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Expanding Wealth and Expanding Inequality in the Economic History of Equatorial Africa After World War I

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Abstract:

The intensification of French colonial economic exploitation and extraction in French Equatorial Africa following World War I required concessionary companies to make considerable investments in both production and security in the 1920s and 1930s. When assessing economic growth, historians have tended to investigate increases in productivity and infrastructure expansion while also noting the financial and human cost of such endeavors. However, another, more subtle catalyst of production has often been overlooked: that of enforcement. Africans both managed and were employed in economic extraction schemes in the interwar period and compensation varied widely between those who mobilized labor for production, those who imposed labor demands through violence, and those who suffered violence and coercion as part of their achievement of production demands. This article establishes a broader framework for considering 'economic development' in Central Africa that fully encompasses the costs and consequences of industrial escalation, the expansion of market productivity, and rise in export production by taking into account the compensation and the deprivation that flowed from the need to mobilize vast numbers of laborers as well as coercive forces to compel and propel human performance.

Keywords: French Equatorial Africa, railroads, forestry, agriculture, forced labor

Introduction

In the period encompassing the first French military incursions in West and Central Africa and German evacuation in 1914 to the French Third Republic's declaration of war against Germany in 1939, the economy of French Equatorial Africa (*Afrique Equatoriale Française* - AEF) underwent dramatic transformations (Manning 1988).¹ There was no singular process of 'economic development' but rather multiple and contradictory processes of financial investment, labor organization, infrastructure expansion, and myriad extractions and infusions that shaped African peoples' quality of life in this region. European attitudes toward the economic development of French Equatorial Africa after the First World War (and by what means and measures this could be achieved) were often contradictory. Some measures to improve infrastructure invoked the need for a more merciful alternative to commodity transport than the brutal portage regimes of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Brazza 1905; Bertin 1919; Sarraut 1923; Roelens 1923; Gosselin 1972; Headrick 1979). However, a far more vast and coercive labor management system was needed to construct the railroads, bridges, roadways, and ports required to transport the increasing number of goods Europeans envisioned exporting. Similarly, the French administration in Equatorial Africa increased investments in health and biomedicine but provided far greater financial and military resources to mobilize human population transfer, which led to disease outbreaks, famine, and subsequently more serious epidemics (Herbst 1934; Jeannin 1945; Curry-Lindhal 1961; Sautter 1967; Azevedo 1981). There was unquestionably greater capital investment in France's Central African colonies (and its Mandate territory of Cameroon) following World War I. However, a more complex vocabulary is required to describe the 'economy' or 'economic development' in this region that fully encompasses the intended and unintended consequences of industrial escalation, the expansion of market productivity, and rise in export production that avoids oversimplified determinations of 'growth'.

This article demonstrates that the immense capital flow after World War I to Central and West Africa from the coffers of the French government and the *Banque d'Afrique Occidentale* - which administered the common currency of West and Central Africa - was directed nearly entirely to private concessionary companies and industrial associations to develop infrastructure and expand export production of commodities such as rubber, timber, copper, and some agricultural goods (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972, 1985; Sautter 1967: 230). This policy was broadly supported. There was a resurgence of the French colonialist movement brought about by the First World War. The empire had become popular, in part due to the acknowledgement of colonial military conscripts and factory workers' contributions to the war effort as well as the perception of Africa's potential as an immense reservoir of raw materials whose exploitation would free France from dependence on foreign suppliers (La Bruyère 1936; Andrew, Kanya-Forstner 1974). Despite being given considerable financial assistance and decades-long exclusive

contracts to millions of hectares in French colonial territories, concessionary principals framed their involvement in AEF as "our investment in France's affair" and referred to the French state and its financial arm as "*débiteurs*" who owed them protection against any financial losses.² The French government, for their part, also expected considerable returns. As one colonial theorist encouraged, "Has not the Great War shown us that our wagers in the colonies were less risky than those placed in Europe?" (Girault 1923: 316).

Other French political leaders at the time like Governor General of French Equatorial Africa Raphael Antonetti framed their support for giving huge amounts of capital to concessionary companies as necessary, rather than simply lucrative, as the French government did not feel adequately capable of economically developing the huge swaths of Central African territory without assistance from the private sector. Writing in 1932, Antonetti wrote "there was a necessity to open AEF to the sea [...] the difficulties of access, limited exit points, the enormity of the undertaking of establishing transport and transit lines [...] with 300,000 hectares between Brazzaville and Pointe Noire - the immense fertile plains would never have been put to use without our concessionary societies [...]. We would have been prevented from profiting from that period of prosperity of 1926-1929".³ However, this "period of prosperity" was made possible not only through transfers of state capital to private organizations, but also through the vestment of the state's coercive powers into private hands. Between 1919 and 1929, as the French administration vigorously executed a program of economic and social reorganization across the entire southern equatorial forest zone stretching south from southern Cameroon to Gabon and eastward to Moyen Congo upwards to Oubangui-Chari, the most essential 'native' staff on the ground consisted of security (i.e. police and military) and labor organizers who coordinated and controlled "*la main d'oeuvre*" or the indigenous workforce (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972; Kalck 1974; Mbembe 1996: 36). Concessionary endeavors depended a great deal on African chiefs, - either locally-recognized elders and potentates or, more commonly in the southern forest zones of Oubangui-Chari and Cameroon, ambitious notables who were persuaded to carry out the exacting *régime du travail* by requisitioning male laborers (and frequently female and child laborers as well; Coquery-Vidrovitch 1968: 100-108; Kalck 1959; Mbembe 1996: 59-88; Laburthe-Tolra 1999: 360-91). This system was upheld by the *indigénat* - the colonial authority structure of police powers that imposed fines, corporal punishment, and prison sentences to Africans guilty of infractions, crimes, or resisting forced labor - and enforced by the powerful *force publique* - French colonial troops along with the *commandement indigène*, who were an indigenous auxiliary police force with considerable freedom to carry out their orders (Delange 1952; Blanchard, Glassman 2012; Blanchard, Deluermoz, Glassman 2011).⁴ Thus, 'economic development' in its myriad forms in the post-WWI period was urgently and aggressively implemented, with legal and military instruments that deployed violence to preserve capital investment.

