

The Background to Trade Union Movement in Nigeria

by

B. C. EGBOH

Dept. of History & Archaeology, University of Nigeria

The Nigerian Traditional Economy And Its Labour Force

EVERY developed or underdeveloped country always has its labour force which may be skilled, semi-skilled or completely unskilled. The level of skill depends on the stage of social and economic development attained by the country in question. The labour force draws its nourishment from the type of economy which has been established in the land. The form of economy from which labour derives its sustenance may be purely agricultural or industrial.

Before the introduction into the area now known as Nigeria, of British Colonial Administration and money economy, primitive subsistence agriculture was the mainstay of the 'national' economy. Since little appears to be known of the character of labour under the traditional economy, there is need to delve into this simple economy to discover the sources of its labour, the general organisational pattern of this labour force and its remuneration.

As the economy was one of mere subsistence, the ultimate aim of every family head in the society was self-sufficiency. His main endeavour was to raise from his farm food crops which would be sufficient for himself and his family throughout the year. In order to achieve this prime objective, he had to adopt the type of agricultural system which would best serve his purpose and he comfortably found this in the mixed farming pattern which is still popular in Nigeria today. Under this mode of farming, the farmer's purpose is to make the maximum use of the piece of land he is able to clear, by planting on it as many kinds of crops as do well in the locality. In many parts of Iboland for instance, it is not uncommon for one to encounter farm-lands on which grows not only yam, the traditional main crop, but also cassava, maize, melon, pumpkin, and various bean varieties. There is therefore a complete absence of agricultural specialisation, the advantages of which cannot be conferred by the all-purpose primitive system described above.

One may wish to know how the farmer provides labour for his various farm operations. "Before the adoption of money exchange economy, peasant farming involved only customary forms of labour and even today a considerable portion of all agricultural services in Africa is rendered in this

way.”¹ The chief source of this labour is “the farm family which consists of the farmer, his wife or wives, children and such other persons who stay in his house or houses and depend upon him or work with him.”² An illustration of a representative simple farm family may be drawn from Yorubaland. Here as in many parts of the country the “farm family consists of a man, his wife and their children,”³ but “since polygamy prevails, the most common farming unit is the ‘compound’ family consisting of several simple or compound families who live together in one home. Sometimes the members of an extended family may live in separate homes and the basic tie is generally one of blood. The able-bodied members of the family are essentially workers who assist the family head in his farming enterprise.”⁴

It is thus clear that in the traditional Nigerian society, whether in its simple or extended form, the family is the main source of agricultural labour. This need for farm labour partly explains the motive behind the insatiable urge, under the old social order, to acquire more and more wives to rear as many children as possible. A family head with many wives and children, may never lack an adequate labour supply completely under his own control. The larger his family, the greater will be the acreage under cultivation and the greater the acreage cultivated and harvested, the more the concentration of his wealth. All these factors—the size of the family, manpower and the economic power resulting from it—help, under normal circumstances, to determine the social and political status enjoyed by a family head in the society to which he belongs.

If the family were to be the only available labour source, the burden of agricultural work on the members would perhaps be unbearable and this might place an inevitable limitation on the amount of farm work to be carried on by a family team. For the purpose of easing the pressure of work on members of the family and for the possible extension of the acreage under cultivation, other forms of traditional labour exist. Throughout African rural communities, and in West Africa in particular, work is done by organised groups within the frame-work of the family labour system.⁵ Under this group system, “a number of farmers may help one another on a sort of relay basis..... In Yorubaland,.....notably around Ilaro, such a group is called the ‘aro’ or ‘owe’⁶ and is used not only for farming but also for house building.”⁷

¹ *African Labour Survey*, (I.L.O., Geneva, 1958), p. 65.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.* See also C. K. Meek, *Land Tenure and Land Administration in Nigeria and the Cameroons*, (H.H.S.O. London, 1957), p. 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ In Owo district of Ondo Province, it is called ‘egba’ or ‘otu’ : in Iboland, it is called ‘igba onwo oru.’

⁷ *African Labour Survey*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

THE BACKGROUND TO TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA

There is another form which bears close relationship to the one just described. In many parts of the country, "members of an age group.....work in turn according to a roster fixed by a meeting of the age group on farms of other members. As the age group may contain from 90 to 200 members, this system of mutual aid provides much more labour and imposes greater obligation on individuals⁸ than its counterpart to which reference has already been made.

