Agriculture Communal Labor in the Nuba Mountains

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the nature and status of voluntary agriculture communal labor in the agrarian communities of the Nuba Mountains region of Sudan. Communal labor organization is widely used in Africa and worldwide to perform actions that are difficult for an individual to perform alone. It is practiced in different forms and for different objectives. Participant observation was adopted to collect the data needed to meet the objectives of this study. The study results revealed that the communal labor assists to perform tasks that the basic production unit - the family labor, cannot perform alone in the study area. It is also indicated that communal labor today is deteriorating in the face of the expansion of modern agriculture due to peasants’ modernization process and the ongoing war in the region. The study concluded that this form of voluntary labor could be utilized by the NGOs and other community development organizations to mobilize the local community to participate in development activities that needs popular participation such as resources management and utilization. It is also could be utilized to solve labor bottleneck for agricultural development projects.

Keywords: Communal labor, voluntary labor, Labor Exchange, Naffir and Nuba Mountains.

INTRODUCTION

Communal work refers to the gathering takes place to accomplish a task or to hold a competition. A number of cultures have such gatherings, often for the purpose of holding a competition, as in a spelling bee, or for providing manual labor, as in a barn raising. A spelling bee is a competition in which contestants are asked to spell a broad selection of words, usually with a varying degree of difficulty. The concept is thought to have originated in the United States and spelling bee events, along with variants, are now also held in some other countries around the world which use imperfect writing systems. The idea of organizing communal work/labor is to perform some activities, such as clearing a field of or raising a barn that would be difficult to carry out alone. It was often both a social and utilitarian event in some traditional communities. Jobs like corn husking or sewing, could be done as a group to allow socializing during an otherwise tedious chore. Such gatherings often included refreshments and entertainment provided by the group. Different words have been used to describe such gatherings (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal_work, 2014).

A barn raising, also historically called a "raising bee" or "rearing" in the U.K., describes a collective action of a community, in which a barn for one of the members is built or rebuilt collectively by members of the community. Barn raising was particularly common in 18th- and 19th-century rural North America. A barn was a necessary structure for any farmer, for example for storage of cereals and hay and keeping of animals. Yet a barn was also a large and costly structure, the assembly of which required more labor than a typical family could provide. Barn raising addressed the need by enlisting members of the community, unpaid, to assist in the building of their neighbors' barns. Because each member was entitled to recruit others for help, the favor would eventually return to each participant (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal_work, 2014).

According to Suehara (2006), Labor exchange is a common phenomenon that can be observed in different peasant societies throughout the world. It is a way of exchanging one's labor for another's labor without using money. To put it another way, it is a way of exchanging...
labor for labor as a gift. Today, when the market economy has spread to every corner of the world, we are inclined to think of labor as a commodity to be bought and sold in the market. In fact, however, there are still many agrarian people in the world who still engage in labor exchange have three basic principles in common: (1) mutual assistance, (2) exchange of equal amount of labor, and (3) no use of money or hired labor. These principles in fact are in the same with the features of communal labor in Sudan and other African countries such as Kenya (Harambee) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (likilimba). This argument is in line with Suehara (2006), on Labor Exchange Systems in Japan and Democratic Republic of Congo: Similarities and Differences, indicated that “Among different labor exchange systems in different agrarian societies of the world. This article focuses on two examples, one from East Asia and the other from Africa, and attempts a comparison of the two systems by carefully taking into account the difference in farming systems between the two regions. The example from East Asia is a labor exchange system known as yui practiced among Japanese farm households, and the example from Africa is a labor exchange system called likilimba practiced among the Tembo people living in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), formerly known as Zaire”. Such an example of labor party also practiced in Sudan among the different ethnic groups for some time. As indicated http://darfurbefore.wordpress.com/category/communal-labour, an individual cultivator in Darfur of Western Sudan (man or woman) mobilizes neighbors (men and women) for work by serving them beer (Arabic: “marissa”) and sometimes some food. Refusal to accept an “invitation” is taken as an indication of an “unfriendly” relation. This type of communal labor is known (Naffir) throughout the country. According to Manger (1987), Naffir is an Arabic word used in parts of Sudan (including Kordofan, Darfur, parts of the Nuba mountains and Kassala) to describe particular types of communal work undertakings. He stated that Naffir has been described as including a group recruited through family networks, in-laws and village neighbors for some particular purpose, which then disbands when that purpose is fulfilled. An alternative, more recent, definition describes Naffir as "to bring someone together from the neighborhood or community to carry out a certain project, such as building a house or providing help during the harvest season http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal_work, 2014). Such form of labor organization spreads throughout the northern parts of the country, under different names Naffir, Faza’a, Abu-morowa, and/or other names. Generally; the Naffir as an institution, took its shape in the context of traditional subsistence agriculture, and continued to exist in relation to its contribution to the objectives of subsistence production. It is observed that