The contradictory aims and consequences were often justified or folded into larger political initiatives that were rhetorically framed as part and parcel of 'development'. Alice Conklin argues that the French idea of empire underwent a transition after World War I in which the powerful rhetoric of emancipation and universal manhood of 1896 to 1914 gave way to a more conservative vision of a French *mission civilisatrice* (Conklin 1997). Conklin's assessment of colonial policy in French West Africa is accurate, but a close examination of French Equatorial Africa during the interwar years reveals even less concern for egalitarian principles and a greater reliance on established hierarchies and private agents with influence (European and African) to transform African societies and institute new political and legal structures with which to reinforce authoritative rule (Conklin 1997: 14-23). Scholars like Pierre Kalck have demonstrated that any humanitarian sentiments stirred by the portage regime in Central Africa before the war, in which Africans were forcibly recruited to transport goods by hand over hundreds of miles on foot, were dismissed once again in the 1920s when workers were impressed into physical labor to construct the Congo-Océan railway (Kalck 1974). This article demonstrates that the emergence of new power structures stemming from authoritative rule made new economic enterprises possible, but also allowed for novel predatory activities and highly disproportionate access to markets and economic opportunities. This ensured that Central Africa's integration into the world economy was attendant with wide inequality and poor overall growth prospects as a result of the seizure and accumulation of productive assets (i.e. land and laborers) by a small minority of foreign and local agents.

Initiating methods of extraction through amplified violence, coercion, and control

After the Great War, the French territorial government in Cameroon was attached to French Equatorial Africa and Commissioner Henri Lorin called for French and Belgian companies working in the Belgian Congo at the time to expand their work in Cameroon and extend their existing projects in AEF.⁵ Jean-Victor Augagneur, the Governor General of French Equatorial Africa following the Great War, secured hundreds of millions of francs for railway construction from the French Chamber of Deputies in 1921 and subsequent Governors secured additional funds to extend the railway to meet the production and extraction points from Brazzaville (Stanley Pool) to Pointe-Noir on the Atlantic Ocean (Andrew, Kanya-Forstner 1974; Azevedo 1981). The French administration allotted land grants for mining and rubber in Oubangui-Chari starting in 1914 and allowed near-exclusive administrative control over those territorial areas to concessionary companies until the early 1950s (Grellet, Monique, Soumille 1982).⁶ To mobilize the tens of thousands of laborers needed for these and related infrastructure projects, the French military, administration, and concessionary officials began amplifying policing as well as developing head tax and other labor

management systems with their indigenous intermediaries across AEF as early as 1915. In that year, Lorin disclosed his new vision for Africa after the war, stating: "what is most important of all is establishing order [...] mandating work [...]. The education of Africans now remains a question of policing them".⁷ French colonial ideologue Arthur Girault argued for imparting greater power to colonial legislators to "regulate work" and "guard against the bad faith of the African laborer" (Girault 1923: 305). Most administrative action in each of the AEF territories in the first decade following the end of the Great War centered on instituting methods and protocols to mobilize huge numbers of laborers.

However, with few regional commanders and generally scarce personnel in the early years after the war, the fledgling French colonial administration in AEF and Cameroon between 1915 and 1920 continued to rely on the ad hoc oversight of concessionary operations, which was largely in the hands of private employees, along with a small cadre of bureaucrats and representatives in Dakar, Brazzaville, and Paris.⁸ Colonial governors agreed that *cessionnaires* would "establish French influence" in the colonies by managing rural labor forces.⁹ Between 1898 and 1930 several dozen concessions extended over the French territories of Gabon, Moyen-Congo, Oubangui-Chari, and southern Chad. These companies assisted in the penetration and installation of the French colonial regime and were, in certain ways, many Africans' first experience with French political subjugation (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1969; Suret-Canale 1964). One of the most financially savvy and influential concessionary firms was the Compagnie Forestière de Sangha-Oubangui, which had operations in Cameroon, Gabon, Moyen Congo and Oubangui-Chari, and maintained a close relationship with the transitional government, lobbying for lower tax and export levies and greater control of forest concessions throughout the post-WWI period.¹⁰ *Cessionnaires* invested little in local market development (and spent little other than the funds they received from the government and the *Banque d'Afrique Occidentale*) and were principally interested in short-term financial gain. The operation and financial protection of such concessions was even preserved in the text of the 1922 Original Mandate Accords at the League of Nations, in which Article 6 states, "there shall be no prevention or obstacle to the right of the mandate power to create monopolies of concessions in a purely fiscal character in the interest of the territory under mandate for the purpose of procuring for the territory fiscal resources in order to better adapt local circumstances or develop natural resources".¹¹ Historians argue that this behavior in the early decades of the 20th century established a pattern of state-funded and corporate-led economic exploitation that continues in present-day Africa (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972; Bayart 1993).

The emergence of a consolidated cadre of African principals who co-produced land and infrastructure development in AEF laid the foundation for dramatically uneven wealth distribution in African societies both during and after colonial rule. Achille Mbembe notes that the "hierarchies, different roles and positions, remunerations and

privileges" created by the colonial regime resulted in "unequal fortunes" (Mbembe 1996: 8). African chiefs in the employ of the French administration, police, officers of the *commandement indigène*, heads of colonial or private *milice* (local enforcement battalions), customs officials, and other overseers and enforcers reaped enormous advantage by skimming laborers or securing productive land while carrying out labor recruitment and village resettlement.¹² Chiefs responsible for tax collection could collect alternative forms of payment in kind from subject populations that were profitable to them, personally, and in some territories in Oubangui-Chari and Cameroon, harvests were collected entirely by chiefs for conveyance to the administration or concessionary company, which provided ample opportunities for graft (Kalck 1992: 240).¹³ Chiefs, police, and other Africans in official positions also engineered unauthorized sources of income from bribes, extortion, intimidation, and protection schemes (Homet 1934; Joset 1968; Sinda 1972; Kewen 1988; Mann 2009; Walker-Said 2018).