This reciprocal group labour has a simple variant which may be practised by two or more workers. In Iboland it is common among young people of the same age group engaged in farm weeding or similar operations. The persons interested in this form of group work are usually friends or acquaintances who have mutual trust in themselves. When the work agreement which is usually an oral affair, is finalised, they work in turns in each other's farm. Its distinguishing characteristics are : first the work arrangement is made on daily basis ; this means that the rotational work operations in the farms of those concerned should normally be completed within the day during which the bargain is made ; secondly, the work is conducted on a piece basis. To each member in the contract, an equal amount of work is always assigned and he is expected to complete it before his own turn. Each member claims from his neighbour as much as he has performed in his neighbour's farm ; thirdly, no feeding arrangements are made in respect of this sort of labour contract.

If a farmer does not wish to employ any of the two closely related mutual labour arrangements, he is at liberty to use what may be called casual labour. Under this, "the peasant farmer in need of workers to perform an operation approaches a few farmers (usually friends or acquaintances, though not necessarily so) and requests their assistance. If they agree and can find the time, they come to work with him on his farm."⁹ This system represents an elementary form of contractual labour common in a simple agricultural economy and may appear indistinguishable from the reciprocal group work system which has earlier been considered. It however differs from it in this respect : "whereas group labour is more or less organised and the participants help one another in turn, casual labour is entirely temporary and no reciprocal aid is expected."¹⁰

Another important source of labour supply for wealthy farmers in the pre-colonial era, is the bond system. A situation may arise in which a man finds it difficult if not impossible to meet his family commitments. It may be that he has no means for the provision of bride-price which before the introduc-

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

tion of money was paid in kind or in labour or he is too poor to perform the burial ceremony rites of his deceased father or relative. Under such circumstances he may be forced to fly to the patronage of one of the wealthier members of his local community. The needy peasant farmer agrees to be the bondsman of his patron who thereupon undertakes to furnish him with all the means necessary for the discharge of his obligations. His agreement to be his creditor's bondsman commits him to a contractual agricultural or household service for part or every day of the week, for his lord, the creditor until he is in a position to return in full the loan which may be a cow or a stipulated quantity of farm produce.¹¹ The loan is usually made at a certain interest and the borrower is expected to pay the interest before regaining his freedom. According to C.K. Meek, the practice of pledging one's person on account of debt or in return for a loan was common in Nigeria and under the system the pledgee worked for his master-creditor until he had repaid the loan with the interest attached to it.¹²

Labour Remuneration under the Traditional Economy

Now that the customary source of labour and its organisational pattern have been treated, reference may be made to the form of remuneration medium and any institutional machinery for handling trade disputes in the traditional society. Since it is a natural tendency in man to expect some reward for work done for another, it is reasonable that under normal circumstances, workers in the customary Nigerian society would be remunerated for work done for others. This at once raises the question of the form the remuneration takes. As the discussion is concerned with conditions in the pre-cash exchange economy period, it appears that any payment made was done on a non-cash basis. This means that payments were made in kind. When the members of a family work for the family head, they "do not receive direct cash payment for their work. The farmer provides them with food throughout the year, with clothing and during local festivals as well as at harvest time, with a few luxuries. He relieves them when they are distressed and in general takes care of them throughout the year."¹³

When an organised group-work was done on reciprocal basis the employer-farmer "merely supplied his employees and their dependants with food."¹⁴ It is necessary to remember in this connection that the reciprocal aspect of the labour arrangement formed an inseparable part of the wage payment and

¹¹ A research which the writer carried out in Orlu Division of Iboland reveals that this practice was common in that part of the country and persisted even after the introduction of money economy and the establishment of the British Colonial Rule.

¹² Meek, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹³ *African Labour Survey, Op. cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

THE BACKGROUND TO TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA

that until the fulfilment of the reciprocal section of the bargain, the full wage payment had not been effected. In the case of the casual labour system in which no reciprocal performance of work was required, the same payment-in-kind arrangement was adopted. All that the farmer was expected to do in fulfilment of his part of the bargain was "to provide his helpers with food and give further customary rewards at harvest time".¹⁵ Usually there was no previous bargaining (as is common nowadays) on the amount to be paid, before work started. The employer was expected to act reasonably by providing ample food,¹⁶ and raw farm produce, "taking into consideration the level of living in the area"¹⁷ and the abundance of the harvest. The farmer was fully conscious that it was in his own interest "to make large payments in kind in order to encourage his workers to work hard and conscientiously, to foster good 'employer-employee' relationship and so convince temporary workers who offer their services in accordance with custom that it is worth their while to offer them when required in the future. It is not uncommon for farmers to make elaborate presents in kind to their workers at harvest time as an inducement to them to return during the following season."¹⁸

There are other forms of inducement practices indulged in by farmers. It used to be a common practice for a wealthy village farmer to allow his regular village workers, free of charge, the use of their farms, of certain scarce farm implements of his or some of his special-occasion dresses, when a special request to make use of them was made to him.¹⁹ This interest-free loan practice and the presentation to the employees of lavish farm presents referred to above, helped in a large measure in boosting the popularity of the farmer as a good employer and in retaining the goodwill and loyalty of his regular workers who would recommend him to their friends thus making it easier for him to have the services of these other people whenever there arose a need for them.

