



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

West Africa and Colonialism, Part 2

by Wendy McElroy

Nineteenth-century Europe revolutionized trade through the development of steam power that sent trains across continents and large cargo ships across the sea. Construction projects, such as the Suez Canal, were proposed to link Africa and Asia to a trade-hungry Europe. With the advent of quinine, which effectively removed the worst threat of malaria, demand for tropical goods grew.

Then, in 1867, vast diamond fields were discovered in South Africa and huge resources of gold were reported. Europeans began to dream of diamonds and gold strewn across Africa. Suddenly, the interior of Africa was being pierced by iron tracks. The political theorist Karl Marx commented on the changes that such railroads brought in their wake:

You cannot maintain a net of railways over an immense country without introducing all those industrial processes necessary to meet the immediate and current wants of railway location, and out of which there must grow the application of machinery to those branches of industry not immediately connected with the railways. The railway system will therefore become the forerunner of modern industry. Modern industry . . . will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour.

Back on the European continent, nations were racing to industrialize, to establish new markets for their goods and shut out their rivals. This renewed interest in colonies that could be forced to provide raw materials and cheap labor as well as buy finished goods. Inevitably, West Africa became entangled in European politics. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 occurred at the beginning of what has been called the “scramble for Africa.” When Prussia defeated France, the French soothed their honor by seeking conquest abroad. The astute German chancellor Otto von Bismarck encouraged such ventures because they stoked hostility between the French and English, both of whom he viewed as enemies.

The Europeans colonized with an arrogance born of nationalism and the technological age. Charles Darwin’s popular theory of evolution was twisted to mean that the “more evolved” white

man had a right to preside over the “less evolved” African. Economic factors also fueled anti-African sentiments. For example, the British felt encumbered by indigenous barriers to commerce: that is, by the sophisticated and well-established local market network. From French Senegal down to the Niger River, a series of markets exchanged native goods for Western ones, and the markets were not necessarily under British authority. In fact, many Africans were becoming anti-British, especially when English traders used armed force.

George Goldie and the RNC

In 1877, Sir George Goldie, an adventurer and an extreme British nationalist, appeared on the Niger River. In 1879, he merged English traders into one monopoly company under his control. He made sure that the British government smiled upon the monopoly; for example, he deprived both France and Germany of access to the area. John E. Flint, Goldie’s biographer, described the company:

Its own treaty powers were so extensive as to transcend the sphere of purely commercial activity. At the same time, the Government’s treaties secured British protection to the area, and therefore the Company was also entitled to protection.

Goldie’s company built up an impressive fleet of gunboats.

Meanwhile, the Anglo-French rivalry continued. For example, Britain and France sought to jointly control Egypt because of its strategic importance for access to the Middle East and the Far East. But in September 1882, Britain moved unilaterally to take over Egypt.

To relax growing tensions, the major European powers (along with the United States) decided to carve up Africa at the negotiating table. The Berlin West African Conference, under the chairmanship of Bismarck, lasted from November 1884 to February 1885 and partitioned West Africa into separate but vague European spheres of influence. Britain’s authority over the South was recognized. It was now incumbent on each party to establish its authority before a rival could interfere.

On the Niger River, Goldie’s hundreds of treaties with local chiefs — along with his gunboats — held sway. In 1886, Goldie was rewarded when his business was chartered as the Royal Niger Company (RNC). He immediately declared the RNC to be the government of this area. Natives of the delta were to pay custom duties to Goldie and to obtain trade licenses from him. Britain declared a protectorate over the Niger districts, including Lagos.

But reliable profits require social stability, and tribal warfare kept erupting. Thus, the British extended their control over the hinterland, which became the Niger Coast Protectorate. One group of tribesmen, called Brass-men, was among those displaced by British commerce. Their homes and their livelihoods now belonged to the RNC. When outraged tribesmen destroyed

one of the Company's factories, the RNC retaliated in what was called "the Akassa Massacre of 1895."

British politicians at home began to realize that British companies in West Africa could not control the vast territories over which they claimed jurisdiction. This made the area vulnerable to foreign competitors, especially the French. A British resident wrote home,

It is hardly realized in England how very slight the control of the RNC is over the interior districts. . . .

