

Forced Labour at the Frontier of Empires: Manipur and the French Congo, 1890–1914

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ABSTRACTS

Dieser Aufsatz beleuchtet die vielfachen Beziehungen zwischen Zentren und Frontier-Zonen des französischen und des britischen Imperiums in Asien und Afrika mit Blick auf die Zirkulation von Ideen sowie die sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Dynamiken. In Fallstudien zu Manipur und Nordost-Indien einerseits sowie Französisch-Kongo andererseits diskutieren die Verfasser Sklaverei, freie Arbeit und in Frage gestellte Souveränitäten. Aus dieser Perspektive wurde die Produktion einer Peripherie weniger als ein Gegensatz von metropolitanem Zentrum und seinen Kolonien wahrgenommen und praktiziert, sondern vielmehr als die Herausbildung von Räumen zwischen den Imperien.

This article stresses the interrelations in terms of the circulation of ideas and the economic and social dynamics between various core and frontiers of the French and the British Empires in Asia and Africa. In taking the case of Manipur and North-East India, on the one hand, French Congo on the other hand, the question of slavery, free labor, and disputed sovereignties will be discussed. From this perspective, the making of a periphery was conceived and practised at the interstices of empires rather than as an opposition between the mainland core and its colonies.

Debates about abolition of slavery have essentially focused on two interrelated questions: (1) whether nineteenth- and early twentieth-century abolitions were a major breakthrough compared to previous centuries (or even millennia) in the history of humankind, during which bondage had been the dominant form of labour and human condition; and (2) whether they express an action specific to Western bourgeoisie and liberal civilization. It is true that the number of abolitionist acts and the people con-

cerned throughout the extended nineteenth century (1780–1914) has no equivalent in history: 30 million Russian peasants, half a million slaves in Saint-Domingue in 1790, 4 million slaves in the US in 1860, another million in the Caribbean at the moment of the abolition of 1832–1840, a further million in Brazil in 1885, and 250,000 in the Spanish colonies were freed during this period. Abolitions in Africa at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century have been estimated to involve approximately 7 million people.¹ Yet this argument has been criticized by those who have argued that the abolitionist legal acts take into consideration neither the important rate of manumission and purchase of freedom in Islamic societies, in areas such as Africa, South-East Asia, and the Ottoman Empire,² nor the important rate of manumission in Russia and Brazil prior to general abolition, nor the legal and social constraints on freed slaves and serfs.

The question is whether these legal tools benefited emancipated slaves and new indentured immigrants or only local and / or colonial elites. We intend to answer this question and examine its main terms: the state, labour, and rights. Instead of the nation-state, we strongly place the role of the empire centre stage; instead of the ahistorical opposition between free and unfree labour, we stress their historical co-evolution and definitions; and instead of abstract rights, we look for law in action and concrete distribution of rights and obligations inside and between the empires.³ Thus, this article seeks to provide answers that go beyond these standard oppositions between “before” and “after” the abolition, on the one hand, and between the “West” and “the rest”, on the other hand. We will emphasize interrelations in terms of the circulation of ideas and the economic and social dynamics between the various cores and frontiers of the French and the British empires in Asia and Africa. Within this broader context, abolitions at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century look unique if compared to previous movements. The European societies were moving to high industrialization: the Second Industrial Revolution, the welfare state and finance, and in this perspective new imperialism were related much less to sugar and cotton than to rubber and minerals. Yet, technical difficulties were still very important, specifically in Central Africa, and therefore geopolitical stakes played a central role, while, unlike former abolitionism, public opinion did not produce massive movements, even in Britain.

In particular, we will focus our attention on two frontier colonies: the French Congo and Manipur. While the abolition of slavery in Sudan, Senegal, and Guinea and French West

1 S. Drescher, *Abolitions. A History of Slavery and Antislavery*, Cambridge, UK 2009.

2 On these debates, see, among others, J. C. Miller, *Slavery and Slaving in World History: A Bibliography, 1900–1996*, Armonk, N.Y. 1999; C. Meillassoux, *Anthropologie de l’esclavage*, Paris 1986; M. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*, New York 1980; O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge, MA 1982; J. Watson (ed.), *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1980; W. G. Clarence-Smith (ed.), *The Economics of the Indian Ocean Slave Trade*, London 1989; G. Campbell (ed.), *The Structure of Slavery in the Indian Ocean, Africa and Asia*, London 2004.

3 Some references: D. Hay/P. Craven (eds.), *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955*, Chapel Hill 2004; L. Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures*, Cambridge, UK 2002; R. Roberts, *Litigants and Household. African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912*, Portsmouth 2005. For more references, see here after.

Africa (FWA)⁴ in general has been widely explored,⁵ the process in the French Congo and French Equatorial Africa (FEA)⁶ has received less attention (apart from studies such as those by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch).⁷ The main focus of these works have been capital and concession companies. Starting from these works, we then will put emphasis on labour while seeking to introduce the Congo experience into a comparative and global perspective. In particular, we will study the case of Manipur, in North-East India. Like the French Congo, this area has been the object of only a few works.⁸ Progressively annexed by the British at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, the absence of natural resources was not attractive to the British economically. However, the abundant supply of labour – in the form of various forced labour – and the strategic geographical location, sandwiched between the British territory of Assam and the expanding imperial Burmese Empire, meant that controlling the state became a very important issue for British imperial interests.

In the major debates in Indian and African studies, some have underlined the hypocrisy of the colonial state regarding its real aim, that is to say to exploit bonded labour. Others have taken the opposite position, arguing that colonial officials were motivated by genuine anti-slavery feelings and that it was only the impotence of the colonial state that limited this impetus.⁹ In both cases, the question concerned the strength and power of the colonial state. James Scott has emphasized the role of the nation-state and the

- 4 In 1895, the colonial government decided to federate its West African colonies. Thus, Senegal, French Sudan, Guinea, and Ivory Coast formed a new administrative entity called French West Africa (FWA). Yet, in practice, the government of the FWA was only settled in 1904–1905. Dahomey was added in 1899, Niger and Mauritania in 1904, and Upper Volta in 1919.
- 5 Among others, see M. Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule in French West Africa*, Cambridge, UK 1998; R. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton. Colonialism and Regional Economy in the French Soudan, 1800–1946*, Stanford 1996; B. Fall, *Le travail forcé en AOF*, Paris 1993; B. Barry, *La Sénégalie du XVe au XIXe siècle; traite négrière, Islam, conquête coloniale*, Paris 1988; D. Bouche, *Les villages de liberté en Afrique noire française, 1887–1910*, The Hague 1968; J.-L. Boutiller, *Les captifs en AOF, 1903–1905*, in: *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 30, ser. B (1968) 2, pp. 511–535; D. Cordell/J. Gregory, *Labour reservoirs and population: French colonial strategies in Koudougou, Upper Volta, 1914 to 1939*, in: *Journal of African History* 23 (1982) 2, pp. 205–224; M. Klein, *Islam and Imperialism in Senegal: Sine-Saloum 1847–1914*, Stanford 1968; P. Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640–1960*, Cambridge 1982; F. Renaut, *Libération d'esclaves et nouvelle servitude: les rachats de captifs africains pour le compte des colonies françaises après l'abolition de l'esclavage*, Abidjan 1976; R. Roberts, *Warriors, Merchants and Slaves: the State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700–1914*, Stanford 1987; H. Brun-schwig, *Noirs et blancs dans l'Afrique noire française ou comment le colonisé devient colonisateur (1870–1914)*, Paris 1983.
- 6 AEF is the French acronym for l'Afrique équatoriale française. The general government of the AEF was officially designed in 1910. According to its 1910 boundaries, French Equatorial Africa included Gabon, Middle Congo, Ubangi-Chari, and Chad. Before that date, in 1898, Gabon, the Congo and the interior areas were combined into an immense colony, called the French Congo.
- 7 C. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo (AEF) au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898–1930*, Paris/La Haye 1972.
- 8 L. Hrangchal, *Revisiting the Boi System of Lushai Hills*, in: *Journal of North East India Studies* 4 (2014) 2, pp. 41–54; L. Dzuwicheu, *Road and Rule: Colonialism and the Politics of Access in the Naga Hills, 1826–1918*. Dissertation, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi 2005.
- 9 J. Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, Princeton 2000; Roberts, *Litigants and Households*.

attempts by state officials in a wide variety of contexts.¹⁰ However, contrary to Scott's argument, his ideal types (city-states, Asian despotic states, and European nation-states) often evolved according to colonial, not just national, realities, and the effort to translate models into practices was hindered by the weakness of colonial administrations and actively opposed by local populations.