French colonial leaders were aware of the considerable atrocities that had resulted from concessionary company exploitation of the equatorial regions in the years prior to WWI, but they appear to have been less concerned about Africans who manipulated administrative procedures to advantage themselves, except in cases of serious corruption or tax theft.¹⁴ The French *Contrôle des Concessions* did express concern on several occasions about reports of disease among the workforces. Pierre Boisson of the Concessionary Oversight Board wrote that the essential elements of economic success in AEF depended on reducing the abuses of the pre-WWI era (which were blamed on German methods) and he noted the use of forced labor resulted in "enormously high mortality rates in both public and private worksites" and population displacement. He wrote, "the Africans were transplanted from their original regions where they had found a climate or food sources to which they were accustomed, and forced to bear a work load which exhausted them, and the enterprises became failures. The natives died in huge numbers. In wanting at all costs to stem the damage that their methods had wreaked, the Germans did not hesitate to employ the most coercive methods and harshest conditions that even the metropole had trouble agreeing to. I have no intention on insisting on these kinds of notorious acts".¹⁵ However, in further underwriting the concessionary regime, the French colonial government only recreated this reality across a greater swath of territory. Certain human rights abuses were justified by claiming they would prevent other human rights abuses, such as Governor Auguste Lamblin's claim that the Oubangiens sacrificed for the Congo-Océan railroad would allow for an end to the more punishing work of portage (Kalck 1974: 204-207). Alice Conklin's claim that the post-WWI years were "among the most coercive of the colonial period" is certainly borne out in evidence (Conklin 1997: 247; Gardinier 1963: 9-12).

The Concessionary Oversight Board worked alongside the French administration in AEF to oversee export development, and in 1918 the Board sent directives demanding the commissioner "organize labor" and "control the male population."¹⁶ With the colonial

bureaucracy subsidizing concessionary investments, financial interests superseded any 'civilizational' initiatives or humanitarian pledges made to the League of Nations, and thus the *force publique* and their allied chiefs forcibly recruited thousands of laborers to remove rock and earth, fell trees, lay stone and rails, build docks along rivers, haul mud and lumber, and perform myriad other punishing tasks under the surveillance of French guards and African police armed with *chicottes* (Londres 1929).¹⁷ David Patterson's work in Gabon has proven that the catastrophic demographic shifts in coastal Gabon, which historians previously attributed to colonial urbanization and land reorganization, was in fact almost entirely a result of punishing labor conditions and correlative community decay in the concessionary activities of ivory, rubber, and timber firms in the years following World War I (Patterson 1975). Colonial infrastructure projects and the French *régime du travail* resulted in massive population relocation and reorganization. Jan Vansina was perhaps the first to provide a thorough analysis of the Central African forest zone and rightly perceived that changes to the physical environment and cultural patterns considerably disturbed human relationships. Vansina's insights into the "equatorial tradition", or the dynamic nature of precolonial social and legal relations, led him to believe that as African kinship, intermarriage, and decentralized authority structures mutated with incorporation into French colonial systems, they were "prevented... from inventing new structures to cope" (Vansina 1990: 247). The "irreversible crisis" of difficult and often socially damaging adaptations to "unforeseen and hitherto unimaginable events of the colonial conquest", Vansina claimed, spelled the death of the equatorial tradition in the 1920s (Vansina 1990: 247).

Indeed, many Africans were forced to abandon longstanding farming, hunting, and human settlement practices to labor on infrastructure projects or for concessionary interests under penalty of arrest, fines, or physical punishment (Tchakossa 2012). African chiefs' novel partnerships with police to mobilize tens of thousands of laborers for road, rail, bridge, and port construction rendered the institution of chieftaincy unrecognizable to African societies in many of the forest zones of the Cameroon, Oubangui-Chari, and Moyen Congo territories. Before European colonization, many societies in these regions did not exhibit centralized political leadership and the emergence of tyrannical and coercive local potentates eroded the principles of reciprocity on which former practices of servitude and obedience to chiefs were based (Tisserant 1955; Alexandre, Binet 1958; Kalck 1974; Geschiere 1982; 1993; Ngoh 1996; Pougoué 2002; Robert, Walters 2011; Tchakossa 2012). French colonial intensification after World War I was marked by an assertive infusion of monetary and military support to African chiefs who displayed organizational prowess and a propensity for strong hierarchical organization (Copet-Rougier 1979, 1987; Geschiere 1982: 258-260; Tchakossa 2012). Administration chiefs compelled men, women, and children to labor on transit lines for months or entire seasons and often either conscripted remaining villagers to work their own agricultural

enterprises or married numerous wives to manage their households and farmsteads (Mbembe 1996: 59–88; Laburthe-Tolra 1999: 360–91; Eze 1975; Philippe-Roger 1966; Robert 2011; Tchakossa 2012).

