

HUNTING “WRONGDOERS” AND “VAGRANTS” ©

The Long-Term Perspective of Flight, Evasion,
and Persecution in Colonial and Postcolonial
Congo-Brazzaville, 1920–1980

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ABSTRACT: In Central Africa, and especially in the former Middle-Congo, flight as temporary migration was an important defense against brutal forced labor under the colonial state. The impact of flight movements thus became one side of a shifting balance of terror. This article seeks to follow compulsory labor and migration from the decline of concession company rule after World War I to the continuities of postcolonial labor services in the 1960s and 1970s. A “topographic analysis” helps to find particular hotspots of forced labor; the article especially focuses on Madingou, a region where various forms of compulsory labor became a particularly unbearable package. The combination of forced labor and work on the Congo-Océan railway line until the early 1930s; the subsequent attempts at reform, which gave way to a new intensification of forced labor during World War II; and, finally, the ambiguous reforms and hidden continuities through the late colonial state and into the independent administration—all left their mark on the district. Throughout these historical

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transitions, local populations proved quite able to adapt, initially through flight movements into neighboring colonies, then increasingly into districts where more benign conditions reigned, and finally into the urban centers of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire.

In October 1936, the administrator of the region (*département*) of Sangha, L. Gondran, was increasingly vexed. For a number of months, he had vividly protested against the severe attacks that some more liberal colleagues had directed against his activities in the region, situated in the remote northern interior of the French colony of the Middle-Congo (current-day Republic of Congo).¹ Gondran was among those who felt the impact of the timid reform measures that the Popular Front in the French metropole had introduced: notwithstanding a whole bundle of difficulties that characterized the implementation of “left-wing” colonial policies, the atmosphere changed within the administrative debates.² Minority opinions came to the surface, and Congolese populations started to petition for better conditions.

The inspector of administrative affairs, Emile Buhot-Launay, a former acting governor and heavyweight within the colonial administration of French Equatorial Africa, had received an impressive dossier of complaints. He could just have ignored the complaints (as had so frequently happened). In Pointe-Noire, seat of the territorial government, Buhot-Launay found immediate support: personal hostilities within the French administration were perhaps even more important in that regard than firm beliefs in necessary reform measures.³ Exasperated, after trying in vain to convince his superiors that he was the victim of lies and of calumny, Gondran played his last card. He directly contacted the Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa (*Afrique Equatoriale Française*, or AEF) in Brazzaville, whose predecessor had still endorsed the methods employed in the Sangha region (see Map 1), notably with regard to the forced harvest of rubber that was at the heart of compulsory labor in that region.⁴ In doing so, Gondran disrespected the usual administrative hierarchies.

Like in many cases of violent forced labor, the internal conflicts within the administration, expressed through this sort of complaint, open the doors for access to African voices and visions. The return to documentation of this type is especially important. The search for oral testimony from living witnesses or their descendants has been much refined for many parts of the African continent. In contrast, the potential of reaching the “archival grain” of social conditions in the Congo and elsewhere, from the massive internal conflicts that the reality of colonial administration entailed, has



Map 1.

constantly been underrated.⁵ This is particularly an issue in regions where field interviews are difficult to carry out, which is definitely the case for the Republic of Congo. But even in a broader perspective, this methodological reflection should again more broadly be addressed for the many theatres of colonial forced labor.⁶ The unexplored potentials of (frequently yet unknown) documentation need to be unearthed to illuminate broader panoramas for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa under colonial domination.

Gondran’s report, a piece of thirty-three pages filled with enormous anger, is a good starting point for interpreting a principal issue of colonial, including French colonial, rule during most of its existence: compulsory labor in its variable forms and dramatic consequences. While forced labor is in principle known as a phenomenon of French rule over African subjects, its modalities have only partly been analyzed.⁷ Other regions, notably the Portuguese colonies of Angola and especially Mozambique, have received more profound studies with regard to the brutalities of unfree labor and the administrative obsessions that reinforced such practices.⁸ One might argue that the impact of Portuguese rule in the African continent is unequaled with regard to violence. This is doubtlessly true. However, conditions in French Equatorial Africa were not too different from those found in Portuguese territories, and their impact on the life cycle of individuals in territories like the Middle-Congo was considerable.⁹ With regard to other parts of the African continent, the “traditions” in French colonies and those in Portuguese territories seem at first glance to be very different from those in British-ruled parts of the continent: direct compulsory labor seems to have ended very early in the latter, and forced labor obligations in places such as Kenya, the Rhodesias, the Gold Coast or Nigeria appear as being limited to “traditional labor” organized as a democratic, village-based practice; to war-time emergency measures; and to illegal, abusive obligations employed by some “native chiefs.”¹⁰ Even so, this distinction is not so simple, and we will come back to similarities between colonial systems in a moment. For now, I will return to the conflict within the French administration in 1936.

Gondran rejected the claim that he had ever practiced abusive forced labor. He held that the accusations were simple exaggerations of facts paired with voluntary misinterpretation of benign conditions. Notably, he insisted that his administrative action—to “promote” the rubber harvest in view of the payment of taxes—did not at all have the violent consequences denounced by the inspector, but was a practical necessity and corresponded to what the Congolese, and especially the “native chiefs,” wanted:

At the end of February this year, the Inspector pointed the Governor-General to the deserted state of the villages that he had visited in the Subdivision of Souanké. All the men [he wrote] under the effect of excessive administrative pressures, had been away to harvest rubber, and the long and alarming ciphered telegram that he had sent to the capital [of AEF] provoked between the acting Governor-General and myself an exchange of telegrams that ended with expression of entire support for my action.¹¹

A principal element of Gondran’s line of defense, which was presented in quite an aggressive manner, was the opinion of the “traditional authorities”

as intermediaries. Chiefs have been discussed in various contexts as middlemen of colonial rule, and in spite of French colonial ideology, these authorities were important for the organization of local administration and labor policies. We do not find well-elaborated systems of indirect rule that could have competed with chieftaincies under British colonialism, although some individuals in the Middle-Congo were defined as “regional chiefs” and enjoyed prestige over a larger community, such as in the coastal areas. In the centre and the north of the territory, chiefs had an influence over more restricted zones; however, many processes of social life depended on them. Chiefs, and particularly chiefs who oversaw mobile communities living close to inter-colonial borders, were central brokers in the compulsory labor system of French colonial rule. And Gondran used their interests as an argument for his action: they were held to be negatively affected by the consequences of the reform measures. Obviously, this was partly a strategy to muster support in a complicated situation, and within discussions about reforming forced labor within European colonialism, it was equally a common step to explain that these forms of labor were indeed “customary.” Even so, it was also confirmed from Gondran’s observations that compulsory labor practices had ample importance for the social history of rural communities, for their internal structures of power, and for the conflicts emerging within these communities:¹²

Not only [did the inspector claim] that the officials were by no means allowed to invite the natives to harvest rubber, as their advice would in itself be qualified to be inadmissible by definition, but the Inspector formally prohibited all the chiefs, in the presence of their subjects, to intimate to them the need of rubber services. They had never experienced such an interdiction[.] They do not understand anything. To this point, they had always been told “Stimulate your men, make them work” and now they are supposed to burn what they adored yesterday. What had been good has become evil.¹³

Unfree labor thus constituted not only an especially violent element of the experience that Congolese populations had with colonial rule, it was also deeply enrooted in the social tissue of local communities. It influenced relationships of power and mobility in regional settings, and its abolition in 1946 challenged these established patterns, as did the ambivalent position that the postcolonial governments of the Republic of Congo had with regard to labor obligations. The Middle-Congo is especially interesting for understanding the social effects of forced labor, as (like in the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique) the structures of compulsory labor were particularly massive. This colony is also especially relevant for interpreting the room for maneuver and possible options available to the local

population—particularly flight and outmigration, two of the principal reactions among Africans facing the impositions of forced labor. These have so far remained understudied as phenomena in Africa under colonial rule, and we need conceptual approaches that understand refugees and deserters from compulsory labor as complementary to the movements of labor migrants and urban migrants.

