

Dash-peonage: the contradictions of debt bondage in the colonial plantations of Fernando Pó

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Fernando Pó, West Africa's largest island, 'which Livingstone reportedly called an unpolished jewel', was by the mid-twentieth century being studded with an imperial agro-capitalist crown.¹ The large cocoa and coffee plantations that came to envelop this Spanish island employed between 30,000 and 60,000 *braceros* – 'arm people' or agricultural contract workers. The majority of both the island's inhabitants and the *braceros* were 'Nigerian migrants under *peonaje* contracts' (Sandinot 1967: 104). Half of their formal wages were withheld until the very last day of a contract to discourage desertions and to make the accounting of deductions easier. There also tended to be an unregistered initial payment before the signing of an irrevocable contract. This informal payment was made possible by the long duration of indenture 'bondage contracts' (Campbell and Stanziani 2013: 17–19). In post-war Fernando Pó, the two-year contractual bind could be doubled and extended, 'as the system of wage advances, over and above the salary, means that the workers are frequently indebted'. This gave the planters in the 'always present conditions of labour scarcity a way to oblige *braceros* to work off their debts' by signing on to a 'further contract' (Velarde Fuentes 1964: 174). However, the 'casually authoritative way' in which this Spanish colonial economist refers to the device of debt in Fernando Pó's hiring arrangements should give us pause, not only because it skims over the many instances of actual violence within the 'deceptively transparent' relation of peonage, but because it papers over the history and ethics of resistance on the part of those who demanded the advance (Taussig 1987: 65; Retsikas 2016).

Why did tens of thousands of labour migrants indenture themselves to the planters in Fernando Pó in the decades after the Spanish Civil War? H. Rylands, a British colonial officer stationed in Owerri, where the mostly Igbo *braceros* were from, says that he had 'heard all about the "evil" conditions of Nigerian labourers in Fernando Poo from those who [had] previously been' there. In 1947, he was dispatched to the island as vice consul and concluded that the 'illiterate candidate for the Fernando Poo labour market knows more or less what to expect'.² The 'candidates' could expect openly practised police torture and overseers committing manslaughter with impunity: so why did the majority stay on for a second and

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¹Alfredo Jones Niger, December 1938, 'Memoria sobre el problema de la mano de obra en la isla Fernando Poo', AGA, C-81/08128, E-1.

²British VC to Comm'r, 8 January 1947, NAE, CALPROF 17/1/278.

sometimes a third contract, but almost never a fourth? And why did the informal modes of payment of these subsequent contracts constitute a remarkable instance of a vast counter-movement that brought the system of planter power to its knees? The answer to these questions is *dash* – which, in Fernando Pó's *pitchinglis*, as in many of the pidgins spoken on the West African coast, meant a gift as an ancillary component to an exchange (Jones 1963: 20; Guyer 2004: 59).³

The 'peculiarity of the process of contracting labour', writes a Spanish planter in the 1940s, 'is the age-old custom of giving advances to the *braceros* the moment a contract is made'.⁴ The Spanish called this advance *regalo* or *prima* – a gift or bounty – while the Nigerian labour migrants on Fernando Pó, most of whom learned to speak pidgin on the island, called it *dash*. The *braceros* who demanded and invariably received this 'very substantial inducement to recontract' found themselves between contracts and already on the island.⁵ The *dash* was not reducible to something else – to an extension of credit used to uproot or to cover initial transport costs. The *dash*, an axiom of Nigerian commercial life, had its own autonomous trajectory and political meaning. As the *dash* became inextricably part of the peonage contracts on Fernando Pó, it produced its own sociality and space of renegotiation, the contradictory character of which came to destroy the viability of the plantations. Recruitment techniques involving debt generated a two-way movement, a mobile form of submission and subversion, a friction that both enabled and undermined imperial plantation economics. Without informal credit wages and the ancillary dispensing of lump sums, the plantations on Fernando Pó would have fallen apart; almost none of the Nigerian *braceros* would have gone to or stayed on the island. At the same time, plantations repeatedly almost collapsed because these same *braceros* continued to sign on to further contracts because of the advances.

Rather than being a predictable moment in the interplay of domination and subordination, the *dash* heralded an 'unstable' promise of 'plenitude' and produced a plethora of tactics for 'unsanctioned' wealth (Guyer 1995: 16; Roitman 2003: 211; Berry 1995: 308). As I will go on to detail, with every contract came a higher *dash*, whether *braceros* acquired it after deserting or not. This double excess – the inherently inflationary, the incitement to escalation – propels the principal social dynamic of circulation in Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (2002 [1925], translated as *The Gift*). This fundamental instability and potential for reversibility are underestimated counterforces in studies of debt bondage. The idea that wage advances are always a sort of poison of entrapment lingers within scholarly and popular conceptual frames – *Das Gift*, after all, means poison in German (Derrida 1992: 12). This, as I will argue, is misleading, because the *dash* wielded by the bonded *braceros* was a show of their creative and collective power.

When the *dash* appears in African labour history, it is sometimes an advance on the first few months of a contractual wage, though often it is not technically an

³The word *dash* is derived from the sixteenth-century Portuguese *doação*, meaning gifting or giving money or goods (Christophersen 1975: 213). For the precolonial and more contemporary forms the *dash* took and takes, see Martino (2015).

⁴Cámara to Curador, 17 October 1949, AGA, C-81/08130, E-3.

⁵British VC to British Embassy, Barcelona, 5 July 1946, 'Labour Conditions in Fernando Poo', NAE, CALPROF 171/278.

advance but an *excess* that surpasses the official wages of a total contract (Kubicek 1990: 78).⁶ Historians and anthropologists, generally and everywhere, have continuously underlined the ubiquity of debt in the creation of bonded labour. The entire premise and effectivity of the wage-veiled-as-credit (Banaji 2003: 87) – for example, the *munnpanam* (money given beforehand) in Tamil Nadu or the *girmit* (agreement) money in the tea plantations of colonial Assam – lay in the fact that it was so high that it became an unpayable debt, leaving workers unable to walk away (De Neve 1999: 387; Behal 2006: 164; Breman 1974: 236).⁷ Wage advances have also been thought to index a modicum of worker ‘bar-gaining power’ as well as various degrees of patronage and dependency – arguments made especially in the so-called ‘revisionist’ Latin American literature on debt peonage (Bauer 1979: 36; McCreery 1983: 744; Knight 1988: 110; cf. Brass 1999: 202; Gudeman and Rivera 1990: 97). The *braceros* on Fernando Pó, as elsewhere, were the ‘initiators of *habilitación*’ – the cash advance; they ‘activated’ it and so they were clearly ‘far from the passive victims of domineering *patrones* [employers] in need of cheap labour’ (Walker 2012: 152). In late nineteenth-century Santa Clara, Cuba, workers seemed to turn ‘credit to their own advantage’, because it ‘meant an effective increase in wages’ – while also being a ‘risky business, since it could lead to lasting debt’ (Scott 1985: 235). The ‘advantage’ and ‘activation’ of advances ignited more unpredictable and volatile relationships than they are usually given credit for.

As Prabhu Mohapatra (2009: 121) notes in relation to early nineteenth-century Bengal, the ‘customary practice of receiving advances before commencing work’ was not so much an imperial ‘imposition’ designed ‘to tie down labourers’, but rather an ‘absolutely necessary compromise in face of workers’ demands’. The imperial wage advance in South Asia sprung from the indenture-like contracts made with sailors, and, as the sailors were continuously escalating their demands for them, the besieged British officials on site took it to be a principal ‘cause of their mutinous behaviour’ (Sinha 2014: 43).⁸ In Assam, British tea planters started complaining in the 1870s that ‘time-expired coolies’ had themselves generated an informal ‘bonus-system’ and thereby had ‘become “complete masters of the situation” due to competition for their labour-power’ (Behal and Mohapatra 1992: 147; Varma 2005: 53). Coolies from the Bay of Bengal, along with *engagé* labourers from Mozambique and Madagascar, had made very similar demands in the plantations of Réunion and Mauritius – but only during the second round of contracts from the 1840s onwards. Their ‘weapon:

⁶In Southern Africa, advances were bulky partly because, until the 1910s, they usually came in the form of indivisible and valuable cattle (Beinart 1979: 216; Crush 1986: 33). Where contracts were not very long or labour scarcity not too intense, such as in the coastal towns or in mining areas with a longer history, small advances were deducted from the wages (Martin 1985: 410; Mark-Thiesen 2012: 29).

