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Tristan Oestermann

Black Rockefeller: The Life and Times of Woermann's Kru Headman Teah Tobey, c. 1860–c. 1940

In perhaps 1935, August R. Lindt (1905–2000), a Swiss journalist who later became a diplomat and High Commissioner of the United Nations, visited the Liberian port town of Cape Palmas.¹ This port was one of the most important places where Europeans could hire Kru migrant laborers in Liberia. In the town's so-called Kru quarter, he was introduced to an old man named Teah Tobey (c. 1860s–c. 1940, Fig. 1). For decades, Tobey had worked as a Kru headman and labor recruiter for the German shipping and trading company of *C. Woermann*. Kru people from the independent republic of Liberia were indispensable workers for Europeans in West Africa before and during the colonial era. Kru worked in trading factories and on plantations. But most importantly, they worked as sailors on the West African run of the European shipping lines that connected Europe and the trading posts and colonies along the continent's coastline. Since the eighteenth century, Kru laborers had professionalized seafaring on European vessels. During the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, practically all European ships going down the West Coast of Africa called at the various settlements along the Liberian coast to recruit Kru laborers. Kru replaced European sailors and took over the menial work aboard ship. Of special importance were their skills in rowing surf boats loaded with goods and passengers through the dangerous surf which rendered access to most parts of the West African Coast extremely difficult. According to the literature, Kru migrants entered labor contracts with public or private European employers in small groups, called “sets,” led by a “headman.” Usually, scholars say, these contracts were short-term and extended to a maximum of one year. After the completion of their service, they returned to their homeland.² Kru workers often were not ethnic Kru but had different ethnic backgrounds. They were,

¹ Mark Perrenoud, “August R. Lindt,” in *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, last modified 24.03.2009, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/014864/2009-03-24/> [accessed 22.11.2024].

² On Kru laborers see Jeffrey Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor: Kru Migratory Workers in Global Ports, Estates, and Battlefields Until the End of the 19th Century* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021); George E. Brooks, *The Kru Mariner in the Nineteenth Century: An Historical Compendium* (Newark: Liberian Studies Association in America, 1972); Ronald Wayne Davis, *Ethnohistorical Studies on the Kru Coast* (Newark, Del: Liberian Studies, 1976); Jane Martin, “Krumen ‘Down the Coast’: Liberian Migrants on the West African Coast in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18, no. 3 (1985); Andreas Massing, *The Economic Anthropology of the Kru* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1980); Ulrike Ofner, *Modernität als Tradition: Von den Crew-Men der Küstenboote zur “Ethnie” der Kru*, Spektrum: Berliner Reihe zu Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft u. Politik in Entwicklungsländern 33 (Saarbrücken: Breitenbach, 1992); Christine Behrens, *Les Kroumen de la côte occidentale d’Afrique* (Tal-

however, lumped together under the name “Kru,” which served as an “ethnic-occupational identity.”³

As Lindt observed, the old Kru headman Tobey owned considerable wealth:

Tobey sat in front of his hut, the most impressive of the Kru quarter of Cape Palmas [. . .]. He looked upon the sea where the dugouts went out to fish. All these boats were his property, he received a part of every catch. All huts in the native town belonged to him, almost every inhabitant was his debtor. He was respected far and wide, because he had helped not only his own tribesmen but also many Bassa and Grebo when they needed money, by marrying their daughters. He needed many wives to cultivate his vast rice fields and coffee plantations.⁴

The old man, Lindt observed, may have worn just a simple shirt, walked barefoot, and eaten rice only once a day. However, by local standards, Tobey was nothing less than “a black Rockefeller.”⁵ Where did Tobey’s wealth come from? How did this Kru headman become such a respected and powerful man in Cape Palmas?

Teah Tobey was an important ally of the *Woermann* company on the African Coast. He appeared to be indispensable for the company and its trading, shipping, and recruiting business. His importance to the firm set him apart from the mass of African laborers, intermediaries, and middlemen with whom it conducted business. He was a prominent figure in the memory of the firm and the family of its owners. For example, Adolph Woermann, born in 1913 in German South West Africa and a trader for the company in Cape Palmas in the 1930s (not to be confused with the company’s towering patriarch of the same name), wrote in his memoirs in 1990: “Chief Toby had been a household name for me since my youth. I knew about this Kru paramount chief from the stories of my parents and from photographs.”⁶ He also features prominently in the company histories published by the firm itself.⁷ Tobey was particularly

ence: CEGET, 1974); Diane Frost, *Work and Community Among West African Migrant Workers Since the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999).

3 Frost, *Work*: 156.

4 German original: “Tobey saß vor seiner Hütte, der stattlichsten des ganzen Kruviertels von Cape Palmas [. . .]. Er blickte aufs Meer hinaus, wo die Einbäume eben zum Fischfang zogen. Alle diese Boote waren sein Eigentum, ihm kam ein Anteil an jedem Fischzug zu. Alle Hütten der Eingeborenensstadt gehörten ihm, beinahe jeder Bewohner war sein Schuldner. Er war weit und breit geachtet, hatte er doch nicht nur seinen eigenen Stammesangehörigen, sondern auch vielen Bassas und Grebos aus einer Geldverlegenheit geholfen, indem er ihre Töchter heiratete. Denn er brauchte viele Frauen, damit seine ausgedehnten Reisfelder, seine Kaffeeplantagen bebaut würden.” A.R. Lindt, “Die Kru-boys: Die Wanderburschen Afrikas,” *Atlantis* 12, no. 7 (1940): 260.

5 “[E]in schwarzer Rockefeller”. Lindt, “Kruboys”: 262.

6 “Chief Toby war mir von Jugend an ein Begriff gewesen. Aus den Erzählungen der Eltern und von Fotos wußte ich von diesem Oberhäuptling der Kru.” Adolph Woermann, *Wie die Windrose dreht: Das Abenteuer meines Lebens zwischen Afrika und Hamburg* (Hamburg: Kabel, 1990): 184.