In this sense, Scott's elaboration of Schendel's "Zomia" and its people is one of the few works that tries to create the idea of frontier and its people from the "frontier" itself; still, this is also done through the voices and writing of the "frontiersmen" (here in the American sense of the term), who happen to have a different voice.¹¹ Scott's work has generated a lot of lively debate among many scholars, and in the process, much praise has been garnered for the originality of the theory. At the same time, many scholars who have worked on a specific region within the Zomia have questioned the validity of his theory for specific tribes/people and if it has been overgeneralized.¹² Scholars who have studied North-East India (which is included in the Zomia) have also highlighted some of the problems of including this part of India in his characterization of Zomia.¹³ Though the term Zomia was conceived from one of the tribes of the North-East Frontier, many of the propositions Scott makes do not find their fullest expressions until the last quarter of the nineteenth century among many of the frontier tribes in the North-East Frontier.¹⁴ Unlike Scott, we refer to empire instead of nation-states and we use Zomia as a heuristic to discuss the construction of empires, rights, and labour. From this standpoint, frontiers of the empire do not necessarily only refer to hills in South-East Asia, but also to Central Africa and similar places (the far north, for instance), which were hard to penetrate and exploit and where violence and coercion persisted well beyond the official abolition of slavery.

Slavery and Abolition in British Africa: Transplanting India to Africa ...

Debates on African and colonial history tend to focus on the transformation of politics, labour, societies, and economies under European "imperialism". The abolition of

10 J. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, New Haven, CT 1998.

11 W. van Schendel, *Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia*, in: *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 20 (2002) 6, pp. 647–668; J. Michaud, Editorial: *Zomia and Beyond*, in: *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010) 2, pp. 187–214; J. Scott, *The Art of not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven, CT 2009. For the criticism on the lack of voices from the Zomians, see B. G. Karlsson, *Evading the State: Ethnicity in Northeast India Through the Lens of James Scott*, in: *Asian Ethnology* 72 (2013) 2 (Performing Identity Politics and Culture in Northeast India and Beyond), pp. 321–331.

12 Karlsson even writes: "Scott is not afraid of generalizations and make comparisons shamelessly over time and space." Karlsson, *Evading the State*, p. 326.

13 See J. J. P. Wouters, *Keeping the Hill Tribes at Bay: A Critique from India's Northeast of James C. Scott's Paradigm of State Evasion*, in: *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 39 (2012), pp. 41–65.

14 Scott maintains that this idea of Zomia becomes unviable after the 1950s, but many of the main foundations of Zomia had become obsolete by the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

slavery,¹⁵ the relationship between direct and indirect rule,¹⁶ and the economic dimension of empire¹⁷ are among the most common themes. Discussions concern the relative strength of “local” and “colonial” actors and institutions,¹⁸ the tensions especially between domination and local agency, and the costs and benefits of the empire.¹⁹

We aim to take some of these topics into consideration here, notably the importance of the labour question and of African agency. Abolition was not an indigenous African concept: masters could free slaves through manumission, and slaves could sometimes redeem themselves. In most cases, manumissions were extremely important, especially in Islamic areas. In some Muslim societies, freed slaves became hereditary clients, while in non-Muslim societies slave origins were remembered when it came to questions of marriage, inheritance, and rituals.²⁰ Instead, full-scale abolition was a Western European idea, although it took different forms in Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal.²¹ Each European power therefore exported its own idea or ideas of what abolition and freedom meant. The British began by fighting against the slave trade, as they had done in the Atlantic world almost a century earlier. They focused their efforts on the slave trade in the trans-Saharan region and the Red Sea, but they gradually enlarged their scope of action to the Gold Coast and other western parts of Africa and then down to the Cape Coast. Colonial methods, competition between colonial states, and the weight of humanitarian motives compared with political and economic goals were the underlying issues. British officials sought to avoid confrontation with Islamic authorities, chiefly regarding the practice of concubines, which was left intact; Islamic customary law was invoked to justify its legitimacy. A number of British colonial elites were of the opinion that control of the colonies should be achieved through agreements with local chiefs, whereas a sudden abolition of all forms of dependency described as slavery might bring about the collapse of local economies and societies and hence of imperial authority.²²

15 A few references (more in the following parts): S. Miers/I. Kopytoff (eds), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, Madison, WI 1977; P. Lovejoy/J. Hogendown, *Slow Death of Slavery: The Course of Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897–1936*, Cambridge 1993; Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*; S. Miers/R. Roberts (eds.), *The End of Slavery in Africa*, Madison, WI 1988.

16 K. Mann/R. Roberts (eds.), *Law in Colonial Africa*, Portsmouth 1996; F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History*, Berkeley, CA 2005; A. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*, Stanford 1996; Cooper, *Decolonization*; M. Chanok, *Law Custom and Social Order. The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia*, Cambridge 1985; Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*.

17 M.E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa*, London 2014; A. Zimmermann, *Alabama in Africa*, Princeton 2010; K. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. 3, *Global Empires and Revolutions*, Cambridge 2012. R. Austen, *African Economic History*, London 1987; G. Austin/S. Broadberry, *The Renaissance of African Economic History*, Introduction, special issue *Economic History Review* 67 (2014) 4, pp. 893–906.

18 F. Cooper/A. L. Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, Berkeley 1997.

19 J. Millar, *The Problem of Slavery as History*, New Haven, CT/London 2012; D. D. Cordell/J. W. Gregory (eds.), *African Population and Capitalism: Historical Perspectives*, Boulder 1987; D. Cogneau, *L'Afrique des inégalités. Où conduit l'histoire*, Paris 2006; P. Bairoch, *Economics and World History: Myths and Paradoxes*, Chicago 1993; J. Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français. Histoire d'un divorce*, Paris 1984; D.K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire*, London 1984.

20 S. Miers/R. Roberts, Introduction, in: Miers/Roberts (eds.), *The End of Slavery in Africa*, pp. 3–68.

21 Drescher, *Abolitions*.

22 Lovejoy/Hogendown, *Slow Death*.

From the start, as regards slavery, and not just the slave trade, British leaders explicitly took India as a model. In Africa, as in India, sovereignty, colonial rule and slavery were interconnected. In 1866, Zanzibar was made “so far as concerns the administration of justice to British subjects, a part of Her Majesty’s Indian Empire.”²³ The subsequent extension of Indian law into continental Africa was a result of the expansion of British power from Zanzibar into the interior.²⁴ A subsequent order in council from the Foreign Office confirmed this outcome and some 20 Indian acts were introduced in different parts of British Africa. These Indian laws and procedures were not turned into British rules but coexisted with “native customs” and Islamic law. Thus, the Protectorate Court sitting in Mombasa, which could appeal to Zanzibar and its subordinate courts, exercised jurisdiction over all British and non-British protected subjects as well as nationals of foreign countries. The Native Courts, whether presided over by tribal chiefs, headmen, or British officials, were meant to enforce “native custom”. As in India, the adoption of legal codes in Africa followed the principle of indirect rule. In India, indirect rule emerged first in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and then again in response to the Sepoy Mutiny. The British adopted the same principle in Africa, where Henry Maine’s approach found a staunch supporter in Frederick Lugard.²⁵ During this period, local forms of slavery were considered “mild”, as they had been in India almost a century earlier, compared with “real” (chattel) slavery and were quite often described as domestic dependency.²⁶ Lugard himself stressed the difference between domestic and chattel slavery (the former prevented idleness). When he arrived in Buganda in December 1890, he therefore declared it was necessary to avoid any direct interference in slaveholding and abolition (a source of chaos).²⁷ In his opinion, slaves should be emancipated only in places under direct protectorate rule like Zanzibar.

These views gradually changed: in the Gold Coast, an ordinance forbidding slaveholding was issued in 1874, whereas in several other areas this did not become the accepted attitude until the 1880s. Tolerance of local practices of bondage came under attack for two main reasons: first, they had been adopted for pragmatic purposes, namely to collaborate with local chiefs in managing the colonies and recruiting labour. Neither aim was achieved inasmuch as the collaboration was limited, and the chiefs failed to provide the labour force required (by the colonial state as well as by private companies) while continuing their slave traffic. Change did take place when the British abolitionist movement escalated its campaign against African practices and British tolerance.²⁸ The Protestant movement in Britain and missionaries in Africa intensified their actions. As in previous

23 H.F. Morris/J. Read, *Indirect Rule and the Search for Justice: Essays on East African Legal History*, Oxford 1972, pp. 112–113.

