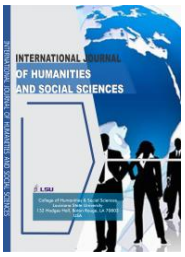
Colonialism and the Evolution of Labour in Eggon Society, 1903 - 1960



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Abstract
This article examines the impact of British colonial rule on the transformation of labour systems in Eggon society between 1903 and 1960, a period marked by conquest, administrative consolidation, and economic restructuring in central Nigeria. Before colonial intrusion, labour among the Eggon was organised around communalism, kinship obligations, and age-grade institutions such as collective farm labour (gaya), rotational house construction, and communal land clearing. These systems sustained subsistence production, reinforced social cohesion, and provided social security through reciprocal obligations rather than monetary exchange. The establishment of colonial administration following the pacification of Eggon territory between 1903 and 1917 fundamentally altered these indigenous labour relations. Colonial policies, particularly cash taxation, compelled Eggon households to seek monetary income, thereby forcing participation in wage labour and cash-crop production. Eggon men were increasingly drawn into groundnut farming for export, road construction, porterage, and service within the Native Administration. Infrastructure development linking Eggon areas to Akwanga and Lafia intensified labour demand, often through coercive recruitment practices sanctioned by colonial ordinances. Drawing on Marxist political economy, the study situates Eggon society within wider debates on colonial labour, proletarianisation, and capitalist integration in Africa. It argues that colonial labour policies produced incomplete proletarianisation, new labour hierarchies, and enduring economic marginalisation. The Eggon case demonstrates how colonial capitalism penetrated rural African societies unevenly and coercively, generating long-term socio-economic consequences that persisted into the post-colonial era.

Keywords: *Eggon Society, Colonialism Labour History, Nigeria, Political Economy.*

I. Introduction

Colonial rule in Africa fundamentally reshaped indigenous systems of production and labour through military conquest, fiscal extraction, and economic restructuring designed to integrate African societies into the global capitalist economy. Across the continent, colonial states reorganised labour to meet imperial demands for raw materials, infrastructure, and administrative manpower, often at the expense of indigenous economic stability. In Northern Nigeria, British colonial administration introduced new political and economic institutions—most notably the Native Administration system and cash taxation—that compelled rural societies to abandon subsistence-oriented labour practices and participate in a monetised economy largely alien to pre-colonial social structures.

Eggon society located in present-day Nasarawa State and incorporated into the Akwanga Division during the colonial period, offers a revealing micro-historical case for examining how colonialism transformed labour relations in a communal and subsistence-based society. Prior to colonial conquest, Eggon labour was organised around kinship networks and age-grade institutions that coordinated collective farming, house construction, and community projects. However, following British pacification of Eggon territory between 1903 and 1917, colonial policies disrupted these systems. The imposition of direct taxation payable in cash forced Eggon households to seek monetary income, drawing men into wage labour, road construction, porterage, and service within the Native Administration as messengers, court clerks, and police. Road-building projects linking Eggon settlements to Akwanga and Lafia further intensified labour extraction, often under coercive conditions sanctioned by colonial ordinances.

While existing scholarship on the Eggon has focused largely on origins, migration, culture, and religion, the history of labour remains relatively understudied. This article analyses the transformation of labour in Eggon society between 1903 and 1960, tracing the transition from communal labour systems to wage, administrative, and coerced labour under colonial rule. It argues that colonial labour policies produced incomplete proletarianisation and entrenched socio-economic inequalities whose effects persisted beyond independence. By situating the Eggon experience within broader African labour historiography, the study contributes to international debates on colonial capitalism and labour transformation, while demonstrating how rural societies were unevenly and coercively integrated into colonial economic systems.