7 Theodor Bohner, *Die Woermanns: Vom Werden deutscher Größe* (Berlin: Brücke zur Heimat, 1935): 252; Dirk Bavendamm, ed., *Wagnis Westafrika: 150 Jahre C. Woermann. Die Geschichte eines Hamburger Handelshauses 1837–1987* (Hamburg: Hanseatischer Merkur, 1987): 119–20.



Fig. 1: Teah Tobey and parts of his family. Photographed by August R. Lindt. Archiv für Zeitgeschichte: NL August R Lind / 41. With kind permission from the Archiv für Zeitgeschichte in Zürich.

remembered by the Woermann family as an example of the loyalty of Africans to the company after the First World War: During the war, Tobey allegedly refused to work for the British and waited for the return of the Germans.⁸ When the first *Woermann* steamer arrived in Cape Palmas after the war, the story goes, Tobey commanded a surf boat to pick up the company's owner, Kurt Woermann: "I am Chief Toby,' called the headman, 'I come to salute Chief Woermann and to bring him ashore.'" ⁹

The strong connection between the German company of *Woermann* and the Liberian Kru headman Teah Tobey contributes to the greater picture of German involvement in the colonial world. It is a perfect illustration of what researchers like Klaus Weber and many others have emphasized: Even though it is often overlooked, German involvement in colonialism went far beyond the establishment of formal colonies. German companies like *Woermann* were present all over the colonized world and played a huge part, both in creating this world before the emergence of a formal German colonial empire and after its end.¹⁰ Independently from German state back-

⁸ Bohner, *Woermanns*: 252.

⁹ "Ich bin Chief Toby', rief der Headman herauf. 'Ich komme, um Chief Woermann zu begrüßen und an Land zu bringen.'" Woermann, *Windrose*: 185.

¹⁰ See for example Klaus Weber, "The Atlantic Coast of German Trade: German Rural Industry and Trade in the Atlantic, 1680–1840," *Itinerario* 26, no. 2 (2002); Klaus Weber, "Mitteleuropa und der transatlantische Sklavenhandel: Eine lange Geschichte," *Werkstatt Geschichte* 66/67 (2014); Klaus Weber, "Germany and the Early Modern Atlantic World: Economic Involvement and Historiography," in *Be-*

ing, German companies did business with colonizers and colonized people. They made contracts with colonial governments, but also entered into relations with local authorities, traders, and laborers, and relied on intermediaries like Teah Tobey.

This chapter argues that bringing the role of German non-state colonial actors such as companies back into the picture can improve our understanding of other aspects of the colonial world, and challenge established ideas. The connection between *Woermann* and the Kru headmen Teah Tobey, the case explored here, provides not only new insights into German involvement in West African trade and labor relations before and during the colonial era. It also opens up new perspectives on the history of Kru laborers, and on the headman as an institution of (not just) Kru labor recruitment and labor organization on the West Coast of Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite their enormous importance for recruiting and organizing labor in precolonial and colonial West Africa, not much is known about the history of Kru headmen like Tobey—neither about the headman as a social institution, nor about individual headmen and their biographies.

Thus, the biography of Tobey is an extraordinary window onto the social relations of Kru and their headmen. Lindt, the journalist quoted above, interviewed Tobey and published his life story in 1940 in a magazine called *Atlantis*. Additional information about Tobey and his activities can be gathered from memoirs penned by members of the *Woermann* family and from the records of the German and Liberian governments. Put together, these sources allow for a critical reconstruction of Tobey's biography. It covers the period from c. 1860 to c. 1940, and takes us from Liberia's Kru Coast to Hamburg, Panama, and back. It sheds new light on the history of Kru headmen and Kru labor in general. Following Tobey's life, this article tackles three problems which emerge from the existing literature and highlights the importance of social change on the Kru Coast: first, the focus on Kru in British service; second, the notion of Kru labor as free labor; and finally, the problematic, quasi-traditional image of the headman. Tobey's history shows how Kru headmen profited from rapacious colonial capitalism—often at the expense of their Kru sets.

yond *Exceptionalism: Traces of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Early Modern Germany, 1650–1850*, ed. Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, Josef Köstlbauer and Sarah Lentz (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021); Caroline Authaler, *Deutsche Plantagen in Britisch-Kamerun: Internationale Normen und lokale Autoritäten 1925–1940* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2018); Christoph Kamissek, *Kriegslust und Fernweh: Deutsche Soldaten zwischen militärischem Internationalismus und imperialer Nation (1770–1870)* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2018); Karsten Linne, *Deutschland jenseits des Äquators? Die NS-Kolonialplanungen für Afrika* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2008); Karsten Linne, *Von Witzenhausen in die Welt: Ausbildung und Arbeit von Tropenlandwirten 1898 bis 1971* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2017). On *Woermann* see Kim Todzi's groundbreaking study: Kim Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung: Der Woermann-Konzern und der deutsche Kolonialismus 1837–1916* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2023).

1 Tobey's Youth: *Woermann*, Liberia, and West African Shipping

There is not much information about the early years of Teah Tobey, and much is open to speculation. The place and date of Tobey's birth are unknown. When he was interviewed by Lindt in c. 1935, he was already a very old man. Taking other parts of his biography into account, especially his trip to Panama (on which more below), it seems reasonable to assume that Tobey was born in around 1860 on the Kru Coast. This area was claimed by the independent republic of Liberia. However, the Liberian state hardly exercised any real control over the Kru Coast until after 1900.¹¹ Tobey was probably born in Grand Bassa, because it was there that, according to the interview, he entered the service of *C. Woermann* at the age of twelve. He first worked as a servant in the household of the local *Woermann* agent.¹² Tobey did not reveal anything about his social background in the interview. However, it is likely that he belonged to one of the important Kru families in Grand Bassa. It is known from other regions where *Woermann* did business that the servants in the company's factories were the sons of the leading families.¹³ In the 1930s, when Tobey was already an old man, he sent one of his own sons, Small Tobey, as a boy (that is: a servant) to a member of the *Woermann* family who worked as a trader in Liberia. According to the trader's memoirs, Teah Tobey sent the boy to secure the future connection between his family and the company,¹⁴ explaining that his father had already supplied Kru laborers to the *Woermann* company.¹⁵

Tobey quickly advanced in the company's service. He became a steward. In this capacity, his employer even took him to Hamburg. All in all, Tobey said, he visited the German port city three times.¹⁶ This may also indicate his elevated social background, as Tobey might not (only) have traveled for the convenience of his employer, but also to foster relationships between the company and his family.¹⁷

When Tobey started his career, *C. Woermann* was already a big name in Liberia. The company had begun trading in the republic in 1849. This was the starting point

11 Jo M. Sullivan, "Fishers, Traders, and Rebels: The Role of the Kabor/Gbeta in the 1914 Kru Coast (Liberia) Revolt," in *Africa and the Sea: Proceedings of a Colloquium at the University of Aberdeen, March 1984*, ed. Jeffrey C. Stone (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen African Studies Group, 1985); Behrens, *Kroumen*: 85.