24 T. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2007, p. 24.

25 K. Mantena, *Alibis of Empire. Henri Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, Princeton 2010.

26 Miers/Kopytoff, *Slavery in Africa*; Miers/Roberts, *The End of Slavery*.

27 Rhode House Library, Oxford, Lugard Papers, Mss. British Empire, 30–99; printed version of Lugard’s diaries: M. Perham/M. Bull (eds.), *The Diaries of Lord Lugard*, Evanston 1959, 4 vol. In particular, vol. 1, pp. 171–173.

28 Cooper, *From Slaves to Squatters*, pp. 61–64.

cases of abolition, humanitarian aims, religion, moral values, and economic interests converged in support of the radical abolition of slavery itself and not merely the slave trade. Evangelical philanthropy allied with “Burkean” colonial abolitionism to eradicate all forms of slavery in Africa. Yet it was the mistreatment and murder of people subjected to slavery rather than the desire to abolish slavery *per se* that finally spurred them to act. They received the backing of a third movement asserting “the elementary rights of humanity”. This movement comprised workers’ unions, the Aborigines’ Protection Society, and groups of British merchants who defended the principle of trading directly with “natives” without the colonial state acting as the middleman. From this standpoint, free trade and free labour were joined together, exactly as labour unions combined anti-colonialism and local workers’ rights.

This political reorientation created a dilemma for colonial officials: how could they reconcile maintaining law and order with the political necessity of defending humanitarianism? The reactions and timing varied from one colony to another, even though a general trend was at work. With the support of the anti-slavery movements in Britain, the colonial administration and the public blamed the “barbaric and backward” attitudes of the Africans, who were accused of enslaving their fellow Africans. This argument was used to justify the “civilizing mission” of this or that European country and furnished the basis for discussions between Great Britain, France, Germany, and Belgium at the Brussels conference convened in 1889 to define the criteria for partitioning Africa. All the participants strongly advocated the introduction of free labour, order, and discipline.²⁹ This process was supposed to take place in two stages (once the territory was occupied, of course): slaves would first be freed and then a genuine labour market would be set up. Yet the Brussels Conference Act of 1890 left procedures against slavery to the discretion of each imperial power. Great Britain took an extreme position with regard to both stages: it pushed much harder than the other powers for the abolition of the slave trade; it adopted a far more careful attitude towards the abolition of slavery by using “the case of India” as an example; and, at the same time, it kept its Masters and Servants Acts alive in its new African acquisitions as the foundation and expression of “free” labour much longer than the other colonial powers. It was therefore up to the colonial state to determine the measures best suited to facilitating the transition to a free labour market while simultaneously guaranteeing that order would be maintained. The transplantation of anti-vagrancy laws and the Masters and Servants Acts to Africa were their response to this dilemma. This helps to explain the attention that European authorities devoted to labour rules after emancipation.

Europeans, and the British in particular, needed manpower for their companies and firms, colonial state infrastructure and public works as well as military recruits and household servants. Despite the denunciation of new colonial forms of slavery by mis-

29 F. Cooper, *From Free Labour to Family Allowances: Labour and African Society in Colonial Discourse*, in: *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989) 4, pp. 745–765.

sionary critics,³⁰ in many British and French areas (Ubangi-Shari, Coastal Guinea, Sudan, Somalia, and Northern Nigeria)³¹ fugitive slaves, “vagrants” (i.e. freed slaves with no official contract of employment), and “disguised slaves” freed by the colonial authorities were still captured and eventually re-enslaved.³² Several measures were adopted to increase the supply of labour force and orient it towards colonial instead of local actors: raising the amount of taxes to be paid in labour as well as economic policies unfavourable to local economies such as mandatory low crop prices, specific crops required, etc.³³ Passes limited free labour mobility, while access to higher-paid jobs was limited for Africans. In fact, the colonial officers were firmly convinced that the African continent could not be developed unless Africans learned that they were not free to choose where, when, and how to work. A campaign was launched against vagrancy, theft, alcoholism, and interpersonal violence; the goal was not only to control African labour, but also to promote labour discipline for the benefit of the black elites.³⁴ Within these broader approaches, which were more or less common to the various areas in Africa, concrete policies varied from one place to another inside each empire (British policies were different in Zanzibar, Kenya, the Cape, and the Gold Coast) and between empires, although transimperial commonalities occurred as well. Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, like Portuguese Angola and French Algeria, gave priority to a cheap supply of manual labour, direct forms of taxation, and pre-emptive rights over land granted to white settlers. Here we find a major shift compared to earlier periods in the relationship between labour institutions in Britain and its colonies. Until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, colonial practices and institutions of free labour had been an extension of mainland institutions, in particular of the Masters and Servants Acts, apprenticeship, and vagrancy rules. In the colonies, they were extreme variants of those in Britain, with even more statutory and procedural inequalities between masters and servants (or indentured immigrants). Henceforth, the creation of the Masters and Servants Acts in Africa no longer meant transplanting and locally adapting British rules, but a deliberate decision to impose specific legislation considered outmoded in the home country. The new Masters and Servants Acts were adopted in Africa precisely at the moment when they were repealed in Britain (1875). In this case, the civilizing mission was based on two judgments: that Africans must be educated (and the law served this purpose) and, at the same time, that they were backward in their development and therefore old British rules rather than contemporary ones were more appropriate for the African context.³⁵ As a result, unlike the previous colonial period, following the repeal of the Masters and Servants Acts in Britain and the emergence of the welfare state, the path of labour and freedom in the

30 K. Grant, *A Civilized Savagery: Britain and the New Slavery in Africa, 1884–1926*, New York/London 2006.

31 See the different chapters by D. Cordell, M. Klein, R. Roberts, L. Cassanelli, J.S. Hogendorn, and P. Lovejoy in: Miers/Roberts, *The End of Slavery*.

32 P. Lovejoy, *Transformations of Slavery*, Cambridge 2000.

33 Fall, *Le travail forcé*, in particular chapters 2 and 3, p. 54 ff.

34 TNA, CO 533/16, W.D. Ellis minute, 12 oct. 1906; *Eastern African Protectorate*, no. 8, 1906.

35 G. St.J. Orde Brown, *The African Labourer*, London 1933, reprint 1967.

colonies (especially African) diverged from the one in mainland Britain. While British workers in Britain were enjoying increasing protection and welfare, labouring people in the colonies still were under unequal labour and legal rules. From this perspective, welfare and its national orientation intensified rather than reduced inequalities within the empire and among labouring people in particular.³⁶

... and Back: From Africa to Manipur

Manipur emerged from the “Seven Years’ Devastation”³⁷ (1819–1826), with its population almost reduced to a handful of thousand (about 3,000 adults) from about 4–6 lakh (a unit numbering 100,000) before the Burmese invasion³⁸ and its land desolated. Many of the Manipuris escaped to Cachar and the British territory of Sylhet. There in Cachar, many Manipuris were kidnapped or abducted and sold as slaves in Sylhet, while many Manipuris in Sylhet, facing hardship, sold their children into slavery.³⁹ The majority of the population were taken as captives by the Burmese and made slaves and dispersed to the various parts of the Burmese Kingdom.⁴⁰ The Indian law commissioner on slavery reported the number of Manipuris detained as slaves in the district of Arracan and Chittagong to about 3,000 or 4,000.⁴¹ So when Manipur was finally free from Burmese occupation in 1826, with the help of the East India Company, the population was only a few thousand and was in need of men to repopulate the valley and of labour to rebuild the kingdom from scratch.

The process of rebuilding started almost immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Gambhir Singh, the raja of Manipur, took up the process of rebuilding the country at the same time he subjugated and brought most of the hill tribes under control before his death in early 1834, a policy also followed by his uncle and successor Nara Singh. Many of the subjugated hill tribes were forced to come down to the valley and work.⁴² The raja also forced many of the fugitive Manipuris in the hills to come

36 Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society*, pp. 342–348; Idem, *From Slaves to Squatters*, pp. 235–254.

37 The occupation of Manipur by the Burmese from 1819 to 1826 is known as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* or “Seven Years’ Devastation” in the annals of Manipur history due to the sheer size of its destruction. Many of the old structures were leveled, most of the fields became jungle, and the valley was almost depopulated.

