

Yet, the strength of Keese's study is that it provides rigorous empirical grounding for this perspective through a comprehensive, historically deep and meaningfully comparative study. Rarely has an author so convincingly demonstrated the flexibility not only of the use of ethnic idioms in the pursuit of political interests, but also of the non-use of such idioms by both African and European actors. In this respect, the book makes an outstanding contribution to the discussion of ethnicity in Africa and elsewhere and ought to appeal to a broad readership.

*Carola Lentz*

Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz  
 Forum universitatis 6 55099, Mainz, Germany  
 E-mail: [lentz@uni-mainz.de](mailto:lentz@uni-mainz.de)  
 doi: [10.1017/S0020859017000220](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859017000220)

SEIBERT, JULIA. *In die globale Wirtschaft gezwungen. Arbeit und kolonialer Kapitalismus im Kongo (1885–1960)*. Campus Verlag, Frankfurt [etc.] 2016. 247 pp. Ill. Maps. € 39.95.

This book looks at the transformation of forced labour to wage labour in the Congo Free State and later Belgian Congo between 1885–1960. The argument developed in the book is that the introduction of “free labour” was paradoxically based on violence and coercion, a mere continuation of the atrocious labour practices under the concessionary rule of the Congo Free State (1885–1908). What follows is a fascinating description of social change under colonial rule as a consequence of the process of the forced introduction of free labour. Eventually, the author argues, this had an impact on the Congolese struggle for independence. Unfortunately, being only in German, the book will probably not reach the majority of its potential readership in the field of Congo studies.

A labour history of former Belgian Congo is long overdue. Much scholarly (and popular) work has been dedicated to the labour atrocities under concessionary rule in the era of the Congo Free State, which to some may leave the impression that the Belgian takeover marked an end to the worst atrocities. The transformation of the labour system as an outcome of the change from concessionary rule to colonial rule offers interesting insights into the continuities of forced labour after the Belgian takeover, as well as on what went on behind the façade of so-called free labour in Belgian Congo specifically. Seibert's work is evidently strongly influenced by the seminal work on concessionary rule in Equatorial Africa by Coquery-Vidrovitch.<sup>1</sup> This economic history unravels how French colonial rule was established through concessionary companies, and how the concessionary regime was transformed and eventually dismantled. Moreover, the study argues that concessionary rule caused such deep economic and social rupture that its demographic effects caused a crisis of underpopulation that had still not yet been overcome by the 1970s, when the book was published. In addition, Coquery-Vidrovitch argues that the roots of post-colonial economic structures in former French Equatorial Africa lie in the concessionary rule.

1. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Le Congo au temps des grandes compagnies concessionnaires, 1898–1930* (Paris, 1972).

While Seibert's book focuses on a different country, her analyses are very similar to those by Coquery-Vidrovitch, particularly for the sections that concern the period of colonial occupation.

The book, which is based on the author's PhD dissertation (2012, University of Trier), is divided into three sections. The first, "Transitions", discusses Belgian colonization as a process of breakdown followed by the construction of the colony. It describes colonization as social, political, and economic rupture. The following section, "Crises", looks at how, after the Belgian takeover of the Congo Free State, forced labour continued to be used in different labour sectors – infrastructure, mines, plantations, and agriculture. This section offers interesting insights that challenge the assumption that the Belgian takeover of the Congo Free State brought an end to the atrocities. The author argues that it was out of necessity, because free wage labour was an impossibility as none of the Congolese were willing to engage as labourers in the colonial economy.

The final section, "Corrections", discusses labour organization since the late 1920s, colonial reform, anti-colonial resistance, and independence in 1960. The discussion of the 1941 strike by 1,500 mineworkers belonging to the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK) in demand of higher wages is the most interesting chapter of the book. The strike was violently suppressed, but it had an important impact on labour relations and on the political awareness of Congolese labourers. The research into the strike and its effects seems to be the author's main focus, as this chapter is by far the longest, the analysis is much more in depth than in the other chapters, and even the narrative style changes. Through a detailed case study, the author argues that the strike was an important event not so much for the continuity of the rule of labour relations through violence, but more importantly for the merging of political resistance and labour resistance and the emergence of new forms of solidarity. The author describes the events of 9 December 1941, when 1,500 labourers belonging to the UMHK gathered at a football pitch. The military, which had surrounded the football pitch, opened fire and at least twenty people were killed. The strikers fled, but returned the next day to continue with their strike, and would eventually be granted a wage increase of fifty per cent. Seibert describes how the miners did not celebrate the strike as a success; instead, those events invoked renewed fear of violence being used by the colonial state. She argues that it was from this realization that political resistance emerged. Such a detailed study of this historic event is a valuable contribution not only to our understanding of labour history in the Congo and that of the UMHK in particular, but more broadly also for our understanding of emerging forms of anti-colonial resistance.