12 Lindt, "Kruboys": 261.

13 Ralph A. Austen and Jonathan Derrick, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers: The Duala and Their Hinterland, c. 1600–c. 1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 77.

14 *Woermann*, *Windrose*: 210–11.

15 *Woermann*, *Windrose*: 185.

16 Lindt, "Kruboys": 261.

17 For the business practice of taking Africans to Europe see Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, "Trust, Pawnship, and Atlantic History: The Institutional Foundations of the Old Calabar Slave Trade," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 2 (1999): 342–43.

for the emergence of the firm's trading empire in Western Africa, in which Liberia occupied a central place.¹⁸ Interestingly, the importance of German actors, and particularly of this German company, for the economic, political, and social history of Liberia is rarely acknowledged by historical research, and a comprehensive study of Woermann's activities there is urgently needed.¹⁹ In 1860, around the time Tobey was born, the company already controlled a large part of Liberia's foreign trade.²⁰ In the following decades, *Woermann* became the most important business in the republic. According to British sources, three quarters of Liberia's imports and exports went through the hands of German trading companies, of which *Woermann* was the biggest and most powerful. After 1900, the Liberian state as well as individual officials and politicians were in debt to the firm.²¹

However, although *Woermann* made profits from its trade in Liberia, the republic's main importance lay in its role as a labor reservoir—for the company itself, but also as part of *Woermann's* labor recruitment business, for which Tobey was an important instrument.²² The key development which led to the emergence of Liberia as an indispensable source of labor for *Woermann* was the expansion of the company's business model: In 1885, the trading firm founded its own shipping line, the *Woermann-Linie*.²³ Its steamships transported cargo and people on the West Africa run. For

18 For the history of C. Woermann see Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung*; Renate Hücking and Ekkehard Launer, *Aus Menschen Neger machen: Wie sich das Handelshaus Woermann an Afrika entwickelt hat* (Hamburg: Galgenberg, 1986); Gert Uwe Detlefsen, *Deutsche Reedereien*, vol. 44, *Die deutschen Afrika-Linien Woermann/DOAL/DAL. Die Firmengeschichte*, 3rd ed. (Bad Segeberg: Detlefsen, 2013); Ernst Hieke, "Der Beginn des Hauses C. Woermann in Afrika," *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 30, no. 3 (1937). See also the historical accounts issued by the company itself: Kai-Axel Aanderud, "Immer wieder Afrika—Afrika what else?" (n.p., 2012); Bavendamm, *Wagnis*; Bohner, *Woermanns*; Karl Brackmann, *Fünfzig Jahre Deutscher Afrikaschiffahrt: Die Geschichte der Woermann-Linie und der Deutschen Ost-Afrika-Linie* (Berlin: Reimer, Andrews & Steiner, 1935).

19 Wolfe W. Schmokel, "The German Factor in Liberia's Foreign Relations," *Liberian Studies Journal* 7, no. 1 (1976/77). For an exception see Jyotirmoy Pal Chaudhuri, *Whitehall and the Black Republic: A Study of Colonial Britain's Attitude Towards Liberia, 1914–1939* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 47–69.

20 NN, "Die Neger-Republik Liberia," *Petermann's Mitteilungen* 7 (1861): 355.

21 Schmokel, "German"; Tristan Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit in Kamerun unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft, 1880–1913* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2023): 167–68; Chaudhuri, *Whitehall*: 47–69; Robert Kappel, *Ökonomie, Klassen und Staat in Liberia: Entwicklung gesellschaftlicher Widersprüche im peripheren Kapitalismus während des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Haag+Herchen, 1982): 137.

22 In fact, the business of *Woermann* and other German firms in the West African labor market continued earlier, direct or indirect, involvements of German companies and individuals in Atlantic labor-recruiting schemes, from the transatlantic slave trade to indenture. Klaus Weber has published extensively on these involvements: see e.g. Weber, "Germany and the Early Modern Atlantic World"; Weber, "Mitteleuropa"; Klaus Weber, "Linen, Silver, Slaves, and Coffee: A Spatial Approach to Central Europe's Entanglements with the Atlantic Economy," *Culture & History Digital Journal* 4, no. 2 (2015); Weber, "The Atlantic Coast of German Trade."

23 Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung*: 51.

decades, it was the only considerable rival to the leading British steamship lines of *Elder Dempster* in the region from Senegal to German South West Africa.²⁴ The operation of an important shipping line on the West Africa run made *Woermann* a major employer of Kru migrant laborers. Even though sources are lacking, we can assume that the company had employed Kru as workers on its sailing vessels and in its trading factories since the beginning of *Woermann's* business in Liberia. During the nineteenth century, Kru already were a very important group of laborers for Europeans all along the West African coast—and it is very likely that *Woermann*, once it had entered the West African trade in 1849, adopted the already established customs and work relations. However, the *Woermann-Linie* escalated the company's demand for Kru labor. Like those of other European shipping lines, all *Woermann* steamers called at one or more ports on the Liberian coast, especially along the Kru Coast, to recruit Kru sailors. Between forty and fifty Kru would come aboard and join the workforce. They took over the manual work of the European crew during the journey along the African coast. They also manned *Woermann's* surf boats, which were used to transport passengers and cargo between the ship and the coast.²⁵