Two strategies to study forced labor in the Congo are important: the first is via local studies extended over several decades,¹⁴ the second is to follow the brutalities connected to colonial forced labor across regions and moments, examining scandals and violence across a broader territory, tracing the variable movements of forced labor and its response in a kind of “topography of reactions.” The latter can also be linked to post-colonial continuities, which are very relevant for the Congolese case.¹⁵

Concessionary Rule and Its End: A Notable Change in Social Conditions?

The Middle-Congo was one of the most problematic territories with regard to labor obligations within the French empire in sub-Saharan Africa. For that reason alone, it is indeed very useful to take this territory as a starting point for reflections on compulsory labor. In the “French” Congo, it is possible to find, within one colony, a combination of practically *all* existing colonial mechanisms of pressure, brutalities and abuses—of which in most other colonies in Africa, in the first decades of the twentieth century, only a selection existed. It is unsurprising that the omnipresence of these routines had grave consequences: the reactions to labor coercion cast into question the whole framework of colonial control.¹⁶

One would need to ask how much this particular situation was an effect of the legacies of concession company rule over vast parts of the territory. Like the Belgian Congo, especially in its early phase, and like Mozambique under Portuguese rule, large parts of the Middle-Congo came under company control in the last years of the nineteenth century—a control that lasted over the first three decades of the twentieth century and was characterized by the takeover of administrative functions by private companies.¹⁷ The agents of concession companies operated as tax farmers and rubber-collecting officials at the same time. Their activity brought local populations into the maelstrom of physically demanding collection duties, which were aggravated by the rubber boom that peaked before World War I.¹⁸ The violent forms of treatment that affected the Congolese, and that led in some areas to dramatic mortality rates, were publicly decried by intellectuals such as André Gide in the 1920s. Officially, the colonial state

installed better control mechanisms and ended the abusive role of the private companies.¹⁹

Conditions on the ground remained more complex. Through the decades of company presence, a number of routines had become established in which the “private” and the “public” were mixed. Colonial officials recruited individuals in favor of companies, and companies demanded the support of the administration for their goals. The end of the concessions did not eradicate these practices. Capitalist firms remained in the territory after the end of their monopoly concessions, and their agents expected to have the support of colonial officials. The issue was further complicated by the fact that the most ambitious, and most feared, infrastructure project in the region, the Congo-Océan Railway line, not only meant the creation of transport facilities to be used by the capitalist economy, but also became a kind of ideological goal of the administration. Local populations feared railway construction work so much—because epidemics were typical during this work and the death rates extremely high—that they were likely to do everything possible to avoid recruitment for such tasks.²⁰ The Congo-Océan Railway line has remained a principal axis of economic life in the postcolonial Republic of Congo, but its traumatic memory also lingered on: during the 1970s, the hardships during railway construction work were frequently referred to as a colonial crime and national trauma, and when in 1985 President Denis Sassou-Nguesso reopened the railway after important repair work, he and other politicians also had to refer to these bitter memories.²¹ This demonstrates the dramatic impact exercised by the experience of railway construction. In the 1920s, an approach to rethink railway policies could have made sense within the French administration of the territory. However, few efforts were made in the early years of the construction project to improve conditions and make the work more acceptable to the Congolese themselves. Recruitment for railway construction constituted an administrative obsession.²² Therefore, the spectacular and brutal project went on for thirteen years, between 1921 and 1934, without much improvement; while French officials claimed that the conditions were not that bad and that “natives” became accustomed to the particular form of work, the railway continued to provoke resistance and flight.

High-ranking officials in the Middle-Congo and French Equatorial Africa felt they had to respond to accusations once under the gaze of the International Labor Organization.²³ While this was in part simply to justify conditions in the region, their perspectives also reflect an entrenched belief that the end of private-sector domination within the administration also meant a relative end of abuses.²⁴ The detailed correspondence between Governor-General Raphaël Antonetti—later famous as the villain behind

the Congo-Océan project—and Emile Antonelli, the Socialist deputy of the National Assembly in Paris, illustrates these beliefs. The deputy was engaged in reformist Socialist labor policy and stood for France’s participation in the ILO rulemaking process. Antonetti reflected the view of the officials on the ground in the Congo when he insisted that the use of Congolese reservist soldiers for the railway construction and other forms of drafting personnel were fully in line with ILO demands (and more than in the colonies belonging to French West Africa). Reiterating the racist colonial idea, a standard one in the interwar period, that “the natives” needed to be “educated” through hard labor, the governor-general held that Congolese who were not offering their military service to the empire had to work in other fields—and that the Congo-Océan Railway was the right place for that work. Antonetti insisted that food resources and treatment of the railway laborers were adequate, and blamed the incompatibility of clothing rules with the climate of the Congo for much of the death rates caused by influenza waves.²⁵

In the “official mind,” the processes of the 1920s therefore seemed to indicate profound changes in administrative behavior. With private companies losing their prerogatives, a more benevolent administration appeared to be in charge, which could have meant the end of the violent forms of forced labor. However, this did not happen. On the contrary, many regions of the Middle-Congo remained a model for multiple practices of compulsory labor under which African populations suffered.

Overcharging the Congolese: The End of Concessionary Rule and the Continuity of Repressive Labor Conditions

A “topographic view” needs a perspective that brings different experiences of repression and different reactions together. Obviously, the colony of the Middle-Congo was, as concerns social experiences and labor policies between 1918 and 1980, not an entirely homogeneous region. A number of factors could be mentioned in a schematic way to take account of these differences. In various regions of the territory, populations were much dispersed—but the north was heavily targeted by recruitment drives for big infrastructure projects in other regions, which led to numbers of absent contract workers. In the broader region of Brazzaville, the strength of a new messianic movement in the interwar period, that of André Matsoua, had an impact on the organization of resistance and evasion. The coastal region populated by the Kikongo-speaking Vili was the principal example for an important “traditional authority,” of the Mâ Loango, which also had a clear importance in local labor policies. However, the repression and

violence that Congolese populations met with regard to labor policies, and the mechanisms of compulsion, shared a common trajectory.

Madingou was particular within this panorama. Within the Middle-Congo, the Madingou region was at the heart of the various infrastructure projects and of the multiple labor obligations that could hit the Congolese.²⁶ Apart from the tax-like instrument called *prestations*, typical for all colonies in the French empire, where male subjects had to work a number of days per year for the construction or maintenance of public infrastructure, other obligations also fell on the shoulders of the Congolese.²⁷ In Madingou, where the construction of the railway connection between Pointe-Noire and Brazzaville created an enormous demand for additional labor, this tipped the balance towards unbearable conditions. The situation was aggravated by the brutalities of recruitment for the labor tax and in control of local labor, and, in sum, the population in the Madingou region was simply overburdened. In October 1928—a year after Raphaël Antonetti had insisted on the notable improvements that were supposed to be linked to the phasing out of company rule—a report from Madingou gave a somber picture, and one that demonstrates how much the accumulated obligations created massive reactions: inhabitants of the region fled into the Belgian Congo and Angola, in panic, to avoid the agonizing work on the railway in particular; the recruitment for the Congo-Océan Railway aggravated the pressures caused by the 12,500 days of labor provided during eight months by the Congolese for road maintenance through the labor tax; the burdensome conditions, combined with the absence of medical services, led to a diminution of eight per cent per year of the local population and to the depletion of entire villages.²⁸ Administrative officials bemoaned this dire situation—without changing anything.