The chapter discusses not only the strike itself, but, more interestingly, how it is popularly remembered as a massacre, not as a victory for the struggle for higher wages and improved working conditions. It is here that the author finally makes use of more diverse source material, including oral accounts from interviews and secondary literature. However, the comments about popular remembrance of the strike would have benefited from excerpts from witness statements and oral histories that narrate the memory, and how the strike is remembered through the words of Congolese people. Here, the popular memory is merely described, which is a missed opportunity, even more so considering that the author has already collected the primary data.

What this book strangely lacks is a concluding chapter in which the arguments put forward in the more descriptive chapters throughout the book could be brought to a more analytical closure. Because it lacks such a chapter, the book now ends rather disappointingly. Even more so because the last chapter, in which the author promises to analyse how political visions of leaders such as Lumumba were primarily based on the labour question, is actually

the weakest chapter in the book. It is very brief, and does not offer the promised insights that would connect Congo's colonial labour history to Congo's post-independence political history. This is a missed opportunity. The promised argument is potentially fascinating, particularly in view of the insights obtained from the analysis of the 1941 strike. Moreover, there would have been interesting opportunities to reflect on Congo's labour relations since independence, up until the present day, and on the deep roots of contemporary forms of "free labour" in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In today's Congo, labour is weakly organized or even unorganized. Trade unions are unable to mobilize and defend labour rights while they are invisible in the political landscape. At the same time, labour conditions are often appalling, particularly in the mining sector, where cases of forced labour, child labour, and other human rights abuses have been repeatedly reported.<sup>2</sup> Seibert's study hints at the links between the colonial labour history and contemporary labour relations, but it fails to really engage with these questions. It is here that she could have contributed something significant to the work of Coquery-Vidrovitch. But this would be a different study, for which Seibert's work will be a very valuable starting point.

*Meike de Goede*

Institute for History, Leiden University  
Doelensteeg 16, 2311 VL Leiden, The Netherlands  
E-mail: m.j.de.goede@hum.leidenuniv.nl  
doi: 10.1017/S0020859017000232

FINCH, AISHA K. *Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba. La Escalera and the Insurgencies of 1841–1844.* University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill (NC) 2015. xiv, 298 pp. Paper: \$32.95. (E-book: \$27.99.)

In 1844, a savage wave of repression swept through the sugar lands of Western Cuba, following the uncovering of a conspiracy to organize a general uprising of slaves and overthrow Spanish colonial rule over the island. *La Escalera*, as it came to be known for the brutal interrogation technique of tying slaves to ladders and flaying them with a lash, brought to an end a cycle of growing discontent and rebellion. So severe were the reprisals of that year that it would take a generational shift for a new concerted attempt to free Cuba from slavery and imperialism, with the outbreak of the first war of independence in 1868. A great deal has been written about *La Escalera*, and historians continue to debate the extent to which there really was a generalized conspiracy, and who were its prime movers: independence-minded white Cubans, agents of British abolitionism and imperial pretensions, or urban free blacks seeking to emulate the racial liberation in neighbouring Haiti. Rarely in such accounts are the slaves on the plantations themselves perceived as the revolutionary driving force.

Aisha Finch's evocative reappraisal of the events leading up to *La Escalera* seeks to rebalance the account, and open new avenues for understanding the social dynamics that led

2. See, for example, Human Rights Watch, *The Curse of Gold* (New York, 2005), and Amnesty International, "This is What We Die For": *Human Rights Abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo Power the Global Trade in Cobalt* (London, 2016).