⁷The usual argument is that, paradoxically, the initial ability to choose employers in the context of a labour scarcity allowed mobile workers to demand high advances that subsequently led them to become ‘attached’ unfree labourers (Bernstein and Brass 1992: 17). A related argument is that advances benefited employers in that they ended up paying bonded labourers much less in total wages than if they had continuously hired them at ‘free’ or ‘normal market clearing rates’ (Banaji 2003: 87; Mohapatra 2009: 120).

⁸Only over the course of the nineteenth century were advances and capitalist bondage recast in the moral language of hybrid debt ideologies of obligation (Prakash 1990: 223–5).

competition among employers' resulted in an uncoordinated rise of ever higher advances and rates of desertion (Stanziani 2013: 74; Carter 1995: 271; Allen 1999: 59). While the *dash* was not an oppositional movement, it could invert the assumed default flow of power relations.

In the early twentieth-century gold mines of the Witwatersrand, 'wage advances bound the voluntary workers' because they 'had to accept employment on one of the mines' (Jeeves 1990: 116), although it is clear that advances were so welcome that many accepted employment at two or more mines. In Southern Africa, recruiters 'induced' potential wage workers to 'enter into contracts [with] such large advances that the borrower "remained in debt"'. At the same time, mobile workers were 'accepting advances from several agents', with evidently 'no intention of honouring their debts to any of them' (James and Rajak 2014: 462, citing Schapera 1947: 109). Advances had become 'so large that the incentive to desert before contract completion was considerable' (Stichter 1985: 114). Attempts to track deserters down were often hopeless and haphazard. In spite of decades of imperial experiments in paper-based contraptions – obligatory contracts, registration regimes, pass laws and the like – most deserters, oscillating at around 10 per cent of the workforce, emerged triumphant (Breckenridge 2014: 87; MacDonald 2014: 156). Charles van Onselen (1976: 231–2) characterizes these movements along a 'stop-go labour route' as a political victory, 'a relative coup which improved their lot'. He imagines that there 'must have been some comfort in "working the system" in such a way that it left the exploiters exploited!'

The African history literature that gives 'a rare glimpse into the actual mechanics of the labour market' (Murray 1995: 376) has shown that the internal logistics of advances and desertions were largely arranged by informal recruiters. But these 'rapacious labour touts' have nevertheless been explicitly disparaged as 'lawless', 'depraved', 'unscrupulous' or 'dubious' at best (Murray 1995: 376; Jeeves 1985: 240; Harries 1993: 115; MacDonald 2014: 157; Cooper 1996: 44; see also Schuler 1986: 177; Mark-Thiesen 2012: 27). Touts – those self-schooled virtuosos of commercial life who came from the bottom up, or rather from sideways in – were primarily motivated by their share of the *dash*, but they were also personally solicited as they enabled a radicalization of workers' strategies and expectations. On Fernando Pó, it was a dispersed set of touts that laterally relayed the worker's *dash*, constructing but also cracking open the edifice of imperial bondage on the final African shores of the Spanish empire.

The *dash* produced a double excess: both the prolonged bind and the incited flight. In African labour history, the moments and passages implicated in the handing over of monetary wages have not received the sustained attention and appreciation they deserve.⁹ On Fernando Pó, the *dash* – the cash that employers intended to advance as a debt trap – left colonial capital in retreat, trying to fend off escalations on a front line populated by *reenganchos* – the 're-hooked' labourers signing on to a further contract. The *reenganchos* were accompanied

⁹For a similar situation in anthropology see Bolt (2014). In contrast, in precolonial West African history, debt bondage – and even 'self-pawning' or people 'selling themselves to get money' (Law 1999: 25) – has received substantial attention. Guyer and Stiansen (1999: 2) note, however, that 'the conditions of repayment', usually involving pawn labour, have been 'described in more detail' than the actual mediators involved in 'the advancing of credit'.

by relatively small but disproportionately effective groups of *ganchos* and *fugados* – ‘hook people’ and ‘fugitives’, or recruiter-touts and deserters. For the rest of the article, I follow the intersecting movements of these three figures in the archival sources in which they make an appearance. The *dash* could emerge only from the reign of long contracts, but its flourishing was the outcome of touts and workers combining.

Assembling an economic coup in 1952

From the sparse and distant¹⁰ existing literature, the movement of people from eastern Nigeria onto Fernando Pó’s plantations is seen to have had two phases. During the first phase, for over a decade after the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, up to 10,000 people per year were being smuggled onto the island by canoe owners from the Cross River Delta – illegal recruiters had ‘shanghaied’ or kidnapped many of them (Osuntokun 1978a: 38; Martino 2016: 93). The second phase (1943–73) saw an ‘indentured labour treaty’ organized by the John Holt company and the government of Nigeria, which expressly aimed to ‘control and regulate on a sound humanitarian basis a traffic which existed on a slave basis’.¹¹ Under the auspices of a new centralized recruiting agency in Calabar, potential *braceros* signed contracts in Nigeria and received a small advance officially capped at five shillings, a ‘safeguard’ measure that sought to keep workers from becoming ‘heavily indebted’ to Spanish planters.¹² From the archive, there emerges a distinct and overlapping recruitment channel containing the escalating *dash* component that fully unravelled mid-century.

The number one complaint among Nigerian *braceros* in 1950 was that ‘the Spanish Labour Office forced them to recontract with the same employer’. Until the 1950s, the ‘system in force’ for ‘re-engaging workers on second contracts was quite irregular’ to say the least. Spencer-Cooke, the British Vice Consul on the island, explains that it was often ‘sufficient for an employer’, *without the bracero*, to appear ‘in the Spanish Labour Office and state that the particular labourer wished to enter into another [contract] with the same employer’; as ‘all employers keep the personal copies of workers’ contracts this practice was all too easy’. The Labour Officer or *Curador*, Sebastian Llompert Aulet – a post he held between

¹⁰Distant, because no one has had access to the abundant documentation about Nigerians in Francoist Fernando Pó in the Spanish archives. Several scholars have used some material from Nigerian archives (Tapela 1990; Ejituwu 1995; Aworawo 2010). The literature has had to rely on top-level reports from the archives in London (Osuntokun 1978a; Martínez Carreras 1985; Sundiata 1990; 1996), Nigerian newspapers (Osoba 1969; Obadare 2003; Aworawo 1999) and publications from the Spanish colonial period (Clarence-Smith 1993a; Liniger-Goumaz 1987; Campos Serrano and Micó Abogo 2006; Sepa Bonota 2011). For my attempt to remedy this distance from the archive, see Martino (2014).

¹¹British VC to British Embassy, Barcelona, 5 July 1946, ‘Labour Conditions in Fernando Poo’, NAE, CALPROF 17/1/278.

¹²The Resident, Calabar to Editor of the *Nigerian Eastern Mail*, Calabar, 4 August 1945, ‘Nigerian Labour in Fernando Poo’, NAE, CALPROF 17/1/278. After a two- or four-year contract the ‘treaty labourers’ were then obliged to return to Nigeria in order to receive the remainder of their formal wages (Ejituwu 1995). This arrangement was similar to the earlier labour treaty signed with Liberia which had kept the island’s planters afloat during the first third of the twentieth century (Sundiata 1996: 117–22).

