The End of Slavery and the « Problem » of Farm Labor in Colonial Somalia

LEE V. CASSANELLI

University of Pennsylvania - Philadelphia

Although farmers today make up only slightly more than one-fifth of Somalia's population, they have had an important role in the history of the southern Horn of Africa. From early precolonial times, the irrigated lands along the lower Shabeelle river provided grain and vegetables that helped feed the coastal populations of Muqdisho, Marka, and Baraawe. Dry-land farmers in the zone between the Juba and Shabeelle exchanged their crops with the pastoral people of the region in order to help solidify alliances and create a mixed agro-pastoral economy that provided considerable economic security for the partners involved. From time to time in the past, ambitious clan leaders sought to control the labor of Somalia's farmers and to appropriate agricultural surpluses to build up or sustain political power. With the coming of Italian colonial rule at the end of the nineteenth century, the agricultural sector assumed special importance as it became the foundation of the new colonial economy. Renewed efforts to mobilize the rural work force culminated in the Fascist era with an extensive regime of forced labor and irrigation construction. Since World War II, a succession of caretaker and independent Somali governments tried to develop the country's agriculture but have enjoyed very limited success.

This paper represents the first part of a larger study on social and economic change in rural Somalia during the twentieth century. It is concerned with the history of agricultural labor from the time of the abolition of slavery at the start of the Italian colonial period up to the 1950s. Further research is being done on the period since Somali independence, though I believe that some of the issues raised in this historical presentation are relevant to contemporary debates about Somalia's agricultural development, notably with regard to the issue of labor availability. In this regard, I call your attention to the recent work of Dr. Mohamed Said Samantar of the Somali National University, who has independently raised some of the same questions about the seasonal shortages of rural labor in several development projects in the Juba valley (Samantar, 1986).

In surveying the history of farm labor, it is important to keep in mind that agriculture in Somalia has been practiced by individuals and families who have a variety of relationships to the land they work and to other groups around them. There are subsistence farmers and agro-pastoralists who own their own land (or enjoy rights to it by virtue of their membership in a community) as well as those

who cultivate for others on land that is not their own. Of those farmers who worked for « others », Somali history provides us with a wide range of examples. During the nineteenth century, many farmers along the Shabeelle river were slaves recently imported from East Africa. Others were clients or dependents of powerful individuals or lineages whose major economic activity frequently was pastoralism. With the coming of colonial rule, outright slavery was ended, though other forms of dependent rural labor persisted and, as we shall see, new types of agricultural labor began to emerge. The point here is that there were many categories of farm labor besides slaves and free wage workers, and in the colonial years from 1900 to 1950, the transformation of the rural work force went through several phases.

1. The Agricultural Work Force in Precolonial Times

Prior to the colonial period, farming in Somalia was done by one of three categories of workers: 1) free farmers, 2) client farmers, and 3) slaves. The first category, free farmers, included most of those agropastoralists who lived in the interriver plains of southern Somalia and who planted sorghum as a supplement to their livestock production. They sowed grain on cultivable patches of rain-fed land just before the onset of the *gu* or *dayr* seasons and left some members of the family to weed and tend the young crops while others moved off with the herds. These dryland farmers enjoyed rights to cultivable land by virtue of their membership in a « noble » lineage or clan whose elders confirmed their claims and helped resolve whatever disputes might arise. There were also a few communities of independent farmers living along the Shabeelle (and perhaps also the Juba) river where they relied on seasonal inundation or irrigation. However, by the nineteenth century, most of the riverine farmers would have belonged to the second category of agriculturalists, the client farmers.

Client farmers were those who were attached in some way to more powerful individuals or groups in the areas where they were settled. While a « noble » pastoralist who had lost his livestock in war or drought might occasionally attach himself as a client to a wealthy landholder, most client farmers in the riverine area were considered (by local Somalis) to be hereditarily of low status. Some were considered to be descendants of very early communities of non-Somali (probably Bantu-speaking) farmers; others were presumed by the dominant groups in society to have servile origins. In any case, their perceived lowly origins combined with their role as sedentary cultivators in an essentially pastoral society gave them a subordinate status in southern Somali life, even while they performed most of the essential agricultural work.

Whatever the origins of this sizable segment of client farmers, by the nineteenth century most of them belonged to their own lineage groups with certain rights to blood compensation and to (limited) representation in the *shir* (assembly) of the local Somali clan to which they owed allegiance (Cucinotta 1921: 493 ff.). It is also important to note that these client farmer usually enjoyed uncontested rights to the land which they cultivated. Such rights were substained partly because their Somali patrons were more interested in herding than in farming and needed the labor of their clients, and probably also because many of the riverine farmers were believed to possess secret supernatural powers that gave them control over the behavior of such river creatures as crocodiles.

The client farmers thus formed part of a division of labor in southern Somalia that left their patrons free to manage livestock, engage in raiding and warfare, and practice trade. Unlike the situation in the rain-fed areas of the south, where members of the same family shared out the tasks of a mixed herding and farming economy, the agro-pastoral system of production along the rivers rested on a division of society into dominant and subordinate groups, with an ideology of social superiority/inferiority to reinforce it. At the same time, a common Islamic faith,community rituals, and a sharing of the risks and spoils of warfare with neighboring confederations strengthened those elements of mutual interest that bound patrons and clients as individuals and as corporate groups.

