

AFRICAN SOCIETY TODAY



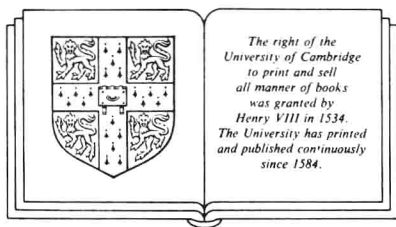
THE AFRICAN WORKER

BILL FREUND

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❧ PREFACE ❧

The African worker is intended as a synthesis considering issues and debates from the work of many writers on labour history and labour studies in Africa. The development of a particular critical literature, spanning a number of disciplines, is critically considered. In some respects, the concerns of the past generation have been to align the understanding of labour issues in Africa with those more generally in the modern world. In others, the emphasis remains on the specific and African. Both directions clearly emerge here. The bibliographical essay, as well as the bibliography itself, is meant to point readers further who want a higher order of detail, a regional focus or a more thorough-going theoretical treatment of all or some of the relevant issues.

This book developed out of ideas put forward in a review essay which was commissioned by the Social Science Research Council of New York and the African Studies Association of the USA. It was published in the *African Studies Review* (27 (2) 1984) and reproduced the following year by the *Newsletter of International Labour Studies* in the Netherlands. That essay was much more confined to being a review of the scholarly literature. The minor attempts in it at coverage of North Africa have largely been abandoned here while I have provided far more material on South Africa.

That essay contained acknowledgements to numerous scholars who provided input at the request of the Social Science Research Council as well as Boston friends kind enough to help as critical readers at an earlier stage and they deserve thanks here. However, this book wishes to acknowledge specifically the helpful comments of readers in Durban, Jeremy Grest, Sheila Meintjes and Mike Morris, as well as the history seminar at the University of South Africa in Pretoria, where a chapter was presented. Mrs Norma Hatcher made the transformation from my drafts into a typescript a thankfully painless operation for me through her efficient labours.

I should like to dedicate this book to my many South African friends who have, as intellectuals, through their debates and engagement, made a critical and unique contribution to the renaissance of the South African trade-union movement in the last fifteen years.

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THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF LABOUR

The lives of Africans can be understood in many ways, through religious beliefs and practices, through cultural responses and creativity, through political life and authority, through the structures and contradictions of village and family. Kinship, ritual, art forms all may seem appropriate avenues into the study of African society. However, economic practices and relationships have also been fundamental, linked as they are to these other aspects of social being. The African has always been an economic person. If students of pre-colonial Africa have tended to neglect economic questions, it has had more to do with their own preoccupations and needs than to the potential of the subject.

Before the colonial conquests of the late nineteenth century just as much as after, human labour rested at the base of conflicts over power and possibilities of material development. It is often said that pre-colonial African societies were *subsistence* economies where people produced solely in order to survive and local communities were essentially self-sufficient in providing what they needed. There can be little dispute that the concept of subsistence is correct in so far as it focusses on survival and the basic needs of social as well as biological reproduction, that is to say of the lineage or community as well as the family and the individual. However, it is quite wrong to assume from this that African cultivators or producers always lived at a marginal level

with no technological capacity to produce more than a bare minimum. They acquired a complex and detailed understanding of their own environment. In fact, most African communities were able to produce a fairly substantial surplus and have been involved over the past two millennia in extensive networks of exchange.

If some exchange involved the transmission of luxury goods, the basic stock-in-trade, repeated in region after region, consisted of the satisfaction of fairly fundamental needs: dried fish rich in protein, salt, pottery, iron and iron ware. Onto this humble pattern one can as well find appended a more glamorous trade in beads, art objects or precious metals. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, exchange was structured for centuries through the evolution of specific exchange means accepted over many states and societies (cloth, metal tokens, shells) and through the emergence of specialised trading communities following long-established trade routes. Specialisation in food production characterised parts of Mediterranean Africa in the Ancient World. Thus parts of Tunisia constituted a granary for the cities of the Roman Empire. By the nineteenth century, certain areas in tropical Africa, also typically rather intensely integrated into world trade networks, similarly were able to concentrate on quite specialised market production. In parts of the Niger River delta, communities of fishermen, later evolving into traders in response to the rise of Atlantic slaving, relied entirely on inland communities to supply them with staple foods. In Sierra Leone and Senegambia systematic cultivation developed to service the slave ships. Grain exports intended for the oases of the Sahara were grown in desert-side communities of the Sahel. The slaves of Zanzibar clove plantations (as well as their masters and the urban commercial community of the islands of the East Africa littoral) relied on food produced by other slaves on mainland grain and rice farms.