Although concessionary companies' influence was moderated in later decades, replaced by district governments, local representative bodies, and judicial systems, crude and despotic techniques of labor and population control remained in place in French Equatorial Africa until the Brazzaville reforms of 1944 (Kaptue 1986: 30–44). According to laws passed in Cameroon in 1924 and 1927, "every adult of masculine sex" was obligated to furnish 10 days per annum of *prestation* (service) for "the accomplishment of works in the public interest."¹⁸ Compulsory unpaid labor was legally set at 15 days per annum in other AEF colonies and 12 days for French West Africa according to 1922 and 1925 decrees (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1985: 360). While some laws established salaries for men recruited for "social and utilitarian purposes", their language was vague and mentioned women could be paid less than men, presumably because they only carried food and water for the laborers.¹⁹ As volunteers were rare, forced recruitments commenced in large numbers in 1916 to complete sanitation work in towns, roadwork on forest paths, brush clearing for railroads and highways, waterway maintenance, and building construction. While the law technically excluded the elderly, women, children under sixteen, the sick, notables, chiefs, and police from forced labor, reports throughout the 1920s and 1930s (most frequently from missionary observers) detail the extensive use of women, children, and the elderly in manual labor and the general neglect of regulated service limits. For example, in 1935, the Cameroon Public Works Commission recorded 1,795,750 days of forced labor by African workers.²⁰

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Another useful tool of concessionary partnerships with the AEF government was the use of the *indigénat* code as a central element of the authority structure. Formally established in Cameroon in 1917, the *indigénat* provided disciplinary authority for district officers but was often broadly interpreted as the power to coerce and discipline all colonized peoples without a legal or judicial appeal (Eckert 1999). The *indigénat* enumerated penalties for crimes including theft, assault, and refusal to pay taxes, as well as refusing to work in a labor camp, disobedience to a chief in the employment of the administration, or 'disrespect' towards colonial representatives (Monga 1996; Eckert 1996; Mann 2009). Although French ministers in Paris and in French West Africa claimed the *indigénat* was only an "early stage" system of legal authority necessary for "initiating" Africans to French law, calls for its repeal in 1924 were rejected, with officials stating that Africa was "still in an era of transition."²¹ Many studies have demonstrated that colonial administrations worked through a simulacra of customary regulation such as improvised chiefdoms and African-led police forces (Mamdani 1996: 21; Chanock 1985; Mann 2009).

Some systems contained within them recognizable elements. But there were also purely novel instruments, such as the *livret du travail* or work permit and other documentary

forms of control such as the pass card, which allowed for the monitoring and policing of African laborers in the most heavily populated districts of French Equatorial Africa. These also helped establish resettled villages or "model villages" in government-approved areas that were preferably under the control of a local chief (Likaka 2006: 404). Remote and dislocated villages posed a challenge to French officials, who wished to consolidate African populations, particularly in zones where post-war reconstruction was necessary. French Minister of the Colonies Albert Sarraut proposed in 1923 that French commanders intensify "penetration and concentration" efforts in the interior of the equatorial rainforest zone to "expand economic action" (Sarraut 1923: 443). However, most Africans had no desire to make themselves accessible and many relocated to zones further in the interior to avoid recruitment. In Oubangui-Chari, populations ravaged by forced labor recruitment, famine, and depopulation left villages along the riverbanks and moved into the interior far from roads and rail lines (Kalck 1974: 160-168). Frustrated by the difficulty of recruiting labor and assembling populations near major thoroughfares under a single authority, the administration enabled a large force of *tirailleurs*, or soldiers, to round up able-bodied Africans to perform repair work on damaged roads and rail lines and clear the forest for new pathways in the decades after World War I (Azevedo 1981: 8; Mbembe 1988; Zimmerman 2011: 65-70). Collectively referred to as the *commandement indigène*, these enforcers were first recruited from among the African population in closest proximity to French administrative centers and were also occasionally recruited from the *tirailleurs* or military recruits, returned from war. In a meeting with French officials, one African chief in Cameroon recounted that members of the *commandement indigène* in the years after the war were "opportunists".²² But along the Chad-Oubangui Chari border, Chadian *tirailleurs* recruited in order to round up laborers by force were reported to have warned locals about the deplorable conditions in the worksites and prompted them to flee (Azevedo 1981: 8). In principle, however, the *commandement indigène* was supposed to relocate villages, displace chosen or elected leaders, impose the authority of the new chief, and assist the new chief with collecting taxes and mobilizing labor contingents. Many chiefs who sought alliance with the colonial administration quickly mobilized alongside the *commandement indigène* to exert pressure on their subject populations.²³ The work of enforcement and imposing violence and authority was often well compensated. Missionary observations recount chiefs in Oubangui Chari and Cameroon owning automobiles, expanding their farms, and marrying many wives, even in times of scarcity.²⁴ Fewer sources describe the compensation received by the various local squadrons of the *commandement indigène*, concessionary guards and police forces, and administration police, but the records reflect that in addition to receiving salaries, these officers also were given tacit permission to take portions of food or harvests from workers and were given considerable leeway in their recruitment methods, as missionaries were occasionally able to prevent certain church members from being

taken for work (Michel 1975: 313–327; Goerg 1997; Brunet-La Ruche 2012).²⁵ The work of imposing obligatory labor was fully decentralized throughout the AEF territories by 1920 and by 1930, African chiefs controlled most of their own *commandements* from their own districts and paid them directly (Kaptue 1986: 32–33).

These labor regimes came under criticism, which was mostly reported by French and American missionary societies in Central Africa (Bedinger 1920; Laburthe-Tolra 1999; Benedetto 1996). Justifying the laws' brutality, Governor Marchand of Cameroon contended, "there is a humanitarian objective to the railways: assuring the disappearance of portorage on men's heads [...]. Work on the railways constitutes an obligation that is to be shared by all collectivities and it is in the name of justice that no one is exempt."²⁶ The French administration's 1925 report to the League of Nations on labor conditions in the Cameroon Mandate defended stringent labor policies, stating: "a man present for 270 days on a worksite only works 210 days because of Sundays, Saturday afternoons, and holidays, which are rest days."²⁷ But this claim of allowing rest days was not even consistently true, as missionary stations reported that their African congregants and catechumens were barred from leaving the worksites for Sunday services.²⁸