Lindt writes that *Woermann* was responsible for “discovering” the importance of the Kru as sailors.²⁶ Given the long history of Kru laborers on European vessels and the decades of experience which British steamship companies already had when *Woermann* entered this business, this is obviously not true. However, what could be true is Lindt's—or rather Tobey's—claim that the latter was among the first who recruited Kru laborers to work on a *Woermann* steamer. A document from the Liberian government from 1928 states that he had been working as a headman for *Woermann* for more than fifty years.²⁷ In 1878, *Woermann* launched its first steamship, the *Aline Woermann*.²⁸ Perhaps this was the time when Tobey ceased to work as a steward, became a headman, recruited Kru sailors for his old employer, and himself worked on board the ship. In any case, *Woermann* quickly became an important employer of Kru labor. As early as 1884, a “German Kru Town” existed in Monrovia, whose inhabitants mainly worked on *Woermann's* steamers.²⁹

The role of *Woermann* in the employment of Liberian Kru labor is rarely mentioned in (English-language) scholarship on the Kru. While there is no doubt that the British were the most important recruiters of Kru sailors during the nineteenth cen-

24 For the history of the *Woermann-Linie* see Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung*; Detlefsen, *Deutsche*; Peter N. Davies, *The Trade Makers: Elder Dempster in West Africa, 1852–1972, 1973–1989* (St. John's: International Maritime Economic History Association, 2000): 72–78, 122.

25 See for example the description in Carl R. Hennicke, “Zum Sklavenhandel: Erlebnisse eines Schiffsarztes auf einem *Woermann-Dampfer*,” *Neue Deutsche Rundschau* 5 (1894).

26 “[E]ntdeckt”. Lindt, “Kruboys”: 261.

27 Indiana University Archives. Liberian Government Archives. Shelfmark unknown, available at <http://fedora.dlib.indiana.edu/fedora/get/iudl:1250315/OVERVIEW> Contract, Cape Palmas, 11.04.1928.

28 Todzi, *Unternehmen Weltaneignung*: 80.

29 Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*: 168.

tury, many authors transfer this position to the early twentieth century.³⁰ Their interpretation of Kru labor therefore misses significant historical changes. It is true that the British shipping companies on the West African run, which were always larger than the *Woermann-Linie*, continued to employ Kru on their ships. However, most of these Kru laborers had probably been recruited not in Liberia, but in the Kru settlement in Freetown, Sierra Leone.³¹ Evidence suggests that from the late 1890s onward, Liberian Kru mainly worked for *Woermann*. In 1898, British ships recruited between one and two hundred Liberian Kru a month. In 1902, *Woermann* hired some 700 Kru workers a month. During the Herero and Nama genocide in German South West Africa, a time when *Woermann's* fleet was fast expanding, the company employed no fewer than 21,233 Kru in the two years between November 1904 and October 1906. In 1913, 10,000 Liberian Kru entered contracts to work on *Woermann* steamers, while other companies' ships only hired 2,500.³² These numbers, even if they may not always be perfectly accurate, imply that by stressing the strong connection between the British and the Kru, (English-language) scholarship on Liberian Kru labor may have overlooked an important change in their employment: the emergence of *Woermann* as the biggest name on the Kru Coast—a development embodied in the life story of Teah Tobey.

2 Wandering Years: Kru Laborers on Ships and Elsewhere, and the Question of Freedom

Tobey probably started to work as a headman for *Woermann* in the late 1870s. Like many Kru men, he will have completed the West African run several times a year.³³ Tobey told Lindt that he gained respect and wealth by working as a headman on the *Woermann* steamers. However, even in the 1870s, before the large-scale colonization of the African continent, Kru laborers worked not only on European steamers, but also on shore: as manual laborers in trading factories and as agricultural workers on plantations.³⁴ With the expansion of European colonial rule in western Africa from the 1880s onward, the demand for labor in the region grew: New empires needed hands, and so did the growing number of colonial companies which expanded into the hinterland. However, most empires and companies were unable to mobilize the local colonized populations during the first years of European rule. Instead, they re-

³⁰ See e.g. Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*; Martin, "Krumen"; Frost, *Work*.

³¹ For the Kru settlement in Freetown see Frost, *Work*.

³² Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*: 168–69. Davies acknowledges the leading role of German steamship lines as employers of Kru workers in the 1920s. See Davis, *Ethnohistorical*: 59.

³³ Raymond Leslie Buell, *The Native Problem in Africa*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1928): 775.

³⁴ Behrens, *Kroumen*: 74–75; Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*.

lied on African migrant workers, who could be hired in various places along the West African coast.

The Kru were an important part of this emerging West African labor market, which grew to meet the escalating demand for African workers.³⁵ However, the work was often very different from their tasks onboard European vessels, which the Kru were most famous for, that has been emphasized and often romanticized in much of the scholarship. Men, adolescents, and even young boys were hired to work as soldiers, porters, and unskilled laborers in trading factories. However, they were also recruited as workers for the plantations which sprang up in the German colony of Cameroon and on the islands off the Cameroonian coast, colonized by the Spanish and Portuguese.³⁶ Other Kru even crossed the Atlantic to work in the Americas—and Teah Tobey was one of the headmen who led his gang of workers on the building site of the Panama Canal. Here, the continuities of the West African labor market to earlier Atlantic recruiting schemes for African labor are most obvious: continuities to the slave trade and various models of indentured labor.

Even though the connection between Kru labor and indenture, even indenture in the Americas, is well documented,³⁷ most historians have portrayed Kru migrants as free and voluntary laborers.³⁸ And even though abuses occurred regularly, according to these authors, labor migration was a benign institution. It evolved into a central part of Kru culture and practically every young man took on work for European employers, until he finally settled in his home country and enjoyed the spoils of his labor. Other scholars have criticized this narrative of free, waged labor. The idea of

35 For the concept of the West African labor market see Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*: 162–65.

36 Adolf Rüger, “Die Entstehung und Lage der Arbeiterklasse unter dem deutschen Kolonialregime in Kamerun (1895–1905),” in *Kamerun unter deutscher Kolonialherrschaft: Studien*, ed. Helmuth Stoecker (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1960): 208–11; Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*: 543; Ibrahim K. Sundiata, *From Slaving to Neoslavery: The Bight of Biafra and Fernando Po in the Era of Abolition, 1827–1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996); Ibrahim K. Sundiata, “Prelude to Scandal: Liberia and Fernando Po, 1880–1930,” *Journal of African History* 15, no. 1 (1974): 97–112; Ibrahim K. Sundiata, “The Rise and Decline of Kru Power: Fernando Po in the Nineteenth Century,” *Liberian Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (1975): 25–41.