In the 1920s, the locals in the Madingou region were sent to work by the so-called “native chiefs.” The latter, although marginally following the discourse of the colonial officials in the Congo with regard to “authentic rule,” were from the administrators’ perspective essential labor agents.²⁹ Many chiefs had themselves a certain interest in the recruitment issue: not only did they expect to receive presents as compensation for their effort, but they also wished that the recruitment measure would not interfere with “traditional obligations.”³⁰ These obligations defined how, locally, male inhabitants in the villages had to work on the chiefs’ fields, and were accompanied by other practices of bondage, depending on the community.³¹ Attempts by some administrators to bypass the chiefs and begin processes of direct recruitment did not work; in various cases, the chiefs personally led the local populations to flee, and in the late 1920s, 37 villages from the Madingou region resettled on the Belgian side of the border.³² This, however, increased the spiral of violence. Panicking officials, seeing “their

subjects” run away, carried out round-ups, during which some of the remaining villagers were bound or shackled, and brought to the labor sites. In 1927, populations and chiefs ran away during a recruitment drive in the region between the Louïla and the Loemba. Only 64 men could be brought to the administrative post of Madingou, in shackles. After a mass flight of fifty Bassoundis breaking out of the huts close to the post where they were held, only fourteen remained—ropes around their necks and in prison.³³

Fifteen months later, little had changed in the Madingou region, although the critical voices within the administration remained loud.³⁴ Local administrators tried to rebuild the alliances with “native chiefs” that had been strained in the moment of conflict in the mid-1920s. The secret of success seemed to lie in a strategy where the officials did not use the “native” district guards, local constables who had a tendency towards particular brutality and public humiliations of chiefs.³⁵ Given the resistance of the Kikongo-speaking Lari and Beembe populations to resettle their villages into places that were more accessible to the administration, the hold on these populations remained complicated. European officials felt they regularly had to go into the remote villages to round up individuals refusing the labor tax—but this only worked as long as the chiefs supported their endeavors.³⁶ By late 1929, 2,000 able-bodied male Congolese remained in the settlements within the subdivision, of which more than half were involved in the different forms of unfree labor. Another principal idea was to better control the borders shared with the Belgian Congo, and to trick the Belgians into supporting a joint border policy. French officials wrote with visible relief that at least the flight into Portuguese Cabinda, the northernmost province of Angola, was cut short by the more rigid forced labor practices used by Portuguese officials from the 1930s onwards.³⁷ However, the French did not at all manage to prevent the many escapes—the flow into the Belgian Congo remained strong and even Portuguese territory was at times again an attractive haven for refugees.³⁸ These movements were normally for limited time periods. The Portuguese in Angola had their own peaks of brutal recruitment, which motivated rural populations to run away into Belgian and French territory; in the Belgian Congo, spates of forced labor recruitment were less frequent, but they appeared—under the label of *travaux d'ordre éducatif*, or “educational work.” Rural populations thus fled and went back and forth between the three territories. They participated in a system of mobility, in which individuals were quite successful at profiting from international borders to improve their situation. Colonial administrators were unable to find methods against these strategies.

At the end of 1931, recruitment for the railway finally appeared to become less complicated, as four years after Antonetti’s unfounded positive claims, the Congo-Océan company had finally attempted to improve social

conditions and the wage situation of the workers—but this did not help with regard to the overall balance of compulsory labor. While more locals now went to the railway sites, the chiefs in the villages did not manage to find compulsory workers under the labor tax and equally did not get enough for their own fields. The results were deserted villages and dissatisfied chiefs; French attempts to maintain a balance between the various forms of mostly unfree labor still did not work.³⁹

In the Madingou region, chiefs who had redefined themselves as leaders of flight groups retained important leverage over the behavior of locals. Also, they were well-informed about the changing situation in the territory even when they sought refuge on the other side of the colonial border. The Bassoundi villages of the region repeatedly fled into the Belgian Congo to avoid being recruited for road labor. The Bassoundi Chief, Kiboana, was in the 1930s a principal intermediary in convincing the locals to come back from Belgian territory or to refrain from moving—but he held that this could only be done if the administration demanded very moderate contributions in labor. Kiboana refused to travel into the Belgian Congo and to seek villagers there before this had been improved. That the French officials in the region swallowed this pill and negotiated with Kiboana illustrates how incomplete their control over the labor process really was.⁴⁰ However, this did not translate into a coherent reform policy. Although some measures were taken to lessen the burden of compulsory labor, the agents of colonial power were unwilling to reduce the labor obligations in principle, and they thus had to accept that local chiefs, with important influence over the villagers, had to remain their principal allies.⁴¹ Where this alliance was unstable, even temporary migration into neighboring subdivisions, paired with occasional flight into Belgian territory, could not be stopped. Chiefs described the conditions in Belgian territory that villagers would find as follows: “[c]ome, they say, here you do not have to work, you do not pay any taxes, you will not have to harvest palm products, in any case if the Commander registers you on the census list, you will not pay more than a half of the taxes that you pay at Mouyondzi”; a village chief, Kintouari, explained that “[h]ere you need to get up to work from 6 o’clock in the morning, down there you get up by 9 o’clock to look for food or to go hunting.” This was plainly exaggerated, but local leaders rightly noted that on the Belgian side of the border, wages were around 27 francs instead of the usual 15 in French territory.⁴²

From the perspective of historians interested in migration as a phenomenon in colonial Africa, it needs to be pointed out that the broader effects of such refugee movements would still need to be quantified and to be put into a larger framework of movement between colonies and between

districts within colonies. However, as far as the Middle-Congo and neighboring territories are concerned, some claims can be formulated—they may seem bold at first, but can be built on the empirical evidence that I have discussed thus far. Migration as flight was omnipresent. It was by far the most successful and most sustained method of reacting to the unbearable demands of compulsory work in the 1920s and 1930s. Deserters had immense success in escaping forced labor, but they paid an enormous price as well: while we need many more detailed studies on these effects, it is obvious that the experiences destabilized rural communities and affected their cycles of agricultural production and their level of food security.

As far as the colonial administration was concerned, hopes were indeed set by the end of the Congo-Océan project in 1934: there seemed to be potential for a substantial reduction of the forced labor burden after the end of recruitment for railway construction, a reduction that had failed to materialize in the 1930s with the decline of the concessionary companies. Administrators were optimistic that this would allow more satisfactory conditions for African subjects. Chiefs and local spokesmen insisted that they were willing to reconsider moving back to the French colony as soon as they received information about improved conditions. However, the system of forced labor proved to be more durable, and much of the everyday life of colonial administration was too committed to labor services to give them up.

A Changing Context: Madingou and the Middle-Congo Between the End of the Railway Madness and the Abolition of Forced Labor, 1934–1946

While a number of French officials saw the end of work on the railway in 1934 as a key to preventing the discontent of locals, these colonial administrators did not understand that the replacement of recruitment for the railway by an ever increasing use of the labor tax was not the way towards a more satisfied local population. Administrators remained as obsessive about labor issues as they had been—and the Congolese in the Madingou region were as able to react as ever:

In the course of the first trimester the number of refugees has considerably increased at Mouyondzi. This is no longer an incidence of isolated departures of natives into the neighboring subdivisions, but indeed a real exodus. In this context the whole population of the surroundings of Mambondjo, led by its village chief and some twenty natives from the territory of Combo Bende, fled, some to Mindouli, others to Mayama.—The reasons brought up by the fugitives can up to a certain point give excuses for their movement: If they do not complain about the rigor of the commander of

the administrative post or of the native chiefs, they claim—and in a fully justified way, we have to admit—that their tax rate (of 27 francs) is too high for their meager resources. Moreover, the obligation to carry out their compulsory labor services [*prestations*] on the motor road, far away from their villages, also angers them.