Trade Disputes under the Traditional Economy

This discussion of employer-employee relationships under the traditional Nigerian society cannot be complete without the consideration of the question of whether or not there existed in the old agricultural society trade disputes, negotiations and settlements which today form an important feature of our so-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ The food varied with locality. In the North grain food, meat, and some local beer would be offered. In the South, cassava or yam foo-foo or eba with soup, fish and meat and palm or tombo wine were acceptable.

¹⁷ *African Labour Survey, Op. cit.*, p. 70.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, page 71.

¹⁹ This practice was common in Iboland and was revealed during oral interviews which the writer had with village farmers in Orlu Division of Iboland, Eastern Nigeria.

called modern industrial community. Experience has shown that whenever two or more people enter into a close relationship such as exists between an employer and employee, there is bound to be, on occasion, some frictional disagreements resulting from the operational technique employed in manipulating the machinery which regulates the relationship between the persons concerned. If this principle is accepted, then it follows that in the society under discussion, trade disputes, negotiations and settlements would form an important feature of employer-employee relationships.

Before the consideration of the nature of these disputes and the form negotiations and settlements took, it may be necessary to touch briefly on the 'industrial' relations machinery used to normalise relations between management and employees. When a trade dispute occurred, recourse was, as a rule, made to the traditional machinery for the settlements of ordinary disputes in the society. Referring to the state of industrial relations at the Enugu Colliery, Major G. St. J. Orde Browne, Labour Advisor to the Secretary of State for the Colonies says that "before the advent of systematic joint consultation, chiefs, native administrations and tribal unions all featured at times in efforts to provide a channel of communication between management and men."²⁰

Coming to trade disputes, if reciprocal group labour is employed and one of the members of the group fails to honour his pledge by refusing to work for a group member from whose services, according to an already agreed arrangement, he has benefited, then a trade dispute arises. The dispute is between the delinquent group member and the member who has lost his return labour services and not as one may be inclined to think, between the bad group member and the group as an organised body. The group does not make its own the trade grievances of one of its members, though this does not mean that no assistance to the aggrieved member would come from the group. Trade disputes under circumstances described above are regarded as a personal affair with which the organised group as a body is not directly concerned.

Settlement of Trade Disputes

Below is the account of the procedure for the settlement of trade disputes in Iboland. When a trade dispute of the nature described above occurs, it is the duty of the individual who has lost his labour rights to report the case to the group members who on their part invite both the delinquent and the aggrieved member to a conciliation talk. If the conciliation fails, the matter goes to the defaulter's lineage family head who again acts as a conciliator. If after the second conciliation, no solution to the problem is found, the case is regarded as very serious and is finally brought before the village head or the

²⁰ *Dept. of Labour Quarterly Review*, Sept. 1960, Vol. I, No. 6, (Govt. Printer, Lagos), p. 67.

THE BACKGROUND TO TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA

council of elders for final determination.²¹ If after a careful consideration of the case the judges are of the opinion that the person is guilty, they impose on him a penalty consisting of the performance of the labour services due and a fine of some local food stuff or domestic animal.²²

After the court action, the age group workers take a stern disciplinary measure against the recalcitrant member. This measure often takes the form of expulsion from the group a punishment which spells social ostracism and is dreaded by responsible age-groupers. Unless re-admitted to the group, he has to continue as an 'outsider' and can no longer benefit from the group-work activities of the other members.

As has been stated earlier, food forms part of the payment made to 'group' workers. If after the performance of age-group work the host employer fails to present to his colleagues food and drink which both in quantity and quality are found unacceptable, a "trade dispute" may be declared at once and this may result in a food 'strike' action. A food strike means that the workers have rejected the food and dispersed. Age group workers however hardly ever resort to this extreme measure. The employer's entreaties and the pleadings of his friends usually succeed in persuading them to accept the food. If the employer is fortunate, the food may be accepted without a fine, if unfortunate the workers would partake of the food only after an imposition of some food fine on the employer to make good the deficiency.

The payments in kind made to casual labourers are expected to be adequate for it is "in the interest of the farm operator to make large payments.....in order to encourage his workers to work hard."²³ If he is not liberal enough in his reward, the person cheated by such an illiberality of reward, can if he wishes take his case with the friends and/or the family head of the employer as conciliators and may even appeal to the village council or union for redress. Casual labourers however rarely adopt the last measure. The step frequently taken is to 'black-list' the employer who in consequence may find it difficult to secure casual labour in the locality.