The third category of farm labor in the precolonial period were slaves. By definition, slaves and their labor were totally at the disposition of their owners. When they purchased slaves, Somali owners obtained a type of dependent labor whose deployment was not constrained by custom or convention. Unlike client farmers, slaves had neither legal nor political rights. Even if their owners allotted them a piece of land to work during their free hours, the slaves had no claim to it. They could be sold to another owner and transferred from one locale to another (and frequently were, according to later nineteenth century sources). Most significantly, the slaves labor could be controlled directly. Slaves could be consigned to plantation work without threatening subsistence production (client farmers took care of that) or disrupting the social relations that bound patrons to their clients. The ability to acquire slaves thus made it possible for owners to produce an agricultural surplus, and this is precisely what happened in southern Somalia during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Elsewhere I have described the growth of the slave trade from East Africa to Somaliland in the nineteenth century and its consequences for agriculture along the lower Shabeelle (Cassanelli, 1982). Basically, the importation into southern Somalia of some 50,000 or more slaves from 1800 to 1890 made possible an unprecedented expansion of agricultural production along the river. Grain began to be exported from Somalia to Arabia and Zanzibar in quantities that impressed several nineteenth-century travellers. The Shabeelle region also began to yield quantities of grain, cotton, and orchella (a lichen that was used to make dyes for the textile industry) for export. For the first and only time in its recorded history, Somalia was an exporter of farm products for an external market.

Later in the twentieth century, Italian colonial authorities would argue that agricultural productivity would never reach the heights that it did in the later nineteenth century until some form of labor discipline was established in the colony. Clearly slavery was no longer conscionable under the civilizing mission, but many authorities did assert that slaveowners had not only provided their slaves with the necessary food and shelter to keep them healthy and productive, but had also gotten the most out of the productive potential of the land for commercial crops. What these commentators overlooked was the fact that the first generations of slaves had no or only small families to feed; that foodstuffs in all likelihood continued to be provided by client farmer communities that inhabited the very same riverine zones where plantation slavery was being established; that the capital for commercial agriculture was being provided by networks of coastal Indian, Arab, and Somali merchant families with long-standing ties to landholders along the Shabeelle; and that the Middle Eastern and Zanzibar markets which fed the demand for Somali grain in the second half of the nineteenth century would find

other sources of supply once colonial rule and its corresponding choking of regional trade networks was consolidated. In other words, economic and political conditions would never again be the same for southern Somalia as they were in the later nineteenth century, however much the Italians wished it. The abolition of slavery by the colonial regime was an important step in the transformation of the rural work force in Somalia, but it was only part of a larger complex of social and economic changes that the twentieth century heralded.

2. The Abolition of Slavery and Its Consequences

The official ending of slavery in Italian Somalia came with three ordinances promulgated by the authorities in 1904, which outlawed the slave trade in towns and interior and provided for the immediate emancipation of all slaves born after 1890 (Perricone-Viola, 1936; Hess 1966: 64-84). However, since Italian military forces did not move into the Shabeelle valley until the second half of 1908, the major slaveholding clans of the Somali interior were not subjected to direct colonial control for four years, and at least some of the anticolonial resistance mounted by southern Somalis during these years was motivated by opposition to the ending of slavery. Nevertheless, there is little question that the imminent abolition of slavery prompted both slaveowners and slaves to take initiatives to secure their interests, even before colonial administration was effectively established.

Slaveowners naturally wanted to keep control of the labor that had provided them with power and profits during the heyday of the Shabeelle valley plantation system. To prevent their slaves from fleeing to the sanctuary of colonial Residents or to the rapidly growing freed-slave settlements along the Jubba (see below), the masters could increase their vigilance and increase the punishments for attempted escapes (which some did for a short period just before the Italian occupation — see Cassanelli 1987); or they could free their slaves as acts of Muslim piety, grant them parcels of land, and hope to turn them into grateful but still dependent client farmers. In fact, the years around abolition witnessed the movement of large numbers of former slaves into that category that we have called client farmers, to the point that early Italian administrators frequently found it impossible to distinguish between the two, calling them all *liberti*, « freedmen ».

This process whereby slaves were assimilated into the client population had almost certainly been going on well before abolition, since both groups tilled the land and frequently intermarried. However, Italian policy in the early years after abolition seemed to reinforce the process. Fearful that complete liberation of slaves would provoke armed Somali resistance and disrupt the agricultural economy (fears which Somali spokesmen were not slow to play upon), the first administrators urged gradualism in the implementation of the emancipation decrees. What this meant was to encourage freed slaves to work out some kind of accomodation with their former masters — in other words, to become clients or « domestic servants ». The rationale for this policy of gradualism was both political and economic: slaves given complete liberty would soon become unemployed vagrants, and a threat to public order. Moreover, one official argued, it would take some time for the idea of salaried labor to replace the system of slavery in Somali rural society:

> to free all the slaves at once would force the free Somalis, unaccustomed

> to working their own field, to abandon them and resume the pastoral way of life ... and for reasons of public security as well as for commercial ones, it is preferable that the nomadic tribes become sedentary rather than the reverse (Casali 1910: 13-14).