Conceptualizing Colonialism and Labour

Colonialism refers to a system of domination in which a foreign power exercises political, economic, and administrative control over another society primarily for purposes of exploitation. In the African context, scholars have persuasively argued that colonialism was fundamentally an economic project aimed at restructuring indigenous economies to serve the needs of metropolitan capitalism rather than local development. Through military conquest, fiscal extraction, and administrative regulation, colonial states redirected African labour and resources toward imperial markets.

Labour, within this analytical framework, is not merely physical work but a social relation shaped by prevailing modes of production and power relations. In pre-colonial Eggon society, labour was socially embedded and regulated by kinship ties, age-grade institutions, and customary obligations rather than by market exchange. Communal farm labour (gaya), rotational house construction, and collective clearing of farmlands were organised through lineage and age-grade systems, ensuring food security and reinforcing social cohesion. Participation in labour was governed by reciprocity and moral obligation, not wages, and economic activities were inseparable from ritual and social life.

Colonial rule fundamentally redefined these labour relations by transforming labour into a commodity. The imposition of cash taxation and the expansion of colonial administration compelled Eggon individuals to sell their labour power in return for wages or to provide labour under coercive conditions sanctioned by colonial ordinances. Eggon men were increasingly recruited for road construction linking their settlements to Akwanga and Lafia, porterage services for colonial officials, and employment within the Native Administration as messengers, court clerks, and police. These developments detached labour from communal obligations and subordinated it to colonial economic priorities, marking a decisive shift from socially embedded labour to exploitative colonial labour regimes.

II. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Marxist political economy as its analytical framework in order to examine how colonial intervention altered the mode of production and restructured labour relations in Eggon society. Marxist theory provides conceptual tools for analysing how changes in the mode of production generate new forms of labour exploitation, social differentiation, and class formation. Within this framework, colonialism in Africa is understood as the forcible introduction of capitalist relations of production into societies previously organised around communal or subsistence economies.

In Eggon society, this transition occurred without the development of industrial capitalism or indigenous capital accumulation. Instead, capitalist labour relations were imposed through taxation, administrative regulation, and coercive labour recruitment. Eggon households entered wage labour primarily to meet colonial fiscal obligations rather than to accumulate surplus. This produced a distorted form of proletarianisation characterised by dependency on colonial wages, continued attachment to subsistence agriculture, and limited class consciousness. For example, Eggon men who worked as road labourers, porters, or Native Administration employees often returned seasonally to farming, preventing the emergence of a permanent and self-conscious working class.

Marxist political economy thus enables this study to interpret colonial labour in Eggon society as a process of exploitation and peripheral incorporation into global capitalism rather than genuine

economic transformation. The framework also highlights the role of the colonial state as an instrument of labour extraction and surplus appropriation, illuminating how colonial capitalism reshaped rural African societies unevenly and coercively, with enduring socio-economic consequences.

Labour in Pre-Colonial Eggon Society

Before colonial conquest, Eggon society was organised around communal labour systems deeply rooted in kinship, lineage, and age-grade institutions. The household functioned as the primary unit of production, with family heads coordinating the labour of members according to age and gender. Age-grade associations mobilised collective labour for tasks that exceeded individual household capacity, such as clearing new farmlands, constructing houses, repairing village paths, and building granaries. These activities were often organised through rotational labour practices (gaya), which ensured reciprocity and strengthened communal solidarity.

Agriculture formed the backbone of the pre-colonial Eggon economy. Staple crops such as guinea corn, millet, sorghum, and yams were cultivated primarily for subsistence, while livestock rearing supplemented household food security and served ritual and social purposes. Hunting and fishing provided additional protein, particularly during dry seasons, while craft production—iron smelting, blacksmithing, pottery, and weaving—was organised through apprenticeship systems supervised by elders and ritual specialists. Iron tools produced by Eggon blacksmiths were exchanged with neighbouring communities through barter, facilitating limited regional trade without commodifying labour itself.

