Creation of Economic Zones in Colonial Africa

During the colonial era, a number of factors coalesced and led to the creation of distinct economic zones in sub-Saharan Africa. Bearing in mind the overall economic goals of the colonial undertaking, colonial economic policies were carefully constructed to meet the interests and objectives of the European stakeholders. Specifically, the extraction of natural resources from Africa for European industries and the establishment of new markets for European manufactured goods were guiding the formulation and execution of economic policies. Additionally, the geographic and geological features of localities throughout the continent were decisive elements in the European pursuit of economic goals. Here, such factors as soil quality, climate, and mineral reserves played important roles. What emerged was a general pattern of four discrete economic zones—peasant zone, settler zone, concession zone, and mining/industrial zone—throughout the continent. Naturally there was significant overlap; nonetheless, these economic zones assist us in our understanding of the ways in which colonialism influenced and shaped the economic structures of sub-Saharan Africa.

Peasant Zone

Most of West Africa formed the peasant zone. During colonialism peasants were encouraged to shift from subsistence farming to cash crop farming geared toward exports. The imposition of taxes forced many peasants to produce cash crops. For countless farmers, making the shift to cash crop farming was the only option for them to earn money that, in turn, would allow them to pay the taxes. The lure of cash incentives also was instrumental in farmers' decisions to pursue cash crop farming. Money earned from selling cash crops allowed peasants to buy European imports. Hence, the imposition of taxes proved a very effective economic policy tool for the European colonial governments. The burden of taxes forced peasants to alter their farming practices. Subsistence farming was replaced with cash crop farming which, quite naturally, benefitted the Europeans. A resultant offshoot of this policy, namely the availability of spending money, created new markets for European products. This, one might argue, ultimately produced dependencies on European products as African societies were prevented from producing such goods themselves. Export agriculture, then, was decidedly supported by the European colonizer. The French government even built a railroad linking Dakar with the interior town of Saint Louis to facilitate the sale and transportation of cash crops. During the colonial era most areas in West Africa came to be associated with one or two primary agricultural exports. As such, Senegal primarily exported groundnuts and palm oil; Nigeria exported palm oil; the Gold Coast became famous for cocoa and Mali for cotton; and the Ivory Coast's principal export was coffee.

Settler Zone

The settler zone was located in east and southern Africa; Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Rhodesia and parts of the Belgian Congo proved most conducive to European settlers to establish new communities. In these areas, white settlers confiscated the most fertile lands from African farmers and formed enormous white-owned farms and plantations. Kenya became known for its coffee and tea plantations, Rhodesia became a major producer and exporter of tobacco. Such large-scale agricultural production required much labor. In order to meet their needs for labor, white plantation owners actively engaged the colonial political system in their efforts to shape policies. In many instances, their efforts were rewarded with the introduction of forced labor policies. African farmers were simply coerced to work for white farmers or, in some cases, were compensated with a minimal wage. Consequently, white settlers played a significant part in shaping economies in the settler zone as they employed African workers either for a minimal wage or through forced labor policies.

Concession Zone

The concession zone was found primarily in the Congo Free State/Belgian Congo and Liberia. Despite never having been colonized, Liberia experienced economic developments not unlike those seen in the rest of the continent. Here, Americo-Liberian elites controlled the government. In their pursuit of economic development, they leased almost the entire country to the Firestone company in 1925. Firestone ran huge rubber plantations in Liberia. The Liberian government encouraged the local population to work for Firestone; the company employed approximately 50,000 people per year. In the Congo Free State, Belgium's King Leopold II turned the colony into his private enterprise. He declared the Congo Free State to be the sole proprietor of land in 1891. Then, he offered land concessions and the rights to ivory and rubber to Belgian companies. These companies essentially ruled the Congo as they had far-reaching powers in levying taxes. These taxes were to be paid in labor. The devastating result of these taxes was that the average Congolese was forced to work 250 days/year for foreign companies. Such policies completely undermined African communities and allowed foreign companies, through the concept of company rule, to exert absolute control over local populations.

Mining/Industrial Zone

The African continent is extremely rich in mineral resources. In areas where large deposits of minerals were found, the colonial governments encouraged the exploitation of such minerals. The mining and industrial zone was located primarily in South Africa, Angola, southern Congo (Katanga province), and Northern Rhodesia. There, huge depositories of gold, diamonds, and copper as well as other natural resources led to immense mining operations controlled by European companies. De Beers, founded by Cecil Rhodes, is one such company that emerged and expanded in colonial Africa. In order to attract workers, the colonial administrations levied taxes, which had to be paid in cash. This forced Africans to leave their homes behind and seek employment in the mines. African workers mostly worked on short term contracts (6–12 months) until they earned enough money to pay their taxes and then returned home to their families. The demand for African workers was so large, however, that colonial administrations recruited workers from neighboring colonies that were not rich in natural resources. For example, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Malawi were turned into labor reservoirs for the large-scale mining and farming operations in South Africa and Rhodesia.

Most African colonies were characterized as mono-economies. This means that the colonial economy in a specific colony was dependent on mining, small scale-farming for exports, or large-scale farming by white settlers. The ways in which colonial governments raised revenues, then, was largely based on local realities throughout the continent, thereby explaining the emergence of distinct economic zones. As such, it also becomes apparent that African colonial economies were not diversified. Mixed economies were the exception; only South Africa and Nigeria managed to create economies that displayed elements of diversification.

In addition to the formation of mono-economies, colonial economic policies severely disrupted the political ecology of African societies. A shift to cash crops (peasant zone), the loss of fertile land (settler zone), the prohibition of engaging in swidden agriculture (concession zone), and the loss of labor (concession zone and mining/industrial zone) led to a loss of African self-sufficiency. All of a sudden, food had to be imported, because Africans no longer had the land or the time to cultivate crops for their families as they had done for centuries. In sum, European economic undertakings in the colonies by and large altered, destabilized, and undercut African socio-economic developments.