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A Workman Is Worthy Of His Meat: Labor Disputes, Food and Identity in Colonial Libreville 1860-1900

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In 1873, an Afro-American sailor named William Wilber wrote Presbyterian missionaries in New York from Libreville in the French colony of Gabon. A deaf man who previously had served aboard various whaling ships as a cook, he lamented his misfortune of working for American pastors based out of Libreville.(1) In a letter to American missionary Albert Bushnell, his concerns revolved around his poor rations. Declaring there was no way to cook for aboard and that the pots about the mission vessel *Elfe* were "not good to cook Swill in," he further bemoaned the fact he only had been given a poor supply of rice for a three-week voyage.(2) Disgusted by his treatment, Wilber decided to quit his job particularly since he had to cook food considered to be part of his salary.

He denounced this practice and lauded rations distributed on English ships:

I will tell you - one pound of beef, one and a quarter pound of pork a day which makes two and a quarter pounds of meat per day - English ship or American ship... We get on an English ship besides we do not eat rice every day. We have a Different bean codfish plumb pudding and Rice a day. The six pounds of beef 4 lbs. pork 5. lbs. bread and 19 of rice has had to last me almost four weeks. I will stand no more fooling...

Miller, in separating himself from other Africans, used descriptions of cooking techniques. Kru workers, to his dismay, had used the ship's teapot to cook rice. Finally, he illustrated the better treatment English traders gave to workers by describing the daily diet rather than by mentioning salaries. Traders, trying to attract workers rather than instill moral tenants, paid workers much higher wages and gave better rations than the missions. He snickered, in conclusion, that Bushnell had been taking him for "a bush nigger" by assuming he would put up with such treatment. In response, Reverend Samuel Gillespie declared to his New York superiors that Wilber was fed well and had often eaten as an equal of white missionaries.(3)

Despite Wilber's disrespect towards Africans, many in Libreville shared his selective tastes. In colonial Africa, food consumption and supply were arenas of conflict between Africans and Europeans. Given the recurrent famines and food shortages that took place in various African regions in the early and mid-twentieth centuries, it is no surprise that historians have paid close attention to these issues during various crises. However, debates over African food consumption in urban contexts have not received attention from scholars. In late 19th century

Libreville, capital of the fledging colony of Gabon, numerous struggles took place between the cosmopolitan African community and European state and private employers. Europeans imported foodstuffs such as canned beef, salted pork, rice and even cattle to the port to feed its European residents and African employees.

These debates were part of a larger series of conflicts over European attempts to impose discipline over African workers' consumption patterns and social conduct. Whereas Europeans tried to control what and how Africans ate, different communities often rejected these demands. Workers sought to guard their own manners of eating and their diet. Since rations constituted part of workers' salaries, debate over rations often reflected differing notions of labor value and social status. These divisions, however, do not represent a simple division between "African" and "European" modes of eating. As Daniel Miller among others have noted, the adoption of foreign goods into local cultural practices does not at all mean a simple decline of "tradition."⁽⁴⁾ Rather than simply aping European manners and meals, African participants in labor disputes over food rations actively appropriated imported commodities such as rice and salted beef and used them as a means of constructing identities as workers and townspeople.

These incidents point to the need of placing the introduction of commodities and imported goods in a historical context. A small number of Africanist scholars have recently taken up this challenge. Several scholars have explored the complicated dynamics and controversies surrounding African incorporation of European clothing and soap in daily African practices.⁽⁵⁾ However, the adoption of foreign foods into African diets has not been examined widely save as an example of colonial power over African hearts and mouths. Eno Blankson Ikpe, in his discussion of foodways in colonial Nigeria, argues Western-educated elites wished to follow slavishly British cultural models.⁽⁶⁾ Nancy Rose Hunt reveals how Protestant missionaries in central Congo introduced table manner and imported foods to Africans to instill discipline in their charges.⁽⁷⁾ Other scholars have pointed to the ways European control over commerce introduced foreign foods at the expense of local production.⁽⁸⁾

Although African employees did demand European food in Libreville, their calls for better rations came from their self-identification as workers worthy of better pay. Their work demands placed constraints on their ability to produce food and thus made rations a key component of salaries. As Sidney Mintz has shown, the incorporation of imported foods came from new economic and social constraints as well as the ability of groups to create new "inside" meanings of new foods in everyday practice.⁽⁹⁾ Outside demands on labor and time imposed by European employers as well as local concerns over status fueled debates over rations in Libreville. Rather than simply being pawns in colonial import networks and missionary projects, African urban workers consumed European foods and adopted foreign eating habits as an assertion of their own privileged status.

In explorations of cultural flows in colonial Africa, missionaries have been rightfully presented as crucial agents in the introduction of new tastes and foreign goods. However, the case of Libreville shows how labor migration not influenced by religious teachings influenced tastes and struggles over food. Foreign laborers in Libreville such as Kru workers demanded imported rice and salted fish rather than local foodstuffs for reasons unaffected by church teachings. Their demands came from their identities and experiences as members of a West African port economy that stretched from London to Angola.⁽¹⁰⁾ Thus, work for European employers had a bearing on the adoption of African consumption practices unrelated to missionary domesticity.