37 Monica Schuler, “The Recruitment of African Indentured Labourers from European Colonies in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery*, ed. Pieter C. Emmer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986); Monica Schuler, “Kru Emigration to British and French Guiana, 1841–1857,” in *Africans in Bondage: Studies in Slavery and the Slave Trade*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); Sundiata, *Slaving*; Ibrahim K. Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Sundiata, “Prelude”; Cuthbert Christy, Charles Spurgeon and Arthur Barclay, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry into the Existence of Slavery and Forced Labor in the Republic of Liberia* (Washington: US Printing Office, 1931).

38 See e.g. Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*; Frost, *Work*; Martin, “Krumen.”

free labor in general has been complicated by labor historians.³⁹ In the case of the Kru, Ibrahim Sundatia argues that most Kru laborers did not work abroad for their own benefit. Rather, their labor served “gerontocratic demand”—i.e. the material interests of the heads of their families, who received at least part of the remuneration.⁴⁰ Considering the question of who profited from the labor of the many Kru migrants, these scholars regard Kru migrant labor as a form of exploitation, or as located on a continuum of hybrid and sometimes shifting forms of labor.

Recruited by *Woermann*, Tobey crossed the Atlantic Ocean as headman of 175 Kru workers hired to help build the Panama Canal. Lindt says it was in 1866 that Tobey and his men boarded a *Woermann* steamer that carried them across the Atlantic to the Isthmus of Panama, which, at that time, was still a part of the Republic of Colombia.⁴¹ However, it was not until 1881 that the French company *Société Civile Internationale du Canal Interocéanique* started the first attempt to build a canal between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.⁴² In fact, *Woermann* recruited Kru and other Liberian contract workers for the French canal construction company and took them across the Atlantic Ocean in 1887. *Woermann* and a French businessman named Xavier Pené (life dates unknown) from Libreville, French Gabon, had made a contract with the Liberian government for up to 5,000 workers per year, who were allowed to stay overseas for a maximum of twelve months.⁴³ In March 1887, the first *Woermann* steamer with 370 Liberians reached Panama. It is possible that Tobey was among those first men. In September, a second shipment of laborers arrived on the Caribbean coast: This time, 730 Liberians were on board the *Woermann* steamer.⁴⁴

The Liberian labor scheme for the Panama Canal was a disaster. Working conditions on the construction site were catastrophic. All laborers—most of them migrants from all over the world—suffered from disease. The annual mortality rate among workers was as high as 38 percent. Conditions were so bad that the Liberian workers

³⁹ See e.g. Alessandro Stanziani, “Introduction: Labour Institutions in a Global Perspective, from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century,” *International Review of Social History* 54, no. 3 (2009): 351–58; Alessandro Stanziani, “Introduction: Labour, Coercion, and Economic Growth in Eurasia, Seventeenth–Early Twentieth Centuries,” in *Labour, Coercion, and Economic Growth in Eurasia, 17th–20th Centuries*, ed. Alessandro Stanziani (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 1–28; Marcel van der Linden, “The ‘Globalization’ of Labour and Working-Class History and its Consequences,” in *Global Labour History: A State of the Art*, ed. Jan Lucassen (Bern: Lang, 2006): 13–36; Marcel van der Linden, “The Promise and Challenges of Global Labor History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 82 (2012): 57–76; Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Marcel van der Linden, “Global Labor History: Promising Challenges,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84 (2013): 218–25.

⁴⁰ Sundatia, *Slaving*: 128. See also Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*: 165.

⁴¹ Lindt, “Kruboy”: 262.

⁴² Rolt Hammond and C.J. Lewin, *The Panama Canal* (London: Muller, 1966): 47.

⁴³ Gary G. Kuhn, “Liberian Contract Labor in Panama, 1887–1897,” *Liberian Studies Journal* 6, no. 1 (1975): 45–46.

⁴⁴ GStA PK I. HA Rep. 81/960 Dieterich to Bismarck, Colon, 16.11.1887: 24.

reached out to the US consul to help them get back to Liberia, but he was unable to help.⁴⁵ By December 1887, 389 Liberians had died building the Canal. There also were diplomatic troubles. The British were skeptical of the labor recruitment scheme, because they felt that it too closely resembled the transatlantic slave trade. The German chancellor Otto von Bismarck feared that the Royal Navy might capture *Woermann* steamers to stop the trafficking. He therefore advised the *Woermann* company to halt shipment of Liberians to Panama.⁴⁶ As far as the sources tell us, the scheme was indeed discontinued after 1887. One thousand Kru and other Liberian workers had crossed the Atlantic on behalf of the German *Woermann* Company. How many of them returned alive after the end of their contracts remains unknown.⁴⁷

Tobey himself made it home—but many of his men did not. According to Tobey, more than eighty of his 175 men died in Panama.⁴⁸ Back home, Tobey had to account for those who did not make it back: “Upon his return, the relatives of the victims accused Tobey of being a murderer, and he had to exert all his influence to not be forced to undergo the poison ordeal.”⁴⁹ Headmen were responsible for the safe return of their set—therefore, Tobey was found guilty of not taking sufficient care of the men entrusted to him.⁵⁰

This duty of the headman, his responsibility for the safe return of his workers, has been interpreted as a regulatory factor to ensure the viability of voluntary and profitable Kru labor.⁵¹ However, it is also possible that this did not primarily serve to protect workers and the integrity of families, but rather to secure the return on an investment. We do not know how the Liberian workers for Panama were recruited. However, it is very likely that many of them did not board the ships across the Atlantic voluntarily. Some laborers from the Vai people on *Woermann* steamers for Panama had been recruited by a very well-known labor recruiter named King John or Vai John in Monrovia.⁵² He served as a middleman between European employers and the

45 Kuhn, “Liberian”: 45–47.

46 GStA PK I. HA Rep. 81/960 Bismarck to Kusserow, Berlin, 25.04.1887; Behrens, *Kroumen*: 81.

47 In later years, Liberians and Sierra Leoneans were again shipped across the Atlantic as workers on the Panama Canal. See Christopher Fyfe, *A History of Sierra Leone* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962): 547; John Grace, *Domestic Slavery in West Africa with Particular Reference to the Sierra Leone Protectorate, 1896–1927* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975): 186; D.E. Dunn, *The Annual Messages of the Presidents of Liberia 1848–2010: State of the Nation Addresses to the National Legislature from Joseph Jenkins Roberts to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf*, vol. 1 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011): 397.