With arguments such as these, the early colonial regime sided with the slaves' former masters in an effort to keep farm labor under the discipline of traditional authority. As shall be seen, this policy ran counter to the objective of the early European concessionary farmers who needed a source of cheap farm labor. Nonetheless, the contradiction between the desire for security and the need to encourage a free labor market was resolved by the early colonial state in favor of the former, and this may go a long way in explaining why most of the early European plantations failed. It was, moreover, the beginning of the colonial « labor problem » in rural Somali.

Nevertheless, despite the efforts of former slaveholders to retain the services of their ex-slaves under some form of clientship, the consequences of abolition were to open new opportunities for rural workers outside the direct control of their former patrons. This was especially true along the two river valleys of Somalia, where most of the best cultivable land was located. One alternative for freed slaves was to join an independent village of farmers, such as could be found in the vicinity of Jowhar, along the middle Shabeelle, or near Golweyn, inland from Marka on the lower Shabeelle (Gasparini 1912: 51; Maino 1959: 75, 117). Here former slaves could work their own farms and enjoy the protection that membership in a corporate lineage offered. However, there was one major disadvantage in joining such a community, and that was the constant threat of conscription into public works projects that the early colonial government initiated. For despite legal emancipation from slavery, it is quite apparent that ex-slaves were still considered to be low status citizens and those best suited to undertake the tasks of bush clearing, road building, and canal construction. Though under early Italian rule all Somali subjects were in theory equally subject to corvee labor, local custom and the prejudices of colonial officials and Somali headmen conspired to insure that former slaves and client farmers were the first to be taken.

For this reason, many freed slaves chose instead to seek refuge in one of the more distant farming settlements along the lower Jubba or Shabeelle rivers, where runaway slaves had begun to settle from as early as the 1840s. The best known of these sanctuaries was located along the lower Jubba in the region known as Gosha, where by 1910 there were some 20,000 farmers settled in over sixty villages and hamlets strung out along the valley from Gobweyn to Dujuma (Ferrari 1910; Cassanelli 1986). Another small cluster of freed slave villages grew up in the swampy lands of the lower Shabeelle at Avai. Some of the farmers from these communities eventually sought employment on Italian farms and banana plantations in the 1920s and 1930s, but the majority continued as independent farmers throughout the colonial period. Cultivating small irrigated plots or *desheks*, these communities of former slaves and free farmers were the nearest thing to a free peasantry that existed in twentieth-century Somalia.

Another option to farmers in the early decades of the twentieth century — and one which has not received the scholarly study it deserves — was to join one of the numerous Islamic religious settlements (*jamaacooyiin*) that had begun to spring up throughout the Somalilands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. Virtually all of these settlements were affiliated with one of the major Islamic Orders-Axmediya, Salixiya, or Qadiriya. Some ninty-three were reported to be in existence in Italian Somalia in 1920 (Cerulli 1964: 171). The settlements were usually established in cultivable zones near the two rivers or alongside springs under the guidance of the head shaykh, each member or family in the settlement cultivated their own plots and donated a percentage of their harvest to the leader. These religious farming settlements frequently took in uprooted or marginal elements of Somali rural society — « individuals without kin, small groups forced out of their clans, slaves without masters and clients without protectors » (Colucci 1924: 82). Whatever their social backgrounds, the members of the communities enjoyed the protection of Islamic law and a voice in the decision-making process. Some of the settlements attracted members from several different clans and thus represented a new form of multi-clan association (Cerulli 1957: 200-204 and 1964: 169-74; Colucci 1924: 262-71).

Ironically, the growth of these independent farming settlements was initially promoted by Italian colonial policy. During the first two decades of colonial rule the Italian government viewed the *jamaacooyiin* as potential allies in its efforts to pacify the country and to avoid a militant dervish movement in the south. To achieve this goal, colonial administrators recognized and sometimes gave stipends to the settlement shaykhs; they also supported them in the occasional disputes that arose over questions of land rights and of personal claims by individuals who had fled from clan law to seek refuge in the religious communities (Guadagni 1981: 57-58; Cerulli 1964: 169). It also appears that members of the *jamaacooyiin* were initially exempt from corvée labor (Cerulli 1957: 203), which must have made the religious settlements attractive to those groups in rural society most susceptible to conscription.

While there is remarkably little information on the economic organization of the religious settlements during the colonial period, a survey done in the 1950s reveals that many of them were still in operation, with communities ranging in size on the average from 50 to 500 members. Most of the settlements had between five and fifteen hectares of land under cultivation, with additional land allocated for grazing livestock. More recent studies have suggested that some religious farming settlements are considerably larger, though conclusive data is not available (Putman 1982). It appears that agricultural productivity in the *jamaacooyiin* was usually sufficient to meet the subsistence requirements of the members and occasionally to provide small surpluses for sale in neighboring local markets. They are rather remarkable examples of what we might consider early self-help schemes in the agricultural sectors.

