remarkable for its level of industrialization. The state, particularly in the last Smuts government (1939–48) promoted investment in heavy industry, notably through the creation of parastatals. Steel, chemicals, shipbuilding took off and consumer goods industries also were hungry for workers. The big companies imitated the gold and other mines in the way large workforces were divided by race and administered at the workplace in almost military forms of control where workers had few rights. African industrial workers were typically described as ‘semi-skilled’.°°°° When the apartheid system took off, it precipitated segregated administrative and political systems, especially in the Bantustans but also in the big cities, that promoted black hierarchies via


°°°°° Owen Crankshaw, Race, Class and the Changing Division of Labour under Apartheid (London and New York, 1997); Doug Hindson, Pass Controls and the Urban African Proletariat (Johannesburg, 1987).
high schools and universities. The virtual absence of black skilled workers with recognized certification, were balanced by the rapid growth of white-collar workers in the social services, the police and the administration generally. Apartheid also aimed at clearing out what remained of feudal type relationships on the land, removing farm workers to intensive settlements in the Bantustans and minimising the population in large stretches of countryside. Work in industry and mining effectively now subsidised life in these supposed emerging independent states. By the 1980s, development efforts located there, as well as heavily subsidised industry in selected locations, were changing the economic basis of life in yet other parts of the country. The number of black women in towns almost equalled the number of men. Where before mid-century urban black women could really only find work in domestic service, as laundresses, or perhaps providing men with beer illegally, they began to be employed as well in factories. Industrial activity was aimed, not at export, but at the local market and was supported by the seemingly limitless profits in natural resource exports with gold mining at the core.

After independence elsewhere and following the end of apartheid in South Africa, economic conditions tended to work against the retention of large unskilled labour forces under regulated conditions. Plans for industrialization were increasingly frustrated and a classic proletariat formation typical of the north-west European Industrial Revolution only existed in fragments. African society became substantially more urbanized but work conditions were dominated by precarity, enormous and expanding geographical mobility and the different activities grouped together as the “informal sector”. In South Africa, the system of massive structured labour migration feeding mining, industry and agriculture gave way to equally massive rates of unemployment by the 1990s.

The economic history of independent Africa with its impact on political and social life can be divided into several distinct layers. In the first couple of decades after independence, some African produce prices held out (for instance for coffee) while aid poured in to Africa, in part as a Cold War stratagem. The new governments generally tried to extend the late colonial development efforts promoting social welfare in the form especially of class formative education and the beginnings of industrialization. However, they were increasingly indebted while Africa played a diminishing part in world commerce.

In the 1970s this trajectory halted. Debt crises were declared, aid was tied to narrow ends and ceased to increase while growth faltered or went into reverse. In some areas, such as the former Belgian Congo, the collapse of infrastructure and of the

63 Crankshaw, Race, Class and the Changing Division of Labour.
structuration of the colonial economy was spectacular as European-owned firms were ‘indigenized’ to the advantage of those with connections to the regime. Welfare started to become the province of so-called Non-Governmental Organizations, Western initiatives that teetered between charity and agencies of neo-liberal policy. NGO employment became an important resource for educated Africans who formed their own NGOs to liaise with the international outfits. In some areas such as Mozambique, central government control gave way to violent secession movements and cult-led insurgencies.

This phase, which I have elsewhere called the age of structural adjustment from the typical programmes pursued by the International Finance Institutions, could be said to have lasted to approximately the end of the twentieth century. The best-off African economies such as those in Ghana, the Ivory Coast and Zambia were often the biggest debtors and here the most dramatic regressions occurred.

In such countries as Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Zambia, mining, the ultimate prop of the African exchange economies, collapsed as a corporate enterprise giving way to so-called artisanal mining whereby large numbers of Africans tried their luck under very dangerous conditions to earn money individually with profits accruing to merchants, licensed and illicit. The remarkable Murid Islamic order shifted its adepts from the peanut cultivation and export sector in Senegal to the import of industrial, notably electronic goods, and Murid traders spread throughout the major commercial nodes of the world—New York, Rome, Hong Kong and elsewhere. Political disasters created African diasporas, for instance, of Somali speakers who also emigrated to most continents but retained commercially and socially significant network linkages. Sahara oasis towns were amongst those that swelled up into small cities full of temporary residents who hoped to be on their way somewhere, most likely north. The scale of urban growth, no longer accompanied by the availability of structured employment, was spectacular.