The nature of surplus production was shaped by the vagaries both of social and natural environment. The danger of a severe drought was always there for most of the continent. Long-distance commerce was nowhere so well-developed as to eliminate the threat. The kind of crops grown and the importance laid on storage ultimately reflected the tyranny of what the Shona of contemporary Zimbabwe call *shangwa*, drought (Palmer and Parsons, 1977). The disposal of a surplus always is problematic in agrarian society and particularly in one with only a limited commercial nexus. In the end it does largely remain true that production in Africa was for use, rather than exchange, value and that commerce itself was intended to extend the reproduction of the producing household. Communities did not depend on goods brought in from outside for their survival.

Production in Africa cannot be divorced from questions of power and inequality. There is a conventional portrait that has long existed in Western scholarship, but which also serves the political interests of many African intellectuals and politicians, which stresses the undifferentiated and egalitarian nature of African society. In this view, the African king or ruler, where he existed, held power largely through spiritual or ideological forms of control rather than because of the constraints of the political economy. The Swedish political scientist Goran Hyden, trying to provide a political and social explanation of the current African agrarian crisis, has synthesised a sophisticated and contemporary version of this argument in hypothesising an 'economy of affection' that reigned and continues to reign in tropical Africa where peasants are able to resist the dictates of artificial, colonially created state apparatuses with relative impunity – 'holding the barriers against capitalist penetration' (Hyden, 1980, 237).

Of course, consensus would never consider that the fer-

tile stretches of North Africa belong to the economy of affection; the Nile peasantry must be as accustomed to a state apparatus as any people on earth. However, it is not often realised how much of tropical Africa (and on the whole, a growing portion) also experienced the weight of economically effective states in the last centuries before colonial conquest. We must consider in addition to Egypt, the lands of the upper Nile and the peasantries of the Horn of Africa, the world expanding out from the islands off the East African coast and a variety of agrarian societies in savanna and forest West Africa. Most Africans by the late nineteenth century were the subjects (or prey) of strong states. On the very edge of Tanzania, the East African country about which Hyden is most expert, Claudine Vidal has created a picture of life in the interlacustrine kingdom of Rwanda, where a densely peopled region provided very unequal access to land and the tools to work it, where a clearly demarcated ruling class were able to control people's loyalties through their ability to regulate the system and where the ruling house clearly represented that class interest (Vidal, 1974). In the emirates of what is today the northern part of Nigeria, the court and its minions extracted from the *talakawa* (the Hausa word for free commoners) a surplus that British conquerors found perfectly respectable by the standards of Asian despotisms (Freund and Shenton, 1979). Such were conditions in the most populous sector of the savanna belt south of the Sahara, an area with a great, long-term historic importance and impact.

What does need perhaps to be considered is the extent to which many African rulers or ruling strata depended on some form of personal ownership of individuals, captives and their descendants, in order to extract labour and thus wealth from their subjects. The prevalence of slavery, the use of slave armies and slave estates can be meshed with an emphasis by some writers on the predatory and thus ex-

traneous nature of many early African states and by others on the command of long-distance trade as a means of acquiring wealth that could not come from the systematic despoliation of a peasantry (Goody, 1971; Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1976). Slaves could be integrated socially in such complex ways that one cannot actually consider them a 'class' but their subjugation, even if it could not be maintained for generations, provided a means of extracting surplus and obedience from the peasantry more generally. Far to the south, in fairly recent times, we have evidence of how the succession of Nguni-speaking warrior chiefs in what is now Natal, culminating in Shaka Zulu, cleverly inserted their power over the reproductive capacity of age-grades, obliging men to do service for them before they could marry, as a means of founding some measure of state authority in a part of Africa where little material differentiation had historically existed (Guy, 1979). In much of Africa, therefore, an economy of depredation and intervention accompanied an economy of affection but it did not lead so firmly as in Zanzibar, in Hausaland, in highland Ethiopia or in the Nile Delta, to a clearly understood class society based on differentiated access to the means of production.

There is an increasingly generalised recognition today, partly in response to feminist scholarship, that household production itself requires differentiated treatment. The African household was not simply a sharing environment where everyone ate equitably from the same bowl. There has been an attempt, in fact, to register this understanding rigorously in terms of hierarchy and exploitation through the formulation of a distinctive lineage mode of production where the male elder ultimately controlled and exploited a surplus produced by juniors and females of all ages, as well as by slaves and others who had a minimum of rights within the household (Meillassoux, 1972, 1981).