48 Lindt, “Kruboys”: 262.

49 “Bei seiner Rückkehr wurde Toby von den Angehörigen der Opfer als ihr Mörder beschuldigt, und er mußte seinen ganzen Einfluß geltend machen, damit er sich nicht dem Gottesurteil des Gifttrunkes unterziehen mußte.” Lindt, “Kruboys”: 262.

50 Behrens, *Kroumen*: 59.

51 See e.g. Behrens, *Kroumen*: 59; Martin, “Krumen”: 415.

52 Johann Büttikofer, *Reisebilder aus Liberia: Resultate geographischer, naturwissenschaftlicher und ethnographischer Untersuchungen während der Jahre 1879–1882 und 1886–1887*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1890), vol. 1: 40.

many Vai, Bassa, or Mende family heads who used him to channel their dependents into bonded labor for Europeans along the West African coast. The hinterland of Liberia was a place where a large part, sometimes even the majority of the population, lived in various forms of dependency. From the time of the transatlantic slave trade at the latest, a comprehensive system of social institutions had developed that ensured that the mobility and labor of many people were controlled by others. Many laborers, therefore, might have been younger family members, slaves, pawns, debtors etc.⁵³ There is no reason to believe that the fate of the Kru who boarded *Woermann* ships to Panama was different.

This calls into question the often-repeated interpretation of Kru labor as self-organized, voluntary, free, and profitable wage labor. First, in addition to the Kru sailors, laborers also called “Kru” were recruited in growing numbers as plantation workers for German Cameroon and, most importantly, Spanish Fernando Po. It is important to not automatically conflate these two forms of Kru labor. There was a difference between skilled Kru seafarers, sought after by the shipping companies, and the groups hired for labor on plantations or on deadly gigantic construction sites. It is possible that they came from different areas, had different social statuses etc. Second, among the Kru laborers who worked along the West African coast, there were always large numbers of young, prepubescent boys.⁵⁴ Third, many workers did not return to their families on the Kru Coast, but formed their own Kru communities all over the West African coast.⁵⁵ Some observers attributed this exactly to the predatory behavior of elders, who demanded large parts of the wages.⁵⁶ The Kru laborers would probably not have settled abroad if return to their homes and families on the Kru Coast had really been central to their lives. All this is evidence that labor migration for many among the Kru was nothing they would have chosen, nothing traditional, but an investment made by people who controlled the mobility and labor of dependents.

So, was all Kru labor indentured labor? We should not throw out the baby with the bathwater, but it is important to move away from a single model of Kru labor, which should rather be seen as a continuum between individually highly remunerative wage labor and extreme exploitation.⁵⁷ Tobey can serve as an important example

53 Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*: 171–76. See also Svend E. Holsoe, “Slavery and Economic Response Among the Vai (Liberia and Sierra Leone),” in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977); Svend E. Holsoe, “The Cassava-Leaf People: An Ethnohistorical Study of the Vai People” (PhD diss., Boston University, 1967).

54 Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*: 165.

55 On Kru settlements see Gunn, *Outsourcing African Labor*; William B. Lyon, “From Labour Elites to Garveyites: West African Migrant Labour in Namibia, 1892–1925,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 47, no. 1 (2021); Frost, *Work*; Sundiata, “Rise.”

56 Henry Fenwick Reeve, *The Black Republic: Liberia; Its Political and Social Conditions to-Day* (London: Witherby, 1923): 120.

57 For evidence on the remunerative aspect see Lyon, “Labour Elites.”

of this continuum: As a headman, he worked with small gangs aboard steamers on the West African run—and with a large group of possibly indentured subordinates in Panama on one of the world's deadliest construction sites.

3 Headman and Labor Recruiter: Authority, Change, and Profit Among the Kru

After Tobey had returned home from Panama and faced the troubles with the families of his deceased workers—who were upset because they had lost a loved one or because they had lost an investment—he had to make tough choices: “[H]e could not stay in his hometown Grand Bassa, so he moved to Cape Palmas with his dependents; he had earned quite a large sum of money at the construction site of the Canal.”⁵⁸ However, Tobey's relocation was not the end of his career as a headman. Rather, it was the start of his ascent to the position of a rich, important man.

That this was possible even though he moved away from his home community calls into question some assumptions made by scholars on the nature of headmanship. In general, the role of the headman as an intermediary and authority figure in work relationships across colonial western Africa has not received enough attention by scholars of African labor history.⁵⁹ The Kru headman served as an intermediary between the Kru laborers and their employer.⁶⁰ His tasks were to communicate the work assigned to the group, to discipline the men in case of problems, and to protect their rights. Allegedly, some Kru sets elected a headman from among their own ranks. Other men became headmen because they recruited their set of laborers with which they entered the services of Europeans.⁶¹ Some accounts stress that headmen recruited from their own communities, where they had kinship relationships.⁶² The case of Tobey proves the opposite. He grew up in Grand Bassa, but had his biggest success in Cape Palmas. While it is possible that he also had family relationships there on which he could rely for recruiting labor, it may also be that his position was not based on kinship, but on his position as an intermediary with the *Woermann* company. While *Woermann* was already a big name in Cape Palmas, Tobey might not

58 “Aber es war seines Bleibens nicht mehr in seiner Heimatstadt Grand Bassa, so daß er, begleitet von seinen Anhängern, nach Cape Palmas zog; beim Bau des Kanals hatte er ein schönes Stück Geld verdient.” Lindt, “Kruboys”: 262.