Figure 1. A spelling bee at Jhenaidah Cadet College, with a speller addressing a table of judges from a stage filled with contestants

Figure 2. A barn raising north of Toronto, Canada in the 20th century
both sexes participate in Naffir, it is therefore entitled to recruit such communal labor provided that, the rule of reciprocity were not jeopardized. Recently the term has also been used in a military context in Sudan. As stated by Kevlihan (2005) was used to refer to what called an-Naffir ash-Sha'abī or "People's Militias" that operated in the central Nuba Mountains region in the early 1990s. Examples of communal labor: Harambee is a Kenyan tradition of community self-help events, e.g. fundraising or development activities. Harambee literally means "all pull together" in Swahili, and is also the official motto of Kenya and appears on its coat of arms. Harambee events may range from informal affairs lasting a few hours, in which invitations are spread by word of mouth, to formal, multi-day events advertised in newspapers. These events have long been important in parts of East Africa, as ways to build and maintain communities. Following Kenya's independence in 1963, the first Prime Minister, and later first President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta adopted "Harambee" as a concept of pulling the country together to build a new nation. He encouraged communities to work together to raise funds for all sorts of local projects, pledging that the government would provide their startup costs. Under this system, wealthy individuals wishing to get into politics could donate large amounts of money to local Harambee drives, thereby gaining legitimacy; however, such practices were never institutionalized during Kenyatta's presidency (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal_work, 2014). Imece is a name given for a traditional Turkish village-scale collaboration. For example, if a couple are getting married villagers participate in the overall organization of the ceremony including but not limited to preparation of the celebration venue, food, building and settlement of the new house for the newlyweds. Tasks are often distributed according to expertise and have no central authority to govern activities (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communal_work, 2014).

**Purpose and Objective of the Study**

The purpose of this paper is to describe the nature of communal labor in the NM and its status today. It is also aims to investigate the possibilities of utilizing this type of voluntary labor organization to promote popular participation in community development process.

**METHODS AND DATA SOURCES**

**Methodology**

Participant observation was adopted to collect the primary data needed to meet the objectives of this study. The author is belong to the same region and had participated in several communal labors including houses building, weeding and crop harvesting in his community. Secondary data were obtained from internet websites and other the relevant sources.

**Environment and socioeconomic settings of the study area:**

The Nuba Mountains region, which refers to locally in Sudan as Jibal-El-Nuba, is situated between the Latitudes, 29-31 degree North, and the Longitudes 10-13 degree West. It covers a total area of approximately 30,000 square miles in the virtual geographical center of the Sudan (Komey2008). It is mountainous in many places constituting uneven patterns of mountains, hills, and rocky ranges separated by broad valleys. Administratively, the region is considered to be the whole area presently known officially as the South Kordofan State and parts of the West Kordofan State, in the Sudan. It is centered on the Nuba Hill. The climate is semi-arid with less than 800 mm of rain per year on average, but lush and green compared with most nearby areas.
The plain areas are covered with muddy cracking and/or non-cracking clay soils with some alluvial deposits in the lowlands (Bello, 2008). Sandy soils dominate in the western and northern parts of the region. Based on these physical characteristics, the region has been a major economic base for the Sudanese agrarian economy; the recently discovered and exploited rich oil fields in its western part have made it even more significant, economically, politically and strategically (Komey, 2008). The rainy season extends from mid-May to mid-October, and annual rainfall ranges from 400 to 800 millimeters (16.4 to 32.8 in), allowing grazing and seasonal rain-fed agriculture (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuba_Mountains, 2014). In terms of ethnic composition, the NMs region is dominated by two major tribal groups, the Nuba and the Baggara Arab group. The term Nuba came to denote most of the black Africans non-Arab groups inhabiting the NMs. They claim to be the original inhabitants of the region, despite the fact that they are not living in isolation from the Arabic tribes. The Nuba people are a diverse ethnic groups comprising more than (90) ethnic or tribal groups, each one of these groups has its own local dialect, and traditions, which are slightly different from each other, but the Arabic Language is a lingua franca in the region. The Nuba are sedentary peasants residing in small traditional villages practicing subsistence cultivation. Very few of them are nomads, who keep animals, such as goats, sheep, donkeys, and small number of cattle, as well as dogs to guard animals from theft, and sometimes to be used for hunting, which considered an important activity practiced by the young men especially during the early rainy season. The Arab group, which is divided into so many sub-tribes share the same Arabic Language, and have more or less similar cultural traditions. A considerable number of this group is pastoral Baggara cattle herders, who keep large herds of cattle. The majority of them are used to keep animals as symbols of prestige and social status, but with the increasing circulation of money in the economy, and modern agricultural technology which hardly affected the
local environment, this practice has declined. Other ethnic groups such as West Africans origin known as Fellata, and other minorities including Darshelango, Berti, Bedeyria, Selehab, and others, are also found in the region (Bello and Daoud, 2014).