Labour in pre-colonial Eggon society was socially embedded rather than market-oriented. Participation in communal labour was regulated by custom and moral obligation, and failure to contribute attracted social sanctions rather than economic penalties. Social status derived from age, ritual authority, lineage seniority, and demonstrated service to the community rather than wealth accumulation. Women played central roles in farming, food processing, pottery, and local trade, while men undertook heavier agricultural tasks, hunting, and village defence. These labour arrangements ensured social cohesion and economic sustainability within Eggon society prior to colonial intrusion.

Colonial Conquest and Administrative Restructuring, 1903–1922

British penetration of Eggon territory began in the early twentieth century as part of the wider military and administrative conquest of Northern Nigeria. Located within the strategic hinterland of the Akwanga area, Eggon communities resisted colonial encroachment, employing their knowledge of the rugged terrain and fortified settlements to delay effective control. This resistance prolonged British military campaigns, and full colonial domination was not achieved until about 1917.

Following conquest, Eggon territory was incorporated into the Native Administration system under the Akwanga Division. Colonial authorities introduced new political institutions, including district and village heads, native courts, and tax-collecting machinery, which fundamentally altered indigenous governance structures. Archival records from the Akwanga Division indicate that these administrative changes were designed to facilitate effective control and the mobilisation of labour and revenue. The imposition of direct taxation payable in cash marked a decisive break from pre-colonial economic practices and laid the institutional foundation for the transformation of labour relations.

Native courts and administrative offices required clerks, messengers, and police, creating new forms of salaried labour tied to colonial authority. At the same time, village heads were tasked with supplying labour for public works, including road construction and maintenance, rest-house building, and porterage for colonial officials. These obligations disrupted communal labour systems and redirected human effort toward colonial economic and administrative priorities. By the early 1920s, Eggon society had been firmly integrated into the colonial administrative framework, setting the stage for the widespread monetisation and commodification of labour that characterised subsequent decades.

Colonial Policies and the Transformation of Labour

Colonial taxation constituted the most decisive instrument through which British authorities transformed labour relations in Eggon society. The introduction of direct taxation in the Akwanga Division from the late 1910s compelled Eggon households to secure cash income in order to meet annual tax obligations imposed by the Native Administration. Unlike pre-colonial tribute systems

based on agricultural produce or communal service, colonial taxes were payable exclusively in money, thereby forcing adult males to engage in wage labour or cash-crop production. Archival reports from Akwanga Division reveal that failure to pay taxes often resulted in fines, imprisonment, or compulsory labour, reinforcing coercive participation in the colonial economy.

Administrative labour expanded alongside the consolidation of colonial rule. Eggon men were recruited as district and village heads, court clerks, interpreters, messengers (jakadu), and members of the Native Authority police. These positions introduced salaried employment tied directly to colonial governance and created a small class of African intermediaries whose livelihoods depended on the maintenance of colonial order. While such roles offered limited prestige and income, they also disrupted traditional authority structures by subordinating indigenous leadership to colonial oversight. Administrative labour thus reoriented loyalty and labour away from kinship networks toward the colonial state.

Agricultural labour underwent significant reorganisation as colonial policies promoted cash-crop production, particularly groundnuts, for export through regional markets linked to Kano and Lafia. Eggon farmers increasingly allocated labour to groundnut cultivation at the expense of subsistence crops, integrating the local economy into volatile global commodity markets. Colonial agricultural officers encouraged this shift through extension services and tax incentives, yet provided little protection against price fluctuations, exposing Eggon producers to economic insecurity.

Infrastructure development further transformed labour relations. Road construction linking Eggon settlements to Akwanga, Lafia, and administrative posts relied heavily on forced or semi-coerced labour mobilised through village heads under colonial ordinances. Similarly, the construction of schools, rest houses, and government stations required unpaid or poorly compensated labour, often extracted during peak farming seasons. These demands undermined communal labour systems, disrupted agricultural cycles, and intensified social tensions within Eggon society. Collectively, colonial taxation, administrative employment, cash-crop agriculture, and infrastructural labour redefined work as a commodity, embedding Eggon labour within an exploitative colonial political economy whose effects persisted into the post-colonial era.