It is certain that the continuous maintenance work on the network of overland communications has become unpopular in the entire region. In the beginning, the population worked without hesitation because it was intimated to them that the creation of the roads would reduce the importance of portage. In fact, these services have hardly been reduced, and the maintenance work has become increasingly oppressive.⁴³

While the French administration blamed the “natural recalcitrance” of groups like the Kikongo-speaking Beembe and Dondo to work, these groups were able to undermine the entire process of road maintenance. Where, such as at the Boko Songho post, the recruitment process via the labor tax was strict and brutal, no recruits were available. The few who had been sent to the labor sites deserted.⁴⁴ In 1935, another attempt was made in the Madingou region to improve the situation of forced workers under the labor tax. Administrators insisted on a better-controlled distribution of tasks via census lists—attempting to prevent that a number of individuals worked an excessive and disproportionate number of days on infrastructure labor—and through the enforcement of the theoretically strict rule that such workers could not be sent more than thirty kilometers to their labor sites. Much of this new initiative remained lip service, and it raised complicated issues, as it challenged the leverage that the chiefs had over the recruitment process in the Madingou region. Even so, officials saw no problems in requiring locals to offer twenty days of labor tax per year, which constituted an enormous increase and enraged Congolese villagers.⁴⁵ For the purposes of administrative routine, this system seemed much simpler: “native guards” could be sent into a limited number of villages, by random choice, and recruit a smaller number of individuals. For the guards, however, the older system had been more attractive: they had targeted villages that were interesting for extracting resources, through intimidation during the recruitment process.⁴⁶

During the period of the Popular Front, internal conflicts within the administration came more clearly to the forefront, allowing the advocates of reform to push for some changes—but this was only a short period. World War II led to a renewed increase of abusive conditions and of violent reactions. French Equatorial Africa, including the Middle-Congo, went into the Allied camp—but forms of repression, which were geared towards offering resources for the allied cause, equaled those in the West African colonies

that were initially under Vichy rule. For those colonial administrators who were fond of repressive instruments, the war situation constituted a kind of paradise.⁴⁷ Suddenly, everything was allowed. It was only necessary to make the measures taken appear as beneficial for the nation’s interest and the war objectives. Even for those colonial officials who had leanings towards reformist policies, it became complicated to escape these logics of exploitation and repression. In the Middle-Congo, like in other parts of Central Africa, it seemed that rubber in particular needed to be won, and compulsory labor was in many cases the way to get it.⁴⁸

During the early 1940s, the road that had been taken found its clearest expression in the choices of personnel. Most noteworthy was the installation of Gondran, the former administrator of Sangha, who had been so prominently accused of the abuses in rubber production, as inspector of administrative affairs. In other words, a notable practitioner of coerced labor practices was transformed into an inspector and, thus, a “protector of the natives” in a territory ruled by the “Free French.”⁴⁹ However, like in the internal conflicts of the late 1930s, Gondran’s observations illustrate the complexity of attitudes in a colonial situation. The new inspector remained doubtlessly committed to repression and mandatory labor. However, he was not at all sympathetic to many demands coming from the private companies; indeed, he came to the defense of some of the interests of the Congolese populations, and showed a clear comprehension of the trauma that the railroad work, with its hardships and atrocities, had inflicted upon the population. It was less in Madingou but rather in other parts of the Middle-Congo where he believed that the “natives” needed to be protected:

In late 1942, the recruitment of a hundred workers took place in the Department in the interest of the Société Minière du Kouilou.

It is difficult to say that this was crowned by success, it is more adequate to remember that, thanks to the intervention of the administration, the SMK obtained the workforce it desired. We did not have any real incidents but a lively perturbation within production has been related over two months.

Visibly, for the natives of the Alima, the bad memory of the old recruitments for the construction of the railway has remained alive, these recruitments having provoked an important exodus of the population into the Belgian Congo and our subjects fear being compelled to leave and being once again subjected to the painful and hard labor of this earlier period, which they had barely withstood.⁵⁰

The ambiguities in the relationship between administrators and Congolese villagers are visible in these reports. While the locals continued to

flee in great numbers (profiting from the inability of Belgian authorities to trace these refugees and to send them into war emergency labor on the other side of the border) French officials lived in a limbo between their massive obsession with the necessity of compulsory labor, and skepticism toward the goals of the agents of capitalist companies in the territory.⁵¹ No improvement seemed possible with regard to the policies of unfree labor. However, the Congolese improved their strategies of escape. Instead of fleeing into remote regions or over borders, these groups entered into other districts, following information that guided them to places where the administrative personnel were less strict.⁵² This technique started to become quite successful:

Following the enquiries made, during the period of approximately between 20 June and 10 July, some 400 natives belonging to the lands of Madzou-Miété, Mapana and Vouma, had abandoned their village to install themselves on the territory of the subdivision of Zanaga, governed by the Chief-Administrator Auclair. In spite of the pressuring demands addressed to him by the Administrator of the District and by the Administrator of the Subdivision of Komono, who asked for the repatriation of the refugees, Mr. Auclair does not seem to have become interested in the question.⁵³

The new strategies were a precursor of other forms of movements after the end of forced labor—but, for the moment, this end of forced labor, only some years away in the future, was barely imaginable on the ground. In spite of the fact that the principal reform conference of 1944 took place in Brazzaville, the Congolese populations did not see any immediate improvements.⁵⁴ Nor did the administrators in the Congo expect them to happen.⁵⁵ In 1942, the administration reflected upon a future with free labor, and decided that this was desirable but also unrealistic. Also, at that point, officials started to become concerned with “vagabondism;” the idea was that “vagrants,” mobile populations, were a future danger to daily life in urban agglomerations, and that such Congolese needed to be put into mandatory labor.⁵⁶ This was an important shift in objectives at a moment when, in theory, the administration could still rely on the complete set of repressive labor policies. It was to have remarkable consequences.

The end of World War II led to an all-encompassing change, expressed in imperial terms: Charles de Gaulle’s provisional government and a centre-left post-war coalition in the French National Assembly allowed African deputies to take seats in the assembly. These new deputies were very sensitive to the issue of forced labor, whose abolition was a principal demand of voters and supporters.⁵⁷ In the case of the Middle-Congo, Jean Félix-Tchicaya made himself a name as deputy through the victory against compulsory labor. The law, named after his colleague and ally from Côte

d'Ivoire, the Loi Houphouët-Boigny of 11 April 1946, helped Tchicaya to stay in his post for several terms. He knew what the electorate expected from him: the Middle-Congo was one principal territory where the provisions of the law had to be pushed through.⁵⁸

The experiences of Congolese populations during the transition period were quite complex. In some regions—especially in some pockets of the territory north of Pointe-Noire, but also in the remote north of the colony—French officials in place seem to have decided simply to maintain labor obligations that were no longer legal. Like in the 1920s, the intensity of experiences with forced labor depended on the level of “obsession” that colonial administrators showed in a given region with regard to enforcing all possible methods of compulsory labor. However, in cases of brutal conditions, village communities knew quite well how to react. In the weeks after the official abolition of forced labor, the territorial services in Pointe-Noire and the government-general in Brazzaville were both flooded with (often anonymous) petitions, in which villagers complained about continuities in forced labor. This had effects: it took a number of months until all these recalcitrant officials had been disciplined, but in 1947, even they had no choice but grudgingly to accept that “state labor” was no longer allowed.⁵⁹

Indirect forms of compulsory labor remained feasible, however. In 1946, the President of the Chamber of Mines of AEF and director of the Société des Mines de Kouilou complained that the Houphouët-Boigny Law had brought complete disaster for all types of labor recruitment. Locals were no longer “convinced” by the administration to sign contracts (although these practices continued in secret). But that was not all. Administrators claimed that many were allegedly sitting in their villages in Bas-Kouilou and Madingo-Kayes regions and not working. And those Congolese who still were in contract were said to be absent at many times. The reaction to flee whenever labor conditions became too unfriendly remained an obvious element of local life.⁶⁰ This was how the capitalist firms and many colonial administrators saw the effects of the end of forced labor, and their negative assessment reflected more than just the position of “reactionary” circles whose influence was waning, producing a direct impact in the decades to come.

Compulsory Labor and Evasion Reinvented: From the Late Colonial State into the Military-Socialist Experiment

It is unsurprising that administrators and settlers in French Equatorial Africa decried the ruin of the colonies that would result from the abolition of forced labor. Over the whole of the late 1940s and into the early 1950s,

they held a disciplined labor force would be a thing of the past; partly, they blamed an unwarranted international intervention by institutions such as the International Labor Organization, who were said to hold absurd ideas about labor and its needs in the African continent. In particular, the officials blatantly mixed reflections about different types of labor and laborers—and Gondran, who remained an inspector of administrative affairs after 1946, was amongst those who issued warnings, taking most of his examples, again, from the north of the territory that he knew best:

The problems of need for labor have become, at Mabirou like in many other regions of the Sangha, increasingly difficult to resolve. We have seen bankruptcy for those merchant houses that do not offer the natives the articles of first necessity that they ask for: salt, cloths, petrol, soap; this makes the eventual workers reluctant to seek liquid money, because they do not have any use for it. To keep paper money that will be eaten by the termites in their huts in the bush—this cannot be a stimulus for work. The needs of the districts become ever more difficult to satisfy after the disappearance of the disciplinary punishment. The problem is so enormous that it leads to the near-total ruin of commerce in this region.⁶¹

It is obvious that colonial officials continued to use compulsory practices wherever they could—their obsession with it was too extensive. It was no longer possible to implement the labor tax, but administrative intervention in recruitment practices went on in various parts, including in Madingou. Local dignitaries—whose authority had been bolstered by their instrumental role in the provision of “public labor”—had an interest in being complicit in these practices. As long as they had power over the decision of who was to be recruited, they maintained some leverage over the villagers:

And for that reason [the absence of a workforce in the 1940s] it became typical for the employer to address the administrator of the subdivision and for the latter to invite the local native authorities to furnish to that director of a company the respective labor contingent.

