

Conclusion

Kru Free Wage Laborers in Global History

Following the water trails of Kru surfboats through time has reconfigured the fragmented history of the Kru into a coherent diaspora framework. The migration of Kru workers from their homeland communities on the Kru Coast under British employment represents a movement of free wage labor that resulted in the formation of a diaspora in Africa, the British Caribbean, and wherever the Kru served on ships sailing the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Significantly, Kru laborers engaged in a voluntary diaspora. Regardless of whether they worked in a diaspora community or solely on a ship, they routinely returned to their homeland on the Kru Coast between contracts. Their diaspora is qualified as a free wage labor diaspora because they were paid for their labor and had the choice to work. Further, the definition of Kru workers expanded in the nineteenth century as the conceptual boundaries of the Kru Coast came to include a range of peoples who spoke Kru. While not always a marker of ethnicity, language was one of the binding forces that enabled Kru beyond the Proper Kru settlements to claim Kru ethnicity.

The Kru story began in the heart of the Kru homeland, where some of the Proper Kru and neighboring trading towns between the Cestos and Grand Cess Rivers traced their origins to at least the sixteenth century, and most probably earlier. Portuguese accounts of surfboats in the region suggest that contact with the Kru was established as early as the fifteenth century. Although their communities were politically autonomous and competed for trade with Europeans, the name “Kru” or “Crou” associated with the Proper Kru *dako* disseminated and became a general label used by Europeans to identify peoples living in the coastal vicinity. Over time, other Kru *dakwe* emerged including the Kabor, Gbeta, Jloh, Sasstown (or Pahn), Grand Cess (or Siklio) and the interior *dakwe* Matro, Bolo, Nanke, and Bwa. By the nineteenth century, Kru-speaking peoples on the West African coast between Cape Mesurado and the Bandama River including the Grebo, Bassa, Krahn, Bété, Godié, and Dida, among others, were recognized as Kru by European and American employers. Collectively, they accepted the label Kru while trading on the coast and in their workplaces. On one hand, they were indifferent to how they were externally classified, however, on the other, being recognized as Kru carried a positive reputation in the nineteenth century and ensured access to contracts. As such, it is our position that the label “Kru” is but one layer informing Kru identity, which must also include dialect, *dako*, secret society membership (if applicable) and village. Understanding the specificities informing various sub-groups of Kru-speaking peoples al-

lows for greater precision of analysis and for deeper meanings in their diaspora to emerge.

Analysis of Kru labor has required the use of a wide range of multilingual primary and secondary sources, physical sources, and Kru oral traditions. English, French, Dutch, German, Portuguese, and Spanish sources offer unique insight on various segments of the Kru-speaking populations on the Kru Coast and in their diaspora communities. Sources as diverse as postcards, gravestones, photographs, oral tradition, court cases, ordinances, Admiralty files, primary published ship captain and traveller accounts, missionary records, ship records, estate records, work songs, medal rolls, and oil paintings, several of which appear here for the first time in secondary published form, provide a sense of the geographical extent and multifaceted nature of the Kru diaspora. Indeed, our goal has been to build on the foundational research of Brooks, Behrens, Fraenkel, Tonkin, Davis, Massing, Martin, Frost, Schuler, and others, by extending analysis to include the full scope of Kru labor in the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans. Recovering the Kru voice through interviews with Kru community members in Liberia and Sierra Leone has provided invaluable information on their diaspora communities, Kru women and headmen, information which would otherwise remain inaccessible. Moreover, understanding how the Kru remember their past adds new layers of meaning in the historiography and vitality to the analysis of their diaspora.

Pedagogically, Kru labor intersects and fits into several strands of the discipline of History including African History, British History, Atlantic History, Indian Ocean History, Wage Labor History, British Caribbean and French Caribbean History, Maritime History, Mission History, Colonial History, and Transnational History. Kru labor and their diaspora add valuable nuances in discussions centered on race, ethnicity, class, colonialism, free labor, and the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. Moreover, the Kru case provides a deeper understanding of the social, economic, and political impact of the introduction of outsourced wage labor in West Africa as African communities shifted their economies towards Atlantic commerce from the fifteenth century. Kru labor speaks to the historical contribution of African labor in the making of the global economy that has significantly benefited from African resources.