To sum up, the abolition of slavery in southern Somalia resulted in a transformation of the rural work force but did not create a substantial pool of free wage laborers. Rather freed slaves preferred the security of independent farming in villages along the Jubba, the sanctuary of religious settlements, or even clientship with former patrons to the uncertainties of wage labor on European farms. Though hard statistics are not available, we might reasonably estimate that the *jamaacooyiin* took in somewhere between fifteen and twenty thousand farmers through the first half of the twentieth century; together with the villages of the lower Jubba, where another twenty to thirty thousand cultivators lived, nearly a third of the country's sedentary agricultural population was represented. The remainder were either client farmers or dryland agropastoralists. Given this range of alternatives available to

the agricultural work force, it is hardly surprising that private European planters found it difficult to secure a steady supply of wage labor. The colonial regime was thus forced to experiment with different techniques of labor recruitment, and it is to these efforts of state intervention that we now turn.

3. The Colonial Regime: Recruiting Farm Labor

The colonial regime assumed from the beginning that there was considerable agricultural potential in Somali. The climate was excellent and there was plenty of still unoccupied cultivable land along the rivers. What was required to make the colony prosper was to mobilize capital (for irrigation works, roads, and port development) and labor. Neither factor of production ever materialized to the extent that the early optimists hoped, but it was the « labor problem » that occupied colonial planners most. From the earliest days of colonial rule untile Independence, the published and archival documents are full of discussions about the reasons for the shortage of rural labor and proposals to remedy the problem. In this section, I want to outline very briefly the history of colonial efforts to recruit agricultural labor. In the concluding section of the paper, I will summarize the historical arguments given for the presumed shortage of farm labor in Somalia and suggest some of the implications for contemporary agricultural planning.

In seeking to promote agricultural development in Somalia, there were several possible courses that the new colonial government could have taken. One was to encourage small Somali farmers to grow for the market (cotton, rice, and tobacco for export; sorghum, maize, and vegetables for domestic consumption) and to provide them with the necessary extension services. A second option was to provide incentives to Somali landholders for lage scale commercial farming, using ex-slave and client labor and thus essentially continuing the nineteenth century plantation regime with salaried rather than slave labor. Neither of these options was seriously considered.

Rather two other agricultural planning models came to dominate colonial thinking from the period of De Martino's governorship (1910-12) on to the end of Italian colonial rule. One, favored by De Martino and most of the subsequent Governors of the colony, looked to European plantation owners as the economic focus of agricultural development. Expatriate farmers would be given large concessions of land under long-term leases and use hired Somali labor to clear land, plant and harvest commercial crops. Food for domestic Somali consumption would be grown by local farmers in the « traditional » farming sector.

The second model, first proposed by the brilliant and ill-fated agricultural economist Romolo Onor, involved what the Italians called « compartecipazione ». Here the state itself, or the state in cooperation with private inverstors, would create estates on which Somali farmers would grow both commercial crops and subsistence ones. In lieu of wages, the estate would provide local farmers with sufficient land to support their families, with a range of medical, social, and agricultural services, and with a secure market for the commercial crops they grew.

Onor explained the reasoning behind the compartecipazione model in a book-length study that was published by his widow eight years after his suicide in 1917. After studying the household economy of « traditional » Somali farmers, Onor had concluded that a multitude of European plantations could never succeed in

Somalia because the rural labor force was too small to provide an adequate year-round supply of wage workers, that the wage rate necessary to attract even the minimal number of laborers would make expatriate farming uneconomic, and that Somali farmers in any event preferred to work their own farms (Onor 1925). He urged the government instead to promote well-capitalized, well-managed model farms on the comparticipazione system and to let the « natural operation of economic forces » demonstrate to Somalis the benefits of modernized agriculture.

Onor's views were systematically ignored by Governor De Martino, who opted instead for a policy that relied on development by means of expatriate agricultural concessions. Only in the 1920s was an attempt made to implement the comparticipazione model, and this was the famous estate of the Società Agricola Italo-Somala (SAIS) at Jowhar. But by then, Fascist administration had come to Somalia and new and harsher methods to mobilize labor for rural development were being implemented. Despite the earlier failures of European plantations, Fascist Governors from De Vecchi onward were determined that Italian agricultural colonization would succeed and that the labor shortage identified by Onor and countless other observers could be overcome.

The first Fascist Governor of Somalia, C.M. De Vecchi (1923-28) attacked the problem head on. For the first time, the colonial state assumed a leading role in recruiting labor for private as well as public enterprises. It did this by imposing the first direct tax on the rural Somali population (in the form of an annual hut tax), by espanding the corvée system, by energetically seeking capital for new agricultural ventures, and by building an infrastructure of roads that extended economic and military control to the inland borders of the colony (and, as it turned out, beyon them into Ethiopia!). In 1920, only four agricultural concession were in active operation in the colony. By June 1933, the government had granted 115 new concessions with nearly 30.000 hectares under actual cultivation. (Hess 1966: 149 ff.; Conforti 1970: 177 ff.).