The canton chief defined the number of men to deliver per village, and each community went to send them, whether the men chosen agreed to the task *or not*. It is within this obligation put on the native to migrate to give his services to an employer he had not chosen, that *one could still find in AEF a form of forced labor*.⁶²

With the weaker mechanisms of control, however—especially through the abolition of separate legal provisions allowing the corporal punishment of “natives” together with forced labor⁶³—populations from most Congolese districts found a flexible means of escape from the power of the chiefs through migration into the growing urban agglomerations of Brazzaville

and Pointe-Noire. Numbers of new arrivals in these agglomerations steadily rose.⁶⁴ It is no wonder that the officials of the late colonial state focused especially on the issue of “vagrancy.” A minor offense—and an offense of minor importance within the recruitment of coerced labor—before 1946, this “vagrancy” became a principal hope and fantasy of colonial administrators between the official abolition of forced labor in the French empire and decolonization.⁶⁵ The highest levels of the administration in Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire took part in this: officials hoped for workhouses, modeled on ideas of the early nineteenth century, where such “vagrants”—migrants into the cities—could be imprisoned and used as a flexible labor brigade.⁶⁶ This was similar to anti-vagrancy strategies in part of the British empire, which had become an issue in the interwar period. In the case of east and southern African colonies under British rule, where the attraction of urban and mining regions had an effect on patterns of migration, the British anti-vagrancy measures remained nevertheless more discourse than reality.⁶⁷ The same was true for the later attempts at punishing “vagrants” in French Equatorial Africa. Although the strategy of escaping from the countryside to the cities had its risks from the outset, as round-ups were easier to organize in the urban environment, relatively few “vagrants” ever became the victims of hard labor as punishment.⁶⁸ Moreover, the turbulent events towards decolonization in the Middle-Congo created sufficient pressure on the agents of colonial power on the ground to prevent them from putting their repressive ideas into practice.⁶⁹ In 1958, the Middle-Congo became an autonomous state within the French Community, only to reach independence in 1960.

It is an open question how much migratory movements, of individuals attempting to avoid repressive labor situations, remain an issue after 1946. It is obvious that this motive for flight movements, even when it comes to migration into Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, diminishes in importance. However, what would be crucial is an attempt at understanding the dimensions of this decline of flight and desertion; as I have tried to show, this was an uneven process. Even for the postcolonial period, evidence points to continuities in terms of labor coercion and flight.

How do late colonial transitions refer to later, postcolonial trends in labor policies? Jean-François Bayart has pointed to a related issue, namely the practices of corporal punishment in sub-Saharan Africa and their complicated relationship with the colonial past. While the omnipresent brutality of beating and whipping during the recruitment process of labor, and during labor tasks, is characteristic for the colonial period, the analysis of the concrete continuities is extremely complicated. However, Bayart shows convincingly that colonial models have, in considerable parts of the African

continent, remained within the mentalities of postcolonial elites. The use of corporal punishment became a political issue and accompanied acts of political control, especially after moments of unrest.⁷⁰

For the postcolonial Republic of Congo, the study of continuities in compulsory labor is equally complicated. The country—which became “progressive” in 1963 and “socialist” by 1968—is no easy place to start research on its postcolonial history.⁷¹ The civil war that raged in the state in the late 1990s has not helped to improve the situation. Nonetheless, as with Bayart’s reflection on corporal punishment, there is convincing, if dispersed, evidence.

First, the principal idea of drafting villagers for collective work remained strong within the postcolonial state. In 1968, still before Marien Ngouabi took power, mandatory labor services in rural zones became commonplace, and they were organized through the unity party structures of the Mouvement National de la Révolution, being dependent on the engagement of Congolese district officers. The successes were relative, as becomes obvious for the Mayama District:

No particular local fact has attracted my attention as concerns purely political issues; however, I would need to indicate that the instructions received from above are more or less respected by the inhabitants.

To be more concrete, on 9 April 1968, party members and locals of Dzoulou and the post of Mayama have started the construction of the bridge over the Loutini, which will allow us to get in an automobile from Mayama to Rénéville, where the land is very good both for agriculture and livestock-raising.⁷²

Progress was not spectacular, as the district officers pointed out. The motivations were apparently quite low. In the Ngouabi era, the use of (unfree) collective initiatives remained a kind of sacrosanct idea. Sources exist on the use of such an initiative on Mbamou Island, where, again, the party was the principal vehicle of organizing labor.⁷³

It is plausible that the use of mandatory labor services in the postcolonial Republic of Congo stands in a line of tradition of colonial coercion—but it is of course complicated to demonstrate a direct connection. After all, from 1963, the Congolese state was governed by a party organization that followed Soviet inspiration, and may have taken ideas of collective labor from there.⁷⁴ Even so, it is remarkable that Congolese officials showed little awareness of the recalcitrance of local populations facing such labor services—it goes beyond simple conjecture that the idea of necessary public labor had been transmitted as an obsession from colonial organization into postcolonial administrative settings.

This transmission becomes more obvious when we look at the treatment of “vagrants” and “floating populations” (*oisifs*) under the postcolonial regime. In 1960, during the transition process towards independence, the autonomous government under Fulbert Youlou charged a French labor inspector, Techer, with preparing comprehensive lists of “unemployed young men” in Brazzaville, to make them available for labor services.⁷⁵ This did not change after the first coup d’état in 1963, the second in 1968, or the turn towards a “socialist variant” of rule. Congolese authorities invented a full civil service to pressure “unemployed youth” into mandatory labor.⁷⁶ The idea to target “idlers” and “vagrants” for public labor thus had made its way from the colonial into the postcolonial state. Moreover, the chances of evasion for targeted populations became less attractive, as these measures flowed from the very path that flight movements had taken: they targeted rural populations who had come into the agglomerations of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire.

Conclusion

The Congolese experience between 1918 and the end of the socialist phase of the postcolonial state, in the 1980s, inscribes itself into the patterns of movement that were relevant over wider parts of the African continent. However, for the Congolese example, the special emphasis on compulsory labor services made migration a dominant reaction and a central form of resistance: rural populations fled from hardships, and became proficient in analyzing information that helped them to compare conditions in different regions in the Middle-Congo, the Belgian Congo, and Angola. Much more than migration for contract labor in the broader Congo Basin to work in plantations and mines, such strategic flight was a regular part of rural life.

The period after World War I, still with a considerable presence of concession companies and their particularly exploitative form of capitalism on the ground, was especially marked by the Congo-Océan project. While the colony of the Middle-Congo was indeed the place which combined practically all variants of colonial compulsory labor, pressures to enter railway labor were just the tip of the iceberg. The railway exacerbated an already brutal system, leading to local populations becoming entirely overburdened. These populations, as in the Madingou region, developed their own forms of reaction: they invented sometimes elaborate flight mechanisms, which profited from the closeness of colonial borders to the Belgian Congo and to Portuguese Cabinda. The chiefs of local communities had an essential role in these contexts; they had far more means to use these situations to their advantage than what has commonly been sustained in earlier research. In

the Madingou region at least, chiefs profited from colonial forced labor, as they managed to partly channel it toward labor processes in local production that favored their own position. They often held the option to use their situation as intermediaries to influence flight movements—and in many cases, the chiefs themselves were able to threaten to organize flights against the administration.