Colonial Libreville between c. 1870-1900 offers an interesting context to examine struggles over food consumption for several reasons. First, large numbers of foreign Africans without fields worked as manual laborers and artisans. They could not do without food imports given to them by their European employers and often had different interests than those of local residents. Secondly, local producers often supplied food for the market in limited amount and high prices. With high prices, Africans thus depended greatly on free rations. Coastal and West African residents of Libreville, determined to express their cultural superiority vis-à-vis Africans arriving from the interior, demanded that they be fed rations worthy of their status. Finally, Europeans and Americans in city often held very different notions on how food should be given out to employees. The heterogeneous composition of Libreville's population in the late 19th century demonstrates complexity and divisions that undermine monolithic notions of "Europeans" or "Africans."

African Workers and Food Supplies in Colonial Libreville 1870-1900

To better understand labor disputes over food supply in late nineteenth century colonial Libreville, one needs to place these conflicts in the context of a very diverse workforce.⁽⁹⁾ French naval officers established a post in the Gabon Estuary in 1843 to protect French commercial interests in the region and combat the Atlantic slave trade. They signed treaties with local Mpongwe chiefs who retained a great deal of autonomy until the 1870s. Soon after its establishment, the port languished for several decades culminating in the near-abandonment of the colony during the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. In the following three decades, Libreville acted as the headquarters of French colonial expansion and European trade in Gabon. Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's expeditions into central and southern Gabon began in Libreville. From 1886 through 1904, Libreville was the capital of French Congo. Thus, the town changed from a sleepy backwater to an administrative and commercial center of over 3000 people.

The new burst of colonial expansion into the Gabonese interior brought with it a host of European and African immigrants. One major reason for the arrival of West Africans into the colony was the intransigence of local Mpongwe communities. Since the establishment of French control over the Gabon Estuary in the 1840s, local Mpongwe people had been loath to perform manual labor for Europeans. Preferring to trade independently or work as clerks or agents of trading companies or the French colonial government, they saw unskilled labor as work fit only for their slaves. Though the French suppressed the Atlantic slave trade in the Estuary by the 1850s, domestic slavery remained a firm local institution until after 1900. Masters generally did not permit their slaves, generally brought from Central or Southern Gabon, to work in large numbers for Europeans. Thus, private European firms and the state government depended heavily on a mixed group of West and Central African immigrants.

The largest immigrant communities in the colony were the Kru workers from the southern part of Liberia. Brought in since the 1840s on one or two year contracts, "Krumen" male workers did most of the general labor for state and private firms: unload ships, construction work, clear streets, domestic labor and agricultural labor in small state fields were some of their major tasks. By the 1880s, roughly 300 to 400 generally stayed in Libreville at one time before returning home. Most Krumen only stayed several years on contract and rarely brought their wives. Employers generally paid manual laborers between 15 to 60 francs per month in a combination of money and goods. Unlike Africans making their own living in Libreville, contract workers generally had very little opportunity to grow fields or fish. Thus, they depended greatly on their employers for rations of rice, brandy, tobacco, and salted fish for their daily subsistence. Since local Mpongwe or Fang farmers who brought food to Libreville often did not accept money, the alcohol and tobacco served as currency at the local market.

Local people, though not as dependent on rations as most foreigners, still often received rations. Mpongwe men generally worked as clerks, artisans or agents of European traders. A small number also assisted missionaries; the American Presbyterian mission greatly depended on such Mpongwe as pastor Toko Truman (1824-1892) to spread the Gospel. All of these groups received rations in imported goods as part of their salary. Mpongwe employees, though free, had dwindling control over the increasingly autonomous slave population in Libreville. With women also moving into wage labor or receiving payment as the mistresses of European town residents, Mpongwe men and women depended on rations and food purchased from visiting Fang villagers rather than their own crops and gardens.

Like West African sailors, Mpongwe people had long eaten certain types of European foods. When missionaries and officials visited Mpongwe clan leaders in the 1840s, they were served European meals on plates.⁽¹⁰⁾ Thirty years after Wilson's dinner, a French naval officer ate with the aged Mpongwe clan leader Denis and remarked, "Everything [about the dinner] was the same as in Europe."⁽¹¹⁾ With a long history of trade between passing European traders and Mpongwe middlemen with interior commercial networks, Mpongwe men and women in Libreville were used to serving European foods as a part of business etiquette. Eating and drinking alcohol opened and closed trade discussions.⁽¹²⁾ By offering European food served in ways familiar to foreign guests, Mpongwe men illustrated their wealth and their familiarity with their clients' tastes to improve trade relations. Through these practices, free Mpongwe people had become accustomed to such imports as salted beef and canned goods served as rations for workers.

A variety of European employers hired Mpongwe and Kru workers. British and German firms such as Woermann or Hatton and Cookson hired large number of Krumen and Africans from Sierra Leone and the Gold

Coast. Workers generally preferred the better wages and living conditions of large trading firms to service for the colonial government. The French naval station hired many Krumen and Senegalese to one-year contracts as well as itinerant Fang laborers and Mpongwe clerks. Catholic missionaries employed many skilled laborers at the large Sainte Marie mission. American Protestant missionaries also hired domestic servants and Krumen to maintain the mission grounds. Finally, smaller European trading companies and retail firms hired small numbers of local and foreign Africans. Each set of employers had different policies in regarding rations and food consumption of workers. Africans recognized these differences and often brought them to light in disputes with their employers. The long battle over rations between American missionaries and their Mpongwe staff illustrate how food supplies and their composition were important issues for African workers.