State techniques for obtaining labor for the expanded agricultural ventures ranged from the meticulously planned and carefully managed system of worker incentives at SAIS Jowhar estates to the use of armed coercion at Jenaale, along the Shabeelle behind Marka. Because many observers considered SAIS the most successful agricultural enterprise undertaken in colonial Somalia, it is worth reviewing briefly its most important features. SAIS was launched in 1920, after an exploratory trip by the Duca degli Abruzzi, with an initial capital investment of 24 million (later increased to 35 million) lire. Some 25.000 hectares of land along the Shabeelle river near Jowhar were leased by the Society through direct negotiations with elders of the local clans in the area. Over the next decade, more than 420 miles of primary and secondary irrigation canals were dug. The colonial government played its part by subsidizing capital equipment purchases, low- interest loans, and a railway line from Jowhar to Muqdisho. The major commercial crops that were tried were cotton, sugar cane, maize, coconut palms, and (briefly) bananas (Scassellati-Sforzolini 1926; Maino 1959).

The SAIS experiment drew considerable attention for its innovative approaches to labor recruitment and management. Local farmers living in the Jowhar district were encouraged to settle directly on the estate. Each family upon signing a contract received a hectare of land, half of which was given over to a designated commercial crop (initially cotton) and the other half to whatever staples the farmer chose. The harvested cotton was sold to SAIS at a price fixed annually by a

board made up of local headmen and community leaders, while the produce of the remaining half-hectare was at the farmer's disposal. The Society also provided its workers with housing, tools, well water, seeds, and medical care. In effect, this was the « compartecipazione » system which Onor had proposed several years earlier. It was a paternalistic system where the working and living arrangements of participating families were carefully contracted and supervised, even to the point where time off for kinsfolks' marriages and funerals were written into the farmers' contracts. At the same time, local advisory councils were set up to insure that the rights and obligations of both workers and supervisors were recognized. The scale of the SAIS operation — some 2600 families were contracted in 1934 — and its close attention to employer/employee relations made it something of a model project in colonial Somalia.

However, other concessions set up during the Fascist era did not fare as well as the regime hoped. Scarcity of unskilled farm labor proved once again to be a major obstacle to large-scale agricultural development. The « compartecipazione » model implemented at Jowhar did not produce the rural worker response in locales such as Jenaale or in the Jubba valley where Somali farmers were already engaged in farming their own plots and where the benefits of plantation life were not as well-subsidized as they were at SAIS. In fact, even SAIS did not escape the chronic problem of seasonal outmigration by farm workers. As early as 1924, the combination of an epidemic of plague at Jowhar and the flooding of the Shabeelle pushed Somali workers off the estate to plant fields further up the valley. Many apparently had family plots in addition to their allocated farms on the estate. As a result, SAIS was forced to seek state intervention to keep its operations going: declaring SAIS' work to be a vital « public service », the government directed each nearby village to furnish a certain number of workers to the Society — a form, it appears, of paid corvee (cf. Maino 1959: 99-100, 122-23; Del Boca 1979: 83-84).

To meet the continued labor shortages at SAIS, Jenaale, and on the other concessions, the authorities experimented with a number of « incentives ». SAIS again offered the most imaginative. Recognizing that even among the workers living on the estate there were many who continued to divide their time between SAIS and their own off-scheme farms, the Society offered additional daily wages (3.5 lire for men, 2.5 lire for women) for labor performed on other parts of the estate during the farmers' free time. (Casual day labor hired from off the estate, usually during harvest time, was paid at the rate of 3 lire for men, 2.5 lire for woment, and 2 lire for children in 1934) (Rapetti 1934). Even more striking were the bonuses offered to farmers to marry, to take second wives (a special premium of 50 lire if the second wife worked on the estate), for having more than three children living on the estate, and for children marrying the children of other estate residents (Rapetti 1935: 5-9).

Other recruitment techniques were less savory. Many appear to have been initiated after 1925 in efforts to develop the concession at Jenaale, where there were more European plantation owners competing for labor and where labor practices were not as uniform. For example, one practice seems to have been to pay hired workers a week's or a month's advance. The planters claimed that this was an incentive for recruiting workers and was in fact the only way that some laborers would sign on. In fact, paying workers in advance had the effect of making them liable for breach of contract should they abandon the plantations and thus brought

the force of law behind efforts to compel their return (For a concessionaire's point of view, see Beltramini 1933; for a critique, see I.L.O. 1951: 11-13).