Communication and transportation and the spread of disease and death

Another palpable disruptive force that also significantly amplified the growing inequality among African societies during the early postwar years in the equatorial forest zone was the expansion of roads and railway lines, which required tens of thousands of men to be held in virtual captivity for months in worksites. In the years immediately following the war, French officials sought to expand the Douala-Bidjoka-Njock and the Douala-Mbalmayo railway lines in Cameroon usable for concessionary export of timber and rubber and construct the Brazzaville-Pointe Noir and the Congo-Océan lines to improve internal communication, facilitate military control, accelerate mobility, distribute wages and contribute to the expansion of the cash economy (Atangana 2001; Schler 2003; Azevedo 1981: 3). The Brazzaville-Pointe-Noir and Congo-Océan lines were built between 1921 and 1934 while the railways from Douala were completed before 1927. The railways, with almost no exceptions, were directed toward the coast, with nearly no links between them across the territory in the north/south direction. Historian Mario Azevedo has explored the demographic impact of the Brazzaville-Pointe Noir line on the Sara population of southern Chad. As Chad and Oubangui-Chari were landlocked colonies, a rail network was considered essential to the development of economic viability. However, the Sara people faced massive population displacement – first by forced removals to railway worksites and eventually through fleeing the region to Nigeria and Cameroon. Chinese labor was eventually imported to assist in the Brazzaville-Pointe Noir construction (Azevedo 1981).

Between 1920 and 1922 the Douala-Mbalmayo railroad extension to Yaoundé was an undertaking that required requisitioning laborers from hundreds of kilometers away

as all local laborers either fled or refused work obligations.²⁹ Moving the site of the territorial government from Douala to Yaoundé was also challenging because there were no indigenous commercial food markets in the surrounding area. To resolve this, the administration requisitioned farmers' harvests using the *force publique* (Guyer 1980b: 8). Later, farmers were compelled to plant crops such as cotton, rice, and groundnuts to feed or clothe African workforces. Coquery-Vidrovich has persuasively argued that in this period among both those who planted freely and those planting compulsory crops, "the income of the peasants remained, in fact, ridiculously low" and that the remuneration of wage-earners (some forced laborers earned wages, others were paid in food or tools) "hardly kept pace with inflation" (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1985: 366). One official report from the period detailed that "one native, it is said, would receive for a year's work a supply of earthenware plates and bowls" (Author Unknown 1912).

Along the Brazzaville-Pointe Noir railway, the digging of twelve required tunnels for the entirety of the line was done primarily with hand tools, mainly hoes, and after rocks were split with dynamite, the dirt and rocks were maneuvered by hand, as was the cement laid down after (Azevedo 1981: 5). Unsurprisingly, labor problems plagued the overseers. Porters frequently refused to carry supplies or abandoned the worksites. Food was scarce and consisted mainly of rice, cassava, and dried fish, and each worker was forced to prepare his own meal, which led to workers abandoning their barracks and worksites to find food and visit villages. Evidence from the period reveals that mutinies due to mistreatment, hunger, hard work, and salary differences (the pay was extremely low and depended on one's personal relationship with the overseer) occurred frequently until 1934, when some measures were passed to improve the diet by adding meat and potatoes and salaries increased (Azevedo 1981: 7). Famines were also reported in the regions around the Njock-Yaoundé rail line, the Otélé-Mbalmayo line, and the Njock-Makak road in Cameroon.³⁰ Rice was soon introduced into the forest zone in the mid-1920s and grown under French administrative order to feed laborers in construction zones (Guyer 1980b: 11). Coquery-Vidrovitch describes the mutinies, revolts, and acts of passive resistance launched by rural workers as the dawn of a "peasant resistance" in Central Africa that initiated the process of molding the ideological environment in which African politics subsequently developed (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1983).

Long-term confinement was a lesser concern than death and disease along the transit lines. The rates of exhaustion and death from sleeping sickness, typhoid, and general malnutrition along the Congo-Océan line prompted the French government to apportion part of the 300 million-franc AEF investment budget of 1925 to increasing workers' wages and the expansion of medical facilities in Moyen Congo (Homberg 1927). In Cameroon, the Central Railway Line and the Otélé-Mbalmayo Railway were both grim circuits where thousands of Africans died between 1922 and 1926 (Ngando 2002; Gardinier 1963). The annual death rate in 1923 was one hundred workers per thousand.³¹ Along these major rail lines, as well as newer roads leading east toward

Moyen Congo, such as the Nyong-Lomié road, the Vimili-Sangmélina road, and the Nanga-Eboko-Batouri road, high death rates were attributed to pneumococcal disease and diarrhea.³² Acute pulmonary infections as well as diseases like sleeping sickness, syphilis, and typhoid, which were common amongst recruited men and women, led to high infant mortality and often left women sterile (Robineau 1923a, 1923b; Ardener 1962). Marcel Robineau recorded 'extremely high' rates of syphilis, sleeping sickness, and leprosy in 1923 among Africans traders and wealthy planters in the southern forests of Ebolowa (Robineau 1923a; 1923b). Along the railway leading from Douala to Dschang in the Cameroon territory, Protestant missionaries also noted in 1926 that "pneumonia, pleurisy, lung infections, tuberculosis, and bronchitis" affected local workers.³³ The American Presbyterian Mission noted that the lack of food provisions and forcing laborers to forage in the forests contributed to contagious infections in surrounding areas. It was given a subvention of 50,000 dollars in 1920 to build clinics to help combat disease in and around the worksites.³⁴ In 1926, over 200,000 medical consultations were recorded for recruited laborers in the Cameroon territory (the majority in the southern forest zone), who suffered from lung infections, sleeping sickness, syphilis, yaws, ulcers, dysentery, parasites, and leprosy, among other ailments.³⁵ Across AEF, the severe human cost of population displacement, the removal of the male labor force from villages and local agricultural enterprises, and the conditions of forced labor was apparent to a wide range of European and African observers. Forced displacement for railway construction not only caused disruptions to food production and provoked disease transmission, but it also demanded removals of populations along the planned railway extensions. Likewise, timber harvesting also displaced thousands of local societies. In Gabon, the boom in *okoume* wood, a raw material used in plywood production, caused severe famine among Fang societies between 1916 and 1918 (Gray, Ngolet 1999). In the 1920s and 1930s, the pygmy populations of the Congo Basin were severely affected by logging and forest conversion. Pygmy societies were removed from lands that had been previously considered their right of access and denied rights to hunt, without compensation or provision of alternative lands. In all cases, the colonial project of transitioning Pygmies from forest-based livelihood to agriculture was not considered successful (Lueong 2016; Milton 1985).