38 The only person to give this number is Col. James Johnstone. See J. Johnstone, *My Experience in Manipur and the Naga Hills*, London 1896, p. 86. But this number is highly improbable, and the total population of the state might only have been around a couple of hundred thousand.

39 Indian Law Commission, *Report from the Indian Law Commissioner Relating to Slavery in the East Indies*, 1841, p. 23.

40 Ibid., p. 103.

41 Ibid., p. 104.

42 Many worked on major projects in the state like building bridges, roads, canal, river embankment, etc. India Office Records and Private Papers, Mss Eur D485: 1904, *Manipur State: Diary of Manipur*, pp. 193, 201 (this manuscript is a one of the many versions of the Cheithrol Kumpapa, or the Manipur Chronicle); L. J. Singh, *The Lost Kingdom* (Royal Chronicle of Manipur), Imphal 1995, pp. 123, 126–127, 129.

down to the valley and resettled them again.⁴³ More subjects under the raja meant more labour and taxes to reconstruct his capital.

The British were not silent observers in these developments; instead, most of the military expeditions to subjugate and, in the process, to capture slaves were done not only in the presence of British officials but with an active participation of the British officials and the government's support, which continued until the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Manipur was not a rich princely kingdom, but in the geopolitics of the nineteenth century with the Burmese Empire rapidly expanding towards its north-west, its position was crucial for the defence of not only the British province of Bengal but also the newly acquired territory of Assam, where tea had been recently discovered. Manipur also played another important role because the kingdom, with its army supported by the British, was crucial in quelling discontent and raids in the region.⁴⁵ For these reasons, a strong and stable princely state was necessary and, in this development, the British overlooked much of the violence and many of the atrocities committed by the state.

The lack of money and resources were substituted by manpower in the form of coerced / forced labour, which were used extensively in every imaginable way. In pre-colonial Manipur, slavery (both chattel and bonded) along with *lallup* – a forced labour system where every male subject between the age of 16 and 60 years were made to provide free labour for 10 days in every 40 days, totalling about 90 days a year to the state – and tributary labour from the hill people formed an important function that met most of the needs of the state.

The colonial officers posted in Manipur did not make much of a distinction between chattel and bonded slaves but no doubt recognized the differences. Most of the chattel slaves were owned by the raja, and a minority of them were owned by the royal family, high officials, and the priestly class, to whom the raja had given the slaves as a present for marriage (in case of the royal family) or for their service to the state. These chattel slaves were the absolute property of the owner and could be given or sold as the owner pleased. Most of these chattel slaves were settled by the raja in a separate community, and they were also liable to be called up for *lallup* and as well cultivated the land they got for serving in the *lallup*, in addition to cultivating the land of the raja and doing other works for the raja.⁴⁶ Compared to the bonded slaves, the slaves in possession by the raja seemed

43 M. W. McCulloch, *Account of the Valley of Munnipore and of the Hill Tribes*, Calcutta 1859, p. 9.

44 The British government provided arms and ammunition to the raja's army even after the Manipur Levy was disbanded in 1934. The Manipur chronicle records many expeditions where British officials were also present. See Nithor Nath Banerjee Papers, Mss Eur D485: 1904; Singh, *The Lost Kingdom*; S. N. Arambam Parratt, *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur: The Cheitharon Kumpapa*, Original text, translation and notes, vol. 3, Delhi 2013. Even British official acknowledged their role, R. Brown, *Statistical Account of Manipur*, Calcutta 1874, p. 71.

45 The British used the Manipuri army to crush the Khasi revolt and to control the Nagas in the north as well as were part of the British expeditionary forces (and sometimes leading the expedition) against the Lushais in the south.

46 Every person who performed their service were entitled to about two acres of land for cultivation, on which the state collected tributes. It was a way of expanding the agricultural land.

to be more independent as they lived in their own houses and when not working for the raja carried on with their own lives.

The bonded slaves in pre-colonial Manipur were mostly in the possession of private individuals. Most of these bonded slaves had fallen to their present status due to debt. With the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo, raiding expedition for slaves had been hindered on both sides, and the British had discouraged the enslavement of the hill tribes.⁴⁷ The coming of the British had instituted the use of money in an unprecedented way, penetrating deeply both the valley society and the hill communities of the state. Very soon, many of the tribal communities began to include in their traditional marriages demands for more material things and money – to meet the demand, many fell into debt. There are no records by the British or the Manipur authorities on the number of bonded slaves in pre-colonial Manipur, but many of the rich and influential families had one or more, and at times these bonded slaves were sent as a substitute for the master's *lallup*.⁴⁸ The bonded slaves were generally treated well, but they seemed to be exploited badly at the same time. They lived in the same house as the master and depended on the master for food, clothes, and shelter.

Bonded slaves were of two kinds in Manipur – *minai* and *asalba* – which Captain Gordon, in his dictionary published in 1837, describes as bondmen, but the term *minai* is also used to describe slave in the same dictionary, indicating that the Manipuris did not distinguish much between the two.⁴⁹ Theoretically, the bonded slaves were in the service of the master for such term until they could repay the money they had taken. But in practice, they remained bonded forever as the interest on the money they first took continued piling up, thereby remaining in debt for perpetuity. Even the children born to such a person also became the property of the master, and in the long run they became chattel slaves but in the possession of private individuals.

Forced labour in pre-colonial Manipur was widespread both in the valley and the hill areas. Many colonial officers used the term “slave like” for the inhabitants of the valley, saying that the raja could do whatever he liked with them and any kind of work could be extracted from them. This, in a way, was somewhat true as the raja, by various means, could make any of his subjects perform any duty he wished. But the people who performed the forced labour lived a very different life from those in slavery. They were not dependent on the raja for their livelihood, and their only connection with the raja was when they went to report for their service. In the case of some distant hill tribes, unlike the slaves in the valley, they were very independent. Forced labour was provided for a limited number of days in a year, and in case of the number of days being extended longer than the stipulated time, then the labour was compensated. In the case of slavery,

47 This did not mean raiding came to an end, rather the treaty marked a period after which the British government, through its political agent in the state, provided checks and balances on such activities between Burma and Manipur. Internal raiding for slaves continued till the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

48 Arambam Parratt, *The Court Chronicle of the Kings of Manipur*, p. 19.

49 C. J. A. Gordon, *Dictionary of English, Bengálí, and Manipurí*, Calcutta 1837.

this was not so because the master was the absolute owner of the slaves when under his possession.

The scarcity of “voluntary” labour was a serious problem in the state, particularly because the wet rice cultivation was basically labour intensive, and the Manipuri raja solved this problem through the *lallup* system.⁵⁰ In exchange for land, the raja received labour, taxes, tribute, etc. But power was not exclusively derived from owning land but how he utilized his taxes and labour. Power begets more power, and the king of Manipur was no exception to this. In pre-colonial Manipur, *corvée* performed by the inhabitants of the valley, slavery, and tributary labour by the hill tribes and the various works performed by the *Lois*⁵¹ were some of the important forms of labour that kept the country running until the takeover of the administration by the British in the last decade of the nineteenth century. These systems formed the backbone of the economic activities until the British took over the administration of Manipur in 1892 and in some way continued to play an important role after 1892.

The British – from company to government – had spent most of the nineteenth century building relations and trying to open up the state while making Manipur more dependent on them. Constructing roads on a grand scale; signing agreements that prohibited monopoly by the raja, free trade, and the free movement of people; and introducing Western education – all these were designed to give the British an upper hand in the politics of the region. The raja of Manipur was not blind to the British’s design, and many efforts were directed to counter the growing influence of the British in the state. The late nineteenth-century European imperial expansion in Africa and Asia saw the British come to power in the state and the region. The policy followed by the British in the region was one of consolidating their power, and, in achieving this, many consolations were given to the ruling elites. One such consolation was the continuation of the use of forced labour, including bonded labour. This consolation came at a cost because the British – claiming to be the advocate of modern civilization and freedom – were criticized by many for allowing such practices to be part of their rule. Practices like *lallup* was abolished and the chattel slaves of the raja were set free with the introduction of the British rule. But along with the abolition of *lallup*, the British also simultaneously expanded the *pothang* system to include all male members of the state.⁵² The British emancipated the slaves of the raja – mostly who originated as captives of expeditions and therefore constituted “true slaves” – but slavery as a system were never attacked, and the practice of making and keeping *manai* (bonded labour) practice lingered throughout the

50 K. Ruhini Kumar Sharma/O. Ranjit Singh, Outlining Pre-Colonial Economy of Manipur, in: J. B. Bhattacharjee (ed.), State and Economy in Pre-Colonial Manipur, Delhi 2010, p. 149.

