The Hut Tax in Liberia: The High Costs of Integration

by Augustine Konneh

Throughout colonized Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Hut tax came to be a despised symbol of imperial domination: a mechanism whereby Africans were forced to adapt to a cash economy by being made to pay a tax in cash instead of goods and, thus, a means by which colonial governments mobilized African labor in the interest of metropolitan development. In Sierra Leone, for example, a Hut tax was employed to secure revenue for colonial administration and forced people to find jobs in the gold mines and elsewhere.[1]

Liberia, however, presents a somewhat different case, where the Hut tax was initially intended less to mobilize labor than to generate capital and where its application was justified by arguments that such taxation was needed to integrate interior Africans into the political state dominated by a settler (but black) elite. The state ideology that all Liberians, natives of the interior as well as the settler elite on the coast, needed to be included in the Liberian polity (or at least the Liberian tax base) masked a more basic need of the Liberian state at the outset of the twentieth century: to finance state operations and the repayment of massive foreign debt when the bulk of the population consisted of indigenous Africans who had, up to this point, lived beyond reach of the state.

As illuminating as the differences in the Liberian example, however, are the final similarities: that the Hut tax did incorporate groups in the interior into a cash economy centered on the coast, and that the Hut tax rapidly came to be employed as a means of labor mobilization, both for infrastructural development in the interior (for example, road building) and, after the granting of the Firestone concession in 1926, for the interests of international capital. Thus, the history of the Hut tax in Liberia is the history of the intersection of a number of competing interests: international finance and the development of Liberian resources for the world market; the settler-dominated Liberian state and the cause of integrating the groups of Liberia's interior into that state; and the groups of the interior, with their own claims to autonomy and their resistance to assimilation.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is twofold: First, it will examine the use of the Hut tax by the settler state in Liberia as a vehicle for incorporating Liberia's indigenous ethnic groups into the state. Second, it will assess the resistance by these ethnic groups to the imposition of the Hut tax.

Review of the Literature

A wide variety of scholars have recognized the way in which the mechanism of colonial taxation - Hut tax, direct tax, etc. - operates in colonial regimes in Africa. Michael Crowder, for example, argues that the British imposed the Hut tax on the interior people of the Gold Coast (now Ghana), Sierra Leone, and Gambia in order to raise revenue to pay for the protectorate administration. This imposition was a major contributing factor to the uprising against British rule in Sierra Leone in 1898.[2] J. Ihonvbere and Toyin Falola maintain that in Nigeria the British levying of a variety of taxes was intended to not only raise funds for the operation of the colonial bureaucracy but also to compel the indigenous groups to engage primarily in cash crop production.[3] Bernard

Magupane and Leroy Vail assert that the Hut tax was employed to mobilize the massive amount of labor needed to work the diamond and gold mines of South Africa, Southwest Africa (now Namibia), and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).[4] Allen Isaacman and Barbara Isaacman claim that the Hut tax was imposed on the Mozambican peasants to enhance colonial capitalist systems. Peasants defiance to such method of taxation took the form of tax evasion, work slowdowns, desertions, and sabotage, which the authorities perceived as merely evidence of the docility and ignorance of the subject population.[5] Leroy Vail and Landeg White contend that the Hut tax was imposed on the indigenous peoples of Zambezia so as to get them to work in the opium fields established by the Portuguese. The Massingirl uprising (1884) was a consequence of this policy.[6]

The History of Liberia: A Series of Challenges

Prior to the repatriation of the freed African Americans from the United States, several indigenous polities existed in Liberia: each of the sixteen major indigenous ethnic groups had its own political system. In addition, all of these ethnic groups shared general socio-cultural and economic characteristics such as the centrality of the group, ancestral religious sharing, communal ownership of the major means of production and egalitarian ethos.[7]

The Liberian modern state was founded in 1822 by freed African American slaves (settlers or Americo-Liberians) under the sponsorship of the American Colonization Society. The attitudes of these settlers were discriminatory toward the indigenous ethnic groups of Liberia. Because they were returning from the United States, they believed that they were superior to the indigenous groups. Therefore, they saw their mission as a civilizing and Christianizing one. Although the indigenous ethnic groups were originally receptive to their repatriated kin, the arrogance demonstrated by these freed people of color sowed the seeds of conflict.[8] Liberia was proclaimed Africa's first independent "republic" in 1847 and was governed by the settlers, a tiny elite group of African Americans, for 133 years until the 1980 coup that ousted settler regime.[9] White governors ruled the settlement on behalf of the Colonization Society until 1847.