It is nil five miles from the river.

In England, Joseph Chamberlain — a staunch imperialist — had become colonial secretary. He had plans for West Africa.

Establishing political control

After 1900, the RNC officially lost its charter. The released territory was divided into the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria; Lagos was a separate possession. As for the name "Nigeria," some credit the London *Times* with coining it. On January 8, 1897, the *Times* suggested,

The name "Nigeria," applying to no other portion of Africa, may, without offence to any neighbours, be accepted as co-extensive with the territories over which the Royal Niger Company has extended British influence, and may serve to differentiate them.

Ensuring British economic interests meant establishing political control, but Nigeria contained a number of ancient highly developed kingdoms, particularly in the North. Indeed, differences between the South and North made the British approach each area in a distinct manner. For example, the South was predominantly Christian, the North Muslim. Moreover, the South had been under British influence for centuries and a loose system of dealing directly with the natives had been established. Northern Nigeria felt colonialism much later, and the British wanted to co-opt channels of government that existed there.

The government back in England wished to subdue the North, but not by force. Frederick D. Lugard, the high commissioner of Northern Nigeria, contrived to ignore these wishes. In May 1902, he was given a *casus belli* when a British official was shot because of a mistranslated word. The British response was brutal and the region's religious leader, Sultan Attahiru, decreed a *hijra*, or flight by the Muslim population. When the British pursued, the sultan pleaded for his people to be allowed to flee: "With a fugitive or peddler you will not fight. I am simply running away; he who is running away, will you stop his journey?" The British gave no quarter either to the

refugees or to other resisters. Throughout Nigeria, the sheer brutality of the British response made people hesitant to resist.

The North fell easily for several reasons: first, the emirates fought separately and sometimes against each other; second, some pragmatic rulers aligned with the British; and third, the North used the outdated tactics of walled cities and cavalry charges against British heavy artillery.

Eventually, the British established a system of “indirect rule” in the North through which existing rulers exercised their authority under the loose supervision of British agents. In the Southern protectorate — which included the East, West, and Lagos — British rule was more direct, with the upper administration of government being entirely British. This was especially true in the West, where the British presence was entrenched. In the East, where there had been little government structure for the British to pre-empt or work through, the British somewhat arbitrarily established “chiefs,” thus destroying the traditional system of village democracy.

Musa Mburi — a village elder — remembered,

Before the coming of Europeans we had no chiefs, but when they came they installed chiefs. When they waged wars against any village, the person that stayed behind and did not run away was installed the chief.

Another elder recalled,

When asked who was their Chief, the people sometimes put forward a man who was the most important man in their village; sometimes (most often) they just looked blank; and sometimes they put forward the village idiot, to see what happened to him.

The new chiefs became rich and powerful but, for the average native, colonialism brought forced labor, the loss of land, and taxation.

Development in North and South

The North and South developed as though they were separate nations. For example, western education — usually conducted by Christian missionary schools — was excluded from the Islamic North, but in the South, where government and commerce required English-speaking employees, such schools flourished. Educated Southerners became indispensable to the British administration, performing the lower routine functions of government. When masses of “properly educated” Southerners flooded northward to assume civil-service positions, Northern leaders worried that a united Nigeria would be dominated by the Westernized South.

From a British perspective, however, the separate development of Nigeria worked well. Indirect rule in the North secured British interests even if it did not benefit the indigenous populations. If a ruler was loyal to the British and paid up, then the British didn't care if he was corrupt or brutal to his own people.

The method of "paying up" in the South, which had no tradition of direct taxation, involved the imposition of a standard currency in which all taxes were to be paid. To get this currency, every family had to work for wages or produce cash crops. The people bitterly resented the burden of taxes, fully half of which went to pay white officials.

An Irish missionary exclaimed,

The government has done little to help these poor pagans. Do they not exist to pay tax, work on the railway, absorb the products of English factories, and provide the raw materials to produce others, with the final aim of enriching some Company Directors and providing well paid jobs for some thousands of young people without resources? Which one is primitive?