Before concluding this section, it will be interesting to note that at a time when trade unions had started to make their impact felt in industrial relations, recourse was still being made to the traditional system of negotiation and settlement. This was attested by Major G. St. J. Orde Browne who in his

²¹ This redress procedure is followed in case of a similar dispute relating to reciprocal work arranged between two individuals.

²² The food fine may consist of some pots of palm or tombo wine or both. The domestic animal may be a cock or even a goat, depending on the seriousness of the offence.

²³ *African Labour Survey, Op. Cit.*, p. 70.

reference to the Enugu Coal strike of 1945 stated that "a good reliance was still placed on tribal organisations and chiefs who persuaded the men to resume work after the strike in 1945."²⁴

The Introduction of Money and its Effects

The introduction of money had a revolutionary effect on the old economy. It shattered the old barter exchange system and facilitated the buying and selling of goods and services. With money European traders were able to buy more easily such products as palm oil, cotton and groundnuts from the local people. With the money realised from the sale of these commodities it was possible for the indigenous population to procure a wide range of manufactured European goods which Dr. Yesufu refers to as the "paraphernalia of modern civilisation".²⁵ These, to mention a few, are metallic spoons of superior quality to wooden and calabash spoons and oyster shells hitherto used; a variety of enamel wares which by far out-classed both in quality and finish similar local utensils designed from wood, calabash, bamboo or potter's clay; neatly woven cotton materials which displaced coarsely woven local fabrics and cloths made from the bark of trees. The superiority, variety and durability of these European goods made a deep impression on the people and there was great eagerness to acquire more and more of them for the high social prestige they conferred on their possessor. The desire to have more of these foreign goods increased the demand for money and to acquire this precious medium, the people engaged themselves seriously in the production of cash crops which were greatly sought for by European traders who made money payments in exchange for them. The workers employed on the farms were no longer satisfied with the payment-in-kind arrangement and desired their reward in monetary form. Also young family members began to show less interest in working on the communal family farm simply to earn their keep and able bodied members could leave the farm in search of work outside the area in order to earn some money to augment their cash resources for a higher standard of living.²⁶

The cultivation of cash crops and the increasing use of money therefore have a disintegrating effect on the family labour pattern which has gradually yielded place to the new system based purely on cash. At the initial stage however the demand for cash in payment for services rendered, never meant a complete abrogation of the customary payment in kind. As old customs die hard, there are cases of workers who maintain under the new economy that the old system of payment in kind, still forms part of the new system and

²⁴ *Department of Labour Quarterly Review*, Sept. 1960, Vol. I, No. 6, Op. Cit., p. 69.

²⁵ T. M. Yesufu, *An Introduction to Industrial Relations in Nigeria*, (OUP 1962), p. 11.

²⁶ W. A. Warmington, *A West African Trade Union*, (O.U.P. 1960), p. 4.

THE BACKGROUND TO TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA

therefore claim that food should be served them after they have done the work for which they receive some cash reward. *African Labour Survey* supporting this view says that "even when farmers employ wage-paid labour, they sometimes continue the old custom and give them food which is often the same as the farmer and his family eat."²⁷ C.K. Meek, confirming this view says that "in many cases farm workers are merely labourers on a daily wage receiving perhaps 6d-1/- per day plus their food."²⁸ There is thus an adoption of a sort of uneasy arrangement, the maintenance of which could not be continued indefinitely. The complete abandonment of payment in kind came with further accentuation of money consciousness and the widespread use of money throughout the country. With the total abandonment of payment in kind, a new stage is reached. There develops in the community a class of people ready to work on a purely money wage basis. To this class belong people who have no adequate means for the cultivation of cash crops on a large scale and concentrate mainly on the production of food crops on which they and their families depend. After they have completed the major operations in their own farms, they hire their services to wealthier village farmers who have the land and the money to raise both food and cash crops on a larger scale. With their money earnings, they are able to buy some of the European 'luxuries and to pay their taxes.

These farmer wage-earners form a source of migrant labour. They work on their food crop farms during the planting and harvesting seasons and on others' farms for money wages after they have concluded their own farm work. They are not entirely dependent on wages for their existence. This class of seasonal and casual wage earners however form "an important source of hired labour for African farmers in the West African Cocoa areas."²⁹ "The workers may move from village to village or establish themselves in one place for the season and accept agreements by the day at daily rates or cash rates or even contract singly or in groups for jobs which may extend over a period."³⁰ As most of the workers are concentrated in a particular locality and usually have common social and economic interests and a common place of origin, it is easy for them to form seasonal branches of their tribal organisations in their temporary new abodes. These temporary branch bodies may pass as 'society' groups or labour 'gangs' on the plantations.

²⁷ *African Labour Survey, Op. cit.*, p. 70.