1943 and 1962 – happily rushed through and re-stamped these contracts on the grounds of the outstanding debts generated by a nominally ‘illegal system of inducements’.¹³ Depending on the amount of the *dash*, Llompart Aulet would eventually also authorize the release of these ‘indebted’ *braceros* after they completed two or more contracts with the same employer. *Peonaje* on Fernando Pó was akin to Igbo precolonial ‘debt-slavery’ (Uchendu 1979: 128) in that the Spanish promised an in-built but ill-defined expiry date to a form of contractual bondage partly held together by a debt relation.¹⁴ Without a nullified contract on Francoist Fernando Pó, ‘the labourer is unable to leave the island by orthodox means and the military control of the island is such that it is virtually impossible for him to leave by canoe’.¹⁵ While there are scattered traces of small groups of *braceros* ‘stealing a canoe’ and trying to ‘row themselves back to Nigeria’, the rise of the *dash* took the shape not of a permanent subtraction, or an escape onto the mountain tops, but of an internal split, a drill inside the patchwork of towns and plantations.¹⁶

The *regalo* or *dash* ‘through times past has served as an index of the variable scarcity – but always scarcity – of labour power on this island’.¹⁷ In the three decades of colonial Francoist rule, thousands of new settlers and a large number of corporate plantations rushed onto the island. The axiomatic ‘labour scarcity’ was obviously intensified: in 1948, barely half of the island’s self-declared ‘labour needs were being met’.¹⁸ A resident social scientist noted in 1951, the year when the *dash* was reaching ‘a distressing and agonizing limit’, that ‘demand for labour has been so intense that the bounty given to the *braceros* the moment they sign the contract is swelling day by day. On the shoulders of this desperate necessity, the *braceros* have organized a *picaresca laboral*’ – a picaresque labour movement – ‘that has been very much to the benefit of the unscrupulous *bracero* and pretty damn onerous for our agriculture’ (Romero Moliner 1952: 91). Wages for a two-year contract were held down at a constant level of 700 to 1,000 pesetas, while the *dash* briefly reached 7,000 pesetas (or £60), at which point the *reenganchos* were pocketing the entire surplus value being produced on the plantations – and in some cases twice as much. The ‘uncontainable rise of the *regalo* [has] turned *las fugas* [desertion] into a habitual affair. The *braceros* have been changing their names, and hiring themselves to multiple employers, creating a malign indiscipline and an invitation to continuous fraud.’¹⁹

¹³British VC, 8 January 1950, ‘Annual Report’, TNA, CO 554/169/2; British VC, 30 September 1950, ‘Labour Report No. 3/1950’, TNA, FO 371/89597; British VC to Cámara, 6 May 1946, AGA, C-81/08130, E-1.

¹⁴Precolonial forms of debt bondage have been artificially divorced from the world of imperial labour, particularly in West African history (Clarence-Smith 1993a; Falola and Lovejoy 2003; Austin 2005; Afigbo 2006; Lovejoy 2013: 67–8). However, Ekechi (2003: 169, citing Talbot 1969 [1926]: 698) makes the observation that ‘the status of a pawn’ in ‘some Igbo communities’ is ‘analogous to that of an indentured servant’ because ‘a limit of several years was imposed’ after which a pawn was ‘to be released “whatever the amount of the debt”’. See also Oroge (1985).

¹⁵British VC, 17 June 1943, ‘Nigerian Labour in Fernando Poo’, TNA, CO 554/127/15.

¹⁶Policia, Entry of 10 November 1953, ‘Registro de Incidencias 1953’, BNM. This contrasts with desertion on São Tomé (see Clarence-Smith 1993b: 150).

¹⁷Cámara to Curador, 17 October 1949, AGA, C-81/08130, E-3.

¹⁸DGMC, 15 January 1948, ‘Informe sobre braceros’, AGA, C-81/12373, E-392.

¹⁹GG, 12 May 1952, ‘Ordenanza: prohibiendo las primas o regalos en la contratación’, AGA, C-81/12373, E-392.

Dash rising: reenganchos

Any *bracero* could become a *reengancho*, irrespective of whether they had previously arrived on the island as shanghaied or authorized subjects. The band of *reenganchos* was narrower as many *braceros* left soon after their first contract – and many others fell ill or died. Three broad figures populated the ranks of first-time labourers in early Francoist Fernando Pó. The first, says Bona Ekatem, a Nigerian columnist and travelling merchant, were those ‘who did not want this work’, those who were ‘recruited by deceit and shoved into the plantation by force’. The second were the ‘volunteers, the good ones, the *bien conformados*’, which means those who had acquiesced or been knocked into shape; this was partly a provisional category and largely a figment of the planters’ imagination. To sum up the ‘third class in one word’, Ekatem uses the figure of the ‘*maleteros*’ or ‘suitcases’, those ‘who until now have dedicated themselves to trying to carry the trunks of passengers in Calabar’s port in order to live off the tips. These types have gone to Fernando Poo following the scent of the *regalo* which the [clandestine] recruiters then swindled them out of.’²⁰ Spencer-Cooke, the Vice Consul, thought it ‘strange that so many workers are persuaded to come here [but] the fascination of being promised such a large sum of money as £15 to £30 is a temptation hard to resist [for someone] who has probably rarely handled a greater amount than 1/’ (one shilling, with twenty shillings to a pound). The ‘hopes’ of these newly smuggled recruits were ‘never realised of course’; a first-time *bracero* was ‘lucky to get £3’ at the end of their contract, while ‘the remainder’ invariably went ‘into the pockets of the illegal recruiters’.²¹

O. Archibong, a political activist in Calabar, sums up the mood among these *braceros*, once they realized what type of exchange had just taken place: ‘every thinking man can prove beyond doubt how these victims felt when they were landed at Fernando Po, their wages [meaning their own promised *dash*] having been paid to the middle-men’.²² A petition by a group of *braceros* tells how, after a week into their first contract, ‘we saw one man who shows us [the] road back to the town’, where they complained to the *Curador*, who ‘repl[ies] us that the parties who brought us here have claimed £6-0-0 per each head [and] so we must go and work for the farm for good 2 years’. As another petition of a group of *braceros* explains: ‘They always sell man two years called sign.’ When they ‘strictly refused’ to be interned in the plantation, the *Curador* ‘held us in prison until we are agreed to go back to the farm, as up to date we are in prison with heavy punishment’.²³ The *Curador*, an agent of neo-slavery, pulled

²⁰J. E. Bona Ekatem, ‘El trabajo en Fernando Poo’, *La Guinea Española*, Santa Isabel, 3 September 1939.

²¹British VC, 8 January 1950, ‘Annual Report’, TNA, CO 554/169/2. The annual tax obligation in Nigeria hovered around the 5 shilling mark. Igbo bride wealth was around £15 to £25. For the Secretary for the Eastern Provinces in Nigeria, the ‘reasons’ why ‘illegal immigration offers certain attractions to the immigrant’ were ‘quite unknown’, but he surmised that the principal reason, ‘not the least among them’, was of ‘an economic nature’. Secretary, Eastern Provinces, Enugu to the Resident, Calabar, 9 June 1951, NAE, RIVPROF 2/1/53.

²²O. Archibong to the Resident, Calabar, 23 January 1939, NAE, CALPROF 5/1/194.

²³‘Your Prodigal Sons’ to the Resident, Calabar, 24 March 1936, NAE, CALPROF 5/1/194; A. Afiatai to District Officer, Nigeria, 28 October 1932, NAE CALPROF 5/1/192.

the carpet from under the feet of new *braceros*, but this happened only once. This neo-Atlantic arrangement was upended by *reenganchos* who transformed the *dash* from being a component of a recruiter's capitation fee into a moving medium for assessing and asserting their own bargaining power.