The British claimed they brought transportation and communication systems, education and technology to the backward natives but the roads and railways were used to ship raw materials to British industry. Moreover, they were built by taxing natives and using forced labor. All real economic power was concentrated in the hands of foreign firms. Nigerians complained that they did not control their future, and yet their past was eroding.

In 1914, the North and South were amalgamated into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria, with Lagos as the capital and Lugard as governor general.

World War I

On August 4, 1914, Britain declared war on Germany thus commencing World War I. By extension, all of the British Commonwealth and its colonial possessions were also at war.

Officially, Nigeria remained loyal to Britain although only a few thousand Nigerian soldiers saw service. Some Africans, however, viewed World War I as an opportunity. Major uprisings occurred and, although they were brutally crushed, the propaganda of the war had a revolutionary effect. The Allies trumpeted the ideals of liberty and equality in order to elicit support, with President Woodrow Wilson and Prime Minister David Lloyd George championing the specific right of all nations to self-determination. Indeed, in 1918, Lloyd George extended that principle to include colonies, although he later excluded Africa.

World War I awakened the political consciousness of colonial peoples. Throughout Asia and Africa, colonial peoples took their first stumbling steps toward independence. In 1918, the first Pan-African Congress issued a resolution:

The natives of Africa must have the right to participate in the government as fast as their development permits, in conformity with the principle that the government exists for the natives, and not the natives for the government.

Meanwhile, Nigeria was opening up to foreign investment as never before. When it was discovered that the light Ford car could maneuver through African bush paths, Fords flooded Nigeria. Thousands of miles of road were constructed. Telegraph, telephone, and railroad systems linked to regions. The consequences were profound. Exports of tin, cotton, and groundnuts soared.

The new Nigeria required a new voice. The freshly created National Congress of British West Africa sent resolutions to London to request several reforms: chiefs elected or deposed by the people; a judiciary separate from the executive; a resident university; and, equal treatment for Nigerians in the civil service. The resolutions were rejected but the Nigerian people continued to reevaluate their relationship with white imperialism, especially with Christianity. Perhaps it was possible to forge a form of Christianity that left behind European influences and embraced many of the African traditions?

The worldwide depression of 1929 did not make Nigerians fonder of Western ways. The price of exports dropped; consumer goods became more expensive; taxes soared, and the people — many of whom bordered on starvation — began to resist. When rumors flew that women would be taxed as well as men, a violent revolt called the Women's War of 1929 was sparked. A woman rebel declared,

Our grievances are that the land is changed — we are still dying. It is a long time since the Chiefs and the people who know book have been oppressing us. We are telling you that we have been oppressed. The new Chiefs are also receiving bribes. Since the white men came, our oil does not fetch money. Our kernels do not fetch money. If we take goats or yams to market to sell, Court messengers who wear a uniform take all these things from us.

The uprising was crushed by police who killed 50 women and injured at least as many.

The British themselves had introduced the most revolutionary influence in Nigeria — Western education, which provided the knowledge and vision necessary to challenge the existing political system. Now Nigerians wanted better schools that would provide an education equal to a white man's. Higher education appeared slowly. With it, came a new sense of West African nationalism. Two Africans from Liberia were among the early founders of Nigerian nationalism: Edward Wilmot Blyden and John Payne Jackson. Blyden insisted that Africans should not copy other cultures; rather, they should make a unique contribution. The *Lagos Weekly Record* — a paper owned and edited by Jackson — became a powerful voice for racial consciousness.

Native resentment of foreign firms within Nigeria was boiling over. By the late 1930s, one conglomerate alone controlled more than 40 percent of the import-export trade. The government only strengthened these firms. For example, by law, any agent in charge of a mining lease had to be European. Organized labor joined the growing chorus for independence. Against this backdrop, Nnamdi Azikiwe, an American-educated Nigerian, returned home to establish a chain of newspapers. In denouncing colonial authority, he became a nationalist hero.

*Wendy McElroy is the author of **The Reasonable Woman: A Guide to Intellectual Survival** (Prometheus Books, 1998). For additional articles on current events by Ms. McElroy, please visit the [Commentary](#) section of our website.*

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