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71 James McDougall and Judith Scheele (eds), Saharan Frontiers. Space and Mobility in Northwest Africa (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2012); Martin Verlet, Grandir à Nima, Ghana, Les figures de travail dans un faubourg populaire d’Accra (Paris, 2005).
However, as Potts has noted particularly, urbanization is not always one-way traffic.\textsuperscript{72} It is more that Africans in a country such as Zimbabwe shift between the rural and urban just as they cross international boundaries or use the cities as platforms for further emigration.\textsuperscript{73} This set of circumstances has created a conjuncture of internationalization, globalization of movement and of work in which borders have melted and requiring new ways of understanding human trajectories and endeavours.

The trend which dominates current literature was the so-called informal sector. By this was meant labour that the state did not regulate, register or control. This range of diverse activities already emerged, and possibly submerged, the early industrial workforce in growing African cities. For some writers, the informal sector seemed to offer new opportunities, divorced from the parasitical grasp of African states, especially for women who escaped from patriarchal structures imposed by the so-called traditional sector that typically dominated the countryside. However others have criticised this approach and noted that this ‘sector’ is very loosely defined and actually embraces large numbers of irregularly employed, poorly paid and very oppressed workers such as the bus drivers of Dar es Salaam or the large network of shoemakers in the lower Niger valley of eastern Nigeria.\textsuperscript{74} In a poor society catering to a consumer population living hand to mouth, the scale of opportunities is small and mobility fairly rare. Perhaps a better way of understanding these trends than informality, with its echoes of state or corporate control as analytically decisive, is precarity. The precarity of modern African life and its implications are profound.

After 2000, with the swing, especially promoted by the economic rise of China, towards higher commodity prices and lower prices of industrial goods, Africa experienced a new wave of significant economic growth measurable in figures. This wave has promoted some return, notable in Zambia for instance, from artisanal to corporate mineral production.\textsuperscript{75} It has allowed the coffers of the state to become less empty. Secondary industry for the local market has revived to a limited extent and the state has been able to sustain the renewed expansion of services especially in health and education with corresponding expansion of employment at all levels. Trade unions have re-emerged from state control or dominance, sometimes playing a key role in agitation for greater democratization.\textsuperscript{76} They are gradually losing

\textsuperscript{72} Deborah Potts, \textit{Circular Migration in Zimbabwe and Sub-Saharan Africa} (Oxford, 2010).
\textsuperscript{73} See also Helena Pérez Niño, “Migrant Workers into Contract Farmers: Processes of Labour Mobilisation in Colonial and Contemporary Mozambique”, \textit{Africa}, forthcoming.
\textsuperscript{75} Larmer, \textit{Mineworkers}.
\textsuperscript{76} Bjørn Beckman, Sakhela Buhlungu and Lloyd Sachikonye (eds), \textit{Trade Unions and Party Politics. Labour Movements in Africa} (Cape Town, 2010); Jon Kraus (ed.) \textit{Trade Unions and the Coming of Democracy in Africa} (London, 2007).
their affiliation to the ruling—or any other—political party as well as any orientation to a clear alternative political agenda.

Where conflict zones persist or develop, as in the Congo, Somalia or the Central African Republic, international agency employs significant numbers of African soldiers usually under the rubric of the United Nations. For unskilled workers in South Africa and elsewhere, a huge growth area of employment has been in ‘security’, as much or more focussed on the private sector to defend the lives and property of the well-off against massive crime rates. Criminals themselves form a network of labour of sorts. In some countries such as Gambia, Senegal, South Africa and Kenya, a tourist economy focussed on beaches and game parks, has fed into a general expansion of services and the financial sector which typifies twenty first century capitalism more generally.

Also to be noted is the emergence of what can be called an entertainment sector. Musicians form a fascinating and important part of the urban economy in virtually every country. The plastic arts and sculpture employ those who produce for tourists, visitors and the African middle class as well as a few individuals with international reputations for innovation and quality. In Nigeria, ‘Nollywood’ (e.g. Lagos) makes and exports throughout the continent videos reflecting African popular culture. It is coupled with another area of employment and enterprise—charismatic religion equipped with the full range of contemporary communications technology. Sport, above all football but also, for instance distance running especially in Ethiopia and Kenya, is increasingly professionalised with an increasingly familiar international success hierarchy. Finally, one might mention one impact of urban growth—the unsteady but often spectacular expansion of physical plant and the construction industry which employs so many migrants and individuals greatly ranging in origins and skills.

Class becomes a clearer factor. If capitalist enterprise involving significant profits—new mines, big construction projects, agro-business, the organized tourist industry—largely seem to engage remaining, sometimes growing, white and Asian minorities or foreign interests, this is not to negate the gradual emergence of some very wealthy and dynamic African capitalists. The development baton, so laden with the hand of paternalistic European late colonialism, is off the ground again but more in the hands of local states and elites. The local is becoming marginalised or at least beginning to be tied to global patterns.

Suggested reading


Deutsch, Jan-Georg. *Abolition without Emancipation in German East Africa* (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005).