51 *Lois* are the outcaste people in Manipur; they do not regard themselves as Meetei but claim that they are the original inhabitants of the valley who were outcaste when the various Meetei tribes, led by the Ningthouja clan, came to power in the valley.

52 *Pothang* was a forced labour system where every adult male was required to give the state labour without remuneration for specific tasks. The service also included providing food and lodging for government officials and guard duties.

colonial period. In the hill areas, much of the labour practices remained the same under colonial rule. The British promoted their old rhetoric that such practices were part of the traditional society and that such labour was necessary for the stability of the region. When the British introduced indirect rule in the region, they did so with some preconceived notion of various tribes in mind. With regard to the British decision to introduce indirect rule, D.R. Lyall, the deputy commissioner of the Chittagong Division, in his note on the future management of the South Lushai Hills (dated 2 January 1890), writes:

*The nature of the people is such that for any attempt at governing minutely would be expensive, and our knowledge of the people and their custom is small. I would, therefore, recommend that for the present system the government through chiefs should be fully recognized.*⁵³

The British, after coming to power in Manipur, divided the administration of the state into two separate units – the valley under the rule of the raja (but until 1907, the British political agent acted as the head of the state in the “interest” of the minor raja), while the administration of the hill areas was placed directly under the administration of the political agent. The period between 1891 and 1907, Gangmumei has argued, can be classified as a period of direct British rule as the political agent had a free hand in all matters.⁵⁴ While in the valley the British introduced many changes after coming to power, none affected the people more than the decision of the British to introduce privatization of land as well as taxes on land. The administration of the valley and the hill was formally separated by the British after coming to power. The political agent was put in charge of running the hill administration without any other European officer to help him in the affairs.

Manipur comprises more than 90 per cent of what James Scott calls “shatter zones or zones of refugee”,⁵⁵ and the population making up these “zones of refugee” are the various tribes that the British labelled “savages” and “primitive”. But Scott says that our received wisdom of what is “primitive” is often a secondary adaptation – their own political choice – adopted by the people to evade state-making. He writes:

*Hill people are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys – slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labour, epidemics, and warfare.*⁵⁶

On the one hand, the hill tribes – the Nagas and the Kukis – were resisting changes, mostly state-making machinery like forced labour and taxation, introduced by the Manipur state. On the other hand, they were trying to hang on to their old ways at the same time the Manipur state was also resisting the attempt of the British to introduce changes

53 J. Zorema, *Indirect Rule in Mizoram*, Delhi 2007, p. 80.

54 Gangmumei Kamei, *Colonial Policy and Practice in Manipur*, on Imphal Free Press, kanglaonline.com/2011/08/colonial-policy-and-practice-in-manipur/ (accessed on 2 August 2011).

55 Scott, *The Art of not Being Governed*, p. x.

56 *Ibid.*, p. ix.

in the state. The British, after coming to power in 1891, did introduce many changes in the state, and many of the old practices were abolished. Their campaign against slavery was not limited to the British Empire but took place on both sides of the Atlantic; in the Indian subcontinent, however, they took a more gentle approach, translating many of the slave systems, which were necessary for the region, that were mutually beneficial to both the master and the slave. But they were not so much against the use of forced labour and very well understood the importance of such service in the state and the region. *Lallup* was abolished not so much because the British in the region were against the use of forced labour but because of economic reasons. The British could do so because with the abolition of *lallup* another form of forced labour – *pothang* – was revived, expanded, and introduced to the general population, so therefore the vacuum was immediately filled by another. The British did not introduce any new forms of a forced labour system after coming to power as this would have meant that the government was sanctioning the use of forced labour, and this would have run counter to the narrative of “civilization” the British were advocating during this period – that of a free and just society. But the British took many of the existing forced labour practices that, in the pre-colonial period, were limited to few of the raja’s subject, expanding the scope of the system to include almost everyone in the state.

The late nineteenth century and the remaining period of colonial rule was spent by the British in trying to consolidate their power in the region with the help of the ruling elite class like the raja and the *pibas* (the head of the clans) in the valley or the chief in the hill areas, and, in their endeavour, many of the old forms of forced labour were allowed to be continued. At the same time, much of the labour owed to the rulers and chiefs was most of the time appropriated for British imperial use. They argued for the continuation of the systems on the grounds that this labour was given as tribute and that abolition of such practices would lead to open rebellion from the ruling elites. But their real concern was that if such practices were abolished, then they would not receive any labour, and many of the state mechanisms that depended on such labour would suffer.

The British consciously kept some of the “unfree” forms of labour in the state, especially among the hill areas, as labour was not willingly provided, and economically it made more sense. Economic reasons, which were in some way responsible for the abolition of *lallup*, were also in some way the reasons for retaining some form of forced labour in hill areas and the introduction of a new form of forced labour in the valley. This policy of extracting tributary labour would later be imposed on the tribes inhabiting the Lushai Hills and be a source of hardship for the people.⁵⁷

57 MSA, Annual Report on the Native States and Frontier Tribes of Assam for the year 1897–98, Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office 1898, p. 22. The labour policy followed by the British in the Lushai Hills made it mandatory for each house to supply one coolie to work for ten days a year.

The French Congo

Several works have pointed out the contradictions between France's revolutionary principles and the forms of labour in its colonies.⁵⁸ Along a similar line, some have revealed the economic interests behind French colonization in Africa⁵⁹ while others have denied it.⁶⁰ Authors closely related to the theory of world-system economies have also highlighted the rentier mentality of French colonizers and the gap between an ideology that advocated free labour and the practice of forced labour.⁶¹ More recently, some historians have taken a new approach, emphasizing the complexity of French policies.⁶² Alice Conklin, for example, has shown that liberal ideals were not mere window dressing for oppressive policies, but in fact set limits on the amount of coercion the colonial administration was permitted to use.⁶³ This view partly reflects recent trends in comparative colonial legal history: instead of expressing the yoke of colonialism, the multiplication of labour rules paved the way to complex social dynamics in which colonized peoples could claim and exercise rights attributed to them in theory but of little avail in practice.⁶⁴ In Senegal, Louis Faidherbe had initially championed the assimilationist principle according to which French citizenship could be granted to all those who embraced the French political and "civilization" principles. Support for this approach gradually crumbled in the 1880s and the 1890s, when Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, among others, advocated the principle of association based on his experience in Equatorial Africa. According to this position, the main objective was to establish broad sovereignty and develop trade relations. Finally, by imitating its neighbour, the Belgian Congo, the principle of incorporation – founded on concession companies – prevailed at the turn of the century in the French Congo as well. In this case, French companies took control of the soil and had rights over labour as well.

Many believed that Africans still were too backward to be assimilated; thus policies had to take into consideration local attitudes and customs and to seek alliances with local chiefs. By the end of the nineteenth century, the possibility of assimilating Africans had been rejected both in mainland colonial circles influenced by racist trends in the social sciences and by the governor of the FWA, Ernest Roume, who considered it politically dangerous.⁶⁵ Thus, even if the Third Republic overcame previous attitudes towards Africans as "barbarians", it simply wanted to legitimate the presence of its subject within the republic, not to grant them full rights. Indeed, the rejection of assimilation was

58 Renault, *Libération d'esclaves*; Brunschwig, *Noirs et blancs*.

59 Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*.

60 Marseille, *Empire colonial et capitalisme français*.

61 Fall, *Le travail forcé*.

62 Cooper/Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*.

63 Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize*.

64 L. Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures*, New York 2002.

65 Conklin: *A Mission to Civilize*, p. 77.

tantamount to saying that Africans were not yet capable of comprehending the meaning of freedom.⁶⁶

Thus, French colonial policy remained in place, although major budgetary constraints were imposed upon it. At the turn of the century, balancing the budget and cutting expenses were both priorities on the political agenda. Such a balance seemed difficult to achieve, as the state was increasing its social intervention during the same period. Initial forms of social protection, along with the centralization of measures formerly handled by municipal authorities (control over markets, roads, etc.), put increasing pressure on the national government budget. In view of the limited political support for the occupation of Africa, the resources allocated for colonial policy implementation became the subject of intense negotiations. The need to balance the budget was underscored not only by those opposed to colonial expansion but also by liberals who were afraid of deviating from financial orthodoxy.