The civil war in the Nuba mountains has enforced the nomads to resettle around the urban centers as sedentary population making new mode of production of the pastoral life in the area (i.e. practice agriculture together with their traditional activity), competing with the traditional farmers in the limited resources (i.e. the land), as well as the poor social services in the urban centers. Prior to the issuance of the unregistered land Act of the 1970, and even in some parts of the NMS region today; the predominant land tenure system is the traditional ownership of land. The Unregistered land Act 1970 stated that; all unregistered land belongs to the government. This is mainly applies to the part of the agricultural land, which is traditionally characterized as no-man's land or (the Ghifar). Therefore, it is accessible for every member of the community. Under the traditional communal system, every recognized member may establish the right to a piece of particular land by clearance, borrowing, rent, planting trees or tapping Hashab (Acacia Senegal), granted by village Sheikh or inheritance. Generally the use system all over, the region (outside the registered areas), is characterized by small plots holder systems. Plots are either far from or near the villages. The house farm or the near farm is locally known as the Jubraka and usually run exclusively by women to grow vegetables such as okra, chilies, pepper, pea, and others, for home consumption, and is located by the farmers homes. The hill farm (Jebel farm), and the far farms are usually run by men, children in collaboration with women to grow sorghum, millet, sesame, cotton, groundnuts and other crops. The hill farms are located about 2 km. from the villages, while the far farms are located about (3-5 km.) from the villages (Bello, 1998). The farmers of the southern parts cultivate more plots than the farmers in the northern parts of the region. This is mainly because of the better availability of land to cultivate. In terms of space; farmers of the northern areas cultivate large areas than the farmers of the southern parts, because of lighter type of soil in the area. Moreover, in terms of preference sorghum remains the most important crop in the region. Millet though not popular as reflected in the small areas, and cultivated particularly in the northern parts. Concerning the cropping pattern in the area, the farmer decides on what to produce, how, and methods to be used, to suite his sets of objectives, and interest as well as his soil type. These include; sandy soils, guarded (mixed sandy and clay) and/or clay soil (Bello, 1998). Agriculture and livestock production are the main two economic activities in the region. Traditionally, the farming system adopted in the NMs is based on the shifting cultivation. This is still practiced by the small farmers in different areas (outside the registered land), in two main forms: First; the fallow cultivation with (1-2) years of cropping system followed by lengthy period of fallow. This system is found in the central and southern parts of the region, where there is a plenty of land. It is commonly adopted among the semi-nomadic farmers, where they use to allow their land to generate fodder for their animals. Second; the short-fallow cultivation with only (1-2) years of fallow, and it is regarded as the most popular, and ideal system of cultivation, particularly among the rural settled groups of the northern parts, where the demand for land is relatively high, and there is an overall increase in the cultivated land to the extent that there is no ghifar (unoccupied or not allocated land), in the area to be distributed or used by the landless group. However, a part from the expansion and incorporation into cash economy, the drought, and the concomitant rural food shortage have imposed upon rural population, a set of coping strategies among which is the increase of area cultivated. These processes have resulted in land exhaustion and declining fertility especially in the northern areas of the region, which led to “inter alia” cultivation of many plots, intercropping and shift into wadi (valley) beds land (El-Magboul, 2003). Livestock production is considered the second major economic activity in the area. Traditionally is practiced by two groups, the Baggara (cattle raisers) and the Aballa (camel raisers) nomads (Bashir and Tahir, 2005). Livestock production is performed in the region by both the sedentary population and the nomadic cattle keepers. Animal husbandry there involves rearing of livestock such as cattle, sheep, goats, and camels. Generally, animals are kept there to serve several functions in the area, including: i- A source of investment, where they represent an alternative of investment in case of high crop production; ii- Food source; iii- Means of transport, and labor source (i.e. animal traction), and iv- Social prestige. The pastoralists, who are mainly, the Baggara Arab, and few of Nuba cattle owners used to reside in different areas in the region during the different seasons. Their settlement usually is based on the availability of water pools and good pastures. It is clear that climate, and pastures shape their cattle movement and herding practices, which had proved that migratory cattle do better than sedentary cattle calving, and mortality rates are less among their cattle. This is mainly due to the better and selecting grazing throughout the year, expressed by the seasonal movements, and transhumant type of allocation (Bello, 2008; Bashir and Tahir 2005). off farm economic activities in the NMs region include all the various forms of income generation activities that farmers or other groups of the inhabitants adopt to supplement the income generated by their own farms. Such activities include dry season migration for wage labor in/or outside the area. Non-farm occupations such as blacksmithing,