Inequality

African territories were certainly revenue-generating for the metropole in the postwar years: colonial exports tripled between 1927 and 1935 (La Bruyère 1936). Despite this, in 1933, French politicians called for increasing investments in export production, lamenting that French African colonies produced "only" 6,000 tons of coffee out of the 150,000 tons consumed annually in France (du Vivier de Streel 1933:170). As wild rubber production decreased in southern Oubangui-Chari, concessionary companies enthusiastically embraced coffee as a major profit earner after 1925 (O'Toole 1984).

However, the massive road building operations and the forced *regroupment* of villages along these roads to facilitate head tax collection and labor recruitment, along with the simultaneous labor recruitments for the Congo-Océan railroad, were further blows to the already ravaged countryside (Sautter 1967: 271-280).

The colonial administration's allowance and encouragement of predatory activities by African principals over the course of the interwar period deepened socio-political inequality and entrenched despotism among those connected to political or concessionary powers. Land, labor access, and social power became concentrated in the hands of chiefs and notables with administrative positions or backing. Chiefs and notables who organized compulsory agricultural projects such as the growing of millet and other foodstuffs to be sent to provision the Congo-Océan railway projects were well compensated. But forced sales of all local harvests meant famine for substantial regional populations. Between 1922 and 1925, historians estimate that famine affected both southern and northern AEF and is estimated to have reduced the Fang population by half, from 140,000 to 65,000 by 1933 (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1985: 372). Likewise, chiefs who requisitioned laborers (and managed to escape *prestation*, themselves) benefitted enormously from their relationship with railway construction overseers. But those forcibly enlisted could be forced to work anywhere from Oubangui-Chari to Chad³⁶ to Moyen Congo, marched hundreds of miles from their home villages to unfamiliar regions where escape offered few possibilities of survival (Sautter 1967: 242-249).

New forms of personal domination led to greater disempowerment - financially as well as socially - of the commoner class who often sought to relocate to improve their circumstances. While the historical record contains far more examples of chiefs who accumulated considerable wealth and power as a result of their newfound positions, there are notable examples of chiefs who decried the state of concessionary exploitation and even economic policy in the French-administered territories. Records from the border between eastern Cameroon and western Oubangui-Chari demonstrate that there was considerable population transfer between the territories as each locality lost workers fleeing to the other territory. Rubber harvesting was the mandate between 1925 and 1933 and workers complained about overwork, sleeping sickness, and having to pay taxes from their wages.³⁷ African chiefs from Cameroon and Oubangui-Chari pleaded with the administration to reduce the tax "confiscations" and blamed the "regime of the *grandes concessions*" for their onerous demands.³⁸ In the worksites at Dzimou and Yokadouma in eastern Cameroon and Sasso-Nakombo in Oubangui-Chari, chiefs petitioned administration officials to be allowed to diversify their economic enterprises with palm oil, rather than exclusively relying on rubber harvesting. Their pleas were ignored and local officials demanded in 1929 that locals both harvest rubber and submit to recruitment for '*débroussage*' or brush clearing, for roadway building.

Neither rubber nor brush clearing generated adequate income for locals to pay their taxes or allow for a greater measure of subsistence or commercial possibilities in the form of locally tradeable goods.³⁹

Even commoners with access to new forms of wealth - including currency and salaries (from wage labor and administrative positions) - were vulnerable to destabilizing economic shifts. Greater circulations of wealth gave rise to more competition for household and agricultural labor as well as speculation and extortion of bridewealth, which created new risks and debt burdens for young grooms as well as, eventually, women seeking divorce (Guyer 1978, 1980a; Likaka 2006). Simultaneously, *indigénat* regulations expanded with the Decree of 21 August 1930, which subjected greater numbers of African commoners to arbitrary labor recruitment and arrest, which threatened their ability to maintain their own farms and households.⁴⁰ The inability to adequately plan or organize seasonable harvests, direct household management, or control the rights to one's own labor had devastating consequences for rural life. Policies that had both economic objectives and the goal of promoting workforce "productivity" often created the very conditions of penury and dependency colonists had wanted to avoid.

Conclusion

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Recognizing that Africans were the true executors of decentralized colonial governance, infrastructure development, the new export economy, and indeed many of the atrocities and widespread suffering these engendered does not 'shift the blame' for injustice from European colonial overseers toward local agents. But it does allow a more complex portrait of colonial 'development' to emerge - one that accounts for the variety of experience between those Africans who wielded privileges and powers to control labor and the means of violence and those who were subject to them. As the interwar period gave way to the Second World War, which brought about another flight of Europeans to serve the front in Europe, Central Africans in positions of authority moved assertively to capture more land and laborers and gain influence in their regions of origin (Kalck 1992; Mbembe 1997; Mbemba Dia Benazo-Mbanzulu 2009). The post-war years saw an intensification of urbanization and wealth concentration in the hands of elite cadres of politically connected members of African society, which has been a continuing phenomenon in contemporary Africa. Conklin's characterization of the Third Republic's colonial operating philosophy of solidifying established hierarchies and empowering private agents with influence without regard for the practice of liberal political ideals is essential for historians of modern Africa to grasp not only because it describes a particular period in the past, but also because of its resonance and the burdens this approach continues to impose today.