59 For the most recent contributions see Cassandra Mark-Thiesen, “The ‘Bargain’ of Collaboration: African Intermediaries, Indirect Recruitment, and Indigenous Institutions in the Ghanaian Gold Mining Industry, 1900–1906,” *International Review of Social History* 57 (2012); Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*.

60 Mark-Thiesen, “Bargain.”

61 Behrens, *Kroumen*: 56–59; Martin, “Krumen”: 407.

62 See e.g. Martin, “Krumen”: 403.

have had many relations there. He may therefore have relied on his already well-established connection to the shipping company in order to continue his work as a headman. Possibly, Tobey's move from Grand Bassa to Cape Palmas transformed his relationship to *Woermann* into a symbiosis: For his social position, he relied on the prestige of the company—and the company was grateful for his services, which were of enormous value for it as it needed hands on its ships and made money from the labor-recruiting business.

In Cape Palmas, Tobey rose to become the respected and wealthy man whom Lindt met in the 1930s. Tobey's account to Lindt makes it clear that he already was a comparatively rich man when he moved to Cape Palmas. He had dependents who accompanied him to his new home. Also, he had made money from overseeing workers in Panama.⁶³ The lack of sources means we do not have a lot of knowledge about his work after the Panama trip—and it is possible that he continued as a headman who worked aboard steamships or who took on other tasks with his men. However, sources for the period after World War I give us a fair idea about some of Tobey's activities. Adolph Woermann claims that Tobey was the "paramount chief of the southern Kru tribes in Cape Palmas."⁶⁴ According to the Liberian government, he became the "Kroo governor" in Cape Palmas, a position he lost before 1928.⁶⁵ It remains unclear whether this was an administrative office through which the Liberian government attempted to gain control of the ever-elusive Kru Coast, or a local title among the Kru themselves. Tobey was not the only longstanding Kru headman of the *Woermann* company who rose to political importance. Robert Cappi had also been working for the firm for many years—and "later he became the chief of the influential Krutown in Monrovia, respected by the Liberians as well as his own people."⁶⁶

As the years went by, recruiting became Tobey's main task. Perhaps he had already worked as a recruiter in the late nineteenth century. It is unclear whether Tobey only oversaw the laborers in Panama or if he had himself recruited them back in Liberia. However, the sheer number of men under his command speaks against the usual, "traditional" version of headmanship in which a headman oversaw a small set of men whom he had recruited or who had voted him their headman. It seems implausible that Tobey himself took on the tasks of the "traditional" headman over 175 men. It is more likely that these were outsourced to sub-headmen who were themselves controlled by Tobey.⁶⁷ This remains speculation, but the number of men and

⁶³ Lindt, "Kruboys": 262.

⁶⁴ "Oberhäuptling der südlichen Krustämme in Cape Palmas." Woermann, *Windrose*: 184.

⁶⁵ Indiana University Archives. Liberian Government Archives. Shelfmark unknown, available at [http://fedora.dlib.indiana.edu/fedora/get/iudl:1250315/OVERVIEW_Judge to President, Judiciary Department, 14.05.1928](http://fedora.dlib.indiana.edu/fedora/get/iudl:1250315/OVERVIEW_Judge%20to%20President,Judiciary%20Department,14.05.1928) [accessed 20.10.2025].

⁶⁶ Walter B. Williams and Maude Wigfield Williams, *Adventures with the Krus in West Africa* (New York: Vantage Press, 1955): 61.

⁶⁷ For the emergence of sub-headmen see Behrens, *Kroumen*: 72.

Tobey's responsibility for them toward their families makes it plausible that Tobey was primarily their recruiter and not an overseer.

In any case, recruiting became the source of his wealth after his move to Cape Palmas. The archives of the Liberian government contain a contract between *Woermann* and Tobey, which dates from April 1928. In this contract, the company writes that Tobey "for more than Fifty years pass [*sic!*] has been in the employ of the said company." Because of his long experience, *Woermann* made him "Chief Permanent Headman." His task was to recruit Kru laborers for the steamers of the *Woermann-Linie*. As compensation for his work, he was to receive 288 US dollars per year.⁶⁸ As the Liberian government stated, Tobey supplied European ships with Kru rowers and seafarers. Illegally, he got to keep a part of the wages of the men he recruited for the Europeans.⁶⁹ Young Adolph Woermann also obtained Kru workers through Tobey in the 1930s, when he wanted to man surfboats for his company. Tobey mobilized the men and said: "And if you need more help, you know that my family and yours have known each other for a long time."⁷⁰

Certainly, Tobey was part of *Woermann's* lucrative recruiting business in Liberia. At least since the 1880s, *Woermann* had not only recruited Liberian laborers for the company's own ships, factories, and plantations, but also for other firms and for colonial governments—or for the French construction company that constructed the Panama Canal. To this end, they worked closely with African brokers like the above-mentioned Vai John. In 1903, the company even received an official monopoly from the Liberian government for the recruitment and export of Liberian laborers along the West African coast. This, it appears, lasted at least until Liberia declared war on Germany in 1915.⁷¹ The reasons behind the granting of the monopoly are unknown. Maybe it related to the debts of the Liberian government to the company. In the 1930s, *Woermann* steamers still carried Kru to the plantations on Fernando Po.⁷²

By being part of this recruiting business, Tobey was able to amass the impressive wealth that earned him Lindt's nickname of "Black Rockefeller." He had invested his wealth in ships, real estate, plantations for cash crop production, and dependents.⁷³ The young Adolph Woermann gives more details about the size of Tobey's family, the most important asset in western Africa: He tells us that in the 1930s, Tobey had 21

68 Indiana University Archives. Liberian Government Archives. Shelfmark unknown, available at http://fedora.dlib.indiana.edu/fedora/get/iudl:1250315/OVERVIEW_2, contract, Cape Palmas, 11.04.1928, [accessed 20.10.2025].