handicrafts, tailoring as well as government occupations (e.g. guards, school employees, and other jobs in the government circles), forestry production and trade in building materials. Services charged for crop and water hauling, as well as income generated from capital intensive enterprises (i.e. oil presses, flour mills, bakeries ... etc), and the services delivered by the animal traction implements), also are considered another off-farm activities in the NMs. It is worth mentioning that income generated from these activities can be reinvested in agricultural inputs for cropping, animal purchases, and consumption needs (Bello, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The organization of labor in the NMs region reflects the subsistence nature of the economy with penetration of wage labor associated with the incorporation of the market production system (i.e. introduction of cash crops, such as cotton, sesame, and groundnuts). The division of labor in the NMs has to some extent been based on sex. Only few occupations are exclusively dominant of one sex (i.e. working in far fields, looking after cattle, and such activities are carried by males only). The exclusive females tasks include load carrying (i.e. water, wood, crop transportation, and such), grain grinding, beer brewing (locally known as marissa), handicrafts, and similar activities. However, the peasants has regular labor team, which consists; the farmer, his wife or wives, unmarried daughters and sons, and even the children, who are able to join the team to carry or/and to participate in the different agricultural activities (operations). Communal labor which is locally known as the Naffir, which is organized on reciprocal basis for mutual benefits. It is a part of the community culture, and other traditional societies of the Sudan, as well as some other African countries. This result is in line Manger (1987), who stated that Naffir is an Arabic word used in parts of Sudan describe particular types of communal work undertakings. It is usually organized to solve tasks that the basic production unit- the family labor, cannot perform alone (i.e. weeding operations during the rainy season, building of a hut(s), sorghum harvesting, threshing and transportation of agricultural production ... etc). It is observed that the Naffir’s organizer is not obliged to pay financial rewards to the participants rather than to serve or to provide food, tea, coffee, and may slught a lamb or he-goat. As far as the case of the NMs is concerned, the local beer (the marissa) is the largest item in Naffir expenditure in the Nuba communities; it varies according to the scale of the group labor. The Naffir usually does not exceed the length of one day at a time, though a person can organize group labor several times during the agricultural season. However, the frequency with which the recruiter’s ability to finance the enterprise and it therefore varies according to the one’s wealth and status. Thus, a poor farmer may organize group labor two or three times annually, where, a well-to-do farmer may organize Naffir six to seven times (Adam, 1989). The Naffir of the NMs may be described as the exchange of labor to local beer (marissa), as well as social obligation. It is worth mentioning that, the Nuba’s women play a very important role in the success of the Naffir parties (i.e. marissa brewing, food cooking, as well as to encourage the participants to work hard by singing special songs). It is also observed that, women organize their own communal work among themselves, with food, and tea instead of local beer for occasional weeding or crop transportation. Such activity was also observed in Darfur of Western Sudan as indicated in http://darfurbefore.wordpress.com/category/communal-
labour/ (figures 3 and 4). Another form of labor organization observed in the region is the wage labor. It is undertaken by both sexes, and occasionally by children. It is evident that the wage labor is not a new phenomenon in the area. It is deeply rooted in the history of the NMs region as old as the introduction of cotton schemes in the area in the 1930s (Bello, 2008). Most of the schemes' owners (of cotton production), are the Jellaba (This term is used locally to indicates the Arab merchants, mainly from the northern parts of the country), who used to cultivate cash crops and sell the consumer goods (i.e. salt, soap, clothes, sugar... etc), which are highly needed by the Nuba peasants. In turn, they are compelled in a way or another to sell part of their labor as wage outside of their farms to earn cash to buy such goods, and to pay the poll-tax imposed by the colonial government during the colonial era. According to Bello (2008) the introduced cotton production as cash crop in the NMs region was associated with new relation of production, new consumption patterns, and new marketing system. It was then incorporated the NMs region into the world capitalist system as an area of primary export oriented economy, it therefore remains in dependency situation.

CONCLUSION

The communal labor assists to perform tasks that the basic production unit- the family labor, cannot perform alone in the traditional agrarian communities, such as weeding operations during the rainy season, building of a hut(s), schools, roads and for crop harvesting and/or threshing. However, this form of voluntary labor could be utilized by the NGOs and other community development organizations to mobilize the local community to participate in development activities that needs popular participation such as resources management and utilization. It is also could be utilized to solve labor bottle neck for agricultural development projects. Finally, today Naffir is deteriorating in the face of the expansion of modern agriculture resulted in peasants modernization and the ongoing war in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Organization (CBOs), need to conduct training, needs assessment and providing capacity building for this form of labor organization to promote this institution to mobilize the targeted communities to participates in development projects implementation, monitory and evaluation. Hence, enable them participate effectively in the process of their development in a sustainable manner.

REFERENCES