As the Fascist administration increased the pace of economic activity in the late 1920s, two forms of « contract » came to dominate labor relations in the agricultural concessions. One involved a rotating system of service, where each village in the vicinity of the European plantations had to provide workers for a six-month « turn » (Somalis recall this as the « teen »). When the regime realized that the riverine areas simply were unable to supply the necessary manpower, they looked to recruit local « colonists » from further upcountry, chiefly in the Buur Hakaba/Baydhaabo region. The colonists were expected to sign contracts to work on the concessions for renewable four-year terms, and work contracts stipulated their obligations for excavating and repairing canals and constructing dikes and dams (Conforti 1970: 139-143; I.L.O. 1951: 13-15). This was the infamous *colonya* (as Somalis recall it), and as recently as 1971 I heard Somalis recollect the period of the colonya as one when families were broken up, workers suffered fatal accidents, and coercion was regularly employed to ensure that they lived up to the terms of their contracts.

The story of forced labor under the Fascist regime has still not been completely told and we may never be able to document it fully. There is (not surprisingly) little direct evidence in the colonial records of deaths and injuries suffered by agricultural workers under these policies of forced labor. However, there is considerable circumstantial evidence in the correspondence of colonial authorities responding to the International Convention of 1930 on forced labor in the African colonies; in the report of the special I.L.O. Mission headed by Robert Gavin sent to examine working conditions in Somalia in 1951; in the interviews with Somalis recorderd by members of the Four Power Commission set up after World War II to ascertain Somali sentiments about the disposition of the ex-Italian colonies; and in the oral testimonies of Somalis in the riverine regions whom I interviewed in 1970-71. These sources reveal that forced labor was the one abuse most frequently associated with the later years of Italian Fascist rule in Somalia, and that experience has remained strong in the collective memory of southern Somalis until modern times.

Somali farm workers were not passive in the face of labor abuses, and in their record of resistance one finds further confirmation of the existence in late colonial times of forced labor. To illustrate, we can look at the uprisings led by two Somali shaykhs in the mid-1920s. Sometime shortly after the advent of Fascist rule in the colony, it appears that the administration had second thoughts about its earlier decision to exempt members of Islamic farming settlements (*jamaacooyiin*) from the corvee. Though I could find in the records no explicit formulation of this shift in policy, it seems that the state began to refuse potential laborers the right of sanctuary in the religious settlements. I am nearly certain that the uprisings of Shaykh Fareg in 1924 and Shaykh Axmed Nuur « Ceel Xaaji » in 1926 were linked to these new labor policies. Colonial records portray both of these Muslim leaders as religious fanatics. But in the case of Axmed Nuur, the official history acknowledges that his « seditious ideas » found fertile ground particularly among the local manual laborers at Jenaale (Ufficio Storico 1960: 177-78; cf. Del Boca 1979: 64-67) and Shaykh Fareg acquired a sizable following precisely in those districts of the lower Shabeelle that recruited workers for the « teen » at Jenaale (cf. Cerulli 1964: 166-68).

While there is no need to dwell on the abuses in the recruitment of labor which the historical record clearly reveals, they are a good indication of the extent to which the Fascist administration of Somalia was prepared to go to overcome the problems of securing farm labor. Throughout the 1930s, the concessions continued to experience critical manpower shortages, shortages which were only exacerbated by the colony's buildup of the military and transport sectors in preparation for the war with Ethiopia. Farm labor was most scarce during the planting seasons, when workers were preparing their own fields or helping with those of relatives. Only in exceptionally dry years did the riverine plantations attract Somalis in sufficient numbers to meet all their needs. During the severe drought of 1933, for example, agropastoralists from the Bay region migrated in large numbers to the Shabeelle valley; the local inhabitants recall the year as « Isniin Eelay-daad », (literally, the « Monday year of the Eelay flood », referring to the major clan group that « inundated » the area looking for food and work). The following year the colonial government transferred one hundred and fifty orphaned children from drought relief camps to the agricultural concessions at Jenaale (MAE Somalia 3/ f. 3. « Notizarii 1934 »).

But despite these occasional crisis-inspired surpluses of casual labor, the plantations on the eve of the Second World War were suffering from an acute shortage of workers (Viviani 1946: 6). Part of the problem seems to have been competition from the higher wagers paid to urban laborers and those involved in public works, a discrepancy which the government sought to eliminate in its decree of 26 March 1938. In addition, the demands of a war-time economy were forcing concessionaires to retain their laborers beyond the duration of their contracted terms, which produced worker resentment and a decline in new recruits. A commission set up in 1939 to reexamine the labor question had its work cut short by the outbreak of hostilities between Italy and Great Britain and by the subsequent defeat of the Italians in Northeast Africa (Bigi 1954: 376).

Labor policies during the British Military Administration (1941-49) reflected the economic uncertainties of the time. All previous Italian legislation was voided, and the system of « colonist contracts » (the *colonya*) was abolished. While Italian officials and planters complained that the British were deliberately trying to destroy the planters' rapport with their workers by declaring the previous contract system a form of slavery, it is clear that many workers readily abandoned the concessions when British military forces occupied Somalia (Viviani 1946; Brilli 1947; Risso 1949). One writer claimed that only a sixth of the acreage cultivated before the war could be maintained with the labor that came forward under the « liberal » British regime (Bigi 1954: 377). However, the BMA did reinstitute a form of rotating contract labor for public works and essential agricultural activities, and the Proclamation of 1947 estalished prison sentences for breach of contract (Ibid.).