The overarching goal of the government of French Equatorial Africa in the years

following World War I had undoubtedly been the structuring of integrated economic circuits that could cross and connect segmented colonial (or mandate) regions and more efficiently provide metropolitan France with a considerably greater number of goods. Accumulation and distribution – managed by concessionary companies – was prioritized over political development or even the full integration of local or regional economies into the global market system. Laborers were to be organized into an obedient workforce, not reorganized or reoriented toward export markets as individual producers – although cocoa and tobacco farmers and palm oil refiners in Cameroon, Gabon, and Moyen Congo sought to make themselves the exception.⁴¹ By and large, the dynamic center of the economy, along with political power, remained located in metropolitan corporations and organizations. Locally, chiefs and other intermediaries with political power and police reinforcements enjoyed a measure of prosperity and power, supplying both manpower and taxes to the central administration. These agents' power would continue to grow in the colonial period in Central Africa, culminating in post-independence political administrations that were mosaics of local hierarchical authority and central governments that remained deeply dependent on France to uphold their legitimacy – typically through violence (Dufour 2010; Laloupe 2013).

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NOTES:

1 - AEF consisted of the colonies from the French Congo to Chad and had its capital at Brazzaville in French Congo. The political institution of AEF was created in 1910, very much on the model of French West Africa. What had been known as French Congo before 1910 was divided into three colonies: one retained the name of 'Congo' (formally 'Moyen Congo'), Gabon regained its identity as a separate colony, and the interior territory was named Ubangui-Chari. In 1920 the northern territory of Ubangui-Chari became the separate colony of Chad, and the southern portion retained the name Ubangui-Chari.

2 - R. Noguès, A. Motte, J. Weber, *La Compagnie Forestière Sangha-Oubangui*, Archive record 7 août 1910 - 5 octobre 1942, "Les entreprises coloniales françaises", n.d.: <http://www.entreprises-coloniales.fr/afrique-equatoriale/CFSO.pdf>.

3 - Centre des Archives d'Outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence (hereafter CAOM) 8Q, *Le Gouverneur général de l'A.E.F. Antonetti à M. le Ministre des Colonies, rapport sur les crédits nécessaires pour achever le Congo-Océan*, 20 December 1932.

4 - The French administration promulgated a number of laws organizing labor in the territory, most of which conformed to laws passed throughout French West and French Equatorial Africa. See *Code du travail en A.O.F., arrêté général du 29 mars 1926; Convention sur le travail forcé de 1930; Convention sur le recrutement des travailleurs indigènes de 1936; Convention sur les contrats de travail à long terme de 1939; Convention sur les sanctions pénales de 1939*. Notably, nearly every labor code passed included a chapter on the "question de la liberté du travail" which allowed for forced labor. Even the revised labor code passed in 1947 after World War II included the statement: "The right to requisition laborers during peacetime, notably in cases of public calamities and urgent work that concerns the health of populations, will be regulated by decrees directed by the minister of Overseas France...", Chapitre 2bis, *Code du Travail d'Outre-Mer*, 18 October 1947.

5 - CAOM AGEFOM 799/1857, *Lettre du Délégué de G.G. de l'AEF Lorin*, December 1915.

6 - CAOM Affaire Economique, 7 B 157, *Compagnie Forestières du Sangha-Oubangui, Documents du Commission des Concessions Coloniales. Ordre du jour: Novation des conventions passées en 1910 par le Département avec la C.F.S.O. Scéance du 26 juillet 1920, projet Augagneur sur la réglementation de la récolte du caoutchouc sur les territoires concédés*.

7 - CAOM AFFPOL 615/1, "Cameroun 1915-1919," *Lettre du M.M. Lorin, au Délégué de Gouvernement Général de l'Afrique Equatoriale Française, Bureau d'Etudes Economiques*, December 1915, p. 39.

8 - CAOM AGEFOM 799/1857, *Lettre de M. M. Lorin*, December 1915; *Commerce Forestiere, 1917-1918; lettre de Dakar à M. le secretaire à Brazzaville*, 31 August 1918. AGEFOM 956/3199, *lettre des Compagnies Forestière de Sangha-Oubangui*, 31 August 1918; *lettres du M. Weber, Directeur des Forêts à Brazzaville*, 1920; *lettre de P. Boisson, AEF Contrôle des Concessions*, 13 December 1919.

9 - CAOM AGEFOM 799/1857 *Lettre de M. M. Lorin*, December 1915.

10 - AGEFOM 956/3199, *Lettres du M. Weber, Directeur des Forêts, Administration Locale à Brazzaville à des Compagnies Forestière de Sangha-Oubangui; letter à Monsieur le Gouverneur Secretaire Général du Gouvernement General sur la Perception de la taxe de recolte et des droits de sortie sur le caoutchouc exportée de l'Ancien Cameroun*.

11 - UNOG Registry, Records and Archives Unit, League of Nations Documents and Serial Publications Reel 22/3/3, *Mandat Français sur le Cameroun, 1922, London*, 20 July 1922.

12 - CAOM AFFPOL 4(3) D 27 Gabon-Congo XV, 29; ANOM Affaire Economique, 7 B 157, *Oubangui-Chari, rapport économique*, 1925; ANOM 8 Q, *Note au sujet des sociétés concessionnaires en A.E.F.*, Brazzaville, January 1918; ANOM GGAEF 5D64, *Notes du Gouverneur-General 1950*; *Journal de l'AEF 1929, Article de 1929 déterminant les infractions passibles de sanctions de police administratives*, p. 1187.

13 - CAOM Affaire Economique 4D 39, *Rapport économique, 1929, documentations sur la culture du coton en A.E.F.* 25 March 1929; ANOM AGEFOM 799/1856, *L'Affaire Yevol*, 1930.

14 - CAOM Fonds AEF, 1 H 74, 540/2, *Décret instituant le travail obligatoire au Cameroun*, Titre I, Chapitre I, Article 4, 21 August 1930.

15 - CAOM AGEFOM 956/3199, *Lettre du P. Boisson*. AEF, 13 December 1919.