²⁸ Meek, *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

²⁹ *African Labour Survey, Op. cit.*, p. 67. In Western Nigeria this form of labour is to be encountered with more in the cocoa farm areas ; see Meek, *Land Tenure and Land Administration in Nigeria and the Cameroons, Op. cit.*, p. 20. In the Midwest, it exists in the rubber plantations.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

With abundance of arable land, the continuance in an unchanged form of this class of casual labour, is possible. The availability of sufficient arable land is limited by phenomenal population growth and a point has been reached in certain areas especially in parts of Iboland where, as a result of high population density, most young people find it impossible to acquire arable land sufficient for the growth of even mere subsistence crops.³¹ Bruce F. Johnston points out that in Owerri province and parts of Calabar province, the "traditional system of shifting cultivation or bush fallowing is becoming untenable as a result of population pressure and consequent shortening of the fallow period."³² This no doubt raises a new problem. The shortening of the fallow period or the difficulty in continuing the shifting cultivation would result in much reduced annual farm yield.

This land scarcity resulting from high population and soil infertility has created a 'landless' class which has to fall back on money wage for its survival. This class forms a source of regular wage labour for large cocoa plantation farms in Western Nigeria and the extensive rubber farms of the Mid-West. Some members of this class however migrate to low population areas with surplus cultivable lands and settle down to agricultural life on the traditional pattern. Even those who may be regarded as regular wage-earners are not strictly dependent on wages for their livelihood; they practise part-time farming on rent basis in their new places of settlement and may not always present themselves for employment on the plantations.

When the migratory wage earners return to their farms after a short spell of wage labour on the farms of wealthy plantation owners, the apparently regular wage labour force remains on the farm permanently employed. Continued employment enables them to remain for a considerable length of time on a permanent cash crop farm.

With the development of a permanent labour force in the plantation areas, the labourers with their completely self-employed tribesmen in the same locality, form a more permanent tribal organisation for the protection of their interests in their new place of settlement.³³ Under the platform of this tribal organi-

³¹ The areas referred to here are Owerri and Okigw divisions which have "one of the highest population densities in Eastern Nigeria, in places reaching 1,000 persons per square mile." See E. Ardener, S. Ardener, and W. A. Warmington, *Plantation Village in the Cameroons*, (OUP 1960), p. 198.

³² B. F. Johnston, *The Staple Food Economies of Western Tropical Africa*, (Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 9. According to Johnston, population densities in the two provinces "exceed 400 per square mile." Ibid.

sation, the labourers, for purposes of improvement in wages and labour conditions, may threaten a withdrawal of their services if management consistently fails to satisfy them.

The Unpopularity of Regular Wage Employment

An attempt has been made to show that wage labour was an important factor in the structure of the traditional economy. The thing new in the economy is not wage labour as such but money wage labour and a class of labour wholly dependent on wages for its existence. The fact that labour was reciprocal never implied that some wages of a sort were not paid to it and the non-payment of wages in money terms does not suggest the absence of wage labour or wage-earning, since labour received its wage in kind. The conclusion appears to throw some doubt on the validity of the proposition that in Nigeria "the practice of wage-earning is new and was practically non-existent before the coming of the white man and the institution of British administration."³⁴ To accept this view without qualification is to ignore completely the real significance of the term "wage-earning" or "wage labour" and the role of labour in the traditional Nigerian society.

Our inquiry has shown that the idea of wage labour is not something foreign to the traditional Nigerian society and that what is new to the community is the introduction of money wage and the growth of a class of workers solely dependent on wages for existence. It may be worthwhile therefore to investigate the basic factors responsible for the non-development of a professional wage-earning class. One contributory factor is individualism in economic matters, another is the love for independence and freedom. An average Nigerian tends to be self-supporting and individualistic in economic enterprise. This trait manifests itself in the establishment of so many one-man businesses in the country today. In the old society, it is seen in the existence of individual farms on which are grown all the food crops necessary for life maintenance. In the customary society, no able-bodied Nigerian is willing to depend on another for his livelihood. And since a man, who lives by wage-earning is regarded as dependent on his employer, an average Nigerian resents the idea of living on wage employment since such a life "connoted a degradation from the independent status of the farmer to that of a hireling."³⁵ A person who in the customary society has no farm of his own and spends all his time working for others to earn his daily bread is always looked down upon as a social failure. His

³³ The Ibo migrants are known for their formation of such an organisation : see H. H. Smythe, and M. M. Smythe, *The New Nigeria Elite*, (Stanford University Press, California, 1960), p. 29.