The Kru free wage labor diaspora was distinct from the larger trans-Atlantic diasporas, which transported 12.8 million enslaved Africans to the Americas. The nature of the Kru free wage labor diaspora presented in this book resonates with aspects of the parity trade relations proposed by John Thornton, which existed

between Europeans and Africans until the mid-nineteenth century.⁸²³ While Kru were never in a position of authority over the British, they were empowered to decide which contracts they would accept and they were paid wages for their labor based on contractual terms.

The Kru Coast's natural environment consisting of rocky sub-sea terrain and adverse surf conditions gave the Kru an advantage and placed them in a position to negotiate trading terms with European traders who struggled to carry out trade operations between ship and shore. As fishermen, Kru developed the necessary seamen skills through use of their surfboats, which enabled them to find employment on European merchant vessels sailing the West African coast from at least the seventeenth century. Whether traversing high surf, paddling out to sea, landing supplies or navigating riverine systems, Kru surfboats and other small watercraft lay at the center of their labor experience at all stages of their diaspora thereafter.

Throughout the various phases of their diaspora, Kru underwent a number of social, economic, and political transformations at home and abroad. During the initial phase of Kru trade with the British and other Europeans, the emergence of trade-men, "talk-men," and interpreters, the advent of the Kru mark and, most significantly, the evolution of the lead paddler to headman, were key developments that marked their transition towards the Atlantic economy. These developments were in response to European trade. While the Kru traded in rice, palm oil, and ivory, the slave trade played a significant role in their economy from at least the seventeenth century. They continued to trade in slaves on the Kru Coast and serve on Cuban slave ships on the West African coast until the mid-nineteenth century.

Kru labor experienced a catalyst moment with the founding of Freetown in 1792. Population statistics reveal that growth of their community was related to their service in the Royal Navy following the British decree to abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade and an increase in shoreside contracts. Freetown became the epicenter of Royal Navy activity as the Kru were offered contracts, which lasted three years with a monthly salary that exceeded all other contracts. Kru served on the front lines of British abolitionism in the Atlantic intercepting slave ships, releasing enslaved Africans and delivering slave ship crews to Sierra Leone for trial at the Vice Admiralty Court, and later, the Court of Mixed Commission. By 1816, they had established their own distinct community in a district known as Krutown, which provided the British with a readily available pool of laborers for ship and shoreside contracts. Krutown became the site of socio-eco-

⁸²³ Thornton, *Africa*, 1–10, 13–71.

nomic transformations including the institutionalization of the position of headman, restructuring of the age-grade system to meet the manpower demands of the British, and new responsibilities for women in the household and market. Headmen played a crucial role in organizing labor gangs, ensuring wages were distributed, and maintaining discipline amongst workers. As such, they were paid more than regular workers and served as the link between British captains and Kru workers. Hierarchical order was further entrenched following the creation of the Krutown Headman who served as administrator with the British, overseeing all contracts and the conduct of Kru community.

The homecoming experience developed into a crucial component in the Kru's diaspora cycle as they circled between their community in Freetown and their villages on the Kru Coast. The result is that direct links between *dakwe* on the Kru Coast and Krutown can be firmly established. While the Proper Kru formed the majority of laborers in Freetown as demonstrated in the naming of the streets after the original five settlements, members of the Grand Cess *dakwe*, Grebo, and Bassa peoples were also present in the nineteenth century. Moreover, homecoming protocol, which included presenting gifts to the *krogba* and purchasing wives, became crucial components of the Kru economy.

The Kru free wage labor diaspora grew as Kru shifted their labor towards Royal Navy contracts and so-called "legitimate" trade in palm oil production. As such, a succession of Krutowns and laboring communities were established on the West African coast as the Kru migrated for work. Service in the Royal Navy enabled the Kru to establish settlements in Cape Coast, Ascension Island, Fernando Po, and Simon's Town in the Cape of Good Hope. Their duties included coaling ships and intercepting slave ships before sailing to Freetown. In the case of Fernando Po, Kru also performed agricultural labor. Population statistics show that the Kru community in Ascension Island and Fernando Po continued to experience growth in the nineteenth century. Ordinances reveal that the Royal Navy had to pay for sick or injured Kru while they received care in "Krooman's Hospital" in Garrison. Their designation in records demonstrates their importance in the Royal Navy.

