

8 - Colonial Rule in West Africa

The [European scramble for Africa](#) culminated in the Berlin West African Conference of 1884-85. The conference was called by German Chancellor Bismarck and would set up the parameters for the eventual partition of Africa. European nations were summoned to discuss issues of free navigation along the Niger and Congo rivers and to settle new claims to African coasts.

In the end, the European powers signed The Berlin Act (Treaty). This treaty set up rules for European occupation of African territories. The treaty stated that any European claim to any part of Africa, would only be recognized if it was effectively occupied. The Berlin Conference therefore set the stage for the eventual European military invasion and conquest of African continent. With the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, the entire continent came under European colonial rule. The major colonial powers were Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Portugal.

The story of West Africa after the Berlin Conference revolves around 5 major themes: the establishment of European colonies, the consolidation of political authority, the development of the colonies through forced labor, the cultural and economic transformation of West Africa, and West African Resistance.

European Penetration and West African Resistance to Penetration

Effective Occupation was a clause in the Berlin Treaty which gave Europe a blank check to use military force to occupy West African territories. 1885-1914 were the years of European conquest and amalgamations of pre-colonial states and societies into new states. European imperialists continued to pursue their earlier treaty making processes whereby West African territories became European protectorates. Protectorates were a loaded pause before the eventual European military occupation of West Africa. Because protectorate treaties posed serious challenges to West African independence most West African rulers naturally rejected them. West African rulers adopted numerous strategies to forestall European occupation including: recourse to diplomacy, alliance, and when all else failed, military confrontation.

Recourse to Diplomacy

The British found few people as difficult to subdue as the Asante of Ghana in their quest to build their West African colonial empire. The Asante Wars against the British, which began in 1805, lasted a hundred years. Although outmatched by superior weaponry, the Asante kept the British army at bay for a short final period of independence.



The 1874 burning of Kumasi by British troops (James Grant). Wikipedia. Public domain.

To understand the Asante wars, one has to look at role of King Prempeh I, who firmly resolved not to submit to British protection. When pressured in 1891 to sign a protection treaty which implied British control of Asante, Prempeh firmly and confidently rejected idea. Here are his words to the British envoy:

The suggestion that Asante in its present state should come and enjoy the protection of Her Majesty the Queen and Empress of India, is a matter of very serious consideration and I am happy to say we have arrived at this conclusion, that my kingdom of Asante will never commit itself to any such policy. Asante must remain [independent] of old . . .

In 1897, King Prempeh was exiled, and the Asante were told that he would never be returned. He was first taken to Elmina Castle. From there, he was taken to the Seychelles Islands.

In 1899, in a further attempt to humiliate the Asante people, the British sent British governor Sir Frederick Hodgson to Kumasi to demand the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool was a symbol of Asante unity. In the face of this insult the chiefs held a secret meeting at Kumasi. Yaa Asantewa, the Queen Mother of Ejisu, was at the meeting. The chiefs were discussing how they could make war on the white men and force them to bring back the Asantehene. Yaa Asantewa saw that some of the bravest male members of nation were cowed. In her now famous challenge, Yaa Asantewa declared:

How can a proud and brave people like the Asante sit back and look while white men took away their king and chiefs and humiliate them with a demand for the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool only means money to the white man; they searched and dug everywhere for it . . . If you, the chiefs of Asante, are going to behave like cowards and not fight, you should exchange your loincloths for my undergarments.

That was the beginning of the Yaa Asantewa War. The final battle began on September 30, 1900, and ended in the bloody defeat of the Asante. Yaa Asantewa was the last to be captured, and subsequently exiled to the Seychelles, where she died around 1921. With the end of these wars, the British gained control of the hinterland of Ghana.

Around the same time, Behanzin, the last king of Dahomey (1889-94), told the European envoy that came to see him:

God has created Black and White, each to inherit its designated territory. The White man is concerned with commerce and the Black man must trade with the White. Let the Blacks do no harm to the Whites and in the same way the Whites must do not harm to the blacks.

In 1895, Wobogo, the Moro Nabaor king of the Mossi told French Captain Restenave:

I know the whites wish to kill me in order to take my country, and yet you claim that they will help me to organize my country. But I find my country good just as it is. I have no need of them. I know what is necessary for me and what I want: I have my own merchants: also, consider yourself fortunate that I do not order your head to be cut off. Go away now, and above all, never come back.