³⁴ Yesufu, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

social status is no higher than that of a slave and he may find it difficult, if a bachelor, to secure a wife from a village in which his economic activities and social status are well known. To work perpetually for others on a wage basis was traditionally connected with slavery because "in pre-British times much of the agriculture of Nigeria was carried on by slave labour."³⁶ All this explains why even after the introduction of money and of money wage, most Nigerians still find it difficult to abandon their life of personal independence and freedom, to work for money wages for their livelihood. Those who work for money wages at all do so occasionally and devote a greater part of their working lives to operations in their own farms where they are lords and masters. In the traditional society, wage labour was organised within a frame-work rigidly designed by custom. Under this guided customary labour arrangement, care was taken to see that the labourer did not lose his independent work status.

Even after the principle of regular wage employment had been generally accepted by the native population, certain obvious cultural traits characteristic of most tribal groups in the country, tended to act as an inhibitive force to paid employment. In the words of J. S. Coleman, Yoruba youths refuse "to turn to wage labour if it involved being a servant."³⁷ and Hausa traders find "clerkship unattractive."³⁸

A research conducted by the writer in Mbanasa, a clan in Orlu Division of Iboland, Eastern Nigeria reveals that the Ibos of this area used to regard as lazy, youths who left the village in search of sedentary clerical appointments in the cities and urban centres.

It may then be said that this rather pathological abhorrence for complete dependence on wage employment is the result of social thinking which has greatly helped to mould the economic structure on which the material life of the people depends.

Apart from the social force referred to above, there is another contributive economic factor responsible for the lack of popular acceptance of wage employment. It is the superabundance of arable virgin lands whose existence made it possible for people to have ample supplies of land both for settlement and for the cultivation of food crops to satisfy the limited needs of a simple society. "The large areas of fertile and unpopulated land-especially in the northern provinces—available for settlement ;.....the encouragement to reclaim.....waste land ; the small requirements of the peasantry, the fertility of the soil and abundance of sylvan products which-especially in the southern provinces - grow without

³⁶ Meek, *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

³⁷ & ³⁸ : J. S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, (University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1959), p. 64.

THE BACKGROUND TO TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA

cultivation.....all justify the a priori assumption that.....the peasant population would take land for themselves.....”³⁹ for the raising of the necessary food crops, and might not “seek wages for hire.”⁴⁰ The conclusion that emerges from this is that so long as suitable land is available for cultivation, village farmers have no inevitable urge to change over to wage earning.

There is another point which is both social and psychological, to be considered. It relates to the difficulty involved in ‘tearing’ oneself away from one’s traditional homeland with its customary attractions and attachments and settling in a foreign area whose environment may be industrial and urban. The fear of living a ‘lonely’ life, coupled with changed social and economic conditions in such novel surroundings with their anonymous character, has an inhibitive effect on the minds of the rural people who may wish to consider the possibility of going abroad for engagement in wage employment.

Factors Facilitating Modern Wage Labour Growth

Under this section an effort is made to discover the political, social and economic forces responsible for the acceptance of the principle of wage employment as the basis of one’s livelihood. When the British Colonial Administration became aware of the traditional reluctance of the people to be dependent on wage labour, the difficulty of getting a substantial number of the indigenous population for the running of essential services on full-time wage basis, dawned on the authorities. Both persuasion and force were employed to get the people to accept full-time paid employment in the railways, mine-fields, and public works. When persuasion failed, force was resorted to. It was remarked by Lugard that “once coercion was removed, the peasant population would take up land for themselves or engage in trade and neither remain as slaves nor seek wages for hire.”⁴¹ In the Plateau mines-field the voluntary labour supply was inadequate for the requirements of the industry. “To augment this labour force a total number of 92,703 men were compulsorily recruited between August 1942 and April 1944 under the powers granted by the compulsory national Service (Essential Mines) Regulations.”⁴² Conscription produced some encouraging results.⁴³ The relatively good treatment given to the press-ganged labourers predisposed them to the acceptance of wage employment voluntarily at the expiration of the normal conscriptional term. Both from the point of view of employers and employees, one good effect of conscription

³⁹ & ⁴⁰ *Lugard’s Political Memoranda*, (1913-18), London 1919 p. 224.

⁴¹ *Lugard’s Political Memoranda*, *Op. cit.*, p. 224.

⁴² *Annual Report of the Dept. of Labour, Nigeria*, 1954, (Government Printer, Lagos), ch. II.