The end of the Congo-Océan project did not end the plight of Congolese populations. In Madingou and neighboring regions, the vacuum created through the abolition of coerced contracts in the railway sector was filled by an extension of labor-tax related tasks. This only intensified the strong reactions of the Congolese, who fled into remote zones and beyond borders. During a short interval, coinciding with the Popular Front period in the metropole, the obsessions and awkwardness of the labor system came to the forefront through internal conflicts. While the administration was uncertain how to deal with the existing forms of compulsory labor, the outbreak of World War II changed conditions altogether. The war effort gave the most welcome justification for all imaginable brutalities—while showing that the administrators were mainly operating for the sake of an imagined necessity of labor for the “natives,” and unwilling to work as instruments of the capitalist companies. Congolese populations refined their strategies of evasion even more. While the chiefs no longer exercised as much control over the process—the intensification of measures of exploitation had made their position as intermediaries untenable—the refugees learned how to quickly move between regions of the colony, and to profit from loopholes created through the negligence of some officials.

The abolition of compulsory labor was brought in from outside and met with resistance from much of the colonial administration; its results were contradictory. Some officials tried to simply continue with established practices, especially in pushing the inhabitants of Congolese villages into labor contracts. However, the authority of the chiefs suffered, and accompanied by the simultaneous end of corporal punishment, led to a new migratory flow that could no longer be stopped: rural Congolese populations migrated into the urban agglomerations of quickly growing cities such as Brazzaville or Pointe-Noire, instead of the more perilous adventure of fleeing into remote regions or crossing borders. Late colonial administrations fantasized about rounding such “vagrants” up and sending them, again, into labor services—but that was mostly impossible under the conditions of disintegrating colonial rule in the 1950s. Ironically, only the postcolonial governments in the Congo could reestablish compulsory labor, doing so with a program targeting “idlers” and “vagrants” which betrayed a clear foundation in colonial practices.

The internal logics that prolonged compulsory labor as an option into postcolonial Congolese society seem to have ended by 1980. However, they show a remarkable longevity, which demonstrates that the obsessions of colonial domination were indeed transplanted into postcolonial forms of administrative control and social concerns. At the same time, the repertoire of reactions for the potential targets of unfree labor became narrower. The choice of urban agglomerations as principal destinations of migration and evasion brought them closer to the institutions of control—instead of hiding in remote and inaccessible forested subdivisions, migrants made themselves vulnerable to round-ups. The case of forced labor in the Congolese context thereby demonstrates that its effects are all but linear, and that its mechanisms and effects need to be discussed in their full complexity, in order to fully understand its impact on African history.

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Notes

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2. For the effects of reform politics under the Popular Front beyond West Africa, see Jean Koufan, “Socialism in the Colonies: Cameroun Under the Popular Front,” in *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front. Hope and Disillusion* eds. Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 203–217; for a Senegalese case study, see Bernard Duquenot, *Le Sénégal et le Front Populaire* (Paris: Harmattan, 1986). For the larger panorama, see also William B. Cohen, “The Colonial Policy of the Popular Front,” *French Historical Studies* 7, 3 (1972): 368–393.

3. Buhot-Launay had not always been known as a “reformer”; previously, he had criticized Governor Marcel de Coppet for being “too lenient” towards African populations in Chad. See Bernard Lanne, “Résistances et mouvements anticoloniaux au Tchad (1914–1940),” *Revue Française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer* 80, 300 (1993): 425–442, 432.

4. For the context of rubber collection in the Sangha region under the Popular Front, see Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes, France (CADN), Fonds Brazzaville, 108, Bourges to Gondran (without number), 21 October 1936; the principal study is still Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au Temps des Grandes Compagnies Concessionnaires 1898–1930, Tome 2* (Paris: Mouton, 1972), 487–506.

5. The new interpretations of colonial archival documentation need to follow the conceptual thoughts of Ann-Laura Stoler in her masterful book, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). I have pointed to the ways in which internal administrative

conflicts can be analyzed to get to the social history of forced laborers for Portuguese Angola: see Alexander Keese, "The Constraints of Late Colonial Reform Policy: Forced Labor Scandals in the Portuguese Congo (Angola) and the Limits of Reform under Authoritarian Colonial Rule, 1955–1961," *Portuguese Studies* 28, 2 (2012): 186–200.

6. On the deterioration of the political situation in the Republic of Congo in the late 1990s, which still creates difficult research conditions on the ground with regard to many rural areas outside of Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire, see David Eaton, "Diagnosing the Crisis in the Republic of Congo," *Africa* 76, 1 (2006): 44–69.

7. Specific analysis on the French colonial practices of forced labor has remained relatively rare over the last years. The principal analytical studies on systems of compulsory labor and local reactions are on French West Africa (AOF), not on French Equatorial Africa. See Anthony I. Asiwaju, "Migrations as Revolt: The Example of the Ivory Coast and the Upper Volta before 1945," *Journal of African History* 17, 4 (1976): 577–594; Nancy Lawler, "Reform and Repression under the Free French: Economic and Political Transformation in the Côte d'Ivoire," *Africa* 60, 1 (1990): 88–110; Babacar Fall, *Le travail forcé en Afrique-Occidentale française (1900–1946)* (Paris: Karthala, 1993).

8. For Angola, see Jeremy Ball, *Angola's Colossal Lie: Forced Labor on a Sugar Plantation, 1913–1977* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); for Mozambique, Allen F. Isaacman, "Chiefs, Rural Differentiation and Peasant Protest: The Mozambican Forced Cotton Regime 1938–1961," *African Economic History* 14 (1985): 15–56; Eric Allina, *Slavery by Any Other Name: African Life under Company Rule in Colonial Mozambique* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

9. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Congo*, vol. 2, 487–506; Samuel H. Nelson, *Colonialism in the Congo Basin, 1880–1940* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1994).

10. Kwabena O. Akurang-Parry, "Colonial Forced Labor Policies for Road-Building in Southern Ghana and International Anti-Forced Labor Pressures, 1900–1940," *African Economic History* 28 (2000): 1–25; Roger G. Thomas, "Forced Labor in British West Africa: The Case of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast 1906–1927," *Journal of African History* 14, 1 (1973): 79–103; Carolyn A. Brown, "We Were All Slaves": *African Miners, Culture and Resistance at the Enugu Government Colliery* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003); David Johnson, "Settler Farmers and Coerced African Labor in Southern Rhodesia, 1936–46," *Journal of African History* 33, 1 (1992): 111–128; Opolot Okia, *Communal Labor in Colonial Kenya: The Legitimization of Coercion, 1912–1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012); Andrew Burton and Paul Ocobock, "The 'Travelling Native': Vagrancy and Colonial Control in British East Africa," in *Cast Out: A History of Vagrancy and Homelessness in Global Perspective*, eds. A.L. Beier und Paul Ocobock (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), 270–301.

11. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 108, Gondran, Administrator of District of Sangha, *Rapport du Chef du Département de la Sangha à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général au Sujet des Récentes Inspections de M. l'Inspecteur des Affaires Administratives* (n° 33), 24 October 1936, pp. 4–5.

12. Alexander Keese, “‘Poser au village’: Un régime de travail en transition, relations de pouvoir, et la fin des prestations forcées au Moyen-Congo français, 1935–1958,” in *Trabalho forçado africano: Experiências coloniais comparadas*, Centro de Estudos Africanos da Universidade do Porto (Porto: Campo das Letras, 2006), 349–366.

13. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 108, Gondran, *Rapport du Chef du Département de la Sangha* . . . (n° 33), 24 October 1936, pp. 4–5.

14. André Engambé, *Impôt colonial et résistance des populations du Congo: Les cas des pays téké, mbosi et des peuples de l’interfluve Sangha-Oubangui (1879–1930)* (Paris: Harmattan, 2013).

15. Alexander Keese, “Slow Abolition within the Colonial Mind: British and French Debates about ‘Vagrancy’, ‘African Laziness’, and Forced Labor in West Central and South Central Africa, 1945–1965,” *International Review of Social History* 59, 3 (2014): 377–407; on unfree labor under postcolonial conditions (but without too much analysis on “state labor”), see Mike Dottridge, “Types of Forced Labor and Slavery-like Abuse Occurring in Africa Today: A Preliminary Classification,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 45, 179–180 (2005): 689–712.