16 - CAOM AGEFOM 956/3199, *Robinneau et Angoulvant, Compagnies Forestière de Sangha-Oubangui*, 31 August 1918.

17 - A *chicotte* is a long, knotted whip with a wooden handle used as a punishment in French Equatorial Africa, Belgian Congo and Portuguese Africa. The enormity (and brutality) of France's infrastructure programs in Cameroon, including roadways, railways, ports, and bridges, is only partially captured in France's reports to the League of Nations. See ANOM TP Série 1 420/11, *Rapport à la Société des Nations, Années 1931, 1934*,

- and 1935. Other observations include Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, *Rapport Brazza 1905* and Albert Londres' 1929 published report, *Terre d'ébène*.
- 18 - CAOM Travaux Publics (hereafter TP) Série 1 420/11, *Arrêté du 1 juillet 1924; Arrêté du 9 mars 1927*.
- 19 - Cameroon's 1925 Annual Report mentions that women performing work along the roads as "food porters and cooks" could be paid 0.30 francs per day. AFFPOL 2190/1, *Rapport annuel*, Cameroun, 1925.
- 20 - CAOM TP Série 1 420/11, *Rapport à la Société des Nations 1935*, Services des Travaux Publics Chemins de Fer, Portes et Rades, p. 75.
- 21 - CAOM Fonds AEF, 1 H 74, 540/3, *Rapport au Président de la République Française, suivi d'un décret portant réglementation des sanctions de police administrative indigène en Afrique Occidentale, en Afrique Equatoriale, à Madagascar, et à la Côte des Somalis*, Jean Fabry, 19 November. 1924, n. 382.
- 22 - CAOM AFFPOL 2190/1, a, *Conseil de Notables de la Circonscription d'Ebolowa*, 18 November 1929.
- 23 - CAOM AGEFOM 989/3430, *Administration 1927-1933*; AGEFOM 799/1855, *Rapport: Travaux ruraux 1931*; AFFPOL 2190/1, *Rapport annuel*, Cameroun, 1929.
- 24 - CAOM AGEFOM 799/1855, *Rapport: Travaux ruraux*, 1931; *Reports of the Mid Africa Mission, Société des Missionnaires baptistes*, 1921, cited in Kalck (1974: 253-254).
- 25 - Societe des Missions Evangéliques de Paris/Département Evangélique Français d'Action Apostolique (hereafter SMEP/DEFAP) Mission Presbytérienne Américaine (hereafter MPA), documents sur la Mission Presbyterienne Américaine au Cameroun, 1921-1931; ACSSp. 2J1.8.2, *Mission Mbalmayo*. For more on African police compensation, see CAOM AFFPOL 530, *Lettre collective de Dahoméens au ministre des Colonies*, 8 May 1923; and
- 26 - CAOM AFFPOL 2190/1, *Rapport annuel du gouvernement français sur l'administration sous mandat des territoires du Cameroun pour l'année 1925*, vol. 5.
- 27 - CAOM AFFPOL 2190/1, *Rapport annuel du gouvernement français sur l'administration sous mandat des territoires du Cameroun pour l'année 1925*, vol. 11.
- 28 - Archives de la Congrégation des Pères du Saint-Esprit, Chevilly-Larue (hereafter ACSSp) 2J1.10.12, *Journal du Père François Pichon, Doumé, 1930-31*; CAOM AFFPOL 2190/2, Fédération des Missions Protestantes du Cameroun et de l'Afrique Equatoriale, *Voeux présentés au gouverneur du Cameroun M. Caras*, 19 August 1943; CAOM AFFPOL 2190/2, *Questions d'enseignement, Mission Française au Cameroun*, Pasteur Marcel Brun, 1944.
- 29 - CAOM AFFPOL 2190/1, *Rapport annuel du gouvernement français sur l'administration sous mandat des territoires du Cameroun pour l'année 1925*, vol. 13.
- 30 - CAOM AFFPOL 2190/1, *Rapport annuel, Cameroun 1925*, vol. 14; ANC 2AC 9286, *lettre de Gov. Marchand à la Mission Presbytérienne Américaine*, 8 November. 1923; *lettre de Pastor Johnson à Gov. Marchand*, 17 November 1923.
- 31 - By 1927, death rates dropped to 35 per thousand but conditions were still brutal. ANC APA 11201/D, *Rapports avec les indigènes: Violences, 1916-1936*.
- 32 - CAOM AFFPOL 2190/1, *Rapport annuel Cameroun 1926*, p. 8; ANOM AFFPOL 2190/1, *Jours de portage dans les circonscriptions, 1921-1926*.
- 33 - SMEP/DEFAP NM, *Cameroun 1925-1926 Mlle Debarge*, 12 oct. 1926.
- 34 - Archives Nationales du Cameroun, Yaoundé (hereafter ANC) 2AC 9268, Gov. Carde, *à l'hôpital à la Mission Presbyterienne Américaine*, 1920.
- 35 - CAOM AFFPOL 2190/1, *Rapport annuel Cameroun*, 1926, p. 31.
- 36 - Until 1920 Oubangui-Chari was joined with Chad in a single territory within the federation of French Equatorial Africa.
- 37 - CAOM AGEFOM 989/3430, Cam. admin. 1927-1933, Conseil des Notables, Bertoua, 16 November 1928.
- 38 - CAOM AGEFOM 989/3430, Cam. admin. 1927-1933, Conseil des Notables, Bertoua, 16 November 1928.
- 39 - CAOM AGEFOM 989/3430, Cameroun admin 1927-1933, *Circ. d'Abong Mbang Bulletin Agricole*, 1929.
- 40 - CAOM Fonds AEF, 1 H 74, 540/2, *Décret instituant le travail obligatoire*, 21 August 1930.
- 41 - CAOM AGEFOM 799/1858, *Cournaire Rapports sur le cacao, 1929-1932*; M. Angelini, *Rapport de la Tourné, Subdiv. de Nkongsamba*, 1933.

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