Labour in French Equatorial Africa: From Local Slavery to Colonial Bondage

Before the arrival of the French, slavery was practiced in the future territories of the FEA, as in other areas of Africa.⁶⁷ For example, eastern Ubangi-Shari had been integrated into the Muslim economy of the Sahel and the Nile basin mainly by Arab and Muslim merchants that penetrated the region between 1820 and 1850 in search of ivory and slaves.⁶⁸ After that date, the demand for slaves was even greater in the Islamic world in general, especially in the Nile valley. The arrival of the Khartoumers in Sudan launched the slave trade. A genuine slave-based mode of production existed in the region. The land was desert, agriculture was abandoned, ivory was intended for export, and the population formed a reservoir of slaves for the Islamic world. Towards the 1890s, when the French first penetrated the area, several decades of slavery and slave trade had already depopulated most of the villages and altered the activities and settlements of the remaining population.

Domestic and other forms of slavery were widespread in Gabon before the arrival of the Europeans, but they further expanded when the colonists came around the middle of the nineteenth century. At the time, slaves were used as porters, farm labourers, and servants.⁶⁹ Animist tribes, such as the NGao and the Babu, were systematically raided by the sultans of north and northeast Upper Ubangi. The sultanate of Bangassu drew much of its strength from capturing slaves, who were then sold to the sultans in Sudan. Rafaï and

66 Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, p. 176ff.; M. Klein, *The End of Slavery in French West Africa*, in: H. Suzuki (ed.), *Abolitions as a Global Experience*, Singapore 2016, pp. 199–227.

67 Lovejoy, *Transformations of Slavery*, pp. 76–80, 191–212.

68 D. Cordell, *The Delicate Balance of Force and Flight: The End of Slavery in Eastern Ubangi-Shari*, in: Miers/Roberts, *The End of Slavery*, pp. 150–171.

69 E. M'Bokolo, *Le Gabon pré-colonial: étude sociale et économique*, in: *Cahiers d'études africaines* 17 (1977) 66–67, pp. 331–344.

Semio, the other two sultanates of Upper Ubangi, were created during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In theory, the sultans wielded absolute power in these entities; in reality, they shared it with clan chiefs. Bonded labourers, particularly the Nzakara and Zande peoples, were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, along with slaves from various other ethnic groups. When the Europeans appeared, the sultanates became their main collaborators and slave suppliers. Chad fell under the influence of the Sudanese caliphate of Sokoto, which possessed a huge contingent of slaves living on plantations, in villages, or even in trade centres.⁷⁰ Along the southern edge of the desert, nomadic merchants and herders owned numerous slaves acquired through desert raids or trading in the savanna. These slaves were used for heavy labour such as building dams, drenching animals, etc. In the Congo equatorial basin, large numbers of slaves were engaged in agriculture (tobacco, vegetable salt, and sugarcane). In inland areas, slaves were usually associated with clan organization: they could be seized and had an exchange value precisely because they were not members of a clan. They could as well be incorporated afterwards into one of the local clans. In this sense, slavery allowed clans to widen their line of descendants.⁷¹ In all these regions, the characteristics of slavery were modified by the arrival of the Europeans. In the Lower Congo, the Mpongwe lost their role as middlemen between neighbouring African populations and the Europeans and became servants or low-level employees in colonial stores.⁷² Similarly, the Loango and Bakongo clans further south could no longer act as brokers but instead became porters or even bonded labourers on coffee and cacao plantations. The inland population put up a longer resistance to European penetration, but in the north, the sultanates signed agreements with the Belgians and the French allowing them to engage in the slave trade until World War II.⁷³ France adopted strategies similar to those of Britain.⁷⁴ At a conference held in 1892, the French authorities declared that there were more servants in their colonial territories than slaves. As servants, the Africans could not be liberated because their status in no way violated French law. When the French first began penetrating into the area, they encountered enormous difficulties in establishing posts and an organized administration. In this context, they were careful not to adopt aggressive politics against slavery, which would complicate an already fragile situation. The elimination of slavery was not central to coping with economic development or depopulation.⁷⁵ The lack of military forces encouraged military elites to use local slaves for their operations, and many civilian colonial officers had no problem with slavery.⁷⁶ The openness of the region made it hard to force abolition without causing the flight of an already limited population. Indeed, slavery and

70 Lovejoy, *Transformations of Slavery*, p. 193.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 246.

72 G. Sautter, *De l'Atlantique au fleuve Congo. Une géographie du sous-peuplement*. République du Congo, république gabonaise, Paris 1966.

73 Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*, p. 76.

74 Conklin, *A Mission*, pp. 11–38; Cooper/Stoler, *Tensions of Empire*, Introduction, pp. 1–156.

75 P. Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa*, Cambridge 1998.

76 ANOM FM SG GCOG/XIV 1 et 2 recrutement de travailleurs Kroumen.

the slave trade were a threat to the colonial project by removing the people who collected rubber, ivory, and other products. However, many families who populated the area, notably the Fang, preferred to mix the market and autonomy, combining farming with hunting, gathering, and fishing. They had no dead season, and when they sold to the market, they did not intend to do it according to French requests in terms of products and prices. Thus, the French collected taxes and tended to break up lineages in order to enhance control. Chiefs were supposed to collect taxes, but the young were often aggrieved that the chiefs would not pay taxes on their behalf and broke away to form their own small lineages.⁷⁷ At the same time, the French collected taxes related to the export of these products. In reality, this vague definition of “genuine slavery” was used to negotiate workforce availability with the local chiefs. During periods when preserving the alliance with clan chiefs was the top priority, African labourers were called “servants”. When, on the contrary, the manpower requirements of the colonial companies became critical or the colonial authorities wanted to flex their muscles in the direction of the local chiefs, the same labourers were referred to as “slaves” and thereby “freed” so they could be more or less reclaimed by the companies and the French authorities.⁷⁸ Thus, in the 1890s, the French established posts where they hoped to gather fugitive slaves, and at the same time they signed treaties with local chiefs.⁷⁹ At first, missionaries accepted fugitive slaves and tried to establish *villages de liberté*, similar to those that had been set up in Sudan in 1894/95.⁸⁰ In those years, the French still lacked the strength to solve their dilemma. They needed good relations with the local chiefs and a labour force: if they pushed their demands too far, they risked losing both the chiefs’ support and the labour force; if they did not, they could not consolidate their position. Like the British in other areas, the French sold weapons to some chiefs, thus supporting warfare and enslavement and weakening their own position.⁸¹ Yet they continued to sell weapons to local chiefs without even mentioning slavery in their treaties until 1904.⁸² Officially, French policies aimed to achieve three objectives: abolish slavery, gradually introduce new labour rules, and create a genuine labour market. It never occurred to anyone that the new rules could be the same as those in force in France. Forced labour was included to meet the demands of both the colonial authorities and private companies;⁸³ it was seen as necessary to help

77 Manning, *Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 37.

78 On this ambivalence in FWA, see Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, pp. 178–185.

79 ANOM MI 131MIOM/3 Gaston Gaillard, *Traité de protectorat, de commerce, de personnes avec les chefs Zoubia et Coumba*, 28 août 1891.

80 ANOM FM SG Soud/XIV/1. See also Bouche, *Les villages*.

81 ANOM AEF GGAEF 2D/9 Mission Dybowski, 1892. Also J. Dybowski, *La route du Tchad du Loango au Chari*, Paris 1893.

82 ANOM FM MIS//12 Mission scientifique et économique par Auguste Chevalier. Also A. Chevalier, *Mission Chari-lac Tchad, 1902–1904*, Paris 1907.