16. For the overview of the weak colonial penetration and the impact of the colonial state, see Florence Bernault, *Démocraties Ambiguës: Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon: 1940–1965* (Paris: Karthala, 1996), 32–37.

17. For the broader context, see Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, “The Colonial Economy of the Former French, Belgian and Portuguese Zones, 1914–35,” in *General History of Africa VII: Africa under Colonial Domination 1880–1935*, ed. Adu Boahen (Paris: UNESCO—London—Ibadan—Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1985), 351–382, 360–365.

18. Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Congo*, vol. 2; the long-term perspective can be found in William Gervase Clarence-Smith, “Rubber Cultivation in Indonesia and the Congo from the 1910s to the 1950s: Divergent Paths,” in *Colonial Exploitation and Economic Development: The Belgian Congo and the Netherlands Indies Compared*, eds. Ewout Frankema and Frans Buelens (London: Routledge, 2013), 193–210.

19. André Gide, *Voyage au Congo* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927). For the context of Gide’s criticism and official responses, see Martin Thomas, “Albert Sarraut, French Colonial Development, and the Communist Threat, 1919–1930,” *Journal of Modern History* 77, 4 (2005): 917–955; Richard L. Roberts, “The End of Slavery, ‘Crises’ over Trafficking, and the Colonial State in the French Soudan,” in *Trafficking in Slavery’s Wake: Law and the Experience of Women and Children in Africa*, eds. Benjamin N. Lawrance and Richard L. Roberts (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2012), 65–85, 67–69; and Jonathan Derrick, *Africa’s “Agitators”: Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918–1939* (London: Hurst, 2008), 237–242.

20. Gilles Sautter, “Notes sur la construction du chemin de fer Congo-Océan (1921–1934),” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 7, 26 (1967): 219–299, 243–244.

21. Archives Diplomatiques du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, La Courneuve, France (MAE), DAM, Congo (1973–1978) (323QONT), 56, Pierre Hunt, French Ambassador in the Republic of Congo, to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate of African and Malagasy Affairs, *Le Congo se penche sur son passé*.

(n° 258/DAM), 13 July 1973, p. 3; Archives Municipales de Brazzaville, Republic of Congo (AMB), 6N, Jean-Théophile Ilobakima, *Bulletin Hebdomadaire de Renseignements (Période du 12 au 17 Août 1985* (n° 1351/CUSP-SEC.), 4 September 1985, p. 1.

22. On the theme of obsessions in labor recruitment in the case of Portuguese Angola, see Alexander Keese, “Searching for the Reluctant Hands: Obsession, Ambivalence, and the Practice of Organizing Involuntary Labor in Colonial Cuanza-Sul and Malange Districts, Angola, 1926–1945,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41, 2 (2013): 238–258.

23. For the context, see Fred Célimène and André Legris, *De l'économie coloniale à l'économie mondialisée: Aspects multiples de la transition (XXe et XXIe siècles)* (Paris: Editions Publibook, 2011), 113–116.

24. James P. Daughton, “Behind the Imperial Curtain: International Humanitarian Efforts and the Critique of French Colonialism in the Interwar Years,” *French Historical Studies* 34, 3 (2011): 503–528, especially 519–520.

25. Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence, France (ANOM), GGAEF, 2H/22, Antonetti, Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa, *Lettre privée à M. Antonelli* (without number), December 1927.

26. However, Madingou has not found much interest in historical studies on the Middle-Congo. The Spiritan missionaries reported on the existence of strong “syncretist” movements in the region—the Mpewu Nzambi—but those could not compete with Lassysism in the coastal region or Matsuanism in the Brazzaville region. See Jean Ernoult, *Les Spiritains au Congo: de 1865 à nos jours* (Paris: Congrégation du Saint Esprit, 1995), 257.

27. On conditions of forced road labor in French Equatorial Africa, especially for Gabon, see Christopher Gray, *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa: Southern Gabon, ca. 1850–1940* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 170–176; Libbie Freed, “Networks of (Colonial) Power: Roads in French Central Africa after World War I,” *History & Technology* 26, 3 (2010): 203–223, especially 213–215.

28. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Harquet, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou, *Gouvernement Général de l’Afrique Equatoriale Française—Colonie du Moyen-Congo—Circonscription du Chemin de Fer – Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1928 – 3me Trimestre* (without number), 2 October 1928.

29. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Administrator of Subdivision of Mouyondzi, *[Rapport sur la] Circonscription de Mouyondzi – 2e Trimestre 1931* (without number, first two pages missing), missing date, p. 17.

30. The relationship between “traditional obligations” for chiefs, elders and other dignitaries, and recruitment for colonial forced labor, has only been studied for a small number of examples, and frequently *en passant* as part of larger discussions. For Benin, the former French colony of Dahomey, see Pierre-Yves Le Meur, “L’émergence des ‘jeunes’ comme groupe stratégique et catégorie politique dans la Commune de Ouessè, Bénin,” *Afrique Contemporaine* 214, 2 (2005): 103–122, 110; for the Gban in Côte d’Ivoire and the Mende in Sierra Leone, Jean-Pierre Chauveau and Paul Richards, “West African Insurgencies in Agrarian Perspective:

Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone Compared,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8, 4 (2008): 515–552, 527–528, 537–538.

31. In some cases, the price was also restraint by the administration from interfering with other, “private” systems of bondage, such as within Beembe households. Domestic slaves could be designated as forced laborers for the state. See Benjamin Kala-Ngoma, “L’esclavage domestique chez les Beembe (Congo-Brazzaville) XVIIIe–XXe siècles,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 204 (2011): 945–978.

32. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Harquet, *Rapport Mensuel [Madingou] – 1er Trimestre 1928* (without number), without date, p. 1/1.

33. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Harquet, *Rapport Mensuel [Madingou] – 1er Trimestre 1928* (without number), without date, pp. 1/4–1/5.

34. Moreover, the problem had extended as far as into the border regions with neighboring Cameroun, where some chiefs, of Souanké, had created bush camps of refugees. These chiefs received a considerable amount of presents for their support given to such refugees. See CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 108, Chefdrué, Administrator of Subdivision of Abong-Mbang, to Commissioner of Cameroun (n° 1/cf), 27 February 1929.

35. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Henri Foucher, Administrator of the Subdivision of Chemin de Fer, *Gouvernement Général de l’Afrique Equatoriale Française—Colonie du Moyen-Congo—Circonscription du Chemin de Fer—Rapport Trimestriel—Année 1929 – 2me Trimestre* (without number), without date, p. 3.

36. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Administrator of the Subdivision of Chemin de Fer, [*Rapport*] *Circonscription d[e] Chemin de Fer – 2e Trimestre 1931* (without number), without date.

37. Refugees ran the risk of being drafted into forced labor in the Belgian Congo; see a late overview of such tasks in Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères de la Belgique (MAEB), Archives Africaines, Brussels, Belgium, GG 10089, Gielis, Administrator of District of Bosobolo, *TOE 1943 pour le territoire de Bosobolo (Congo-Ubangi)* (without number), 1 October 1942; on forced labor in and flight from Cabinda, see Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon, Portugal (AHU), ISAU, A2.49.003/46.00337, Américo Batista da Sousa, Inspector of Administrative Affairs, *Província de Angola—Inspeção dos Serviços Administrativos e dos Negócios Indígenas—Relatório da Inspeção ao Concelho de Cabinda* (without number), 1953, pp. 15–18.

38. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Administrator of the Subdivision of Chemin de Fer, *Gouvernement de l’Afrique Equatoriale Française – Colonie du Moyen Congo – Circonscription du Chemin de fer – Rapport Trimestriel—Année 1929 – 4ème Trimestre* (without number), without date, p. 1.

39. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Henri Foucher, Administrator of the Subdivision of Chemin de Fer, *Gouvernement Général de l’Afrique Equatoriale Française—Colonie du Moyen-Congo—Circonscription du Chemin de Fer – Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1931 – 3me Trimestre* (without number), 10 October 1931.

40. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Administrator of the Subdivision of Boko-Songho, [*Rapport sur la Circonscription de Boko-Songho, District du Madingou – 3e trimestre [1933]*] (without number), without date, p. 1.

