

BOOK REVIEW

Cassandra Mark-Thiesen. *Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital: Mechanized Gold Mining in the Gold Coast Colony, 1879–1909*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018. xii + 217 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$110. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-58046-918-0.

Throughout the first decades of British colonial rule in the Gold Coast, dozens of European firms set up mining operations in Wassa, an area in the southwestern part of the colony. During gold rushes from 1879–85 and 1900–05, however, Wassa's low labor density, locals' aversion to underground work, and the colonial administration's disinterest in developing the colony's mining sector mired the emergence of a wage labor market. Other scholars have established that expatriate-owned mining companies in the Gold Coast faced difficulty attracting African laborers during the early colonial era, yet *Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital* adds to the literature on mining and labor relations in West Africa by analyzing the recruitment mechanisms that enabled foreign firms to employ and retain sufficient workforces amid capitalist intensification from 1879 to 1909. By deepening our understanding of the actors and institutions involved in mobilizing labor after the outlawing of slavery in the Gold Coast in 1874, Cassandra Mark-Thiesen sheds light on the economic, political, and socio-cultural factors that motivated people from within and beyond the Gold Coast to work in the Wassa mines.

Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital encompasses five chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. Mark-Thiesen begins by introducing individual leaders of the late-century expansion of Wassa's mining sector, starting with entrepreneurs wishing to secure speculators' patronage during the first gold rush, followed later by professional miners who left the Rand during the Anglo-Boer War and who "South Africanized" (46) Wassa mining. The colonial administration's persistent apathy with regard to the mining sector prompted expatriate managers to rely on Liberian intermediaries who recruited gangs of Kru men to work their concessions. As Chapter Two explains, these recruiters, who worked on behalf of a specific company but operated mostly outside the purview of European managers, imbued the contract work with prestige by, for example, offering advances and donning regalia when recruiting in Liberia. Upon arrival at the mines, these recruiters were responsible for ensuring the welfare, training, and disciplining of

their labor gangs. Drawing on correspondences between workers and their families, Mark-Thiesen shows that recruits could glean wealth and respectability from their employment. European managers, meanwhile, appreciated that the system minimized their direct obligations to employees. These webs of dependencies between laborers, recruiters, and firms, Mark-Thiesen argues, served to bridge “traditional” and “modern” employment relations (81). By reconstructing and personifying this system, moreover, her account redresses others that have obscured the rationality and aspirations of workers by overstating recruiters’ coerciveness (8–10).

The second half of *Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital* examines the actors and institutions that filled the void left in the Wassa mines’ labor supply chain after circumstances in Liberia in the 1890s restricted recruiters’ activities there. Mark-Thiesen shows that the entrance of local recruiters, who did not affiliate with a particular company, made it possible for workers, including women, to leverage their scarcity and expertise for better terms of service. Rising labor costs led a colonial official sympathetic to the mines, namely F.W.H. Migeod of the government transport department, to attempt to foster more cooperation among the mines. In 1902, European mine managers formed the Gold Coast Mine Managers’ Association, modeled after the Transvaal Chamber of Mines, and called for the importation of Asian indentured laborers and the replication of South Africa’s pass law system, for which Migeod also advocated. Ultimately, the Government House in Accra refused to endorse these controversial and costly measures, yet Mark-Thiesen’s coverage of the debates surrounding them helps to illuminate why the Gold Coast’s labor policies differed from policies elsewhere in the British Empire. In the final chapter, Mark-Thiesen offers a cursory summary of the state’s system of coercively recruiting workers from the Northern Territories from 1905 until 1909, at which point the government instead sanctioned the institutionalization of indigenous recruitment.

As a whole, *Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital* reveals the interpersonal relations, economic and sociocultural calculations, and some of the colonial, regional, and global factors that influenced the development of the Gold Coast’s wage labor market. Yet in places Mark-Thiesen’s analysis is hurried and largely disconnected from other relevant developments in the Gold Coast, such as the rise and fall of the timber and rubber industries, the commencement of cocoa cultivation, and the activities of the Aborigines’ Rights Protection Society, all of which influenced the labor market and the government’s involvement with it. This in part derives from the book’s focus on itinerant actors whose ties to the Gold Coast were typically tenuous. Consequently, the reader should not expect to gain more than a passing sense of Wassa itself or work in mechanized gold mines there. Nevertheless, scholars of West African economic history and global labor history will find that *Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital* offers valuable insights into the relational interstices of global capitalism, colonial governance, and African societies.

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For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Abdullah, Ibrahim. 1992. "Profit versus Social Reproduction: Labor Protests in the Sierra Leonean Iron-Ore Mines, 1933–38." *African Studies Review* 35 (3): 13–41. doi:10.2307/525126.
- Akurang-Parry, Kwabena O. 2003. "To Wassa Fiase for Gold: Rethinking Colonial Rule, El Dorado, Antislavery, and Chieftaincy in the Gold Coast (Ghana), 1874–1895." *History in Africa* 30: 11–36. doi:10.1017/S0361541300003120.
- Naanen, Benedict B. B. 1991. "'Itinerant Gold Mines': Prostitution in the Cross River Basin of Nigeria, 1930–1950." *African Studies Review* 34 (2): 57–79. doi:10.2307/524228.