83 Fall, *Le travail forcé*; F. Renault, *L’abolition de l’esclavage au Sénégal. L’attitude de l’administration française 1848–1905*, in: *Revue française d’histoire d’outre-mer* 58 (1971) 1, pp. 5–80.

improve the “barbarian Africans”⁸⁴ and cope with the lack of manpower.⁸⁵ At the same time, France continued its “redemption”⁸⁶ practices and the colonial authorities tried to persuade the chiefs to enforce the labour rules rather than impose them themselves. French policies did change, however, with the rise of the anti-colonial movement in France and the 1889 conference in Brussels (where the British tried to force the other colonial powers to adopt their anti-slavery policies). Between 1903 and 1905, slavery was declared illegal, first in the FWA and then in the FEA. In 1905, official French statistics, based on an unidentified calculation method, reported 2 million slaves in the FWA out of a population of 8 million.⁸⁷ According to the new strategy, it was necessary to eradicate slavery in order to break the resistance of the local chiefs and put an end to their “disloyalty”.⁸⁸ Colonialist discourse and the “civilizing mission” gained renewed momentum, along with the rhetoric about “vestiges of feudalism”. Such vestiges were said to prevail in Africa; the civilizing and colonizing mission was thus viewed as a new chapter of the revolution in France.⁸⁹ Civilization was associated with private property, a free labour market, and social stability. This was not pure rhetoric, however; a number of colonial officers sincerely believed it. Nevertheless, they all expressed disappointment at the attitude of the Africans who, despite the “revolution” and the contribution of civilization, continued to “cheat”, that is they did not behave as the colonial authorities had hoped. Instead of “independent peasants” and urban workers, the French found themselves confronted with populations that migrated from one empire to another, often with the changing seasons.⁹⁰ In 1905, slaves began a massive exodus throughout French Sudan, in spite of attempts on the part of the French to reconcile masters and slaves.⁹¹ The refugee communities in Sudan posed a threat to the demographic stability of eastern Ubangi-Shari.⁹² Refugees and slave raiding were difficult to distinguish,⁹³ while incidents between the French and local population increased.⁹⁴ The regular army and concession militias intervened in joint acts of violence.⁹⁵

To counter these tendencies, the French authorities, again like the British, introduced highly repressive work discipline. The former slaves were not supposed to work wherever

84 ANOM Equatorial Africa, government, G 1 AEF 2H/8, From the Governor of Cameroon to the Minister of Colonies, September 14, 1917.

85 ANOM, G 1 AEF 2H/8, From the Governor of Cameroon to the Minister of Colonies, September 14, 1917.

86 Cordell, *The Delicate Balance*.

87 Boutiller, *Les captifs en AOF*, p. 520.

88 ANOM, GGAEF, 4(1) D2. N'Djolé, Rapport du capitaine Curault, administrateur de la région de l'Ogooué sur le groupement hostile de Mikongo et la nécessité d'une répression immédiate contre le chef Ngoua-Midoumbi et ses partisans, *Années 1906*.

89 ANOM Equatorial Africa, government, G 1 AEF 2H/8.

90 Lovejoy, *Transformations*, pp. 254–262. Also Renault, *L'abolition de l'esclavage au Sénégal*, pp. 5–15.

91 Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, pp. 159 ff; R. Roberts, *The End of Slavery in French Soudan, 1905–1914*, in: Miers/Roberts, *The End of Slavery*, pp. 282–307; M. Rodet, *Les migrantes ignorées du Haut-Sénégal, 1900–1946*, Paris 2009.

92 Cordell, *The Delicate Balance*, pp. 205–224.

93 ANOM AEF GGAEF 3D/3. Mission Fillon.

94 ANOM FM 2 AFFPOL/19. Incidents du Bas M'Bomou.

95 ANOM, GGAEF 8Q58.

and whenever they thought best: if they did not have a proper labour contract, they could be found guilty of vagabondage; if they left before their task was completed, they would be sentenced for desertion.⁹⁶ Such measures proved ineffective, however, due to the unwillingness of the various colonial authorities to cooperate with each other – the French, British, Belgian, German, and Portuguese were all competing for manpower and always ready to recover fugitives.⁹⁷ The coercive measures were also weakened by competition within the French Empire itself, between different regions or even between companies and public authorities. In 1904/05, the Congo was definitively placed under French administrative control; its territory was divided into four main areas: Gabon, Middle Congo, Ubangi-Shari, and Chad. A general commissar directly oversaw the Middle Congo, while a lieutenant governor ruled Gabon.

However, the economic exploitation of the area was difficult: in 1902, the value of the FEA's exports was 1.6 million (in current US dollars), compared with 13.1 million for the FWA. By 1913, the latter had reached 29.2 million dollars in exports, while FEA exports stagnated.⁹⁸ The colonial powers, particularly France and Belgium, developed an interest in the Congo and Gabon only with the rise of steamboat navigation, when it became possible to use the Congo River to transport products and link up with the various European empires in Africa. It should be emphasized that the French government was generally reluctant to finance its colonies and preferred to concentrate its limited allocations in the FWA.⁹⁹ During this period (1900–1920), France adopted the concession system, that is to say it granted operating monopolies to private enterprises. From this standpoint, the colonial policies in the FEA differed significantly from those in the neighbouring FWA, where concessions were seldom awarded and private companies dominated. Despite these advantages, few companies invested in the FEA prior to World War I and almost none before 1900. French capitalists preferred Turkey, Russia, and Indochina to Africa, particularly Equatorial Africa, which was considered too difficult to exploit profitably. By 1903, only one-third of the companies set up in the previous ten years were still in operation; they merged over the next few years to the point where, in 1909, only six companies controlled all French activities in the FEA.¹⁰⁰ Until the 1920s, these companies ran a predatory economy, trying to obtain a maximum amount of resources with minimum investment and maximum coercion. Their operations were not very profitable.

The only certitude was that population was scarce. Thus, the commercial traffic between Stanley Pool (a lake) and the Upper Congo, linking Boubangui, Batéké, and Bakongo, included slaves, manioc, ivory, and European goods. This trade was carried out by the

96 ANOM, GGAEF 2H 15.

97 ANOM, G 1 AEF 2H/8.

98 D. Fieldhouse, *The Economic Exploitation of Africa: Some British and French Comparisons*, in: P. Gifford/W. R. Louis (eds.), *France and Britain in Africa: Imperial Rivalry and Colonial Rule*, New Haven, CT 1971, pp. 659–660.

99 Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*, pp. 120–127.

100 Ibid.

Fang people from the Gabonese coast to the Moyen-Ogooué province.¹⁰¹ Outside this circuit, the French army, the concession companies, and the colonial state had to resort to porters, whom they constantly criticized for their native indolence and laziness.¹⁰² This argument was to prove useful to the concession companies in suggesting the need for coercion.¹⁰³ In the absence of any explicit governmental authorization on this point – but with all the ambiguities mentioned earlier – the concession companies were able to recruit labourers either directly or through tribal chiefs. Most often, the companies and the government chose to work with the chiefs. However, the authority of the local chiefs was often limited to their own villages, and in any case they seldom supplied all the manpower requested.¹⁰⁴ The companies usually paid in kind, arguing that local workers did not understand the meaning of money. Some chose the approach used by planters in Assam and the Mascarenes: they kept wages not only to help Africans save, but also to protect themselves against possible misconduct.¹⁰⁵

Tensions mounted, especially over portage. The French authorities and the concession companies had an enormous need for porters.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the companies abused the porters: They not only did not pay them, but they also extended their *engagement* longer than stipulated in the initial agreement.¹⁰⁷ This type of forced labour generated a considerable amount of resistance and desertion.¹⁰⁸ The French military authorities then turned to various forms of forced requisition: women were taken hostage until the men presented themselves.¹⁰⁹ Later on, some concessions adopted the same principle, which was the source of the main scandals in the French Congo at the time.¹¹⁰ Wages were very low or even non-existent in view of the extremely hard labour involved; recruiters carried out manhunts around deserted villages, notably in the Cercle de Gribingui area.¹¹¹ The French League of Human Rights denounced the abuses,¹¹² but little was done concretely to stop these practices.

Violence was not the only problem; due to the requisition of manpower by the colonial powers, there were not enough labourers for the local farms. Collaboration between the colonial authorities, concession companies, and local chiefs was more harmonious in the Upper Ubangi, particularly in the territory of the sultanates.¹¹³ The three small

101 Sautter, *De l'Atlantique au fleuve Congo*, pp. 825–829.

102 ANOM FM SG GCOG/XIV, 1 et 2.

103 *La Dépêche coloniale*, 23 décembre 1903; Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*, p. 103.

104 ANOM, GGAEF 8Q58.

105 ANOM, GGAEF, 8Q59, Libreville, Rapport d'inspection de la Société du Haut-Ogooué, Année 1908.

106 ANOM, GGAEF, 2H 15, Correspondance du Commissaire général du Gabon au Commissaire général dans les possessions françaises et dépendances, Année 1907.