The 'odd thing', says a surprised British Consul General in 1953, 'is that although men who are sent to Fernando Po by illegal means, such as trickery or kidnapping, tend to be resentful at first, many of them give in' – and, indeed, 'stay on there for years'.²⁴ In the early 1940s, W. Evans, the British Labour Officer on site, gathered from some of the migrant workers who served as his informants that those who were 'completing their contract' were not returning to Nigeria but had instead started to 'put a high premium on their future services'. The *reenganchos* did not leave the island without the total wages they considered to be their due; they did not return home with nothing to show for their many years of hard work abroad. The 'recruit soon learns that without his services the employer will be ruined and at the expiration of his first contract he may himself employ a tout to offer his services for re-engagement to the highest bidder'. Evans describes the *reenganchos* as being 'fully alive to the possibilities' and 'out to make capital of the situation'. During this reshuffling for the second round of contracts, he witnessed how "intermediaries" who have scented the elements of a racket are springing up wholesale. These "agents" – themselves Nigerians – haunt [the capital] Santa Isabel and the neighbouring farms in search of likely recruits and, of course, take their cut out of the bonus offered.²⁵ This was a novel shift. A German Nazi scientist who found refuge in Fernando Pó at the outbreak of World War II observed that 'usually the Nigerian *Gastarbeiter* returns home' after their first contract with 'about three pounds in savings' (Wolff 1942: 98).

During the late 1940s, the convoys of canoe-going clandestine recruiters started encountering obstacles in the form of the Nigerian navy, which had set up a base on the Cross River Delta, and the numbers of smuggled labourers dropped sharply. While licensed recruiters were allowed to operate in Nigeria from 1943 onwards, they had difficulties persuading a substantial new generation of formally recruited workers – at least until the late 1950s. And so, during the post-war decades, it was *reenganchos* – 'as many as 25,000 non-Treaty labourers' in 1952 – who made the majority of contracts – some fifty a day.²⁶ These Nigerian *reenganchos* were the first generation to radically escalate the *dash*. They renegotiated its twenty-fold increase in a little over ten years – doubling the effective wages of *braceros* every time they were released from an expired or sabotaged contract. Thrown and kept on the bottom rung of the colonial economy because of an initial ruse, a dire need, or dreams of excess, they figured out a way to stay on the

²⁴British Consul General, Brazzaville, 12 June 1953, 'Tour of French Cameroons, Fernando Po, Spanish Guinea, Nigeria and British Cameroons', TNA, FO 371/102621.

²⁵British LO to Consul General, Duala, 26 May 1944, TNA, FO 371/39661; British VC to Comm'r, 11 June 1946, NAE, CALPROF 17/1/278; British LO, 26 May 1944, 'Report No. 4', TNA, FO 371/39661.

²⁶Nigerian Secretariat, Lagos, [undated, c.1953] 'Memorandum on the Labour Connection Between Nigeria and the Spanish Territories in the Gulf of Guinea', Rhodes House Library, Oxford, 600.18 s. 21/XI (10). GG to British VC, 11 January 1949, AGA, C-81/08130, E-3.

plantations only as long as necessary. This they did through an uneasy alliance with touts.

Up until the early 1930s, there was a standardized and registered *regalo* of exactly 300 pesetas ‘for re-engagement [which] changes hands in front of the Spanish labour officer’. This was a small sum – about the price of fifteen bottles of olive oil or ten dozen eggs or 25 metres of cloth in Santa Isabel’s markets – but it almost exceeded one year’s worth of official *bracero* wages.²⁷ In the 1940s, however, ‘outside the door of the Labour Office’ and due to the negotiations of decentralized tout emissaries, a much ‘more substantial *dash*’ was now changing hands. This ‘unofficial *regalo*’, laments a planter, ‘has been consecrated by the reality of the bargaining power of labour’.²⁸ In 1949, the *Curador* refused to inscribe the real amounts of this ‘free playing system of *primas*’ in his registry. The ‘300 peseta limit’, he says, one imagines in a desperately raised voice, was the ‘only way to brake the *regalos* of the underground market of labour which have been elevated to absurd levels’. For Llompart Aulet, the *Curador* – who received an annual reward of some 45,000 pesetas for fulfilling his duties – the ‘regime of *regalos*, free playing as to [their] quantity is a danger’. This was not only because it ‘defrauds the fiscal regime’, since it was tax-free, but because, he says, it was driven by the ‘venality of the uneducated native and the maliciousness of men in general, when they are moved by economic reasons alone’.²⁹

The turbulence introduced by the rising *dash* was well on its way to seriously undermining the plantation economy even after ‘reforms’ kicked in: there were violent scenes of repression outside the doors of the *Curaduría*, where the *dash* was being renegotiated and informally paid out. The *dash* – and the touts who linked *dash*-givers and *dash*-receivers – emerged from this void of registration surrounding the *Curaduría*, from the thwarted ability of dirigiste political economic power to make *reenganchos* stand in an orderly queue behind unilaterally stipulated terms of payment. Such state-coordinated contract monopsonies had been set up across imperial islands and enclaves of indenture in order to drive down and cap wages and worker bargaining power (Arrighi 1970: 200; Rodney 1981: 657; Behal and Mohapatra 1992: 143). As a 1909 collective petition of mine workers in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe says: by ‘putting down the amount of wages to be paid on the Registration Certificate the native is prejudiced through subsequent employers refusing to advance or increase the rate of pay!’ (cited in van Onselen 1976: 231). For European colonials in the post-emancipation world of recruitment, what ‘was at issue was not so much the capacity of market penetration to loosen workers from the land but an excess of commercialized labour mobilization, over which neither the planters nor the state was able to establish effective control’ (Sen 2010: 11).

²⁷British VC to Comm’r, 20 June 1946, NAE, CALPROF 17/1/279. The 300 pesetas figure emerged from an earlier recruiting constellation when Spanish recruiters had calibrated the *regalo* with the first instalment of a recently monetized Fang bride wealth. Recruiters doubling as marriage-enabling creditors were a huge success, and so Fang from Rio Muni, Gabon and Cameroun made up the majority of *braceros* in the 1920s and early 1930s (Martino 2012).

²⁸British VC to Comm’r, 11 June 1946, NAE, CALPROF 17/1/278; Cámara to Curador, 17 October 1949, AGA, C-81/08130, E-3.

²⁹Curador to GG, 8 November 1949, AGA, C-81/08130, E-3.

Dash renegotiations: *ganchos* touts

For the ‘prospect of returning to Nigeria with £24 [or eventually £60] in their pockets’, *braceros* were ‘prepared to risk work in Fernando Po’ and ‘prepared to suffer poor conditions of service’ – to put it mildly.³⁰ Contracts on the island were irrevocable and fixed in length. The *dash* marked one’s entry into them, a threshold with a very ambivalent sign: ‘it [is] generally recognized by the labourer that the higher the “dash” the worse the conditions are on the farm, but quite often their cupidity gets the better of them’.³¹ Once on the island, however, *reenganchos* were ‘very discerning when signing second contracts’ and stayed clear of planters ‘who had a reputation of ill-treating the labourers’.³² The *dash* for *reenganchos* far exceeded the ‘trade *dash*’ commanded by clandestine recruiters because planters were paying extra for experienced hands – for the skilled wielding of long-armed sickles, making exact incisions on the dangling cocoa pods without which any subsequent blossoming was irreversibly lost; for the keeping constant of furnace temperatures in the tin-roofed, chimney-sprouting cacao drying houses; and for much more. During the late 1940s the labour force had actually ‘fallen steadily in number’ while ‘production figures however [had] not’, so it was clear that the experienced *reenganchos* were being ‘kept under pressure all day from 6.30am to 5.30pm without any established rest period’.³³ The ‘high productivity of these most diligent *reenganchos* quickly generated a group of agent entrepreneurs, the *ganchos*’, or recruiter-touts (Velarde Fuentes 1964: 165). Out of interactions with *ganchos* came a realization that effected a radical coup against an arrangement that officially promised only poverty wages and a high risk of being incapacitated or killed – there were one to two deaths per day – by what can euphemistically be called the guardians of public order and work-related injuries.³⁴

Ganchos were a discontinuous and unrelated group of resident ‘headhunters’ who often started off very modestly, armed only with the capacity to handle, relay and embellish language and money. They were drawn from the ranks of lowly and landless Spanish and Portuguese *pichinglis*-speaking settlers, from the community of urban Creoles or Fernandinos and West African self-employed immigrants, from the existing entourage of Calabar-based recruiter kingpins, or they were former *braceros* themselves with a few contracts under their belt – they were ‘neither planters nor merchants, they [were] usually not even actual

³⁰LO, Calabar, to Government, Lagos, 15 November 1945, AGA, C-81/08130, E-1.