Between 1862 and 1881, Kru were hired on Royal Navy ships in the Indian Ocean to assist in the suppression of the slave trade. Kru played a major role in capturing slave *dhow*s. The shortage of Royal Navy ships meant that Kru were tasked with manning the launch boats aboard each vessel, which enabled a larger coalition to form. Kru operated out of Simon's Town in South Africa, Zanzibar, the Seychelles, Aden, Basra, Bombay, and Trincomalee. Although Kru did not form Krutowns in Indian Ocean ports, they were identified as Kru in Zanzibar because of their Kru mark and continue to be remembered on grave-

stones. Even when they did not form distinct communities, their bodies bore the mark of their diaspora.

Their role as stevedores, porters, and boatmen engaged in so-called “legitimate trade” in palm oil led to the creation of Kru diaspora communities in Bonny and Calabar. Headmen continued to organize and ensure labor gangs circulated between the Kru Coast and the Oil Rivers annually. During the same period, the establishment of new coastal communities on the Kru Coast in the nineteenth century led to the formation of new *dako* including Jloh and Gbeta. They all spoke Kru, and their villages, which were adjacent to the Proper Kru, extended to the Cestos River in the west and Grand Cess in the east. In all cases, *dakwe* on the Kru Coast continued to inform the demographic composition of each diaspora settlement. Jloh from Sasstown and Gbeta from Picaninny Cess were the most common Kru working in Monrovia, while Grand Cess Kru formed the majority in Cape Coast. Workers from Settra Kru were hired for contracts in Calabar and Bonny, and Kru in Ascension Island, Fernando Po, Simon’s Town, and Lagos were most frequently hired in Freetown and belonged to the Proper Kru and Grand Cess *dakwe*. They were also accompanied by Bassa and Grebo laborers. All of their settlements were interconnected as Kru circulated on contract between their homeland on the Kru Coast and diaspora communities. By the close of the nineteenth century, some of their diaspora communities displaced the Kru Coast as the main centers of employment.

Kru participation in expeditions, Royal Navy service in the Indian Ocean, and in military campaigns played a role in the British consolidation of its empire in Africa and Asia. During expeditions between the 1820s and 1860s, Kru served as boatmen and porters who were frequently charged with collecting wood and water for the crew. Their services contributed to the functioning of the expeditions. Perhaps even more significant, Kru service in the Royal Navy was extended to include military campaigns. Their duties included serving as porters, boatmen, gunners, and auxiliary soldiers in naval brigades. The nature of their service adopted a military dimension as they served on the front lines in the Anglo-Zulu War and were awarded medals for their service during the period. Rather than forming diaspora communities, Royal Navy ships became the cultural spaces where Kru maintained traditional practices and were also able to evolve their seaborne practices first developed in their homeland on the Kru Coast. Their role in expeditions and military campaigns shows that Kru were concerned with the economic terms of their contracts and less so with the lasting social, economic, and political effect of engaging in conflict with those outside their communities. The politically autonomous nature of their villages on the Kru Coast, which fostered competition in trade and periodic conflict, most certainly

informed their worldview towards other Africans. Moreover, their role reveals the complex nature of European colonial processes in Africa and Asia.

The Kru free wage labor diaspora expanded to include the British Caribbean. Beginning in 1841, Kru migrated to Jamaica, Trinidad, and British Guiana for contracts on estates and wharves that promised higher wages than those earned on the west coast of Africa. Service in Jamaica was short-lived and few records survive of their service beyond the wharf in Kingston and their landing in Montego Bay. Much more can be said of their experience in Trinidad where they worked on several estates in Port of Spain and Oropuche. Similarly, Kru circulated between estates in Demerara, Berbice, and Essequibo in British Guiana. They continued their tradition of manning small craft as they transported people and commodities from estate to ship. Their contracts were between three and five years in length. As an incentive, they were offered higher wages than could be earned in West Africa. The Kru free wage labor diaspora was maintained in Trinidad with the creation of “Krooman’s Village” and other communities that resembled Krutowns in West Africa, but on a smaller scale. In British Guiana, Kru formed a community in Canal No.1 where they resided alongside Yoruba laborers. They continued to apply the Kru mark, which distinguished Kru from other laboring groups including Yoruba and Liberated Africans. Kru bound for British Guiana were hired in Freetown, Settra Kru, and Grand Cess, which shows that the majority belonged to the Proper Kru and Grand Cess *dakwe* and most certainly included Bassa and Grebo laborers.