⁴³ Conscriptioned Labour was paid for by the Government, See *Lugard’s Political Memoranda*, *Op. cit.*, p. 243.

has been the widening of the field from which volunteers may be expected to flow in the future and it is interesting to note that in Northern Nigeria, discharged conscripted mine workers have been known to travel many miles on foot from their homes to the mines-field for voluntary employment.⁴⁴

Another contributory factor to modern wage labour growth was government taxation policy. Colonial development fund available for the maintenance of essential public services could be augmented by direct public taxation. As tax payment could legally be made only in the officially recognised currency, "every household was eventually either required to turn to wage labour or to produce cash crops."⁴⁵ Thus "the direct taxation which must be paid in cash adds its incentive and (the peasant farmer) is willing to work for wages when sowing or harvest does not require all his energies."⁴⁶

Personal, family and extended family requirements in a fast developing Nigerian society with newly acquired tastes and desires for attractively designed imported European goods made their contribution to the development of popular wage labour. Youths go out to seek wage or salaried employment not necessarily in their own interest alone but very largely also for the "maintenance of the kin-group"⁴⁷ to which they belong. Part of the Money is of course used for the purchase of European goods "that are so highly valued for their quality or the prestige they confer."⁴⁸

Another fundamental factor in the growth of regular wage labour is the ever growing high social status which money wealth from employment in respectable European firms and government establishments paying good wages and salaries confer on poor peasant farmers and emancipated slaves who before their new employment in the towns enjoyed little or no social distinction. Thus, as money has now become the primary criterion of wealth, and has come to figure very largely in social transactions,⁴⁹ the hitherto 'home-keeping' youths show remarkable enthusiasm in accepting wage employment.

Another reason for which wage employment is sought is the desire to earn enough money for the payment of bride-price, "which increasingly tends to be paid in cash"⁵⁰ rather than in kind as before and the urge to secure the necessary money pushes most young men to look for paid employment. Another

⁴⁴ *Dept. of Labour, Nigeria, Annual Report, 1943, ch. II.*

⁴⁵ *Coleman, Op. cit., p. 57.*

⁴⁶ *Lugard's Political Memoranda, Op. cit., p. 224.*

⁴⁷ *Ardeners and Warmington, op. cit., p. 240.*

⁴⁸ *Social Implications of Industrial Urbanisation in Africa South of the Sahara, (UNESCO, Switzerland, 1956), p. 22.*

⁴⁹ *Ardeners & Warmington, op. cit., p. 238.*

⁵⁰ *Coleman, Op. cit., p. 70.*

THE BACKGROUND TO TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA

impetus comes from many young ladies who, eager to avail themselves of the amenities of a civilised society, are selective in their choice of husbands and tend to show preference to young men in secure wage employment in the growing towns and cities. All this explains why "wage employment became an essential precondition for the acquisition of a wife"⁵¹ and there developed a keen competition among progressive young men for paid employment.

In Nigeria the possession of concrete buildings with modern architectural designs has an immense social value. Solid constructions of this character can be erected only by people with ready cash and since salary or wage earning is one of the quickest means for the accumulation of the necessary monetary capital, there is an increasing demand for regular wage or salaried employment.

All things being equal, peasant farmers are not interested in paid employment so long as there is in existence sufficient arable land for subsistence farming. But as high population density has drastically reduced the size of this particular type of land, and has created a class with little or no land of its own, the urge to seek wage employment tends to increase.

Apart from the impetus given to wage and salaried employment by arable land scarcity, there are instances where an account of the unattractiveness and low remunerative financial returns of peasant agriculture, many young people in spite of the availability of suitable arable land, prefer to move to the town where provision for wage employment with better financial reward and conditions of service exist. This explains for why "the labour field is being daily reinforced by a considerable percentage of the younger men from the agricultural areas who have shown their very definite preference for paid employment with regular hours of work to the more humdrum life on the farms."⁵²

Another reason for the accelerated demand for wage-earning employment is of course the irresistible urge in forward-looking and freedom-conscious youths to divorce themselves physically from "the close-knit, tightly organised community in which (their) every action is subject to scrutiny"⁵³ and control by the old social order.

Opportunities for Modern Employment

If it is desired that an appreciable percentage of the local population should change over to regular wage employment, it is necessary that opportunities for permanent employment should be created. Government and commercial firms provide such opportunities. According to J. I. Roper, "the first important field of wage and salaried employment for Africans was in the public

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Dept. of Labour, Nigeria Annual Report, 1943, op. cit., ch. II.*

⁵³ *Smythe & Smythe, Op. cit., p. 47.*

services.....the clerical grades in government service employed Africans on a considerable scale.”⁵⁴ Roper further points out that “commerce has been the second major field of wage-earning employment that has been opened by the economic revolution in West Africa”⁵⁵ and adds that “commercialisation on agriculture has brought into existence a wide variety of subsidiary activities such as the buying, grading, transporting and storing of crops which have offered paid jobs over a wide area.”⁵⁶ Railway and road construction work by government formed an important source of wage-earning employment. Between 1900 and 1936, 2,178 miles of railway had been laid and between 1900 and 1926, over 6,000 miles of road had been constructed in the country.⁵⁷ The laying of the railway tracks and the road building work, opened up a wider field of paid employment for general labour and the development of ports and harbours and the erection of public buildings by government added to the amount of unskilled labour in paid employment. Lugard in his Political Memoranda stated that government secured “a fairly adequate supply for current needs and construction works such as railways.”⁵⁸

The railways provided employment not only for general but also for skilled labour such as loco drivers, blacksmiths and fitters. The interest shown by government in the development of postal, local government, health, education and social welfare services speeded up the pace of wage employment.