Alliance

When West African leaders struck alliances with the imperialists, they did so in an attempt to enhance their commercial and diplomatic advantages. King Jaja of Opobo, for instance, resorted to diplomacy as means of resistance to European intrusive imperialism. Mbanaso Ozurumba, a.k.a Jaja was a former slave of Igbo origin. He was elected as king of the Anna Pepple House in Bonny, Niger Delta, in 1863, following the death of his master. Soon a struggle between the Anna Pepple House and Manilla Pepple House led to the outbreak of civil war in Bonny in 1869. The war resulted in King Jaja's migration and founding of the inland kingdom of Opobo which lay in the palm oil producing hinterland.

Jaja was an avowed nationalist and determined to control the trade in his political domain. He was determined to prevent European incursions into the interior. He also wanted to ensure that Opobo oil markets remained outside the sphere of foreign traders. To this end, King Jaja signed a trade treaty with the British in 1873. Part of the treaty reads as follows:

After April 2, 1873, the king of Opobo shall allow no trade established or hulk in or off Opobo Town, or any trading vessels to come higher up the river than the Whiteman's beach opposite Hippopotamus Creek. If any trading ship or steamer proceeds further up the river than the creek above mentioned, after having been fully warned to the contrary, the said trading ship or steamer may be seized by King Jaja and detained until a fine of 100 puncheon [of palm oil] be paid by the owners to king Jaja . . .

By signing the treaty, the British acknowledged Jaja as the king of Opobo and dominant middleman in the Niger Delta trade. However, the ensuing scramble for Africa of 1880s upset the understanding. The British merchants and officials were no longer in the mood to respect Jaja's preeminence in the Niger Delta hinterland. They instead penetrated the hinterland to open up free trade and therefore a confrontation with Jaja became inevitable. In 1887, the British consul Harry Johnson enticed Jaja to the British gunboat for discussions; but then exiled him to West Indies where he died in 1891.

Military Confrontation

Some decentralized West African societies equally resisted European penetration.

The Baule of Ivory Coast and Tiv of Nigeria stiffly resisted colonial occupation. The Baule fought the French from 1891-1911. The Tiv fought the British from 1900-30; and Igbo resistance was particularly widespread and prolonged. Because of the egalitarian nature of their society, the British found it extremely difficult to subjugate them. The British literally had to fight their way from Igbo village to village, from town to town, before they could finally declare their imperial authority over the Igbo people. Igbo elders challenged the British imperial penetration and invited the British to: "Come and fight: if you want warm, come, we are ready." The British waged wars from about 1898-1910.

While West Africans fought gallantly against their European intruders; everywhere but Ethiopia, the Europeans were triumphant.

European Political Policies in their West African Dominions

The British in West Africa

The 19th century British colonial policy in West Africa was a policy of assimilation.

Their grand plan was to have Africans assimilate into European civilization and culture. The policy created a western class of black Englishmen who were supposedly British partners in religion, trade and administration. These African "British men," especially Creoles, rose in colonies of Freetown, Bathurst, southern Ghana and Lagos to important positions in the church, commercial firms and the colonial government. However, with the growth of European racism, western educated Africans (elites) found that they were increasingly discriminated against in administration. The British now imported European administrators to fill positions previously held by Africans. Western educated Africans like the Creoles were even forced out of the civil service.

In 1910, the British colonial office expressed the opinion that Englishmen naturally expected to enjoy fruits of their conquests, therefore they should be preferred over Africans in senior positions. The problem however was that there were not enough Englishmen prepared to serve as colonial administrators in Africa. Therefore, the British soon adopted the policy of Indirect Rule.

Indirect Rule was the brain child of Lord Lugard. He presented the principles of the system in his book [*The Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa*](#). In it, he identified the two most important administrative principles to employ in ruling alien people. The first was the principle of decentralization, in which he stressed importance of recognizing and ruling people through their indigenous authorities. He argued that the role of the British officers, except in critical areas such as taxation, military forces and the alienation of land, was to advise, not demand. The second principle, was the principle of continuity. Lugard argued that the British should utilize indigenous institutions and authorities, thereby preserving “continuity” with the past, while laying foundations for what he saw as the progressive improvement of indigenous society.

Indirect Rule which begun as administrative expedient in Northern Nigeria, would eventually be imposed throughout their territories of British Africa.

Administrative Policies

The British set up separate administrative machines for each of their colonies. At the head of each colony was the governor, who was responsible to the Secretary of State at the colonial office. He administered the colony with assistance of a partly nominated legislative council and executive council of officials. Most of the laws of the colony were drawn up by the government or his council.

Each colony was divided into regions under a regional or chief administrator. The regions were divided into provinces which were controlled by the provincial commissioners. Each province was divided into districts under leadership of a district commissioner. Each district was divided into one or more traditional states which were ruled by traditional rulers.