The Scriptures Say The Workman is Worthy of His Meat: Labor Disputes and Food Supplies at the Baraka Mission 1873-1900

The American Presbyterian mission of Baraka in Libreville, founded in 1842, depended greatly on a very diverse workforce for its daily upkeep.(11) Protestant missionaries, with limited success, competed with their larger French Catholic rivals for converts with limited success in Libreville. Their efforts required the assistance of many African workers. Though dwarfed by the large trading companies, the Mission hired Mpongwe preachers and domestic servants, Fang unskilled laborers and Liberian contract workers. Several American missionaries would supervise roughly 30 Africans working at a variety of different tasks from laundry work and kitchen help to unloading supplies from ships docked at the harbor.

American missionaries generally paid these workers in goods once a month. The mission also fed their staff. Joseph Reading, stationed at Baraka in the 1880s, evokes in rich detail how workers were fed his 1890 work *The Ogowe Band*:

At eleven o'clock a single stroke of the bell calls each group of workman or colored mission family to come and get the provisions for the day. There is no regular supply of native [provisions], and the mission must feed everyone in its employ except the mission family itself, which must buy its own food or go without! Many plans have been tried at Gaboon for feeding its employees, but the one now adopted is to keep on hand rice and codfish, with a common grade of salt beef, all of which is imported from England.(12)

This description reveals several major important facts regarding food supply and consumption that posed problems for them vis-à-vis their African workforce. First, they could not depend on a regular supply of African food. Mpongwe slaves and free people sold American pastors local food. However, as missionary Lydia Jones noted in 1879, these sources were far from reliable. "During the dry season of 3-4 months, it is difficult to obtain food in Gaboon," she wrote.(13) Food remained scarce, with several famines in the 1870s, until Fang farmers began arriving regularly to Libreville in the 1890s.

Secondly, they sought to establish a disciplined sense of time and order among their workforce via controls over food consumption. Africans were only allowed to take meals at set times. Breakfast was served at 8 AM and ended at 8:30. Food provisions, mainly English salted codfish or meat, were served at the sound of the 11 o'clock church bell and lunch lasted from 1 to 1:30 PM.(14) Students and workers were prohibited from eating on mission grounds or leaving to eat outside its boundaries by American missionaries.(15) They also were expected to eat in European fashion; missionary teachers taught their charges how to eat with forks, knives and plates.(16) Unlike the Catholic mission, did not maintain large fields to feed their workers and students. They decried their brethren for bribing their followers and not instilling a strong work ethic. Catholic missionaries, able to feed their students and workers, had a much easier time attracting students and laborers. Missionary William Gault noted this fact by stating parents knew that their children would be provided for with the Catholic priests rather than at Baraka.(17) As for themselves, they refused to indulge Africans whom they regarded as utterly indolent.

Given their tremendous lack of success gaining converts, many Americans had little qualms displaying their contempt of the Mpongwe. They felt that these coastal Africans, tempted by the material trapping of Western

clothes and objects, had been enfeebled from trading with Europeans and entering into sexual liaisons with visiting whites.(18) Henry Bachelor gave a typical example of their position:

The Mpongwe folks have, as compared with the other tribes, a 'bad physiognomy.' They are lazy, insolent, proud, brutish, superstitious, and independent in their dependency. They think they are better than any other tribe from the sole fact of being the first traders with white men!(19)

Nearly all Europeans regardless of faith or profession in Libreville regarded the Mpongwe in similar fashion. Though dressed in the latest European fashions and educated by missionaries, they had not been willing in large part to accept the Gospel or the supposed superiority of their French overlords. Thus, American missionaries condemned Mpongwe people for unduly and unruly consumption of European imports.

According to William Walker and other Americans, their demands for aid and better rations only demonstrated their decadence. "Hunger will urge most people to work but women here sit beside the street and cry 'Njanla,' hunger, when they see one passing," Walker wrote, "but they will not work or remit rum and tobacco for food." (20) Thus, missionaries had little interest in aiding their charges. Robert Nassau, who resided in Gabon almost forty years, voiced a common opinion in diary about his flock. "As if the mission was to feed and clothe and bury all these idle people," he wrote after being asked to aid with a funeral in 1895.(21) Accused by African parents of underfeeding their children, missionaries replied, "Their idea of beauty is to have girls grow up the shape of a barrel."(22) Obesity in the view of missionaries thus reflected the supposedly innate sloth of the Mpongwe. This attitude did not endear Africans in Libreville, be it their employees or otherwise, to their cause.

African and Afro-American mission employees, particularly Mpongwe residents, complained of unfair treatment in regards to their salaries and rations. In their letters, they repeatedly tried to separate themselves from Fang arriving from the interior. They fully believed themselves to be equals of Europeans and thus wished equal treatment.(23) Such statements illustrate how food preparation and consumption patterns could be considered expressions of value and treatment. Poor rations and low salaries often irked workers at the mission. As cash and barter exchange existed side by side in the uneven development of currency exchange, rations served as part of wages. Before the 1890s, French money was not regularly used in Libreville. Already unable to compete with wages offered by European traders, Protestant pastors offered workers coupons to be exchanged for goods at the mission. They offered a wide range of goods: beef, hard bread, tobacco, clay pipes, soap, matches, salt, and sugar among other items.(24) However, the relatively small finances of the mission did not allow missionaries to compete with low prices offered by European traders.