After its declaration of independence in 1847, the Liberian settler state was confronted with four major challenges. First, since the territorial base of the state was confined to several small enclaves, it was important to expand the land area. Second, the emergent state needed access to the natural resources that remained untapped in the hinterland. Third, there was the problem of constructing a market where goods and services could be exchanged. Fourth, labor was needed to perform the myriad tasks of state-building. Overall, given the preponderant concentration (over 70%) of the population in the rural areas, it was therefore deemed necessary to integrate the hinterland into the new Liberian body politic.[10]

Incorporation of the Interior

Benjamin Anderson, a Liberian government representative, undertook two exploratory missions into the interior in 1864 and 1868.[11] It was only with Anderson's travels in the interior that the Liberian Central Government began to have any clear ideas about the indigenous people there. His travels brought to the attention of the Central Government the number of people in the interior and their lack of connection to the state. Anderson suggested the incorporation of interior people into the Liberian political system. He advocated appropriating land from the indigenous peoples in order to expand settler government hegemony and the territorial state. Several negotiations occurred between Anderson, on behalf of the settler government, and local chiefs for land concessions. The discussion about assimilation can be seen as coterminous with discussion of the Hut tax, concluding with the actual implementation of the Hut tax in 1910.[12]

The Need for Government Revenue

After independence the settler government found itself in dire financial straits. Several reasons accounted for the financial straits and the resulting need to explore alternative sources of government revenue. First, the economy experienced a major decline; for example, the prices of Liberia's major exports--camwood and coffee--declined because European buyers preferred to purchase these commodities from other countries. This preference was based upon a perception of these Liberian products as being inferior. Second, Liberia lacked a reservoir of tapped resources that could be used to generate revenues, particularly since the deposits of natural resources were located in the hinterland over which the government had no control. Third, there was a decrease in revenues from port-of-entry fees. This decrease occurred because European vessels, especially British and French, often refused to pay for the use of Liberian ports. Fourth, with the increase in population the limited government revenue base was incapable of meeting Liberia's economic and social needs.

Dependence on Foreign Loans and Capital

The combination of the preceding factors forced the government's dependence on foreign loans. In 1871, for example, the Liberian government turned to the British for a loan of about $100,000.[13] The inability to repay the loans led to British and French claims on the country. In the end, the United States (which had a paternalistic interest in Liberian affairs because of its role in the state's founding) prevented European incursion into Liberia, assumed the loans, and provided a General Receiver to the Liberian government while plans were made to reschedule loan payments.[14]

The 1871 loan contributed to the overthrow or deposition of President Edward J. Roye. Conflict mounted among the settlers, with a particularly key division occurring between mulatto (light-skinned) and dark-skinned settlers. The light-skinned settlers led by J. J. Roberts (who had first been elected President in 1847) accused Roye of embezzling money from the loan. Roye was overthrown and later died under mysterious circumstances. These events brought about the re-emergence of light-skinned domination, as J. J. Roberts became president again in 1872.[15]

In 1926 the Liberian government took a loan from the American Finance Corporation largely to pay off previous loans. According to the terms of this agreement, Liberia's public debt, of which almost 90% carried an interest rate of 5% or less, was eliminated and replaced by a $5 million loan with an interest rate of 7%, and a maturity period of 40 years.[16]

The precondition of the loan was that the Liberian government would grant concession rights to Firestone. The Liberian government did grant a very liberal investment package to Firestone: a 99-year concession of a million acres of land at a cost of 2 cents per acre, duty-free privileges, and the right to repatriate profits. In addition, American financial advisors controlled the country's finance and approved the nation's budget every year. Their annual salary of $12,500 was paid by the Liberian government. The Liberian government was forbidden from taking any new loans without the consent of the American Finance Corporation, itself controlled by Firestone.[17]

The labor mobilization of the Hut tax also worked in Firestone's interests. Those persons in the interior who did not have the cash for Hut-tax collection were forced to seek jobs from Firestone. Additionally, chiefs were encouraged by the government to force persons who could not pay the Hut tax to accept involuntary employment on the Firestone plantations. The company also provided chiefs with incentives for labor recruitment. The company paid its workers 1 shilling (= 24 cents) a day, supplementing the wages with food (rice, fish, and oil). Between 1956 and 1961 approximately 2,000 workers were recruited through this forced-labor system.[18]

Working conditions at the Firestone concessions were extremely poor. Workers were paid very low wages. For example, in the 1930s the average daily wage of a worker was twenty cents ($.20) per day. Living conditions were even more deplorable. Workers and their families lived in one-bedroom thatched-roofed mud houses with no lavatory facilities or electricity.[19] The workers were not allowed to organize labor unions and, therefore, were unable to create the solidarity necessary to extract concessions for improved working conditions from Firestone. The Firestone concession gave new impetus to the incorporation of interior groups. Both their resources and their labor needed to be mobilized on behalf of the Central Government's patron.