³¹British VC, 31 March 1950, ‘Labour Report No. 1/1950’, TNA, CO 554/169/1.

³²British VC, 20 March 1956, ‘Annual Report’, TNA, CO 554/1346. British VC, 2 January 1952, ‘Report No. 4/1951’, TNA, FO 371/96714.

³³British VC to Consul General, Barcelona, 8 November 1950, ‘Report on the existing Labour conditions in the Spanish Territories of the Gulf of Guinea’, TNA, FO 371/89597.

³⁴The death rate ‘represents 3.6% of the labour force’ and was ‘11 times greater than in [the colonial rubber] plantations in Calabar’. The Spanish ‘medical authorities continue to be reluctant to certify workers who become physically incapable of completing their contract and this is certainly a contributory factor to the high death rate amidst Nigerian workers’. British LO, 1 October 1952, ‘Labour Report No. 3/1952’, TNA, FO 371/96714. A ‘conscience-stricken’ British colonial official says he had ‘the unpleasant task of glossing over the reports of extreme brutality (cases of Nigerian workers being beaten to death were not unknown)’. H. S. Smith, ‘Spanish Guinea’, *The Observer*, London, 30 April 1961.

proxies or company agents'.³⁵ The *dash* was fomented by refractory mediators who never operated with the full blessing of the planters or the administration. A planter pleaded: 'make these intermediaries disappear, for, as a rule, they are *persona extraña*' – strangers, but also strange or startling – 'external to real colonial interests'.³⁶ Labour touts could confound and re-route the imperial economics of labour scarcity – they spotted gaps, forged loopholes and pushed them to extremes. As would have been said in Nigeria, touts pocketed commissions 'by hook or by crook', proposed unnecessary fees, and some even became fully fledged con men – the underground has its contradictions too.

Fernando García Gimeno (2004: 45–8) grew up in Santa Isabel working at his uncle's restaurant; this catered to an African clientele, so he spoke fluent *pichinglis*. One of his first jobs was working as a labour contractor for a group of Portuguese planters, for whom he enrolled a small but peaceful army of Nigerian touts. These '*ganchos* would bring potential recruits to the best farms we had' – often not the ones 'they were actually going to be destined to' – and would 'win them over by inviting them to lunches and things. We even paid for a session with a woman of the night.' With almost theatrical pathos, planters started complaining that the *ganchos* were 'twisting the will' of the *braceros* who were abandoning them after their first contract.³⁷ The sometimes Dionysian pampering that accompanied *dash* negotiations was an inversion of plantation patio life, with its early morning roll calls, its unchanging food rations of rice and stockfish, and its prohibition and repression of 'vice' and various forms of respite in the evening. It was a liminal phase that corresponded to the validity of a fourteen-day *papel de libertad*, a 'freedom paper' handed over to *braceros* when finishing a contract so that they could buy a ticket and wait for the bimonthly steamer to Nigeria, or so that they 'may look for work without risk of being taken by the police'.³⁸ A contract was always laid out at the end of this self-implosion grid of reallocation and inducements, because the anti-vagrancy ordinances revamped by the Francoists had made unemployment totally illegal on the island: 'any person who failed to produce satisfactory evidence of being in employment is arrested and detained'.³⁹

In the mid-twentieth century, a colonial accountant noted anxiously that the '*pequeño regalo*', the 'small gift', had become the 'single largest expenditure' for planters: the *dash* was 'having negative repercussions on the costs of production' and becoming antagonistic.⁴⁰ When, in 1952, the *dash* had 'risen to amounts oscillating between 6,000 and 7,000 pesetas, the benefits of the harvest [were] squarely falling into the hands of the *braceros* themselves or to the intermediaries who intervene on their behalf'.⁴¹ The growth of the *dash* was paid for

³⁵Joaquín Jose de Sousa to GG, 17 September 1931; Curador to GG, 26 September 1931, AGA, C-81/08126, E-34.

³⁶Cámara, 15 May 1930, 'Nota sobre el problema de brazos en Fernando Poo', AGA, C-81/06415, E-13.

³⁷Cámara to GG, 3 August 1946, AGA, C-81/08129, E-1.

³⁸British VC to Consul General, Duala, 30 December 1944, TNA, FO 371/49598.

³⁹British VC, 22 April 1960, 'Annual Report', TNA, FO 371/146562. See Martino (2016: 113).

⁴⁰Delegación de Hacienda, Santa Isabel, to GG, n.d. [c. 1950], 'Oficio Num. 150', AGA, C-81/12373, E-392; British VC, 30 June 1945, 'Monthly Report, No. 16', TNA, FO 371/49598.

⁴¹Comité Sindical del Cacao, Barcelona to DGMC, 5 May 1952, AGA, C-81/12373, E-392.

by large Spanish and capital-rich corporate plantations that were the ones 'needing a large amount of *braceros* and constantly renewing the contracts of their recruits'.⁴² Until the early 1950s, these hegemonic planters fuelled the increases in the *dash* in order to drown out the undercapitalized small farms owned by Spaniards, Portuguese and Fernandinos who had not been 'able to stand the pace' of the increase and had 'no alternative but to sell out to the larger concerns'.⁴³ Only during 'peak *dash*' in June 1952 did the *Cámara Agrícola* – the sole planters' lobby representing big and established capital – call upon the Governor to 'resolutely intervene in order to cut the rising costs of labour in its tracks'.⁴⁴ Within three weeks, the Spanish colonial authorities had 'put in motion a study to wipe out the escalating *regalo*', but they found that they could not get rid of it. They partially rearranged it into a registered bonus, a reduced 'lump sum paid out only at the end of a contract', because 'the total suppression of the *prima* would have completely paralyzed the island's agriculture'.⁴⁵

The Vice Consul gathered that *braceros* 'did not take to this new method at all'.⁴⁶ Those 'who completed their contracts had no interest in staying' because their 'calculations or estimation of the *regalo* were no longer being taken into account' (Llompert Aulet 1961: 68). The *dash* was a way for workers to guarantee for themselves some form of payment in the first place, because formal wages were often left unpaid. This was either because, over the course of a contract, planters went bankrupt or because employers were 'in the habit of delaying paying the labourers whose contracts have expired', which resulted in *braceros* having to 'pay out most of the money which is due to them for their living expenses until they are unable to leave the Island, then they are forced to recontract'.⁴⁷ New *dash* prohibitions notwithstanding, over a third of the planters continued to pay upfront and off the books; if not, they were simply unable to harvest their crop. The growing amount of cheaper 'treaty labour' that did not receive the *dash* was being 'blatantly directed' to the *Cámara*'s Spanish-only members. No new 'treaty labourers' were 'allocated to foreigners', and 'very very few to Spanish emancipated natives', so the many large Portuguese, Fernandino and German plantations and the small Bubi farmers – about a hundred or so who usually had only one *bracero* under contract – had to 'rely on retaining their pre-treaty labour or obtaining illegal [smuggled or deserting] labour in order to carry on'.⁴⁸

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Anonymous, Santa Isabel, 17 August 1951, 'El problema de braceros en Guinea Española', AGA, C-81/12373, E-392; British VC, 10 April 1951, 'Report No. 1/1951', TNA, CO 554/169/2.

⁴⁴GG to DGMC, 17 June 1952; DGMC to Comité Sindical del Cacao, Barcelona, 10 July 1952, AGA, C-81/12373, E-392.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶British VC to Consul General, Barcelona, 4 July 1952, 'Report No. 2/1952', TNA, FO 371/96714.

⁴⁷British LO to Curador, 30 October 1944, TNA, FO 371/39661.

⁴⁸British VC, 30 September 1950, 'Labour Report No. 3/1950', TNA, FO 371/89597; British VC to Consul General, Barcelona, 8 November 1950, TNA, FO 371/89597.