These differences became dramatically evident in the correspondence of Ntaka Truman (c. 1841-1894). The first Mpongwe ordained pastor, Truman was unafraid to voice his criticism of American missionaries' racist attitudes. Dependent entirely on the mission rather than family aid, he had served missionaries for over ten years as a preacher.(25) Truman, receiving well less than a quarter of the salary given to American pastors and a third Mpongwe men could earn as artisans or clerks, repeatedly demanded higher wages in the 1870s. Heated quarrels over salaries and the conduct of individual American missionaries led to angry letters from Truman and other converts to the mission board in New York in April 1880.(26) After asking for better pay and that rations not be deducted from his salary, the Mpongwe preacher wrote the missionary headquarters in New York two months later.

Truman, in very colorful language, decried the lack of respect he received from missionaries over food.

The Scriptures say the workman is worthy of his meat. The Gaboon mission say no food to be given people who work in the Mission ever since I joined with the mission here, next August will be 10 years and many times I have complained to the Mission about my ration but they all say no. I must buy my food myself.(27)

Since William Walker and Joseph Reading refused to tell Africans how much the goods they gave out as salary actually cost them, Truman asked that Africans be paid entirely in hard money. He believed that missionaries overestimated the worth of objects given as pay. If Christianity, "which revealed is the greatest thing or religion is revealed to us," he wrote, "how then do our missionaries say invoice prices cannot be revealed to we black

men."(28) Such harsh comments, typical of the embittered Truman, would illicit equally dour responses from his white peers.

Truman's request had a less than impressive reception. In July 1880, Mrs. J. B. Cameron sent a letter that criticized white male pastors and Truman for their demands on mission work. She complained visiting white missionaries expected American women at Baraka to make their meals on a moment's notice. Also, she found it appalling that Ntaka wanted servants to cook his food.(29) William Walker, head of the mission, denigrated the Mpongwe in mid-July. At Baraka, he reported, "food is easy here & laziness flourishes here like the growth of weeds & just as troublesome."(30) Truman was generally seen as arrogant and as addicted to easy living as his non-believing brethren.

Truman, receiving no response from his immediate superiors at Baraka, wrote New York again demanding the situation be changed. In his polemic, he included many specific details regarding rations and salaries.(31) For example, he pointed out missionaries considered 2 bars of soap to be worth a dollar while the traders offered 5 bars for the same amount. Furthermore, the Americans forced Africans to buy their supplies and food from the mission storeroom for prices far higher than elsewhere in Libreville. He added, "This is the worst thing in the mission work...[When] Hatton and Cookson's factory sends traders up to the rivers...he gives them their stores such as beef, rice, biscuits, preserved meat in tins, coffee, sugar and all that is fit to them." Again, rations are presented as an expression of the value of workers; traders understood this far better than Protestant clergymen.

The Mission Board asked the Baraka missionaries to investigate the matter soon afterwards. John Laurie wrote his peers in Libreville in late July 1880 that, "We think that he and other natives who are on the staff of our missionary laborers might well receive such goods at the same rights as are charged to missionaries."(32) Joseph Reading refused to pay Truman in money since it was not commonly used in Libreville.(33) Truman struck back in the following year by writing two angry missives to America. Again decrying the high mission store prices and poor treatment. Again, food played a major role in his argument. "Mr. Walker says what use for a black man to drink coffee and Tea," the Mpongwe pastor wrote, "I thought he came to enlighten the place."(34)

Truman here touched on a central issue in the battle over rations. Protestant missionaries had come to Gabon ostensibly to "civilize" Africans through introducing evangelical Christianity and American forms of consumption in dress, eating and working. By the 1880s, Mpongwe town dwellers consumed European food and wore imported clothing for the most part. However, they did not readily accept Protestant dogma; this refusal led missionaries to view the Mpongwe as a class of 'demi-savages' even worse off than Africans cut off from Europeans altogether. To the missionaries, the fact most of their mission students ended up working for traders was a sign of their weakness for the material trappings of European civilization. Far from being unaware of this disdain, Truman referred to it repeatedly.

By suffering so year after year that young man goes away to the factories to ask for work. He gets his salary and the factory feed him too. That is the reason the young man go away from the mission. If you have a dog and you give that dog enough to eat so there is no room in his stomach to hold anything, that dog would not go... Why, it is because there is no room in his stomach to hold anything. So it is about the mission and young men here in Gabon...(35)

Thus, Truman asserted that Americans alienated potential converts and workers by refusing to respect them as equals in conduct and in salary.

American missionaries remained firm in their refusals throughout the 1880s. Truman, who never heard directly from Laurie, insinuated that Walker and other missionaries never sent his letters. In 1882, he even asked to go to New York to discuss the matter directly with the Presbyterian Mission Board.(36) After numerous refusals, Truman up until his death in 1892 never relented on his demands for higher salaries and free rations.(37) Other Africans shared his views. James Patton, another Mpongwe employed by the mission, expressed his fury over treatment in a diatribe against missionaries in 1889.(38) In a somewhat rambling letter to New York, he attacked missionaries' presumptions over their moral superiority over European traders:

[The missionaries] are nothing but a trader they do more than what the merchant trying to do...See lots of money and goods you are sending to the Gaboon mission what are they doing with it, it is only for their own use. Even the workmen in the yard cannot get their rasha [sic] rights. For an instance There is a certain woman who as a truly believe for Christ...She has no chop to live upon. Her name is Julia Green...Toko Trueman Although he is in sickness bad he was worker for the mission of which he ought to be head under his life time no chop...(39)

Such outbursts, loaded with personal attacks on the Americans, again present access to European imported foods as a sign of respect.