Despite these continuities, Kru laborers underwent a process of creolization. Their ability to purchase land was a major factor. On the Kru Coast where land was communally owned by their respective *dako*, Kru remained subject to the authority of the *krogba*. In Trinidad and British Guiana, this was not the case. The combination of the Kru’s tendency towards task-based work on an individual basis as jobbers and the opportunity to own land outside of the communal village allowed the Kru to function beyond traditional societal norms. The hierarchical order informing the relationship between Kru worker, headman, and *krogba* became obsolete as many Kru decided to remain in Trinidad and British Guiana indefinitely following the completion of their contract. By circumnavigating the traditional protocol of gift-giving for the *krogba* and paying a percentage of their wages to their headman, Kru laborers gained a new-found sense of economic independence. Another factor in their creolization was intermarriage with Creole women. As such, their descendants were frequently classified as “Africans” rather than Kru or confused with Yoruba laborers in demographic surveys. The result was that the Kru free wage labor diaspora in the British Caribbean was short-lived, and these factors led to their disappearance as a distinct ethnic group in Trinidad and British Guiana by the early twentieth century.

By the close of the nineteenth century, Kru diaspora communities in West Africa experienced growth, while employment in their homeland on the Kru Coast declined. ACS agents and Americo-Liberian settlers aimed to profit from Kru labor as early as the 1830s when all Kru laborers were made to pay a head tax while working in Krutown in Monrovia. Following independence in 1847, the succession of Port of Entry Laws had a major effect on the Kru economy. Kru headmen acquired new state responsibilities ensuring each worker was properly taxed before they could embark and disembark vessels. This created pressure on headmen to secure higher wages in order to avoid lower net wages. The Kru Coast economy was forced to shift towards its secondary industry in palm oil production, which placed Kru in a subservient role to Americo-Liberian settlers and the Liberian state that controlled sales on the Kru Coast. Conversion rates to Christianity surged as a result of the growing missionary presence on the Kru Coast that aimed to influence their socio-cultural practices.

Competition between the British, French, Germans, Americans, and Liberians for Kru labor increased. Increased taxation via Port of Entry Laws imposed by the Liberian government and mounting conflict were responsible for the lack of opportunities on the Kru Coast as Kru workers sought to make a living abroad free from government interference. Many Kru decided to immigrate to their diaspora communities in Freetown, Cape Coast, Lagos, and elsewhere. Others accepted French contracts and formed a new diaspora community in Grand Bassam. While economic incentives to work abroad increased, there was little desire to return and hand over a portion of their earnings to both their *krogha* and the Liberian state. Moreover, conflict with Americo-Liberian settler communities and the loss of land that transpired created an unstable socio-economic environment on the Kru Coast that further marginalized the Kru in relation to the Liberian state.

In the late nineteenth century, the nature of Kru identity evolved to encompass a greater range of Kru speaking peoples as they emigrated for contracts. Kru Coast boundaries were at the heart of the conflict between the Liberian and French government to secure the border between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. In 1891, Liberian authorities perceived the Kru Coast as the expanse of land that extended eastwards to the San Pedro River. There was an attempt to extend Port of Entry Laws in the region and tax laborers. However, the Liberian government was only able to secure the region to the west of the Cavalla River. The French understood that the region was inhabited by Kroumen in the towns to the east of Cavalla River, which included Cavally, Bereby, Tabou, and Drewin, among others. These were the main trading villages where laborers were traditionally employed by French merchants. The British generally hired the Kru on the Kru Coast to the west of the Cavalla River or in diaspora communities such as in Free-

town. The boundaries of the Kru Coast were politicized and depending on who was responsible for providing the dimensions it could be as large as the region between the Mesurado River and Bandama River or limited within the Liberian national borders created in 1893. In the latter, when language remains the deciding variable, the Kru Coast encompassed the region between Cape Mesurado and the Cavalla River in Liberia and the area between the Cavalla River and Bandama River in Côte d'Ivoire. While the Kru Coast experienced periods of growth and contraction in the nineteenth century depending on sources, the peoples therein spoke Kru and were able to identify each other by *dako* affiliation, dialect, and the location of their villages.