Dash life: smugglers, prostitutes and planters

The ‘point of view of the *bracero* is to never want to remain a *bracero* but for the shortest period of their life as possible’ (Romero Moliner 1949: 42). The Nigerian *reengancho* found himself on ‘Fernando Po with the sole object of making his fortune in his small way’;⁴⁹ his overriding purpose was apparently to figure out how to ‘make money as quickly as possible’ (Osuntokun 1978b: 10). A former Hausa *bracero* – who, in the 1950s, turned himself into a prosperous smuggler of canes and batons – remembers the Fernando Pó of the booming post-war heyday as ‘a place of many profits’, ‘money everywhere’: ‘if something was a luxury in Nigeria, here it was in abundance’.⁵⁰ The thousands of Spanish settlers – when not bossing people about and attacking them on the plantations or manning most of the administrative positions – were largely busy running the ‘many, many, many *factorías* that plague Santa Isabel’ (Pozanco 1937: 25; de Terán 1962: 60). These merchant shops openly catered almost exclusively to a clientele of wholesale brandy and tobacco smugglers from the Cross River Delta and the Wouri Estuary who sailed to the island in large ocean-going canoe convoys. By the 1950s, they had orchestrated the largest contraband network in coastal West Africa.⁵¹

While on a fundraising tour in Santa Isabel, the secretary of the Ibo State Union – a kind of democratically arranged ‘development’ association (Ahanotu 1982: 154–6; van den Bersselaar 2005: 69) whose members on the island were being continually arrested, beaten and deported – ‘witnessed with [his] own eyes the much talked about Fernando Poo. It is truly a “market country”. In its entirety it is filled with gigantic mansions and warehouses with innumerable merchandise for sale.’⁵² ‘In reality,’ says a British colonial officer (Brook, 1966: 196), ‘the Ibo went for two reasons: to make money and to take advantage of the opportunities the island presented for smuggling.’ In Calabar he caught a glimpse of the ‘great sea canoes filled with Africans being taken to Fernando Po for illicit engagement’. On their return trip these canoes were ‘laden to the gunnels with brandy, guns and trade goods for sale in Nigeria. Labourers also at the end of their contract shipped contraband.’ The *dash* was also being used to purchase expensive bicycles, gramophones or Spanish-made ‘sewing machines, before returning home’ to Nigeria, where many former *dash-braceros* turned themselves into independent transport workers, bar owners and tailors. ‘In fact,’ says a thinly veiled advertisement in a Nigerian newspaper, ‘as the Milton Lotion washes away any stain in a cloth, so Fernando Po washes away poverty from the starved and unemployed Nigerian Citizens.’⁵³ Positive propaganda for the island in the Nigerian media was a very rare sight.

For half a century, every few years, and sometimes daily for months, a Nigerian press storm laden with scandal and outrage formed over Fernando Pó (Akinyemi 1970: 243; Ejituwu 1995: 45; Obadare 2001: 85; Falola and Fleming 2005: 152).

⁴⁹LO, Calabar to Government, Lagos, 23 March 1945, AGA, C-81/08130, E-1.

⁵⁰Interview with [anonymized], Malabo, 12 July 2013.

⁵¹‘Smuggling: Nigeria’s curse’, *Drum*, Lagos, January 1961.

⁵²Ibo State Union, 1954, ‘Delegation to Fernando Poo’, AGA C-81/08223, E-1.

⁵³British VC, 14 April 1953, ‘Annual Report’; Gabriel B. Hart, ‘Public opinion: recruitment for Fernando Po labour’, *Nigerian Daily Standard*, Lagos, 30 July 1957.

Journalistic exposés contained interviews with deported politically active labourers who told ‘newsmen in Calabar that they had suffered “the most inhuman, hellish and brutal treatment” they ever had heard of in their lives’ – principally at the hands of the colonial police. Fernando Pó was known in the press, and popularly, by the epithet ‘Hell’s island’.⁵⁴ While journalists never mentioned the *dash* directly, if they had, they might have described it as a deal with the devil. From afar, and even from up close, it seemed that ‘conditions are such that on completion of his term of work, [a *bracero*] is forced to sign on for another term. This vicious circle continues till the victim has wasted the better part of his life serving inhuman masters.’⁵⁵ Many *braceros* were a bit more nonchalant; one ‘Chinebu Echu, from Okigwi’, after returning to Nigeria at the end of a four-year contract, told a journalist that the conditions on the plantation where he worked ‘were fine’ and that he had earned ‘some £35’ because of the ‘bonus given by employers’.⁵⁶ Labourers made it clear to anyone who asked them that the ‘principal attraction of a term of employment in Fernando Poo [was] the acquisition of a lump sum’ – ‘the inability of the individual to save when employed in Nigeria on even well paid work is well known’.⁵⁷

One of the Vice Consul’s informants gave him the impression that ‘the majority of labourers, on receiving the lump sum bonus on contracting, paid a large part of it over to a woman and this gave them the right to spend the night with her, whenever they came to Santa Isabel’. This was only partially true; she was more than a sex worker. Several thousand Nigerian and Cameroonian women ran and staffed the market stalls, brothels and bars that populated *Nu Billi* (New Village) or *Campo Yaounde* – the migrant slum of Santa Isabel.⁵⁸ These women acted as the so-called ‘money-keepers’ accounted for elsewhere in West Africa, because informal *dash* money was obviously unbankable (Berry 1995: 309; Peebles 2014). The peseta lost its value fourfold vis-à-vis the West African pound between 1936 and 1952, so it made sense to quickly convert the *dash* into fixed assets such as bottles of liquor that could eventually be smuggled back and easily sold in Nigeria – a conversion usually arranged by these women. *Braceros* never actually held onto the *dash* money for long. Keeping unattended valuables in the housing barracks of plantation patios was not a good idea – theft was common.⁵⁹ Also, as there were no official receipts for the *dash*, *braceros* would avoid carrying around large sums of cash for fear of being accused of illicit

⁵⁴ ‘Writer vehemently condemns idea of labour recruiting to fascist territory’, *Eastern Nigeria Guardian*, Port Harcourt, 1 March 1945; Isaac Pepple, ‘Free ticket to hell’, *Drum*, Lagos, April 1957; ‘We were tortured, starved’, *Nigerian Outlook*, Enugu, 27 January 1961; V.S., ‘Hell on earth’, *New Times*, Lagos, May 1962; Peter Pan, ‘The brutal island’, *Sunday Times*, Lagos, 18 February 1962.

⁵⁵ Linus B. Njoku, ‘The Fernando Po question’, *West African Pilot*, Lagos, 3 February 1961.

⁵⁶ ‘Fernando Poo’, *Eastern Nigeria Guardian*, Port Harcourt, 14 August 1957.

⁵⁷ Minister of Labour, Lagos, 18 January 1956, ‘Report of the Federal Minister of Labour and Welfare on visit to Fernando Poo’, TNA, CO 554/1346.

⁵⁸ British VC, 14 April 1953, ‘Annual Report’, TNA, FO 371/102612; Policía, Entry of 28 September 1953, ‘Registro de Incidencias 1953’, 278, BNM; Paul Iregbulam, Jefe de los Ibos Owerri, Santa Isabel to Administración Territorial, Santa Isabel, 14 December 1955, AGA, C-81/08601, E-5.

⁵⁹ Theft of each other’s possessions was not as common and was clearly marked off from the pilfering of planters’ property: ‘whereas all labourers seem to consider robbing their employers

earnings or theft and immediately being thrown into jail or forced to join the penal road gangs of the public works department.