The Barclay Plan

The Barclay Plan of 1904, initiated by President Arthur Barclay (1904-1912), provided a comprehensive blueprint for incorporating the interior into the settler state. The basic contours of the plan were: a reorganization of the administrative structure of the hinterland and its division into governable districts; the creation of district commissioner positions to coordinate activities of the hinterland; and the institution of a judicial system parallel to that of the Western legal system, consisting of the courts of the district commissioners and the various traditional chiefs--paramount, clan, town, and village. The court legal system was accountable to the President of Liberia; the Frontier Force, created in 1907, was the military support of settler government authority.[20]

About six years after the Barclay Plan was enunciated, the Liberian government under President Arthur Barclay began collecting the Hut tax from groups in the interior.[21] While the laws were enacted in 1910, actual collection proceeded more gradually. Martin Ford claims that the Hut tax was first collected among the Loma people of Lofa County in 1915.[22] The primary reason for imposing the Hut tax was to generate revenues to facilitate the operation of the state machinery and to help the Liberian government meet its loan obligations to the European imperialist powers--notably Britain and France. As Secretary of State King noted, "the revenue received through taxation would be the major part of repayment."[23] The tax was set at $1 per hut, a level that remained unchanged until the 1930s (although corrupt local officials often charged more).[24]

Bureaucratic Procedures for Hut-Tax Collection

The Central Government appointed for each district a tax collector or District Commissioner, named by the Department of Interior. The tax collector visited towns and villages of the district once a year. Many commissioners, however, resided in the district headquarters, and representatives of the various towns and villages brought their taxes to them. The chief of a town or village did the actual assessment and collection of the Hut tax under the direction of the District Commissioner. He received about ten percent of the taxes collected in the form of salary.[25] The chiefs became a dependent elite created by the state. Thus, once the system was installed, some people in the interior benefitted from it and had interest in supporting it.

In the case of the Lofa region (northeastern Liberia), for example, two steps preceded the town and village representatives' delivery of taxes to the tax collector at the district headquarters. First, the town inspector traveled the entire district to inspect the huts. Prior to his coming the town was cleaned and huts repaired. However, regardless of the cleanliness of the town or huts, the inspector always found faults. They often falsely accused the townspeople of dirty areas and depleted huts in order to impose fines. To avoid heavy fines from the District Commissioner, the town typically gave chickens, goats, and money to the inspector. After the inspector had been taken care of for two or three days with delicious and elaborate meals, he left for the next town, carried in a hammock accompanied by musical instruments and escorts.[26]

Second came the harbinger of the tax collection who counted the houses. This government official not only counted the houses that were standing but also those that had been demolished recently. The individuals of the town and the town chief had to appeal to this official to exclude deserted or demolished houses often bribing him with goats, chickens, money, etc., to reduce the number of houses in his estimate.[27]

Once a year the representatives of towns and villages went to the district headquarters to pay the Hut tax. Again, they had to take more funds than required just in case they had to pay a fine. The collector often overcharged or claimed that the money given him was short by a certain amount. Often there seemed to be no connection between the inspector and the counter. Therefore, there was no indication of what part of the taxes paid would be reported to the government.[28]

The Frontier Force: A Vehicle for Hut Tax Compliance

The Frontier Force was originally an army organized as a resu of the Barclay Plan. Initially, it had several functions: (1) to polic the interior to ensure that there was no insurrection against th settler government; (2) to control trade routes, such as Musard and others; (3) to supervise inter-ethnic relations among th various indigenous groups in the interior.[29]

The recruits in the beginning came largely from the hinterlanc particularly central and western portions of the country. Th major criteria for recruits consisted of the following: (1) illiterac; (2) loyalty to the settler state, (3) lack of contact with the Frenc and British imperialists who were determined (the governmer was convinced) to undermine the settler state. Ethnic groups, suc as Grebo, Kru, and Golas were rarely recruited because of the opposition to settler government incursion into their regions.[30]

