

Cotton Cultivation in Togo Through the Lens of Europe's Periphery

Tina Palačić

Fig. 1: Collection: Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana; Object number: D 8066; Name: A man weaves on a handloom, photograph on a glass; Place & Community Details: Kamina, Togolese Republic; Photographer's Name: Leo Poljanec; Materials: slide; Collector: Leo Poljanec; Date collected: 1912–1914.



Baron Anton Codelli, an Austro-Hungarian from Ljubljana, arrived in the then-German colony of Togo in 1911. He was hired by the German telecommunications company Telefunken of Berlin to build a radiotelegraph station that would wirelessly connect Berlin and the German colonies in Africa. At that time, international cables laid on the seabed facilitated wired communication between continents, but

this means of communication was unreliable in the event of an international conflict.

Together with German engineers, Codelli surveyed the area and decided on Kamina near the town of Atakpamé as the best location for constructing a radiotelegraph station. Plans had to be made for the transportation of construction elements and equipment for the buildings from Germany, and hard work was required on the site, which relied on local labour. This involved clearing forests, as well as building roads and a railway. Approximately 300 locals worked on the construction site at the start of the project, but this number later decreased. They were paid poorly at first, and the Germans eventually forced them to work under the guise of having to pay taxes for a project they had neither conceived nor desired.

The first telegram from Germany arrived in Kamina successfully at the end of 1913. The project was halted when the First World War broke out in 1914. Togo was surrounded by English and French troops and Germans were forced to defend themselves. In August 1914, the Kamina radio station received an order from the supreme military headquarters in Berlin to destroy the complex, which took only five hours.

The construction of the Kamina station was extensively documented. Nearly 800 photographs, negatives, and slides depicting the progression of the station's construction, as well as daily life in nearby villages, can be found in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum and the National and University Library in Ljubljana. Some were taken by Anton Codelli, others by his colleague Leo Poljanec, also from Ljubljana, and some very likely by locals. However, the authorship of many remains unknown. In 1959, SEM purchased 82 slides in Poljanec's collection, including the one that is the subject of this paper, from his sister Ana.

The photograph shows a man weaving cotton thread fabric on a simple loom. This was one of the scenes that Anton Codelli and Leo Poljanec often came across. The images in the collection also show the storing of cotton in sacks for export to Germany, the spinning of thread and the sale of cotton at the local market. These shed some light on cotton production and the manufacture of cotton fabrics in Togo around the turn of the twentieth century. More importantly, they illuminate how this plant connected the distant corners of the world through the movement of people, raw materials, and capital.

With the abolition of slavery in 1865, the American Civil War resulted in a global recasting of commodity production, including cotton cultivation, which was no longer dominated by the slave-driven plantations of the American South. Europe was left with a scarcity of raw cotton supplies, and many European countries turned to their colonies for replacements. This was also true for Germany, which sought a reliable and inexpensive source of cotton in newly acquired African colonies after 1884. As part of the German policy to increase cotton production in Togo, James N. Calloway, John Robinson, Allen Burks, and Shepherd Lincoln Harris, the sons of formerly enslaved people from Alabama connected to Tuskegee Normal and

Industrial Institute, were invited to instruct German colonialists and locals on how to grow cotton for export. They stayed in Togo from 1901 to 1909; cotton production and export increased during that period.

However, Togo's social and economic conditions differed from those in the American South. Togolese farmers owned the land and the material resources, so the Germans could not force them to grow cotton. Furthermore, the raw cotton prices offered by German colonial administrators and merchants were too low to persuade farmers to abandon other crops in favour of monoculture. The prices were even lower than what local spinners and weavers were offering.

When Codelli and Poljanec arrived in Togo (in 1911 and 1912 respectively), the German project with Tuskegee experts had already ended. The two men were nevertheless able to photograph vivid local activities related to cotton cultivation. Codelli and Poljanec had the opportunity to photograph locals and their activities as a by-product of their involvement in establishing wireless communication between Germany and Togo. This photograph offers an insight into the many connections and exchanges of knowledge and skills that also involved the Slovenian territory as a semi-periphery of Europe. Their photographs can also be read as a contribution to the production of knowledge of the Other made possible by colonialism.

Bibliography

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