In concluding our survey of farm labor in the colonial period, it is worth calling attention to some of the trends of the late 1940s noted in the report of the 1951 I.L.O. Mission to Somalia. The Mission recognized that the chronic scarcity of labor on the large estates, especially during the rainy seasons, was exacerbated by the fact that Somali landholders were themselves hiring labor during the planting season, paying (in 1951) So. 2.50 per day plus food, in comparison with a minimum wage of So. 1.30 on European farms. During the dry season, in contrast, the daily wage for hired labor on Somali farms was So. .30-.40 (I.L.O. 1951: 9). Although in all probability only well-to-do farmers could afford to pay

hired help at these rates, it seems clear that at the start of the Trusteeship period, Somali farmers were beginning to compete with European farmers in recruiting seasonal workers.

Another trend that was evident by 1950 was the influx of rural Somalis into the towns of the coast. This movement occured in spite of seemingly high levels of urban unemployment. The BMA estimated that in Muqdisho alone in 1947 there were at least 5000 unemployed Somali workers, or more than one-fifth of the town's total estimated works force (U.N. Four Power Commission 1948: 91).

The same Four Power Commission Report adds:

> It should be observed that unemployment exists in the towns simultaneously with a shortage of manual labour in rural areas. Thus in 1947 the Italian concessions at Genale and Villagio could have absorbed four fifths of the natives unemployed in Mogadishu. In spite of the fact that, according to the British Military Administration, conditions of life are better in rural areas, the wages paid to agricultural workers are not high enoug to attract the urban unemployed, who prefer to remain in towns in the hope of obtaining work.

This observation, made in 1948, could apply to the labor situation in Somalia right up to the present.

Concluding Considerations

This brief history of colonial efforts to mobilize workers for their agricultural projects shows that the present-day « problem » of rural labor in Somalia is not just a post-Independence phenomenon. The Italians assumed that by ending slavery in Somalia they would be creating a pool of rural workers who could readily be recruited as wage laborers on European farms.

However, the ex-slaves and clients had other ideas; seeing that they were the first group to be conscripted into colonial work gangs, many sought refuge in the runaway slave villages along the Jubba or in the *jamaacooyiin*. Others stayed on as « domestic servants » or clients of their former masters, who were only too glad to retain their services rather than hand them over to the plantations. As a result, most of the sedentary rural population became small independent farmers or joined communal religious or corporate clan communities. These options combined with the relative abundance of unoccupied cultivable land clearly retarded the emergence of a wage labor force in colonial Somalia. Not until the rapid mobilization of colonial subjects for the Italian war effort against Ethiopia and the concurrent growth of towns during and after World War II did a substantial free labor market appear on the Somali scene.

The early colonial state in Somalia, concerned with security and limited in finances, was slow to formulate and implement a consistent labor policy, which helps explain why it lost out to other « recruiters » of rural labor before 1920. Only with the Fascist regime do we see the state resorting to the classical colonial techniques of labor recruitment: the alienation of native land, a hut tax, and finally a resort to coercive measures, which were typically veiled in the language of labor « contracts » of various kinds. Despite these efforts, the European concessions suffered from a chronic shortage of manual workers.

In summarizing the reasons given for this labor shortage, we must bear in mind that most of the evidence I have reviewed comes from the colonial side, from plantation owners or officials. They tended to blame the Somali farmers' unwillingness to work beyond the point of meeting their subsistence needs, or their sense of Islamic « fatalism ». Most colonialist felt that because agricultural work had been associated with slavery in the past, twentieth-century Somalis were reluctant to work on plantations even for pay. More astute observers noted that there may have been sound economic reasons for rural Somalis' reluctance to sell their labor. Onor, for example, calculated that an independent farm family had to invest 344 work days (husband and wife combined) to produce 2100 Kg of maize, an amount sufficient for their family's annual needs plus a small surplus to exchange for other necessities. Moreover, because the critical planting and harvesting seasons overlapped for most plantation and staple crops, Somali farmers simply could not maintain their own farms while working for a concessionaire.

To be sure, many colonialists observed that in times of drought or poor local harvests Somalis from hundreds of kilometers away would turn up seeking work on the irrigated farms along the rivers. Most of these seasonal workers, however, tended to come from Somali communities living in the districts between the rivers, where agriculture depended exclusively on rainfall. In hard times, poorer families would send one or more of their members in search of wage work. But as the Italians soon learned, as soon as the rains returned with the promise of good planting, the migrants just as quickly abandoned the plantations and returned to their own plots (cf. Maugini 1961: 42-46). Throughout the colonial period, the concessions drew most of their voluntary labor from populations living in the marginal agriculture zones, not from the stable farming communities of the riverine zones.