In the end, as a result of these complaints, Americans at Baraka changed their position regarding rations. They requested authorization to pay workers only in money in 1889.(40) However, they continued to make Africans pay for food. When Africans complained, missionaries questioned their willingness to work. When Mpongwe assistant Ovendo Lewis asked for aid, Baraka head William Gault replied, "He demanded somewhat [more] when he found out how much his usual supply of rations cost him. But I told him that he was a man, and that I was tired of giving out food, kerosene oil, etc."(41) Since Lewis' wife had a garden, Gault found Lewis to be lacking in virility. Just as Mpongwe men were presented in missionary accounts as lazy, their demands for food and unwillingness to do agricultural work did not fit missionary constructions of masculinity.

The death of Truman silenced the most eloquent advocate of Mpongwe rights and rations in the Baraka community. No other African mission members wrote the board regarding the problem of rations. However, debates over food supply appear repeatedly in the journal of American missionary Robert Nassau. This pastor spent over 40 years in Africa and supervised the Baraka mission through much of the 1890s. One of the larger thorns in his side was the question of rations and eating habits among his African employees. In his diary, he referred repeatedly to his attempts to control the behavior of his domestic servants.

Nassau governed his cosmopolitan workforce with a fair amount of discipline. Fang residents of Libreville, Kru immigrants, free and enslaved Mpongwe men, and other Liberian contract workers all did various forms of domestic and general labor on the mission. Some were hired by day; others lasted several years. Most at some point felt the American's wrath. Nassau, despite the competition for domestic servants between Europeans in Libreville, did not hesitate to fire workers. A typical entry, written on 29 January 1896, gives a sample of Nassau's style of management. "The day an evil one," he noted after reporting some Fang workers had talked during prayers and grass-cutting.(42) He then chased them off and afterwards whipped a domestic servant.

Nassau tried to force his African employees to respect his policies regarding food consumption. He prohibited Africans from eating save at set dinner and lunch times. When he caught workers eating during work, he threw their food away and smashed their plates.(43) In April 1895, several Bassa laborers from Liberia brought food to work that Nassau promptly threw away. They walked off the mission the next day.(44) Nassau became convinced they tried to set a spell on him after finding a dead frog at his doorstep three days in a row. When the missionary caught a domestic servant cooking for himself in the mission kitchen, he punished the African.(45) The American's attempts to enforce his sense of ordered time and eating practices did not help him keep workers.

Rations and mission supplies created several types of problems for Nassau and his workers. In the early 1890s, food supplies to the mission were fairly irregular. Fish, in particular, does not seem to have arrived fairly often. As a result, Nassau served his workers salted codfish to make up for it. His African employees disliked the imported fish enough to quit working for Nassau on occasion.(46) When Nassau tried to offer more money instead of rations, workers appear to have rejected his offer.(47) Daily workers often stole breadfruit and oranges from the mission gardens.(48) In August 1895, several former employees robbed the mission cellar of food supplies.(49) Some students and workers left mission property during working hours of school to find provisions elsewhere.(50) Africans thus challenged attempts by Nassau to control how and when they ate food.

American missionaries, by the late 1890s, had largely given up on new evangelization efforts in Gabon. Due to the strong opposition of the French government to teaching in English, their schools were run by visiting French and Swiss teachers. Furthermore, their inability to combat the influence of European traders or Euro-African sexual relationships made them consider Libreville a spiritual wasteland. "I most emphatically object to [being

stationed] at Gaboon [Libreville]...I couldn't name a spot in America that has more Gospel privileges and less Gospel fruit than Gaboon," one American missionary wrote in 1892.(51) With more success in Southern Cameroon after 1890, Presbyterian missionaries slowly moved out of Gabon and left the Baraka mission post vacant from c. 1906 onwards. The Baraka mission was officially ceded to French Protestant missionaries in 1913 but Americans had largely abandoned the mission a decade earlier. Thus, their attempts to rigidly monitor and control African workers ceased entirely.

Protestant missionary attempts to control and impose their food consumption patterns on Africans thus encountered various forms of opposition. Just as educated Mpongwe demanded respect that was to be reflected in food supplies, common laborers left the mission when missionaries tried to control how and what they ate. Thus, rations and eating habits became an arena of conflict over how the behavior of African workers. Other Libreville employers, less determined to impose notions of discipline and individual responsibility, did not encounter the same type of difficulties. European traders and the French government were willing on many occasions to be more generous with rations as a means of attracting workers than the American mission. However, rations would appear to be a point of conflict between workers and European employers. In the case of Kru migrant workers, generally dependent on rations, the composition and quantity of food supplies was a source of many labor disputes.