Features of Indirect Rule

Indirect Rule saw to the mapping out of relatively large areas which were subject to single authority: Smaller ethnic groups were included in the jurisdiction of their larger, more highly organized neighbors. And district heads, especially in Igbo and Ibibiolands, Nigeria, were appointed to defined areas without much consideration to their relationship with the populations under their authority.

Indirect Rule sustained tyrannical and corrupt governments and promoted divisions in populations: In Northern Nigeria, the system strengthened the emirates, therefore increasing the possibility of revolution by the oppressed peasantry. In Igboland and

Ibibiolands, warrant chiefs were created to fill the leadership positions, because the Igbo and Ibibios had no chiefs, instead they had egalitarian systems of government which recognized authority as coming directly from the people. These warrant chiefs were corrupt and miniature tyrants. Therefore, in 1929 when the British tried to impose direct taxation on Igboland, Igbo women challenged government and the Women's War or *Ogu umunwanyi* ensued. The warrant chiefs were the main targets of the women's attack.

Indirect Rule weakened traditional rule: The traditional paramount ruler in British West Africa was not really the head of social and political order. Rather, he was a subordinate of the British overlord who used him to implement unpopular measures such as compulsory labor, taxation, and military enlistment. Moreover, the British had the power to dispose of traditional rulers and replace them with their own nominees. And the British often interfered with existing paramountcies by breaking them up and raising subordinate chiefs to the status of paramount chiefs.

The British District officers dictated to traditional rulers and treated them as employees of government rather than supervising and advising them. Members of ruling families were not encouraged to attend new schools that were introduced for fear they may become denationalized. In northern Nigeria and northern Ghana, the people as a result were not given the sort of education that would enable them cope with new problems of colonial society, thus making them even more dependent on District Commissioners and British Technical Officers.

The greatest fault of the Indirect Rule system, however, was its complete exclusion of the West African educated elite from local government: the educated elite were excluded from both Native Administration and colonial government, and thus became transformed into an alienated class.

In conclusion, Indirect Rule was implemented because it was cheap and practical. It preserved old conservative authorities who were ill equipped by education and temperament to cope with the changing environment.

The French in West Africa

Administrative Policies

The French had a policy of assimilation which sought to "civilize" indigenes and gradually turn them into *petits Français* or junior Frenchmen. The highest-ranking of these juniors were the *évolués*, or evolved ones. They were colonial subjects trained to work in administrative positions.

Évolués served two purposes. First, to cut down on costs by replacing French manpower. Second, to create an illusion that colonials were profiting from their becoming "civilized." Both the junior Frenchmen or *petits Français* and the evolved ones or *évolués* were to serve

the grandeur of France and in the far, far, future, they would become “civilized” enough to be considered fully French. This would never really happen however. When independence came, these well-positioned *évolués* often ended up running their countries.

In French West Africa, the colonies were integral parts of the metropolitan country, and were also considered overseas provinces. West Africans were regarded as subjects of France, and like children were expected to have patriotic duties to their mother country. The French believed that the first duty of civilization to the savage was to give them “a taste for work” on the grounds that as beneficiaries of civilization, they should contribute to expenses of the country which brings them benefits. In keeping with this philosophy, the primary role of the “native” therefore was to fight and produce for mother country. The French believed that the “native” will inevitably be civilized by this process, so that in helping France, the “native,” in fact, helps him- or herself.

West Africans that were deemed civilized were rewarded by conferring the privileged status of French citizen on them. To become a French citizen, the West African would have to have been born in one of the four communes or municipalities in Senegal: Saint-Louis, Gorée, Rufisque, and Dakar. They must also have merited a position in the French service for at least ten years; and have evidence of good character and possess a means of existence. They must also have been decorated with the Legion of Honor, a military award.

The advantages of French citizenship were many. Once a West African became a Frenchman, they were subject to French law and access to French courts. The black Frenchman was exempted from *indigénat*, which is a legal system which enabled a French administrative officer to sentence any African for up to two years forced labour without a trial. A West African Frenchman could commute compulsory labor for a monetary payment. The person could be appointed to any post in France and in colony. For example, Blaise Diagne of Senegal was the first black African elected to French National Assembly and Mayor of Dakar, which was the capital of the Federation of French West Africa. He would however fall out of favor with West Africans because the French colonial government used him to forcibly conscript West Africans to fight for the French army during WWI.

However, the assimilation policy was abandoned as impractical. By 1937, only eighty thousand of the fifteen million French West Africans had become French citizens. Seventy-eight thousand of those had become French citizens because they were born in one of the communes.