Finally, it seems clear that most Somali farmers, whatever their wealth or social status, preferred to have their own plot of ground even when they lived and worked most of the year on colonial estates. Bigi (1954) reported that an « extensive » survey conducted at SAIS among Somali farm workers and machine operators showed that 100% of the farm workers held and cultivated their own « shambas » to which they devoted from 45% to 90% of their own or their family's labor time; while 64% of machine operators (who were better paid and might be presumed to derive most of their income from wages) had their own farms, and that 79% of these cultivated them with family labor alone (the remainder employing their own salaried workers in addition). This pattern continues to hold, it appears, for contemporary Somali laborers on most of the Jubba valley agricultural projects (cf. Abyan 1986), and suggests that for many rural Somalis, paid labor is regarded as a supplement to, and not a substitute for, their own agricultural enterprises.

References

Abbreviations

ASMAI = Archivio Storico dell'ex-Ministero dell'Africa Italiana
CDI = Centro di Documentazione dell'Istituto Agronomico

Abyan, I.M. 1986, « Development and its Social Impact on the Local Communities ». Juba Valley Development Report of a Joint Workshop on Environmental and Social Aspects held at the

Al-Uruba Hotel, Mogadishu, January 30-February 4, 1986. Ministry of Juba Valley Development, U.S. National Resarch Council, Somali National Resarch Council.
Beltramini, A. 1933, « Mano d'opera ed economia indigena in Somalia », CDI no. 1602.
Bigi, F. 1954, « Il problema del lavoro nelle aziende agricole della Somalia », *Rivista di Agricoltura Subtropicale e Tropicale* 48, 10-12: 375-388.
Brilli, P. 1947, « Il comprensorio agricolo del Giuba prima e durante l'occupazione britannica, fino all'ottobre 1946 », CDI n. 828.
Casali, G. 1910, « Schiavitù », ASMAI, pos. 85/2, f. 17.
Cassanelli, L.V. 1982, *The Shaping of Somali Society*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Cassanelli, L.V. 1987, « The Ending of Slavery in Italian Somalia: Liberty and the Control of Labour 1890-1935 », in S. Miers and R. Roberts (eds.), *The Ending of Slavery in Africa*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
Cerulli, E. 1957, 1959, 1964, *Somalia: Scritti vari editi ed inediti*, 3 vols, Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato.
Colucci, M. 1924, *Principi di diritto consuetudinario della Somalia italiana meridionale*, Florence: Società Editrice « La Voce ».
Conforti, E. 1970, « L'Avvaloramento in Somalia », *L'Avvaloramento e la Colonizzazione*, Tomo II, *L'Italia in Africa*, Rome: Ministero degli Affari Esteri.
Cucinotta, E. 1921, « La costituzione sociale somala », *Rivista coloniale* 16, pp. 389-405, 442-56, 493-502.
Del Boca, A. 1979, *Gli Italiani in Africa orientale. La conquista dell'impero*, Bari, Laterza.
Gasparini, J. 1912, « Sulla liberazione degli schiavi e servi domestici e sui metodi di assistenza e di tutela nel primo periodo della liberazione », *Agricoltura e Colonizzazione*, Monografie e rapporti n. 1, Rome: Ministero degli Affari esteri.
Guadagni, M. 1981, *Xeerka Beeraha. Diritto fondiaro somalo*, Milan: A. Giuffrè Editore.
Hess, R.L. 1966, *Italian Colonialism in Somalia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
International Labor Office, 1951, *Relazione della Missione in Somalia*, Geneva.
Maino, C. 1959, *La Somalia e l'opera del Duca degli Abruzzi*, Rome: Istituto Italiano per l'Africa.
Maugini, A. 1961, *Agricoltura tradizionale somala e problemi relativi di miglioramento*, Relazioni e Monografie Agrarie subtropicali e tropicali, n. 81. Florence: Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare.
Onor, R. 1925, *La Somalia italiana. Esame critico dei problemi di economia rurale e di politica economica della colonia*, Turin: Fratelli Bocca.
Perricone-Viola, A. 1936, « La liberazione degli schiavi nel vecchio Benadir », *Rivista delle colonie* 10: 882-86.
Rapetti, G. 1934, « Promemoria. Condizioni mano d'opera colonica ». CDI n. 1882.
Rapetti, G. 1935, *L'opera della Società Agricola Italo Somala in Somalia*, Relazioni e Monografie Agrario-Coloniali n. 36. Florence: Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare.
Risso, E. 1949, « Relazione sulla visita alla S.A.I.S. Villaggio D. Degli Abruzzi, Dec. 1948-Apr. 1949 ». CDI n. 4536.
Samatar, M.S. 1986, « Economic Impact of Development Projects in the Juba Valley ». (see entry under Abyan).
Scassellati-Sforzolini, G. 1926, *La Società Agricola Italo-Somala in Somalia*, Relazione e Monografie Agrario-coloniali n. 12, Florence; Istituto Agricolo Coloniale Italiano.
Ufficio Storico, 1960, *Somalia. Vol. II. Dal 1914 al 1934*. Rome: Stato Maggiore Esercito.
United Nations Four Power Commission, 1948, *Four Power Commission of Investigation for the Former Italian Colonies. Vol. II. Report on Somaliland*. London.
Viviani, C. 1946, « Relazione sugli avvenimenti dei giorni dell'occupazione britannica e successivi anni di guerra. Comprensorio agricolo di Generale », CDI n. 827.