Subsequently, the Frontier Force was used to enforce Hut ta compliance. Those who could not pay or refused to pay the Hı tax were confronted with physical force. There were reports c physical abuse, imposition of foot chains, and confiscations c cattle, chickens, and other goods.[31] The soldiers, many of whor had not been paid for months, also resorted to corruption an exploitation. They collaborated with the District Commissioner in exacting heavy fines and excessive taxation from interic groups.[32]

Resistance to the Hut Tax

The Hut tax, especially in combination with the abusive an sometimes ruthless methods used to collect the tax, was nc accepted by interior groups. In fact, the first decades of th twentieth century were already marked by episodes of arme resistance by interior peoples to the intrusions of the Liberia state, particularly by the Grebo in 1910 and the Kru in 191:

Despite being expected to pay money into state coffers, interior groups were still excluded from direct political participation; they saw the hut tax as a form of taxation without representation.[33] Feelings of animosity toward the central state increased after 1915 when, in part to make up for loss of revenue from the disruption of trade due to World War I, the government sought to regularize and expand tax collection in the interior. When the Kru rebelled again in 1915, it was specifically over the injustices of the Hut tax. The Kru went so far as to appeal to the British for protection against Liberian authorities.[34]

Short of full rebellion, a wide range of other means of resistance to the Hut tax developed in the interior. Tax collectors were often killed, or taxed groups fled into the interior to avoid the collectors.[35] Others tore down huts before they were counted as a form of passive resistance to the tax. One long-term result of such passive resistance was that the number of individuals living in each hut steadily rose, from around five per dwelling in 1917 to as many as twenty per dwelling in Nimba in 1934-35.[36] The Hut tax can thus be seen as one of the festering grievances of interior groups against settler elites that would finally explode in Samuel Doe's 1980 coup and the civil war that followed.

Unlike the rural elites (District Commissioner, chiefs, and clan chiefs) who derived some benefit from the Hut tax in the form of cash and goods, the rural peoples were opposed to the tax for the following reasons: (1) their taxes were not used by the Central Government to improve their social conditions--education, health, housing, transportation, roads, and communication; (2) since the majority of them were subsistence farmers with an average per annual income of $70, they did not have the financial resources to pay the tax; (3) the rural masses did not have significant representation in the formulation of government policies.[37] As a result, much of the resistance to the tax was initiated at the popular level; and local elites were as much a target as the central state.

These grievances were manifestations of the larger issue of socio-economic inequality that had prevailed in Liberia since independence: the domination of the economy by people primarily settlers and the concentration of limited state resources--education and health services--in settler-controlled areas. Members of indigenous groups were denied citizenship until the 1940s but were required to pay taxes and to perform various civic functions such as building roads, constructing bridges, etc., without compensation. Thus, these grievances were contributing factors to the April 12, 1980, coup d'etat that brought Samuel Doe to power.[38] The continuation of the Hut tax under the Doe regime after its attempted elimination, particularly combined with the absence of tangible development projects in the interior, were parts of the persistent problem of economic and social injustice that confronted the lower classes in Liberia, particularly the rural masses. Against this background, the decisions of successive Liberian governments, including the Doe regime, to marginalize the have-nots, while requiring them to pay taxes to the Central Government, provided one of the major conditions for the current Liberian civil war.

The Labor Mobilization Policy

The Hut tax was the most persistent and pervasive state attempt to integrate the interior to the benefit of the Settler groups. The early history of labor mobilization of the Liberian interior is marked by examples of abusive practices by agents of the Central Government. The Liberian government labor mobilization policy in the interior to honor labor contracts from the planters of the Spanish island of Fernando Po, sparked a forced labor debate in the 1920s by concerned human rights groups and led to the intervention of the League of Nations. The demand for cash payments was the pull factor to such abuse of the local people. A local who could not pay the tax would pawn a relative or indenture himself until the debt was paid. Both chiefs and influential settlers performed the functions of middlemen and intermediaries in the slave trade.[39] The League of Nations' inquiry into slave activities of government officials implicated President King and Vice-President Allen N. Yancy. They were found guilty of supplying indentured service in return for money or loans in kind and of the use of compulsory unpaid labor. Both men later resigned.[40]

Foreign capital began to penetrate Liberia in 1926 with the establishment of the Firestone Plantation Company. This development affected the Hut tax in several ways. It provided a source of employment for rural dwellers as laborers through which they were able to pay the hut tax; but it also forced many rural dwellers to leave their towns and families to live near the Firestone concession. By 1926, about 30,000 indigenes were employed by Firestone.[41]