In September 1956, the Regional Labour force position in government and commercial establishments is as follows :⁵⁹

Eastern Region	:	77,650
Northern „	:	151,570
Western „	:	89,109
Southern Cameroons	:	33,180
Lagos	„	97,556
		<hr/>
Total		449,165
		<hr/>

The two world wars created an opportunity for wage labour. During the first world war (1914-18), the number of Nigerians recruited into the army soon after the outbreak of hostilities was well over 4,000 ; 250 naval ratings

⁵⁴ J. I. Roper, *Labour Problems in West Africa*, (Penguin, 1958), pp. 16.

⁵⁵ & ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Coleman, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-6.

⁵⁸ *Lugard's Political Memoranda*, *op. cit.*, p 224.

⁵⁹ *Dept. of Labour, Nigeria Annual Report, 1956*, Table X (A).

THE BACKGROUND TO TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN NIGERIA

were also recruited.⁶⁰ During the second world war (1930-45), the supply of local voluntary labour was reduced by recruitment for the army.⁶¹

Another opening for regular wage employment was offered by the mining industry which gave employment to a substantial number of people. "The average normal labour force on the mines-field for the first eight months of the year (1945) showed an average of 60,000 per month."⁶²

Plantations had their own quota of employed wage labour. In the former British Cameroons which before Nigerian independence was part of Nigeria, the strength of labour in the plantations in 1945, was 20,000.⁶³ The approximate statistical figure for plantation labour throughout Nigeria and the Cameroons by September 1956, was 155,613.⁶⁴ C. K. Meek states that there is a cautious estimate of some 40,600 people in agricultural employment in Nigeria in 1953.⁶⁵

Labour and its new Environment

Certain obvious conclusions emerge from the inquiry we have so far conducted. In the first place, the traditional social and economic barrier to regular wage employment has been broken by the receptive capacity of the people. Secondly, the acceptance of paid employment on a more permanent and regular basis has been established and industries offering employments to people desiring them have been founded. With this in mind, we may proceed to consider the problems facing the new labour class in its novel industrial environment. "Since the major employing agencies (government and commercial firms) had their headquarters in cities, the majority of Nigerians drawn into salaried and wage employment became urban dwellers,"⁶⁶ and as they "became increasingly dependent upon their occupational specialities or salaried jobs, they lost the economic and psychological security of (their) lineage and self-sufficient rural communities."⁶⁷

Their "dependence on an employer not restricted by customary obligations"⁶⁸ and the conflicts of interest that result from this new economic relationship pose unique and challenging problems to which solutions have to be found.

⁶⁰ Yesufu, *op. cit.*, p. 10, and also *Lugard's Political Memoranda*, p. 231.

⁶¹ *Dept. of Labour, Nigeria Annual Report, 1942.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 1945, Ch. II, par. 5.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, par. 10.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1956, Table XIV.

⁶⁵ Meek, *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁶⁶ & ⁶⁷ J. S. Coleman, *Op. cit.*, p. 172.

⁶⁸ J. I. Roper, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

One of such problems is the question of relationship between management and workers. As the new environment made no provision for a new machinery for the solution of industrial problems as they arose, the employees fell back upon the traditional machinery to which they were used in the customary rural society. They in co-operation with their "brothers and sisters" self-employed in certain service trades in the new areas organised branches of their traditional village kinship societies and tribal associations to "meet needs which (had) arisen specifically out of the dislocations of an urban environment."⁶⁹

Workers who have an axe to grind with their employers have to appeal to the union to intervene on their behalf, for to them "the relations between worker and employer are generally assumed to be analogous to family or tribal relations."⁷⁰ As stated elsewhere, "before the advent of systematic joint consultation, chiefs, native administrations, and tribal unions all featured at times in efforts to provide a channel of communication between management and men."⁷¹ The village and tribal unions which had served society creditably well in the settlement of disputes in the old rural community, is ill-equipped both technically and psychologically for the unfamiliar task it was called upon to perform in the new social order with changed social and economic relationships. Herein lies the reason for the need for a more progressive and dynamic organisation capable of handling effectively the numerous industrial problems created by the new economic system. The solution was found in the formation of the trade union movement.

⁶⁹ Smythe & Smythe, *The New Nigeria Elite*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁷⁰ Warmington, *Op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁷¹ *Dept. of Labour, Nigeria, Quarterly Review*, Sept. 1960, Vol. I, No. 6, *op. cit.*, p. 67.