41. A part of the debate, with regard to the complicated relations between officials and missionaries on Congolese soil, is discussed in Côte Kinata, “Les Administrateurs et les Missionnaires face aux Coutumes au Congo Français,” *Cahiers d’Etudes Africaines* 175 (2004): 593–608, 604.

42. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Administrator of District of Madingou-Mouyondzi, *Rapport sur le District de Madingou-Mouyondzi—Année de 1933* (without number), without date, p. 2.

43. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Capagorry, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou-Mouyondzi, *Colonie du Moyen Congo—Département du Pool—Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi – Rapport Trimestriel – Année 1935 – 1er Trimestre* (without number), 19 April 1935.

44. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Administrator of District of Madingou-Mouyondzi, *Rapport sur le District de Madingou-Mouyondzi—Année de 1933* (without number), without date, p. 2.

45. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 87, Capagorry, Administrator of Subdivision of Madingou-Mouyondzi, *Gouvernement de l’Afrique Equatoriale Française—Région du Moyen Congo—Département du Pool—Subdivision de Madingou-Mouyondzi—Rapport du Deuxième Trimestre 1935* (without number), 27 July 1935, p. 33.

46. On violence by “native guards” in the Middle-Congo, see ANOM, GGAEF, 6Y/5, Turenne, Administrator of Subdivision of the Adoumas, *Note: Impôt* (without number), 11 February 1929, pp. 1–2.

47. Ruth Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked: The Vichy Years in French West Africa* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

48. William Gervase Clarence-Smith, “Grands et petits planteurs de caoutchouc en Afrique (1934–1973),” *Economie Rurale* 330–331 (2012): 88–102, especially 92–93; William Gervase Clarence-Smith, “The Battle for Rubber in the Second World War: Cooperation and Resistance,” in *Global Histories, Imperial Commodities, Local Interactions*, ed. Jonathan Curry-Machado (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 204–223.

49. On “Free French” war politics in French Equatorial Africa, see Eric Jennings, *La France libre fut africaine* (Paris: Editions Perrin, 2013).

50. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 9, Gondran, Inspector of Administrative Affairs of the Middle-Congo, *Note sur la Situation Politique du Département de l’Alima* (without number), 4 March 1944, p. 6.

51. On the lack of cooperation between the French administration in the Middle-Congo, Belgian and Portuguese officials, see ANOM, GGAEF, 2Y/12, Raoul Mary, envoy to Angola, to Government-General of French Equatorial Africa, civil cabinet, *Compte-Rendu de mission* (without number), 14 April 1941, p. 2.

52. The quality of information distributed in rural areas becomes obvious in a number of petitions sent from 1944; for one example, see ANC, GG 376, “Population Indigène Bayaka d’origine Sibiti” to Government-General of French Equatorial Africa (without number), 10 August 1945.

53. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 9, Gondran, *Rapport relatif à de récents exodes de populations à l’intérieur de Département du Niari*. (without number), 21 August 1944, p. 1.

54. Martin Shipway, “Reformism and the French ‘Official Mind’: The 1944 Brazzaville Conference and the Legacy of the Popular Front,” in *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion*, eds. Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 131–151; Tony Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France’s Successful Decolonization?* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 56–61.

55. The Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa, Félix Eboué, had made clear that he did not see a chance for a colonialism in Africa without compulsory labor; see James I. Lewis, “Félix Eboué and Late French Colonial Ideology,” *Itinerario* 25, 1 (2002): 127–160; Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës*, 89.

56. ANOM, GGAEF, 2H/2, Capagorry, Acting Governor of the Middle-Congo, to Administrators of Districts in the Congo (n° 52/MC/APAG-), 21 April 1942, 1–2.

57. Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 67–68.

58. Bernault, *Démocraties ambiguës*, 107.

59. Compare, for AOF, Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 185–202; for AEF, Keese, “Slow Abolition.”

60. ANOM, GGAEF, 2H/2, Menneret, Director-General of Société Minière du Kouilou in Kakamoeka, to Director of Political Affairs of AEF (n° 941/SS), 26 June 1946.

61. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 1, Gondran, Inspector of Administrative Affairs of the Middle-Congo, *Mabirou* (without number), 12 June 1948, p. 10.

62. ANC, GG 88, Government-General of French Equatorial Africa, Service of Social Affairs, *Les Conditions du Travail et la Condition du Travailleur en A.E.F.* (without number), without date.

63. See Gregory Mann, “What Was the *indigénat*? The ‘Empire of Law’ in French West Africa,” *Journal of African History* 50, 3 (2009): 331–353.

64. Migration into Brazzaville is analyzed by Bruce Whitehouse, *Migrants and Strangers in an African City: Exile, Dignity, Belonging* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), who, nevertheless, focuses on West African migrants.

65. CADN, Fonds Brazzaville, 1, Gondran, *Inspection du District de Dongou—Partie Economique* (without number), 19 April 1949.

66. ANOM, GGAEF, 5D/182, Government-General of French Equatorial Africa, Directorate of Political Affairs, to Jean Letourneau, Minister of Overseas France, *Vagabondage* (without number), 26 January 1950, pp. 2–6.

67. On practices of punishing “vagrancy” in British East and southern Africa, see Andrew Burton, *African Underclass: Urbanization, Crime & Colonial Order in Dar es Salaam* (Nairobi: British Institute in Eastern Africa., 2005), 26–27, 38; Burton and Ocobock, “The ‘Travelling Native’”; Paul Ocobock, “‘Joy Rides for Juveniles’: Vagrant Youth and Colonial Control in Nairobi, Kenya, 1901–52,” *Social History* 31, 1 (2006): 39–59; Robert J. Gordon, “Vagrancy, Law & ‘Shadow Knowledge’: Internal Pacification 1915–1939,” in *Namibia under South African Rule: Mobility & Containment 1915–46*, eds. Patricia Hayes, Jeremy Silvester, Marion Wallace, and Wolfram Hartmann (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998), 51–76.

68. ANOM, GGAEF, 5D/182, [*Lettre de Poto-Poto à*] *Haut-Commissaire de l'AEF* (without number), without date.

69. In fact, colonial officials felt they rather had to commit themselves to spectacular infrastructure projects to satisfy, even more than local populations, the Congolese elites; see Stéphane William Mehyong and Robert Edgard Ndong, "L'électrification de l'Afrique équatoriale française (AEF) dans la période de l'après Seconde Guerre mondiale: aménagements hydroélectriques et rivalités interterritoriales," *Revue Historique* 657, 1 (2011): 93–118.

70. Jean-François Bayart, "Hégémonie et Coercition en Afrique Subsaharienne: La 'politique de la chicotte'," *Politique Africaine* 110 (2008): 123–152, especially 136–140.

71. This is due to the particular legacy of violence; see, e.g., Jean-Claude Mayima-Mbemba, *La violence politique au Congo-Brazzaville: Devoir de mémoire contre l'impunité* (Paris: Harmattan, 2008); Patrice Yengo, *La guerre civile du Congo-Brazzaville* (Paris: Karthala, 2005).

72. ANC, PR 64, S. Mambou, Administrator of the District of Mayama, *Région du Pool, District de Mayama—Année 1968—Notice Mensuelle—Mois d'Avril et Mai—Considérations Politiques* (n° 40668/S.M./M.L.), 31 May 1968, p. 1.

73. MAE, DAM, Congo (1973–1978) (323QONT), 57, French Embassy in Brazzaville to French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate of African and Malagasy Affairs, *Ephéméride pour la période du 1er au 15 Mai 1976* (n° 204/DAM), 19 May 1976.

74. Samuel Decalo, "Socio-economic Constraints on Radical Action in the People's Republic of Congo," in *Military Marxist Regimes in Africa*, ed. John Markakis and Michael Waller (London: Frank Cass, 1986), 39–57.

75. Archives Municipales de Brazzaville (AMB), 3N, Techer, Inspector of Administrative Affairs, *Procès-Verbal* (without number), 18 January 1960.

76. AMB, 3N, Bitsinda, Director of Civil Service of Congolese Youth to Mayor of Brazzaville (via Prefect of Djoué) (n° 86A/SC), 12 June 1963.