

Labor and labor relations in Swiss companies in Nigeria 1945-1975

A contribution to the Global Labor History

Marcel Brengard, Department of History, UZH

Abstract:

This research project deals with the relationship between Swiss employees of international Swiss companies and their subordinate African employees in the years 1945 to 1975. After the Second World War and especially after the decolonization of Africa, several Swiss companies expanded to Nigeria which was considered a promising market because of the large population and the abundance of commodities. With the expansion of these companies, numerous Swiss workers came to Nigeria, working directly with local laborers. Their teamwork took place in clear hierarchies: Swiss employees should train the Africans to form industrious workers according to the Swiss ideal. These working relations are at the center of the project. They will be described and it will be questioned if colonial practices continued, therefore, to which extent the recruitment of African workers relied on forced labor and whether the Swiss used physical violence to castigate them. The study is part of the Global Labor History which focuses on the connections and transfers of workers and their ideas beyond national borders. Postcolonial approaches are taken into account and thus the image of Swiss companies unencumbered by colonialism will be critically questioned. The study of the perspectives of Swiss as well as Nigerian actors requires a combination of economics and oral history and supplements the studies on Swiss industry in late and post-colonial Africa. New sources are opened in a transnational setting and the concrete working and living conditions are elaborated.

Key words:

Swiss companies in Africa, transnational economic history, transnational labor history, Switzerland, Nigeria, violence, corporal punishment, postcolonial studies