107 ANOM, GGAEF, 2H 15.

108 ANOM, GGAEF, 8Q59, Libreville, Rapport d'inspection.

109 ANOM, FP, PA/16(V)/5 (mission Brazza, notes); FP/PA/16(V)/3 (criminal cases, women).

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid. See, in particular, Bobichon, Report on portage.

112 ANOM FM 2AFFPOL/19. Observations of the French League for the Protection of Human Rights and the Womens International League for Peace and Freedom on the system adopted by the large concessions.

113 E. Assidon, *Le commerce captif: les sociétés françaises de l'Afrique noire*, Paris 1989.

potentates of Bangassu, Rafaï, and Semio relied on slaves they acquired through raids or trade.¹¹⁴ Encouraged by the French authorities, the Compagnie (later Société) des Sultanats decided to seek the support of these potentates and their workforce.¹¹⁵ The idea was to exchange European products, already widely used by the elites of the sultanates, for rubber produced by the sultans' slaves.¹¹⁶ However, the local chiefs either did not supply the manpower they had promised, or they failed to provide sufficient numbers to satisfy the French companies.¹¹⁷ The often violent clashes with the local population increased,¹¹⁸ notably in response to the actions of militias employed by the concession companies.¹¹⁹

Huge debates took place in France at the turn of the century concerning their political, legal, and economic legitimacy.¹²⁰ All these aspects were linked to the role of the colonial state: on the one hand, it delegated much of its authority to the concessions on the pretext that it lacked the necessary financing to become directly involved in African colonization. On the other hand, that same colonial state thought the concession system lent itself to fraud and abuse.¹²¹ This twofold connection between the colonial state and the concessions, already of considerable importance with regard to profits and taxation, became even more problematic when it came to labour and violence against local populations. The fact that taxes could be paid in kind and in labour and not necessarily in cash made it difficult to separate taxation and labour. The payment of taxes through concession companies thus paved the way to the worst abuses, and local workers were compelled to work for the companies to redeem their "debts" to the colonial state.¹²² Violence was widely used to enforce this rule.¹²³

Conclusion – Colonial State and Free Labour: Universal Meanings vs Local Practises

In India, the return to indirect rule during the second half of the nineteenth century once again went along with renewed tolerance towards "local customs". The British showed

114 E. de Dampierre, *Un royaume Bandia du Haut Oubangui*, Paris 1967.

115 ANOM FM/2AFFPOL/21, sociétés concessionnaires, Société des sultanats.

116 ANOM, FM, 2AFFPOL/4 (compagnies concessionnaires); FM/2AFFPOL/21.

117 ANOM, FM, 2AFFPOL/25 (sociétés concessionnaires, recrutement de la main d'œuvre indigène); 2AFFPOL/29, Société des Sultanats.

118 ANOM FM, 2AFFPOL/1 (commission des concessions, réclamations formulées par des collectivités indigènes).

119 ANOM FM, 2AFFPOL/13 (compagnies concessionnaires) et 2AFFPOL/29, Société des Sultanats.

120 On these debates, see Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo*; J. D. Saint-Marc, *Des compagnies privilégiées de colonisation. De leur création et de leur organisation dans les possessions françaises*, PhD, Bordeaux 1897; M. Hamelin, *Des concessions coloniales. Étude sur les modes d'aliénation des terres domaniales en Algérie et dans les colonies françaises du Congo*, Paris 1898.

121 H. Cuvillier-Fleury, *La mise en valeur du Congo français*, Paris 1904; Union Congolaise, *Les sociétés concessionnaires du Congo français depuis 1905. Situation financière, plantations, main-d'oeuvre (1906–1908)*, Paris 1909.

122 G. A. Nzenguet Iguemba, *Colonisation, fiscalité et mutations au Gabon, 1910–1947*, Paris 2005.

123 ANOM, GGAEF, 8Q58 and 8Q59.

similar attitudes in a completely different context, namely Africa. They initially exported their notion of the colonial state developed in India, seeking agreements with local chiefs while tolerating local forms of slavery. It was only when these alliances collapsed and the abolitionist movement reinforced its position regarding Africa that direct rule and the prohibition of slavery developed.¹²⁴ Considering the Lushai Hills and the French Congo as a “non-state space”, as postulated by Scott, is also not novel or unique considering that understanding frontier has been studied from such a perspective.¹²⁵ But by the term “non-state space” should not mean that the state was not present in their discourse or that state did not want to do anything with these people in the hills and frontiers. Zomia was always within the realm of the state and within the discourse of the state because controlling these areas were crucial for the peace, prosperity, and stability of the state. The notion of Zomia also hardly fits with the French Congo. The French pursued their civilizing mission, but the possibility of imposing these attitudes was greater in Senegal than in the Congo. It was undoubtedly more difficult to establish a colonial state in the Congo: more power was attributed to military than to civilian colonial authorities, and it was accompanied by more violence and abuses. In the FWA, the civilizing mission was a topic of discussion and policy debates;¹²⁶ in the FEA, debates focused on the relative strength of military vs civilian power and the brutal exploitation of local resources. In short, the “colonial state” encompassed various institutional actors: private companies (in India and the Congo), state officials, and law courts. For institutional and ideological reasons, these actors advocated and tried to practice different policies with regard to sovereignty and slavery. Some were genuine abolitionists, some were merely opportunistic abolitionists, and still others were hostile to local autonomy and because of that, they fought local forms of slavery. Efforts to implement abolitionist aims ran up against these diverse attitudes within the administration as well as lack of organization and information. In addition, local societies, which presented a similar variety of attitudes, also played an active role; chiefs, merchants, slaves, and former slaves transmuted the initial, often contradictory aims of the colonial powers into something else. In the end, the top-down activity of the state was certainly stressed in many – though not all – colonial contexts, but it tended to be an aim and ambition more than a historical reality. Colonial and post-colonial studies have often confused aims, goals, and practices. At the same time, we should not exaggerate the opposite interpretation and focus exclusively on the lack of power of the colonial state. Even when the colonial state was weak, as Herbst has pointed out, and even when the state was a private company, aided if neces-

124 Morris / Read, *Indirect Rule and the Search for Justice*.

125 Scott, *The Art of not Being Governed*, p. 13. For discourse on frontier as a “non-state space”, we just have to look at any literature published by the colonial authorities where frontier is portrayed as a “lawless” and “uncivilized” space inhabited by the “savages”, which is contrasted with the organized and law abiding subject in their directly administered area. See Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal* by Alexander Mackenzie, Calcutta 1884; Sir Robert Reid, *History of the Frontier Areas Bordering on Assam From 1883–1941*, Delhi 1942, etc.

126 Klein, *Slavery and Colonial Rule*, pp. 178–196.

sary by military and paramilitary forces, the violence was extreme. Just because the ideal type of efficient state was not achieved does not mean the state did not matter. While British norms and perceptions translated into various forms of bondage and slavery in India, and thereby helped perpetuate slavery well after its official abolition, those institutions nevertheless predated any British intervention. The solution adopted in India and the practices that were accepted did not result solely from British influences, but rather from the interaction between those influences and local labour relationships and values. Europeans did not create slavery in India and Africa, but they transformed its existing forms and introduced new ones. Oppositely, Henri Maine has identified status with despotism and ancient societies, like India and its castes. Starting from this experience, he has reached the conclusion that the legal opposition in Britain itself between masters and servants was no longer acceptable.

Such mutual influence between the mainland and its colonies did not necessarily lead to more “freedom” in the colonies and convergent paths between the two. Indeed, it was quite the contrary. Although the rhetoric assimilating slaves into proletarians was widespread in both France and Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century, it reflected a political and ideological attitude occasionally espoused by conservatives and by some labour associations as well. The Indian experience encouraged people like Henri Maine to support the abolition of the Masters and Servants Acts in Britain while keeping coercion alive in India. Worse still, the French constantly sought to impose their own categories and values in what they believed was their civilizing mission. In this effort, they tried to limit the influence of local and colonial values and attitudes.

Finally, at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, it was no more a question to discuss the abolition of slavery in the European colonies, but, quite the opposite, to occupy new territories in the name of freedom. The scramble for Africa responded to this goal. From this standpoint, the colonies were no more an extension of the mainland, but – being its extreme variation – rather its negation. There was no question of granting any kind of welfare to liberated Africans; instead, a transition period of cultural and technical apprenticeship was required before they could understand and practice freedom. The state and the welfare state enhanced one each other in France and Britain, while in the frontier colonies weak colonial states, military presence, violence, and coerced labour were bound together.