Given the commercial intensity of the island, it was unsurprising that *braceros* were 'tempted to fritter away' the 'ill-gotten gains' of the *dash* on 'wine, women and tobacco', while 'the more prudent of them', says the Vice Consul, 'invest the money in goods with which to trade on their return to Nigeria'.⁶⁰ The Methodist minister on the island lamented that his churches were being neglected because the *bracero* went on Sunday shopping trips to 'spend his money in shops [with] fine displays offering a bewildering variety of cheap Spanish drinks', for export and consumption.⁶¹ In a rare archival find, the confiscated diary of a *bracero*, a politically conscious and torn convert, a young unmarried man called Monde, reads: 'Shameful, I had over doze [*sic*] shots of illicit gin and palm oil wine and adulterated and woke up to 12 noon at the premises in the Afonta local Bar. My action when I was very high was rewarded as madmans way of life.'⁶² Those with the intrepidity to stay on the island for several contracts, says Israel, a former treaty-*bracero*, were given the nickname '*griho*', derived from the Spanish word for the nocturnal and noisy cricket: 'this simply means that those people were carried away by the high life in Fernando Po that existed in the form of women and alcohol' (Oham 2006: 71). While the *dash* had much to do with the labour economics of scarcity, its pace, direction and outlet were set by the relationships *braceros* established with touts, bar owners, prostitutes and smugglers. The latter did not operate a parallel 'second economy' but configured the consistent interdependencies and contradictory ruptures between wage and informal labour (MacGaffey 1991: 12; Bolt 2012: 116), between regulated contractual exchange and gifts and thefts, and between needs and desires.

Dash* desertion: *fugados

The 1952 decree that tried to ban the *dash* was explicitly geared 'to stop labourers deserting and recontracting, under false names, with false documents in order to obtain the engagement bonus'. Deserters 'appeared to consider that the risk of breaking the law is well worth the "dash", which they would receive for contracting, if they were not caught'.⁶³ A 'great many Treaty labourers', at times up to 30 per cent, were defecting to the spiralling *dash*. They did this by simply 'adopting a new name'. They 'realise that if they run away and obtain false papers, which can be bought[, they] receive a "dash" of some £30'.⁶⁴ The labour market into which

as all in a day's work, they do not rob each other with the same monotonous regularity'. British VC, 31 March 1950, 'Labour Report No. 1/1950', TNA CO 554/169/1.

⁶⁰British VC, 4 July 1952, 'Report No. 2/1952', TNA, FO 371/96714; British VC, 31 March 1950, 'Labour Report No. 1/1950', TNA CO 554/169/1.

⁶¹David Lawrence (unpublished memoirs, 1999), 'Faith hope love: a legacy', 42, SOAS Archives, London, Archives of the Methodist Missionary Society, MMSL MSS/028.

⁶²Monde Obongue, 15 October 1961, 'Annals 1961' [diary booklet], AGA, C-81/08803, E-622.

⁶³British VC, 14 April 1953, 'Annual Report', TNA, FO 371/102612; British VC, 4 January 1952, 'Report No. 4/1951', TNA, FO 371/96714.

⁶⁴British VC to Comm'r, 8 January 1947, NAE, CALPROF 17/1/278; British VC, 10 April 1951, 'Report No. 1/1951', TNA, CO 554/169/2.

the *fugados* inserted themselves was characterized by an excess of paperwork. It was a costly routine, but a routine nevertheless, to acquire paperwork and fill the pockets of one of the ‘at least 400 functionaries who easily succumb to the temptation to falsify a paper or document as soon as the opportunity presents itself’ (Romero Moliner 1949: 43). Marck Oturu, a clandestine Nigerian tout from Bende, was arrested and held in the police headquarters of Santa Isabel, where he assured his interrogators that any ‘necessary paperwork could all be arranged for right here’.⁶⁵ Deserters tuned in to circuits of localized knowledge and again enlisted the collaboration of *Nu Billi*’s bar owners, who ‘protect[ed] *fugados* in their homes’ while they awaited a supply of new paperwork.⁶⁶ *Ganchos* brokered and sold any supporting documentation to deserting labourers. This was usually arranged beforehand, because the ‘detaining of immigrants without the appropriate papers’ was almost instant. Dozens of *Guardia Colonial* (military police) detachments and roadblocks were placed around the only road that encircled the island in the 1940s – a road largely built and maintained by imprisoned Nigerian *braceros*.⁶⁷

The division of value between capital and labour on Fernando Pó was often jarring, verging from absolute injustice to spectacular coups. A group of *braceros* told George Dove-Edwin, a Nigerian Krio lawyer visiting his brother-in-law on the island, that ‘a note from any one of their employers was sufficient not only to confine them in prison but for them to be treated as convicts’: that is, subjected to unpaid penal labour (Bernault and Roitman 2003). In addition, ‘if a labourer’s employer has any sort of grounds of complaint he can send the labourer along to the Police and have him soundly flogged’.⁶⁸ Someone who hit the employers where it hurt them was a man who went by the female alias⁶⁹ Okpara Anita. With a forged ‘freedom paper’ and after receiving an ‘envelope of money’, Anita deserted from his second contract at a Pepsi-Cola bottling plant and then proceeded to send a letter taunting his former employer. Anita explains how his flight was a conscious act of retribution for deductions from the accrued wages kept in arrears: ‘Now Pedro the [w]hole palaver in the month of September could you remember what you told me when paying me? Could you remember how much money you

⁶⁵Policia to GG, 22 June 1961, AGA, C-81/08215, E-5.

⁶⁶Policia, Entry of 10 August 1953, ‘Registro de Incidencias 1953’, 174, BNM; Interview with [anonymized], Malabo, 12 July 2013.

⁶⁷GG, 25 September 1963, ‘Circulares Indocumentados’, AGA, C-81/08781, E-3; Guardia Colonial, Santa Isabel, 1950, ‘Memoria’, AGA, C-81/08183.

⁶⁸George Frederick Dove-Edwin to British VC, 31 January 1944, NAE, CALPROF 17/1/277; British VC to Comm’r, 8 January 1947, NAE, CALPROF 17/1/278. The mainly Iberian overseers were legally permitted to punish workers with non-mutilating whips. There was plenty of dispersed insurrectionary push-back after which *braceros* would need to desert for reasons unrelated to the *dash*. Jose Ocoyo from Calabar wisely ‘fled apparently to Santa Isabel’, untracked, after ‘inflicting a head-wound with a shovel on the overseer Mr. Garcia’. Comandante de Puesto, Concepción to Administración Territorial, San Carlos, 7 April 1941, AGA, C-81/15865, E-11.

⁶⁹In Fernando Pó and elsewhere in colonial Africa, the ‘very casual use of names’ among contract labourers was a pre-emptive defence grounded in wit and well-founded paranoia: ‘he fears that some unknown and probably oppressive use may be made of any information about himself which he may supply, and he therefore frequently purposely gives false particulars; he may even adopt a vulgar or indecent pseudonym as an excellent joke in the vernacular’ (Orde-Browne 1967: 77). On aliases, and the flailing dialectics of fingerprints, photography and forgery, see Breckenridge (2014), MacDonald (2012: 254; 2014: 168) and Singha (2000: 175).

have cuted [cut] me with out reasonable point?’ Insisting on the more or less ethical conduct of his operation, Anita also noted that ‘the money was given me by Master Pinga, not by night or hidden thing it is in day time’, in broad daylight.⁷⁰ The sabotage precipitated by the *dash* worked only if performed with theatrics and props – with aliases, forgeries and simulations – in the light of day rather than through predatory night-time banditry or the stealth of the burglar (see Bastian 1993: 149). If deemed just or worth the risk, a *bracero* could ‘contract himself to five different employers in the course of a month, each time receiving a handsome “dash”’. ‘One man [who] had 13 current contracts’ might have broken a record, but all except one of his hopeful employers denounced the *bracero* as a *fugado*.⁷¹ The cumulative play of flight was one of withdrawal and tactical re-entry, a guerrilla warfare without bloodshed.