Milk Be Fit Only For Piccaninny, I No Be Picanniny: Kru workers, Rations and Labor Disputes 1860-1890

From the original establishment of French troops in Gabon in 1843, workers from the Kru coast had handled many forms of menial labor for public and private employers. Though a few maintained fields, most arrived without family members. Burdened with a heavy workload, Kruman could not maintain fields for the most part. Generally, between 200 and 400 Kruman lived in Libreville; this was a large group given that only 3000 or so people lived in the town.(52) Signed to one-year contracts following the lunar calendar, they were housed and fed by European companies and the French colonial government.(53) As the previous section illustrates, Mpongwe workers considered European traders to be more equitable in distributing food to their workforce. However, the case of Kru workers often demonstrated this opinion was not always the case.

Kru workers in Gabon often protested regarding their rations. Unlike the Mpongwe, however, these workers generally were illiterate. They thus could not write voluminous letters or contact people outside of Gabon as did some in the Libreville community. Also, their demands differed somewhat from African employees of the Protestant mission. From the scattered source materials available, it is the composition of rations that mattered most to Kru workers. Through their refusal to eat plantains or manioc, they sought to separate themselves from Gabonese Libreville residents. They disliked other foods as well that they associated with local people. Around 1900, one Kruman told a Protestant missionary, "Milk be fit only for piccaninny, I no be picanniny."(54) Furthermore, the fact the local government depended heavily on Kruman meant that their demands were more likely to be respected than those of Baraka mission employees.

Two British travelers, the famed Richard Burton and his rather obscure compatriot Winwood Reade, visited Libreville separately in 1862 and 1863. In search of gorillas and adventure, they hired Kru workers to handle domestic chores and portage.(55) Both men admired the work ethic of Kruman especially in comparison to local Mpongwe guides and assistants. They also observed that their workers were very concerned about the composition of their rations. These Englishmen encountered problems in part as a result of food for their workers.

Both travelers faced Kru workers' demands for rations similar to those given by Mpongwe employees. Reade noted that his Kru workers did not enjoy long travels outside of Libreville and preferred set schedules with regular rations.(56) Their concerns undid in part Reade's plans to wander the coast of Gabon. When Reade asked his Kru workers to travel with him to Corisco, a small island roughly 100 miles away from Libreville, he received a rude response. One of his workers told him, "Mass'r! We go bush with you, paddle plenty. Mosquito bite we too much. We no catch good chop [food] there. S'pose Kruman no chop fine, he no fit work there - for true."(57) Another told Reade with scorn that the island was only fit for "bush niggers" and was bereft of

European traders. When Reade refused to offer them enough food and money for their liking, they accused the Englishmen as being as poor as missionaries.

This incident offers several points of interest regarding rations. Just as William Miller use food as a means of separating himself from Krumen, these workers sought to distinguish themselves from other Africans through "chop." Secondly, rations as well as wages were criteria for accepting European employers. Finally, Krumen had enough leverage to choose between different European employers. Richard Burton ran into the same type of problem during his 1862 stay in Libreville. He found that colonial officials were often more respectful of Krumen than English traders.

A Kruman, offended by a ration of plantains when he prefers rice, runs to the Plateau and lays some fictitious complaint before the Commandant. Monsieur summons the merchant, condemns him to pay a fine, and dismisses the affair without even permitting a protest. Hence, impudent robbery occurs every day.(58)

Twenty years later, a French officer encountered similar skirmishes over rations with his Kru workers. "For a futile question of food, did not my men want to assault me in broad daylight in Libreville?"(59) Far from being insignificant, Kru workers were willing to use various strategies to ensure they received their due in rice and brandy.

Commandants of Gabon, unable to attract Mpongwe workers to their service for menial labor, knew well that they needed to treat Kru workers with care. Otherwise, they would on finishing their contract tell other Kru villagers not to accept contracts from French vessels. Without Krumen, the administration suffered greatly from a severe lack of manpower. The administration thus acted in many instances to punish English and French residents of Libreville who treated their workers poorly and did not feed them the standard ration. Several incidents in the following twenty years illustrate the importance of food for Kru employees.

In the mid-1870s, a small cohort of American, British and German traders set up small firms to buy ivory and redwood brought by Africans to Libreville. With the recent arrival of Fang clans engaged in near-constant feuds with each other and Mpongwe traders, bloodshed and intra-clan warfare became endemic difficulties in the Gabon Estuary. In this Wild West environment of violence, European traders often tortured or beat their Kru workers.(60) Many times, they did not receive wages or much food; one small American trader did not feed his workers for months.(61) In response to these attacks, Europeans would often be jailed and expelled from the colony.

Determined to curry favor with skilled Kru workers, the French administration paid heed to Krumen complaints about their rations. Krumen generally received brandy, 500 grams of rice, salt, tobacco leaves and salted fish or pork each day.(62) When the local administration to save money fed Krumen manioc, the situation became difficult. A French naval captain assigned to recruit Kru workers in 1882 wrote to his superiors:

I was asked to promise that the Krumen be given rations of bread or rice instead of manioc. The Krumen that I brought complained about the food. 'In the factories,' they said, ' we get rice and if the French government gives manioc, they will not get anymore Krumen anywhere on the coast.(63)

The captain added that, given the fierce amount of opposition to manioc, that the Commandant of Gabon should follow this request. In this case, Krumen workers threatened the French government just as other Krumen had used state officials against local traders. When the local administration attempted to feed Krumen manioc in 1887,(64) other Kru workers raised similar threats.(65) French officials thus generally ordered that rice be paid to their Kru staff.(66)

Thus, Krumen workers succeeded to impose their diet on European employers. Aware that European traders and the colonial administration could not enough manpower among the local population, they threatened to stay out of Gabon unless their demands were met. From the limited sources available, they appear to have used food consumption as a way of maintaining a separate identity from other Africans in Libreville. Their strategies were more successful than the written appeals of Africans at the Baraka mission. Whereas mission workers could be

replaced and remained in Libreville, Kru workers were irreplaceable until the late 1890s. Instead of labor troubles, political strife between the Liberian government and Kru villages after 1900 led to the end of Kru contract labor in Libreville.