The data presented suggests that the Kru free wage labor diaspora was often contradictory and overlapping in nature. Kru served an abolitionist function on board British Royal Navy ships tasked with intercepting slave ships, while simultaneously serving on Cuban slave ships bound for Havana. Kru loaded enslaved Africans in the Rio Pongo and the Gallinas and continued to engage in the slave trade on the Kru Coast until at least the 1850s. Similarly, Kru participated in military and exploration campaigns that paved the way for British colonial conquest in Africa. Their contradictory impulses revealed their tendency to make a living by all available means.

The power dynamics governing the economic relationship between the British and the Kru were structured differently than the systems informing master and slave relations in the Americas. While enslaved Africans could negotiate and possess a degree of mobility within the framework of slavery, Kru remained free and in control of their bodies and labor for which they were paid. They answered to their headmen and worked within the parameters established in British contracts, but were never enslaved in the process. Much like their transition from childhood to adulthood through Kru age-sets, adolescent Kru understood that they first had to learn the necessary skills to become regular laborers, which could be a physically and emotionally demanding transition.

Despite racist undertones that informed their working relationship with the British, the ship became a cultural space where the Kru could perform both within and outside racial parameters. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's (2000) examination of alternative societies where rigid class hierarchies informing power-relations amongst the ship crew had the potential to become fluid depending on the circumstances in question resonates with the nature of Kru service on British Royal Navy ships. The Kru were able to take full advantage of the fluid order which defined their roles on ships despite the racial hierarchies that

contextualized the period.⁸²⁴ The British came to depend on the Kru, particularly in the Indian Ocean, when they were tasked with manning Royal Navy launch boats as part of a wider coalition in pursuit of slave *dhow*s. They frequently led the charge, boarded slave ships and put their lives at risk for which they were awarded medals. As such, Royal Navy ships created a fluid space that could not contain the Kru within a rigid racial system.

While the Liberian state played a significant role in the decline of the Kru economy in the later decades of the nineteenth century, Kru had positioned themselves on a course for economic disaster long before. Although they continued to trade with Europeans and Americans on the Kru Coast, the Kru economy developed a dependency on British contracts. The risk of losing the revenue generated from the homecomings of migrant workers threatened to undermine the social, economic, and political structures that informed Kru societies in the nineteenth century. Traditional age-sets were geared towards fulfilling British labor contracts. Profits earned affected social status, the ability to meet bride-price demands necessary for marriage, and maintained the authority of the *krogba*. The Kru failed to diversify their homeland economy to the extent that was needed given the encroaching Liberian state. Once the Liberian state imposed regulatory measures to interrupt the free flow of laborers, their entire social, economic, and political structures began to collapse and they were forced to develop alternative strategies of survival that ultimately led their homeland into a state of decline and marginalization in the twentieth century. Like many global indigenous peoples, the weakening of the Kru's economy expedited their forced assimilation into the nation-state apparatus, which valued their labor but not their political will.

In conclusion, the Kru developed a strategic engagement with British employment in shipping contexts in West Africa. The transformations which occurred within Kru communities along the Kru Coast, in Freetown, and the migratory culture that emerged is comparable with other African communities such as the Cabenda, Vai, and the Nyamwezi caravan culture that came to fruition in the nineteenth century in East Africa, albeit on a much grander scale.⁸²⁵ While Kru did not occupy a position of authority, their labor force became vital to British commercial operations in West Africa. Tracing the Kru free wage labor diaspora from the Kru Coast to the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans reveals the active role they played in the expansion of British trade and military cam-

⁸²⁴ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 13–14.

⁸²⁵ See Rockel, *Carriers*, 4–5.

paings and calls for a rethinking of African agency in the development of global capitalism. Their case remains an early example of the outsourcing wage labor model that has come to dominate work environments in the twenty-first century. Perhaps no other African ethnic group occupied such a versatile and important social and economic role in British commercial and military interests in the nineteenth century as the Kru did.