Consequences of Colonial Labour Transformation

The restructuring of labour under colonial rule generated profound social hierarchies and inequalities within Eggon society. Whereas pre-colonial status had been derived from age, ritual authority, and kinship affiliation, colonial labour regimes introduced new forms of stratification based on access to wages, administrative positions, and proximity to colonial power. Small African administrative elite emerged, consisting of district heads, court clerks, interpreters, tax collectors, and members of the Native Authority police. These individuals received regular salaries, enjoyed preferential treatment, and often exercised coercive authority over their communities, thereby distancing themselves from traditional communal obligations.

In contrast, the majority of Eggon men were incorporated into colonial labour markets as poorly paid wage labourers, seasonal workers, or peasant producers tied to cash-crop agriculture. Road construction, porterage, and public works in the Akwanga Division were characterised by low wages, harsh working conditions, and frequent coercion, as documented in colonial administrative reports. Women, whose labour remained largely unrecognised by colonial authorities, bore increased burdens as men were drawn into wage labour, leading to disruptions in household production and food security.

Colonial labour policies also intensified labour migration. Unable to meet tax obligations solely through local employment, many Eggon men migrated seasonally or permanently to mining centres on the Jos Plateau, commercial farms, and urban centres such as Kaduna and Zaria. This out-migration weakened communal labour systems, reduced agricultural productivity, and increased dependency on external income sources.

These transformations entrenched structural poverty and dependency within Eggon society. Colonial extraction of labour and resources prioritised imperial economic interests while limiting local capital accumulation and infrastructural investment. The post-colonial state inherited these distorted labour structures, marked by underemployment, reliance on volatile commodity markets,

and persistent socio-economic inequality. The Eggon experience thus illustrates how colonial labour transformation produced enduring patterns of marginalisation that continue to shape livelihoods and social relations in contemporary Nasarawa State.

III. Conclusion

Colonial rule fundamentally transformed labour relations in Eggon society between 1903 and 1960 by dismantling indigenous communal labour systems and imposing capitalist forms of labour through coercive, uneven, and extractive mechanisms. Pre-colonial labour arrangements rooted in kinship, age-grade cooperation, and reciprocal obligations were progressively undermined by colonial taxation, administrative restructuring, and infrastructural demands that compelled Eggon households to engage in wage labour and cash-crop production. These processes redefined labour as a commodity subordinated to colonial economic priorities rather than communal welfare or local development.

The Eggon experience demonstrates that colonial labour transformation did not result in genuine proletarianisation or sustained economic modernisation. Instead, colonial policies produced an incomplete and distorted form of proletarianisation in which Eggon men sold their labour power intermittently while remaining tied to subsistence agriculture and customary obligations. The absence of industrial development, limited wage employment, and reliance on coercive labour practices prevented the emergence of a stable working class or meaningful local capital accumulation. Colonial labour regimes thus entrenched new hierarchies, privileging small administrative elite while exposing the majority of the population to economic insecurity, seasonal migration, and dependence on volatile commodity markets.

The long-term consequences of these transformations extended into the post-colonial era. Patterns of labour migration, rural underdevelopment, and structural inequality that emerged under colonial rule persisted after independence, shaping contemporary socio-economic realities in Eggonland and the wider Middle Belt region. The extraction of labour and resources by the colonial state left a legacy of marginalisation that post-colonial governments have struggled to reverse.

By foregrounding a rural and historically understudied society, this article contributes to international scholarship on African labour history by demonstrating that colonial capitalism penetrated rural communities unevenly and coercively. The Eggon case underscores the importance of micro-historical perspectives for understanding the social consequences of colonial labour regimes and challenges narratives that equate colonial labour transformation with economic progress or modernisation.

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