Conclusion

Food consumption and rations often were issues of major concern to workers and employers in late 19th century Libreville. Africans unable to maintain fields and feed themselves naturally were the most concerned with how they obtained food. However, food consumption also served as a cultural marker Kru workers and Mpongwe wage laborers used to separate themselves from other Africans in Libreville. For both these reasons, workers struggled to control the types of food available to them and how they could eat. In turn, European employers held different positions regarding food distribution. Whereas American missionaries wished to use food policies as part of a larger project of instilling individual discipline, state officials and traders simply wished to sate workers and attract others to their service. Various African and European employers and consumers had different strategies and aims in mind regarding food consumption. Thus, food struggles in Libreville do not fit well into a simple division of collaboration or resistance. Instead of monolithic notions of African workers or European employers, great care must be given to distinguish various groups in labor conflicts to clearly understand their motives and actions.

These protests give a glimpse of the complex incorporation of European goods into local food consumption patterns in Africa. Though Protestant missionaries may have derided Mpongwe employees as mere mimics of Europeans, employees stressed imported rations signified their value as workers that deserved better treatment than uneducated people. Furthermore, these laborers faced the practical necessity of eating without time to tend to crops in a town where food scarcity struck regularly. Thus, larger economic and social limits combined with racial debates and a new urban identity to spark dissent. Town workers griping over rations challenged missionary attacks on African consumption by arguing for the right to eat and be paid in equal measure as white employers.

The experience of Kru workers also demonstrates how migrant workers used food to separate themselves from others as well as their better bargaining position. Although their positions are less easy to trace than Mpongwe mission staff, Kru sailors and laborers lobbied for what they deemed as just treatment by good rations. Instead of being accustomed to European foods by missionaries, they called for foods such as rice they consumed at home as well as prepared foods such as salted beef. Though labor constraints imposed upon them restricted their diets and brought in new foods, they struggled to shape their meals that better suited their tastes and recognized their value to European and American employers in Libreville. Unlike Mpongwe workers, European employees held Kru laborers in high esteem and thus were more willing to accept their demands.

Workers' battles with employers over rations were not bound by simple divisions between "African" and "European" eating habits and consumption patterns. In the cosmopolitan town economy, Africans readily adapted various European foods while endowing them with new social meanings. Laborers also presented their views on the use of food as a commodity. Whereas employers wished to set monetary values on foodstuffs given as salaries, workers challenged these assessments and fought for better treatment. Consumption of selected European goods thus became a part of town and worker identities. Strife over rations thus reflected a number of debates over consumption, value and power that divided Africans and Europeans in a colonial setting.

Endnotes

1 Wilber wrote a series of letters complaining about missionaries. In turn, several American pastors bemoaned his deafness and his inability to work competently. See Africa Letters 1837-1903, Foreign Missions Board of the Presbyterian Church in the USA [PCUSA Archives], Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 11, Samuel Gillespie

- to Dr. Laurie, 12 June 1872; Rev. Murphy to Dr. Laurie, 1 August 1872; William Wilber to Dr. Laurie, 2 February 1873; William Wilber to Dr. Laurie, 8 March 1873. 2 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 11, William Wilber to Albert Bushnell, letter #494, no date [1873]. 3 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 111, Rev. Samuel Gillespie to Dr. Laurie, letter #447, no date [April 1873]. 4 Daniel Miller, "Consumption and Commodities," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995), pp. 144-147.
- 5 Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 154-172; Hildi Hendrickson, "Bodies and Flags: The Representation of Herero Identity in Colonial Namibia," in *Clothing and Difference: Embodied Identities in Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, ed. Hildi Hendrickson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 213-244; Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revolution and Revelation: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 218-273.
- 6 Eno Blankson Ikpe, *Food and Society in Nigeria* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1994), pp. 84-89.
- 7 Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 120-123.
- 8 Igor Cusack, "African Cuisines: Recipes for Nation Building?," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13 (2000), pp. 208-209. 9 Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 17-32.
- 10 A rich literature on Kru workers, a cornerstone of West African naval labor in the 19th and 20th centuries has been written by scholars for 30 years. For general information on Kru societies and worker conditions as sailors and workers, see George Brooks, *The Kru Mariner in the Nineteenth Century: An Historical Compendium* (Newark, Del.: Liberian Studies Association in America, 1972); Christine Behrens, *Les Kroumen de la Côte Occidentale d'Afrique* (Talence: Centre d'Études de Géographie Tropicale, 1974); Ronald Davis, *Ethnohistorical Studies on the Kru Coast* (Newark, Del.: Liberian Studies, 1976); Mary Jo Sullivan, "Settlers in Sinoe County, Liberia, and Their Relations with the Kru, c. 1835-1920," Unpublished Dissertation, Department of History, Boston University, 1978; Jane Martin, "Krumen 'Down the Coast': Liberian Migrants on the West African Coast in the 19th Century," African Studies Center Working Paper, Boston University, 1982; and Diane Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers Since the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999).
- 11 For a general overview of American missionaries in Libreville, see David Gardinier, "The American Presbyterian Mission in Gabon: Male Mpongwe Converts and Agents," *Journal of Presbyterian History*, 69 (1991), pp. 61-70 and David Gardinier, "The American Board (1842-1870) and Presbyterian Board (1870-1892) Missions in Northern Gabon and African Responses," *Africana Journal* 17 (1998), pp. 215-234.
- 12 Joseph Reading, *The Ogowé Band* (Philadelphia: Reading and Co., 1890), p. 181.
- 13 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 18, Lydia Jones to John Laurie, 21 November 1883.
- 14 Reading, *Ogowé*, pp. 181-182.
- 15 Robert Nassau, *Tales Out Of School* (Philadelphia: Allen, Lane and Scott, 1911), pp. 35-36, 48.
- 16 Robert Milligan, *The Fetish Folk of West Africa* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1912), pp. 201-203.
- 17 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 15, William Gault to John Gillespie, July 16 1887.
- 18 K. David Patterson, "The Vanishing Mpongwe: European Contact and Demographic Change in the Gabon River," *Journal of African History*, 16 (1975), pp. 217-238.
- 19 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 14, H. M. Bachelor to Dr. Laurie, 14 July 1880.