69 Indiana University Archives. Liberian Government Archives. Shelfmark unknown, available at http://fedora.dlib.indiana.edu/fedora/get/iudl:1250315/OVERVIEW_2, Judge to President, Judiciary Department, 14.05.1928 [accessed 20.10.2025].

70 "Und wenn du weitere Hilfe brauchst, du weißt es ja: Deine und meine Familie kennen sich schon seit langem." Woermann, *Windrose*: 185.

71 Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*: 183.

72 Christy, Spurgeon and Barclay, *Report*: 56. See also Sundiata, "Prelude."

73 Lindt, "Kruboys": 260.

wives. His sons were all either headmen themselves or chiefs of their own villages.⁷⁴ As we saw in the introduction to this article, Tobey held a central position in the Kru town of Cape Palmas: Almost everybody was indebted to him.⁷⁵ Also, his credit relationships reached into the interior to the Bassa and Grebo—and it is very likely that a lot of the laborers recruited and placed by Tobey were Bassa and Grebo.⁷⁶ Tobey was also at the center of a network of kinship ties between the Kru towns that stretched north as far as Monrovia and Freetown.⁷⁷

Looking at Teah Tobey provides insights that go beyond the traditional role of headmen as presented by the literature. Headmen were colonial intermediaries. They may have had their origin in older forms of authority previously described as “traditional.” But these relationships changed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the Kru Coast became more and more integrated into colonial capitalism. The role of the headmen diversified. Some recruited in their local community, went abroad with their recruits and worked as their spokesperson and overseer. In some cases, Europeans sent Africans out as recruiters who would look around for men to hire—a system termed “indirect recruitment” in the literature. After finding enough workers, they returned and supervised them as their headmen.⁷⁸ At the same time, all along the West African coast African recruiters were looking for men who could be hired as migrant labor and taken to places where European colonial states or companies needed workers they could not find locally.⁷⁹ Others worked as freelance labor recruiters.⁸⁰ Many men were tricked into labor relations by headmen.⁸¹ Others were hired out by men who exercised rights over their mobility and labor. Sometimes, headmen and other recruiters would buy out young men indebted to their masters—and send them somewhere along the West African coast.⁸² Far from the ideal of the headman as the spokesperson for his set of Kru laborers and ideally even elected by them, the headman in the heyday of colonial rule in western Africa was essentially

⁷⁴ Woermann, *Windrose*: 209.

⁷⁵ Lindt, “Kruboys”: 260.

⁷⁶ Lindt, “Kruboys”: 260.

⁷⁷ Woermann, *Windrose*: 211.

⁷⁸ Mark-Thiesen, “Bargain.”

⁷⁹ Mark-Thiesen, “Bargain”; Cassandra Mark-Thiesen, *Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital: Mechanized Gold Mining in the Gold Coast Colony, 1879–1909* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018); Enrique Martino, *Touts: Recruiting Indentured Labor in the Gulf of Guinea* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022); Enrique Martino, “Clandestine Recruitment Networks in the Bight of Biafra: Fernando Pó’s Answer to the Labour Question, 1926–1945,” *International Review of Social History* 57 (2012); Enrique Martino, “Panya: Economies of Deception and the Discontinuities of Indentured Labour Recruitment and the Slave Trade, Nigeria and Fernando Pó, 1890s–1940s,” *African Economic History* 44 (2016); Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*.

⁸⁰ Reichs-Kolonialamt, “Denkschrift über die Enteignung und Verlegung der Eingeborenen in Duala (Kamerun),” Aktenstück Nr. 1576, Verhandlungen des Reichstages 305 (Berlin, 1914): 3380.

⁸¹ See for Nigerian laborers Martino, “Clandestine”; Martino, *Touts*.

⁸² Mark-Thiesen, “Bargain”; Oestermann, *Kautschuk und Arbeit*: 178.

someone who was able to recruit laborers—no matter how he achieved this. Ultimately, however, headmen who just sold their laborers to European plantation companies and those who carried out the tasks toward their men that are described in the literature were at different ends of the same continuum.

4 Conclusion

Judging by the sketchy dating of the young Adolph Woermann, Tobey died in the late 1930s. He was buried “according to his wishes. That is, in a coffin from Germany.”⁸³ For years before his death, the *Woermann* subsidiary in Cape Palmas had an imported coffin in stock—in case Tobey might die. Allegedly, during the funeral his coffin was covered by the flag of the *Woermann* company.⁸⁴

The biography of Teah Tobey opens up new, hitherto unexplored perspectives on the history of Kru labor. Firstly, his strong connection with the German company of *Woermann* draws new attention to the role of German actors in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Liberia and beyond. German companies were important trading partners of the republic, and employers of its workers. Without paying attention to German firms and their position toward Liberia and Liberians, there is great danger of painting a distorted image of Liberian and also of Kru history. Secondly, Tobey’s biography sheds new light on the nature of Kru labor. Especially his role in the Panama labor scheme, organized by the company to which he was bound throughout his life, *Woermann*, shows once again that we should be careful not to present Kru labor as a benign institution that was beneficial for everybody involved. Rather, it was part of a spectrum of labor forms ranging from voluntary wage labor to the indenture of slaves and other dependents. Thirdly, it is important to rethink the idea of the headman. Researchers should stress the historical change of the position of the headman. The origins, duties, and actions of a headman evolved from decade to decade. The term was used in various ways for various people who did very different things. In the end, a headman was someone who was able to recruit, organize, and hold together a group of laborers—no matter how and under which circumstances these laborers were hired. Tobey, like other headmen, probably used trickery, violence, money, or forms of dependency to recruit his men.

Just like J.D. Rockefeller, the wealthy American to whom he was compared, Tobey owed his wealth to his position in rapacious capitalism. This perspective, hitherto not explored by historians, was an important aspect of Kru labor and headmanship. Labor was not only a remunerative occupation for the Kru, the most important and

⁸³ “[W]urde beerdigt, wie er es sich gewünscht hatte. Nämlich in einem Sarg aus Deutschland.” Woermann, *Windrose*: 214.

⁸⁴ Woermann, *Windrose*: 214.

most prominent group of laborers of the West African labor market. It was also a profitable, often ruthless, and predatory business that was fed by exploiting the dependent positions of others.

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