Government Dependence on the Hut Tax

The Liberian government, meanwhile, became dependent on the Hut tax for its budget. Revenues from commerce and trade were low, and the government turned to the interior people for its funding. The Hut tax became Liberia's prime budgetary source. In 1911 the Hut tax accounted for more than $50,000, although only $10,000 was reported to the Treasury Department. In 1933 and 1934 Hut tax collections amounted to $62,121. In all the Hut tax made up thirty-eight percent of the total revenue in these years which was $174,014.11.[42]

The Tubman administration (1944-1971) devised ways of placating the rural dwellers so as to soften the effects of the Hut tax. He launched the "Unification and Integration Policy" to give rural dwellers a sense of political involvement. Specifically, he established four new rural-based counties, as a way of impressing the rural people that they were on a par politically with their urban counterparts. Similarly, he gave the rural areas representation in the national legislature. Also, he undertook the construction of schools, roads, and clinics in various rural communities. The administration of the Hut tax was also overhauled.[43]

However, while the Tubman regime was undertaking reforms that were designed to bridge the "rural-urban divide," it also increased the amount of the Hut tax from $2 to $10.[44] The explanation for the Hut tax increase was that the cost for hinterland development was high and that the indigenes must pay their fair share. The contradiction embedded in alleviating the deleterious impact of the Hut tax on the one hand, and increasing the financial burden of the rural dwellers on the other hand, was symptomatic of the Tubman approach. To use a local Liberian parlance, "Tubman bit and blew" simultaneously. That is, he continued the exploitative nature of the Hut tax, but attempted to give it a "human face" by accompanying its extraction with specific projects that stood to benefit those taxed.[45]

During the Tolbert era (1971-1980), the collection of the Hut tax from rural dwellers persisted. The Tolbert government aimed, however, to use the proceeds from the Hut tax to engender development in the rural areas. For example, under Tolbert the road network at eventually connected Monrovia with the major settlements in the interior and knifed through large tracts of previously inaccessible forest areas.[46] Such development, however, cut both ways. As Liebenow notes, these improvements "also provided better access to the collectors of the odious regressive Hut tax."[47]

Abolition and Reinstatement of the Hut Tax

Samuel Doe's April 12, 1980, military coup d'etat gave rise to the expectation that the Hut tax would be abandoned because of the new regime's purported sensitivity to the rural dwellers. Doe's military government did, in fact, undertake a study of the Hut tax. In its findings, contained in the "Tipoteh Plan," it was decided that the tax should be abolished. The rationale was two-fold. First, it was argued that the Hut tax was designed initially by the settler government as a tool of repression. Second, it was posited that, with an average annual income of $70, rural dwellers could not afford to meet the tax obligation.

However, the military government's decision to abolish the Hut tax was resisted by the rural bureaucratic elites--District Commissioners, and paramount, clan and town chiefs. Abolition of the tax eroded their power base and took away their major source of revenues. After two years the Doe regime decided to reinstate the Hut tax. The stimulus for this policy reversal was provided both by the rural political elites and the burgeoning economic problems which the Doe regime was experiencing.

The reimposition of the Hut tax by the regime provides an ironic conclusion to the history of this most regressive form of taxation. The Liberian state turned to the Hut tax at the beginning of the century both to raise funds to support the heavily indebted national government and to integrate the peoples of the interior into the state. It continued to employ the tax through the course of the century both as a means to support the costs of the central state (even though those who paid the tax had little part in the government) and to mobilize labor for interior development and in the service of international capital (even though the mobilization of labor, in Liberia as elsewhere, disrupted families and destroyed traditional political and social life).

Officially, whatever the financial needs served, the Hut tax was justified as a way to integrate peoples of the interior into the Liberian state. It is a measure of the success of that integration that the administration of the tax created a bureaucracy in the interior--even if it was a highly corrupt bureaucracy--that would fight against the abolition of the tax. Interior groups perceived that, although they were paying the Hut tax, they received few benefits from the Central Government. This sense of inequity between interior groups and the coastal elite was a precipitating factor of the civil war. It is a still more ironic mark of that success that the Doe regime, the first non-settler ruling group in Liberia's history, would turn again to the Hut tax when in need of funds. The continuation of the civil war suggests that the sense of inequity among peoples of the interior has yet to be fully addressed. Reformulating the Hut tax--replacing it for instance, with a tax on income--may indeed contribute to the stability of the Liberian state in the future.

Notes

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