- 20 William Walker Papers [WWD], State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Box 3, William Walker Diary 21 September 1881 entry.
- 21 Robert Nassau Diary [RND], Archives Nationales du Gabon, Libreville, Volume VIII (July 1892-July 1895), 15 April 1895 entry.
- 22 Jane Preston, *Gaboon Stories*, (New York: American Tract Society, 1872), p. 31.
- 23 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, reel 18, William Gault to John Gillespie, 16 July 1887.
- 24 Reading, *Ogowe*, p. 205.
- 25 Gardinier, "Converts," pp. 63-67.
- 26 Ibid., p. 65.
- 27 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 14, Ntaka Truman to Dr. John Laurie, 1 June 1880.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 14, Mrs. J.B. Cameron to John Laurie, 22 July 1880.
- 30 WWD, Box 1, Correspondence 1879-1883, William Walker to Alfred Walker, 22 July 1880.
- 31 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 14, Ntoko Truman to John Laurie, 31 July 1880.
- 32 Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Selected Documents and Historical Data, Gaboon and Corisco Mission, 1833-1964, John Laurie to the Gaboon and Corisco Mission, 28 July 1880.
- 33 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 14, Joseph Reading to John Laurie, 23 October 1880.
- 34 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 15, Ntaka Truman to Dr. John Laurie, 10 October 1881.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 WWD, Box 3, William Walker Diary, 17 February 1882 entry.
- 37 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 19, Ntaka Truman to John Gillespie, 5 March 1890.
- 38 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 19, James Patton to John Gillespie, 18 December 1889.
- 39 Ibid. All grammatical errors are found in the original source.
- 40 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 19, J. Reading, B. Briar, W. Gault to Board of Foreign Missions, 25 September 1889.
- 41 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 19, William Gault to Joseph Gillespie, 19 February 1890. The underline is found in the original document.
- 42 RND, 29 January 1896 entry.
- 43 RND, 23 May 1894 and 4 December 1894 entries.
- 44 RND, 2 April 1895 entry.

- 45 RND, 1 July 1895 entry.
- 46 RND, 1, 25 and 26 September 1894 entry.
- 47 RND, 1 October 1894 entry.
- 48 RND, 11 July 1894, 1 and 23 May 1895 and 11 October 1895 entries.
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- 50 RND, 25 October 1894 entry; Nassau, *Tales*, p.37.
- 51 PCUSA Archives, Stanford University Microfilm, Reel 20, W.S. Bannerman to John Gillespie, July 20 1892.
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- 55 William Winwood Reade, *Savage Africa*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1864), pp. 78-79; Richard Burton, *Two Trips to Gorilla Land and the Cataracts and the Congo*, vol. 1 (London: Sampson, Law and Searle, 1876), pp. 13-18.
- 56 William Windwood Reade, *The African Sketch-Book*, vol. 1 (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1873), pp. 46-47.
- 57 Ibid., pp. 47.
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- 60 A veritable wave of beatings and assaults by Europeans on Kru laborers took place roughly from 1875 through the early 1880s. A full discussion of the brutal treatment many Kru workers received is outside the scope of this essay. A good sample of the cases can be found in Archives Nationales Section Outre-Mer [ANSOM], Aix-en-Provence, Série 2B28, Commandant du Gabon to Ministre des Colonies, 23 septembre 1876.
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- 62 ANSOM 2B11, Commandant du Gabon to Ministre des Colonies, 13 novembre 1882; E. Blim, "Le Congo Francais," *Bulletin de la Société Commerciale du Harve*, 1892, pp. 257-258.
- 63 AN FM SG Gabon XIV-1, Capitaine Cornut-Gentille to Commandant du Gabon, 28 octobre 1882.
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- 65 AN FM SG Gabon XIV-1, Lt. de Montferrand, Capt *Ariège* to Ministre de la Marine, 25 mars 1888.
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