It must be said, however, that the rights of male elders to appropriate surplus in African societies varied immensely as does the right of African women to a share of what they produce themselves (Guyer, 1982). The lineage mode of production model holds up well for some places and historic situations and not at all for others. Even where the patriarchal pattern is most deeply entrenched, however, it is not entirely clear how we could provide a completely convincing economic explanation for the power that is being exerted by elders. The heavy labour burden on younger women is however an extremely commonly observed phenomenon.

New research into labour in pre-colonial African society reflects new directions in African history and anthropology over the years since 1970. Until that time, questions about human labour were not fundamental to research on African households or African states. Indeed the literature that has developed has often been essentially intended to move us to consider the state or the relation between the sexes or the nature of kinship, questions which have long exercised scholarship in Africa. It can very readily be argued that even current scholarship, while providing some effective descriptions of African labour systems (Cooper, 1977), is often far too ready to move from generalisations about labour to the apparently 'broader' issues.

A much-discussed example lies in the elegantly conceived and theoretically penetrating work of the French historian Emmanuel Terray, whose study of the Abron kingdom of Gyaman led him to explain the basis of power in the kingdom on the royally controlled gold mines worked by slaves (Terray, 1974). In fact, it is not very clear that the systematic exploitation by slaves of relatively deep-level mines was actually very important in Gyaman (and West African) mineral production and export. According to a critic, 'traditional gold mining was carried out mainly by

free family labour with slaves used as an adjunct to the kin-based labour unit' (Dumett, 1979, 64). Terray is so focussed on the question of the state that he tends to move away far too quickly from the labour process and its ramifications.

There is much that is unknown and remains for historians to explore on the conceptual complexities of labour organisation and its relation to social structure in pre-colonial Africa, as hopefully has been indicated. However, it was only with the advent of European imperialism in Africa that we can talk about a consistent attitude towards labour in the scholarly literature which ultimately feeds into contemporary debate and relates to an historiography of labour. Broadly speaking, this literature may be periodised readily. First, there is a specifically imperial literature on labour linked to the slave-trade era, the object of the missionaries and the traders in raw materials of the nineteenth century which can be linked up to the Scramble for Africa. Secondly, colonial rule, which apparently promised the generalisation of a free labour market and the blossoming of uncoerced enterprise in Africa, proved to have a far more complicated and less happy impact and the contradictions that resulted generated an expansion of considerations about labour in colonial literature. Thirdly, from the time, roughly speaking, of World War II, late colonialism brought forth a literature on labour of considerable richness and depth that broke qualitatively, for historic reasons, with earlier assessments. Finally, independence has shifted the balance towards more political views of labour moving from an initial emphasis on the politics of trade unions to a more current one that takes a very wide-ranging view of labour issues. These phases will be considered in some detail in the pages that follow.

Early European interests in Africa were at first diverse; Europeans bought West African peppers, products of the

hunt such as ivory and tropical woods when available near the coast, searched for precious metals and tried to establish alliances against the Turkish enemy. However, by contrast with Mediterranean Africa, which provided Europe with some desirable manufactured luxuries – carpets and leather goods – tropical Africa in general did not. Gold was one of the few products from Africa involving human application and skilled labour that was desired by Europeans when the voyages of discovery opened the shores of the entire continent to commercially minded travellers from the fifteenth century onwards.

Commercial links between Africa and Europe became more and more dominated by one notorious exchange, the sale of African slaves at the ports to those who arranged their passage across the Atlantic Ocean to plantation colonies in the New World. By the middle of the seventeenth century, with the systematic establishment of sugar plantations in the Caribbean region, the slave traffic became massive and remained so for the following two hundred years. Some ten to twenty million slaves were during this era taken from their normal existence with the intention of shipping them to America.