Deserters and touts reassembled the techniques of financial capitalism – generating speculative debts based on their labour – within a state of generalized corruption. The dual spiral of the *dash* – escalating advances and desertions – did not, of course, involve any syndicalist organization; ‘in that island of terrorism and brutality strikes are illegal and agitation is criminal’.⁷² It used to be said of desertion that it was a ‘conservative’ and ‘inhibiting’ form of resistance, because – as with the *dash* – success was variable and individualized and the whole ‘tramping-system’ was sustained by a ‘spontaneous and ephemeral ... communications network’ of ‘touts’ (Harries 1993: 42). Recent scholarship even suggests that negotiating higher advances and deserting with forged papers was not a form of resistance at all; instead, it was a ‘self-interested act of duplicity’ (Allina-Pisano 2003: 192) or just a technical search ‘for slightly better wages’ (Cooper 1996: 45). However, the decentralized and fragmentary renegotiation of total wages held up and enacted a devastating critique of the entire colonial contract system itself. Touts and workers, the ‘hooks’ and those ‘re-hooked’, the *ganchos* and *reenganchos*, with or without deserters, opened up the space for a form of contestation that first of all managed to get rid of the most abusive overseers and planters, and then struck the plantations at their very core, their bottom line. Drawing on the repertoire of *dash* negotiation techniques – self-evident demands, up-to-date scripts, and sometimes masks made with forged papers – they outwitted the imperial capitalist system that had engineered low wages on bondage contracts, and they did this with an indispensable dose of confidence and dexterity. It was a remarkable manoeuvre.

Conclusion

Conditions for debt bondage arise when employers use wage advances to ‘manoeuvre workers into a system of forced labour (which is still wage-labour) or contain their mobility’ (Banaji 2003: 87). However, such binding properties did not emerge from the quasi-magical invocations of sheer debt alone, but rather

⁷⁰Akpara Anita, Calabar to Mr. Pedro, Santa Isabel, 24 November 1961, AGA C-81/08803, E-622.

⁷¹British VC, 10 April 1951, ‘Report No. 1/1951’, TNA, CO 554/169/2; British VC, 4 July 1952, ‘Report No. 2/1952’, TNA, FO 371/96714.

⁷²Peter Pan, ‘The brutal island’, *Daily Times*, Lagos, 27 January 1965.

from the ‘organized violence’ of those who measured and enforced repayment through labour (Graeber 2011: 121; Taussig 1987: 65; Prakash 1990: 242). In post-colonial Latin America, as in colonial Africa, the advances of *peonaje* ‘usually involved indebtedness and always involved the machinery of state to make the system work’ (Dore 2003: 218; Washbrook 2006: 390). This, rather than the *dash*, was the source of bondage in the imperial labour relation. When the prolific adviser on African labour matters Major Orde-Browne (1967: 72; see also Cooper 1996: 60; Brown 2003: 83) described the ‘cut-throat competition’ that ‘set in when competing recruiters give increasing advances’, he immediately recommended that ‘some written statement of any obligation of this nature should be drawn up at the time of incurring it’. As Keith Breckenridge shows, the elements of an ‘archival government’ – templates for contracts, centralized registries, traceable receipts and sundry identification techniques – were only deployed in colonial economies in the first place to try to regulate the mushrooming of both wage advances and the related desertions that accompanied ‘capital intensive forms of labour recruitment’ (Breckenridge 2008: 22; see also Singha 2000: 161).

The *dash* was the result of an uncompromising commodity economics achieved through constant negotiations that reflected the ‘real value’ of *bracero* labour as a type of ‘free’ labour, in the elementary sense of agreed wages and the ability to exit contracts (Marx 1906 [1887]: 256; Turner 1995: 14–15; Amin and van der Linden 1997; Moulrier Boutang 1998). As Isaac Pepple, a Nigerian journalist arrested on the island in 1956, found out from ‘a group of five thieves [in a] prison cell’: ‘strangely enough’, the Nigerians who bypassed the treaty and ‘smuggled themselves’ onto the island did so ‘because as free men, they can bargain for high wages’ in the form of a *dash*.⁷³ Needless to say, the autonomous escalations of the *dash* took place entirely outside imperial self-definitions of ‘free’ contract labour. For *braceros*, the *dash* was their own criterion inserted into unstable parameters of exchange; it was even a *just* moment that could be pulled out from inside the predetermined terms of an imperial labour contract. Even though the spiralling of the *dash* was a provisional and rare feat, the self-propelled trajectory of the *reenganchos* on Fernando Pó was sustained by a praxis based on a sense of fairness – a moral economy of radicalized economics – in one of the most structurally violent colonies of its day. Only the *dash* could overturn a plantation economy that depended on conned and kidnapped Nigerians during World War II; only the *dash* could ward off the ‘labour treaty’ with Nigeria that was a West African variant of apartheid’s labour recruiting system. *Dash*-peonage had a deeply ambivalent and highly volatile trajectory that underpinned, straddled and then circumvented the free–unfree labour binary and the colonial economy itself.

Notes

Abbreviations for the archives: AGA = Archivo General de la Administración, Alcalá de Henares, Spain, IDD 15, Fondo África; C = Caja; E = Expediente; BNM = Biblioteca Nacional de Guinea Ecuatorial, Malabo, Equatorial

⁷³Isaac Pepple, ‘Free ticket to hell’, *Drum*, Lagos, April 1957.

Guinea; NAE = National Archives of Nigeria, Enugu Branch; TNA = National Archives of the UK, London.

Abbreviations for correspondence: DGMC = Dirección General de Marruecos y Colonias (Colonial Office, Madrid); GG = Gobernador General de los Territorios Españoles del Golfo de Guinea (Governor, Santa Isabel); Curador = Curador Colonial, from 1941 on Delegado de Trabajo (Labour Officer, Santa Isabel); Policía = Jefe de Policía Gubernativa (Police Chief, Santa Isabel); Cámara = Presidente de la Cámara Agrícola de Fernando Póo (Head of the Agricultural Chambers of Commerce, Santa Isabel); British VC = British Vice Consul (Santa Isabel); British LO: British Labour Officer (Santa Isabel); Comm'r = British Commissioner of Labour in Nigeria (Lagos).

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Abstract

Dash in pidgin English means an ancillary gift to an exchange. What happened when the *dash* became attached to the indentured labour contracts that the Spanish Empire brought from Cuba to their last colony, Spanish Guinea? On the island of Fernando Pó, which came to be almost wholly populated by Nigerian labour migrants, the conditional gift in the form of a large wage advance produced a particularly intense contradiction. In the historiography of unfree labour, the excess wage advance is thought to create conditions for the perpetuation of bondage through debt. However, in imperial contexts, the wage advance did not generate compliance and immobility; exactly the opposite – it produced unprecedented waves of further escalation and dispersed flight. The *dash* was pushed up by workers themselves and relayed by informal recruiters. Together they turned this lynchpin of indentured labour and debt peonage into a counter-practice that almost led to the collapse of the plantations in the 1950s. The trajectories of the *dash* led to a more pointed version of the foundational thesis of global labour history: namely, that it was actually free labour, not unfree labour, that was incompatible with labour scarcity-ridden imperial capitalism.

Résumé

Dash, en anglais pidgin, signifie un don accessoire dans le cadre d'un échange. Que s'est-il passé lorsque le *dash* est devenu rattaché aux contrats de travail en servitude que l'empire espagnol a ramenés de Cuba dans sa dernière colonie, la Guinée espagnole ? Sur l'île de Fernando Pó, pour un temps presque entièrement peuplée de travailleurs migrants nigériens, le don conditionnel, sous la forme d'une avance sur salaire importante, a généré une contradiction particulièrement intense. Dans l'historiographie de la main-d'œuvre non libre,

l'avance sur salaire excessive passe pour être créatrice de conditions de perpétuation de la servitude par la dette. Cependant, dans des contextes impériaux, l'avance sur salaire n'a pas généré de conformité et d'immobilité ; tout au contraire, elle a produit des vagues sans précédent d'escalade et de fuite dispersée. Ce sont les travailleurs eux-mêmes qui ont poussé le *dash*, ensuite relayé par des recruteurs informels. Ensemble, ils ont fait du pilier que constituaient le travail en servitude et le péonage de la dette une contre-pratique qui a presque conduit à l'effondrement des plantations dans les années 1950. Les trajectoires du *dash* ont conduit à une version plus appuyée de la thèse fondatrice de l'histoire de la main-d'œuvre mondiale, à savoir que c'est en réalité la main-d'œuvre libre, et non la main-d'œuvre non libre, qui était incompatible avec le capitalisme impérial marqué par une pénurie de main-d'œuvre.