

Calling All Men: Political Considerations in Southwest Ghana's Gold Mining Industry (1878 – 1912)

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Industrial mining companies initiated a stage of expanding wage labor in Africa. In Ghana immediately succeeding the legal emancipation of slaves in 1874, the first gold mines were being constructed. The Wassaw mines employed thousands of mineworkers from all over West Africa. Among other things, mining entrepreneurs believed that their companies could carry colonial Ghana into a new stage of socio-economic progress. This involved not only the promotion of a free wage labor market, but also instilling Africans with new ideas of industriousness. However, while wage labor was on the rise, labor was more often subcontracted as gangs, as opposed to through individual direct hire. This paper argues that the presence of economy of scale in southwest Ghana stimulated permanent urbanized labor, in conjunction with supporting modified forms of preindustrial labor relations, in particular subcontract labor (voluntary or involuntary). Akan headmen and chiefs, in response to the transforming market, increased their income by supplying contract workers to the mines in exchange for cash payments. At the same time, they focused on production (and arguably on maintaining social power) in their home territories by ensuring that these young men would return home once their contract was over.

Gold mines run by predominantly European management had the potential of giving the colonial state better control over export revenues and the broader labor market after the Scramble for Africa. However, the urgency for the abolition of slave trading, slavery, and debt bondage was weakened by a growing urgency that entailed political expansion and economic growth in the colonies. Although slavery was no longer the dominant mode of production after 1900, the industrial labor market stimulated the persistence of preindustrial labor relations through chiefs and headmen. Using company and administrative records combined with newspaper editorials, I argue that, coinciding with colonial policy surrounding “developmental imperialism”, productivity took priority over free wage labor ideology within the larger scheme of socio-economic progress. However, productive “unfree” labor relations in colonial Ghana did not stop managers, or the state, from seeking more severe strategies to control labor reminiscent of industrial labor history in South Africa.