The impact of the slave trade on Africa itself is debatable, particularly with regard to population. Many writers have assumed that depopulation brought about by slaving must have had a major effect on the economic underdevelopment of Africa through the sheer loss of manpower. Those who have tried to establish findings with more precision have, however, generally come up with contrary results. The slave trade worked in very uneven ways. Some regions where the state used the trade to its advantage became in conventional terms richer and more populous through its workings, although ultimately it cannot be said that they were not just as much industrially underdeveloped when confronted with capitalist Europe in time. There was a strong tendency for

male slaves to be sold to the Atlantic trade; women slaves, who did much or most of the productive labour and who had a greater commercial value, were largely kept in Africa to enrich powerful households. There is moreover no correlation between the concentration of population in Africa since reliable records can be used as evidence, and the extent of slaving; some of the major sources of slaves are extremely heavily peopled areas while other areas seem lightly peopled because of ecologically unfavourable conditions. Given our inability, finally, to know much about the population concentration or growth rates of Africa in the past, the whole subject is likely to remain highly uncertain. Much of the significance of the slave trade was not to be measured in terms of labour gained or lost to America or Africa, but in terms of a form of commercialisation with the consequent ties built up or intensified over long distances, the prevalence of armed men disrupting the more peaceful patterns of development and the assistance given to the formation or growth of what Walter Rodney called 'social oppression' (Rodney, 1966).

What must be stressed for the moment is that Europeans found little use for the application of human labour to production in Africa itself. To this there was one exception: the Dutch colony at the southernmost extremity of Africa which expanded into the interior during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Elphick & Giliomee, 1979). By American standards, this was a small-scale colony of very modest wealth that expanded only slowly; its successful exploitation even then depended, much as in America, on the importation of outside labour – slaves from elsewhere in Africa, from Madagascar and from Asia in particular, as well as from the direct immigration of Europeans.

During the nineteenth century, the Atlantic slave trade came to an end, excoriated by reformers in Europe whose ban was enforced by the energetic naval patrols of the first

industrial capitalist nation, Britain. Historians debate the cause for this dramatic shift and the rather sudden turn in moral opinion against slavery. Although the sugar island colonies of Britain were less profitable than they had been in an earlier phase, when the soil was richer and sugar scarcer in Europe, it is increasingly acknowledged that slavery was profitable in many places until abolition and that it could be adapted to some extent to all kinds of industrial situations. However, an ideology of free wage labour, the essence of capitalist economic and social relations, achieved greater and greater hegemony in the nineteenth century. Only wage labour provided the generalised incentives and internalised capitalist values which made these relations entirely viable.

The abolition of the slave trade was followed by the full-scale abolition of slavery in the New World colonies, in the British Empire in 1833, in the French Empire in 1848, in the USA in 1865, in Cuba in 1880 and in Brazil in 1888. The British forced the Zanzibari state, which sold slaves primarily to the non-capitalist world of the Middle East and western Asia, to close down its infamous slave market in 1873 and eventually to abolish statutory slavery, even though it was slave plantations of clove trees that made the prosperity of the sultanate. Indeed, the zeal for abolition and anti-slavery spread to Africa itself. The evils of slaving and slavery were a major theme in the propaganda of imperialism as Europe turned to carve up Africa and annex its peoples in the 1880s and 1890s. Yet it would be a mistake to see this propaganda as justification for conquest alone or a weapon in a war to get God on the colonists' side.

It was in fact genuinely believed that the labour system in Africa needed to be transformed in order to create a productive, prosperous world with which European capitalists could do good business. In West Africa, Anthony Hopkins has systematically related the intensifying demands for European political intervention to the problems which

European and coastal merchants felt in penetrating the interior markets and supply sources profitably (Hopkins, 1973). The Scramble for West Africa is convincingly explained by him in terms of a commercial crisis. In Central and East Africa, equivalent commercial interests were less developed. It is hard to extricate European conquest there from the propaganda of the Livingstones and Stanleys about the depredations of the slave trade and the cruelties of African rule whose elimination would pave the way for prosperity and propriety.

In southern Africa, the imperatives for imperial expansion were rather more obvious. From the time of the discovery of substantial mineral deposits with the related need to discipline and organise a substantial workforce, there were important forces calling for a new British-run political order that would unify a variety of territories under the Crown and unify a 'Native' policy – labour recruitment and organisation policy – for the entire sub-continent. Already in the late 1870s, a Confederation scheme to place the trekker Boer republics under British control and to pick fights with the remaining independent African states in the area has been so interpreted by historian Norman Etherington (Etherington, 1979). The Boer War can also be placed in the context of the needs of mining capital for a political environment that could actually suit the immense demands for labour, a systematic cheap food supply, a comprehensive urbanisation programme and other essentials called forth by the remarkable development of the Witwatersrand goldfield from 1886 onwards (Marks and Trapido, 1979).

In most of Africa, however, there was nothing like a paying proposition for capital of the kind the immensely important gold mines represented. Instead, there was a generalised feeling within imperialist circles that Africa's resources could be harnessed only if labour could be devel-