

Book Review

Cassandra, Mark-Thiesen. (2018). *Mediators, Contract Men and Colonial Capital. Mechanised Mining in the Gold Coast Colony, 1879-1909.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press. 217 pages.

Historical studies on the early colonial Wassa gold mines have shed light on the diversity of the labour market in Wassa in terms of its demographics and labour markets. Mark-Thiesen's study provides a number of important insights into the global labour history of imperial gold mining in Wassa, as well as in a wider West African context. In a clearly woven language, the work showed how capitalist intensification evoked a variety of responses by local actors. Her intricate and artistic combination of printed, photographic and archival sources supported by insights from a diverse and rich list of previous scholarship helps to understand discourses and practices of labour recruitment and the politics thereof among mining entrepreneurs, labour agents, chiefs and village headmen and colonial state official. The author has displayed an uncanny skill at sourcing data from distant and near places and knitting together relevant pieces of data collected in the distant past into remarkable, refreshing, illuminating and coherently structured chapters. A unique feature of the study is the recognition it has accorded women's work. Author notes, "Women have not taken up much space in the history of colonial mining in West Africa. Nonetheless, this study has tried to make up some ground in that arena. Women workers had some particular skills that they could monetize, and managers in the Wassa mines seems to have noticed that quickly" (pp. 163-164).

Thematically, the book is more than just a narration of the "a social and economic history of West African miners in West Africa's first mechanised mining sector, which developed rapidly in the context of the colonial state laissez-faire economic policy" (Introduction, p. 2). Above all, it provides a detailed documentation of how a history of the processes of labour mobilisation for the Wassa mines necessitates a story of the interplay of social, economic, and political transformations at the local and regional as well as colonial and imperial levels.

The book comprises 5 main chapters. At the centre of chapter 1 is the theme of change: It demonstrates the transformations that occurred in managerial professionalization, capitalisation, and technology of mining over the course of the last of the nineteenth century and roughly the first half of the twentieth. Chapter 2 initiates the second major theme of this book, innovative continuity: It begins by introducing actual practices of labour recruitment in the nineteenth century. Outlining the process by which contract workers were brought to the mines and

held there, and the ways in which recruits, recruiters, and employers in the mines sought to shape this endeavor are the central concerns addressed in this chapter.

Chapter 3, titled “Disrupted Recruitment at the Turn of the Twentieth Century. Women, White, and Other Labour Agents,” has three sub-sections. It examines the second gold boom to show that technological and managerial improvements had but little impact on the way migrant workers were brought into the mines. In fact the turn of the twentieth century marked a period in which recruitment from Liberia became too expensive, and mining companies were obligated to break ties with labour recruiters from that country, men with whom they had built long-standing relationships. Yet out of this situation arose business opportunities for a number of labour recruiters, who unlike the Liberian labour agents, used their own capital to recruit workers from other parts of West Africa. It is noted that opportunities in and around Wassa brought together labourers and labour agents from the Gold Coast, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, to name a few places.

Chapter 4 introduces another intermediary body for the recruitment of mining labour, the government transport department. Beginning in 1903, officials re-created the indigenous recruitment and supervisory system within this colonial agency in order to subcontract men to the mines. Nevertheless, the proposal of a Concession Labour Ordinance that same year, the chief officer of the bureau anticipated stricter labour regulations, including pass laws, for individual labourers in the mines in the future. Ensuing debates help to bring out the tensions at various levels of the colonial state on the issue of disciplining mining labour and, related to that challenge, the future of economic development.

The concluding chapter – Chapter 5 focuses on some of the identifiable social and economic ramifications of the forced-labour system as it was established in the Northern Territories between 1906 and 1909. As it re-visits this period when the Wassa mines recruited through chiefs, it has as one main task: to compare and contrast procedures of labour mobilisation under the forced-labour regime with those practised by the Liberian labour agents, the carrier-oriented gang leaders of the government transport office, and the more independent indigenous recruiters and supervisors. The author hopes that the findings will stimulate further inquiries related to socio-economic and political change in Wassa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Out of the findings, more research can be launched, examining the agency of African workers and shifts in their bargaining power during the colonial period, credit compulsory labour, and voluntary bondage during the colonial period; and workers’ consciousness outside of working-class formation.

Given the fact that as regards the recruitment machinery from the Northern Territories the author noted that “the responses of local authorities to demands for labourers were mixed, compelling political officers to employ a combination of reward and punishment to gain their support”, it would have been apt and illuminating for the author to have elaborated on why the responses of local authorities to demands for labourers were mixed. It is important to know the true nature of the dissenting voices in the whole drama of the grand deceptive scheme of recruitment of cheap labour, which was a tangible product of British influence.

There are a few spelling mistakes and omissions on the following pages worth noting: p. 16, line 9 “of” is omitted; second paragraph of p.31, line 26, among is spelt as “amongst”; p. 40, 4th line, invested for “interested”; p. 47, entry spelt as “ingress”; p. 89 second paragraph, line 10, more spelt as “mores” and p. 142. “of” omitted in line 6 of paragraph 2. These minor criticisms aside, Mark-Thiesen’s comprehensive, informative and well-researched study is recommended for public and private libraries, and especially for historians and experts of migratory studies, mining industry and labour relations.

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