Thus, in the 1920s, the policy was changed to the policy of association, which was advocated as the most appropriate for French Africa. On paper, association reorganized the society supposedly to achieve maximum benefit for both the French and the West African. In practice however, scholars have argued that this policy was like the association of a horse and its rider, since the French would at all times dictate the direction that the development should take and determine what would be of mutual benefit to themselves and West Africans.

The colonial belief in the superiority of French civilization was reflected in the judicial system, their attitude toward indigenous law, indigenous authorities, indigenous rights to

land, and the educational program. They condemned everything African as primitive and barbaric.

Actual Administration

The French employed a highly centralized and authoritarian system of administration. Between 1896 and 1904, they formed all of their eight West African colonies into the Federation of French West Africa (AVF), with its capital at Dakar.

At the head of Federation was governor-general who answered to minister of colonies in Paris, took most of his orders from France, and governed according to French laws. At the head of each colony was the Lt.-governor who was assisted by a council of administration. The Lt.-governor was directly under the governor-general and could make decisions on only a few specified subjects. The French policy of assimilation, was a policy of direct rule through appointed officials. Like British, they divided their colonies into regions and districts. The colonies were divided into *cercles* under the *commandants du cercles*. *Cercles* were divided into subdivisions under *Chiefs du Subdivision*. Subdivisions were divided into cantons under African chiefs.

Distinguishing Features

1. African Chiefs were not local government authorities. They could not exercise any judicial functions. They did not have a police force or maintain prisons.
2. African chiefs were not leaders of their people. Rather, they were mere functionaries, supervised by French political officers.
3. African chiefs were appointed, not by birth, but rather by education, and familiarity with the metropolitan administrative practice.
4. African chiefs could be transferred from one province to another. The French policy actually went out of its way to deliberately destroy traditional paramountcies.

The Portuguese in West Africa

Administrative Policies

Portugal, one of the poorest of the European colonist nations in Africa operated what amounted to a closed economic system in their African colonies. They created a system which welded their West African colonies to mother country, Portugal, both politically and

economically. As such, their territories in West Africa were considered overseas provinces and integral part of Portugal.

Actual Administration

One underlying connection of all West African Portuguese colonies was the presence of relatively large numbers of Portuguese in the colonies, especially after 1945 when there was a full-scale emigration program from Portugal, especially to Angola. The Portuguese operated a very authoritarian and centralized system of government. At the top of government was the Prime Minister. Under him were the Council of Ministers and the Overseas Ministry, which was made up of the Overseas Advisory Council, and the General Overseas Agency. Then there was the Governor General, a Secretariat and Legislative Council. All of these offices were in Portugal. There were also Governors of Districts, Administrators of *Circumscricoes*, *Chefes de posto* and at the very bottom of the governmental hierarchy, the African Chiefs.

As in the British case, the Portuguese corrupted the systems of chieftaincies. They sacked chiefs who resisted colonial rule in Guine, and replaced them with more pliant chiefs. Thus, the historical authority of chiefs and their relationships with subjects was corrupted to one of authoritarianism which reproduced the authoritarian system of government in the *Estado Novo* dictatorship (1926-74).

Real authority was held by the Portuguese council of ministers, which was controlled by the prime minister. The direction of colonial policy was determined by the overseas ministry, aided by the advisory overseas council and two subsidiary agencies. The governor-general appointed the chief official resident for the colony. The chief official of the resident for the colony had far reaching executive and legislative power. He headed the colonial bureaucracy, directed the native authority system, and was responsible for the colonies' finances.

The *Circumscricoes* and *Chefes de posto* roughly corresponded to the British provincial and district officers. They collected taxes, were judges and finance officers. West African chiefs were subordinate to the European officers with little power to act on their own. Moreover, they could be replaced at any time by a higher Portuguese power.

The political policy adopted in Guinea Bissau, São Tomé, Príncipe, and Cape Verdes, Portugal's West African territories was a system of *assimilado*. The *assimilado* policy held that all persons, no matter their race, would be accorded this status if they met the specific qualifications. Similar to the French policy of assimilation, the Portuguese West African had to adopt a European mode of life; speak and read Portuguese fluently; be a Christian; compete military service; and have a trade or profession. However, only a small number Portuguese West Africans became *assimilados* because of the difficulty in achieving this station.

Additionally, the Portuguese did not support education in their colonies. They built few secondary schools, and almost entirely neglected elementary education. Most of their emphasis was given to rudimentary levels of training where Portuguese West African students were taught moral principles and basic Portuguese; making it almost impossible for the Portuguese West African, even if she or he wanted to, to achieve the status of *assimilado*.

The Germans in West Africa

Administrative Policies

The Germans had two territories in West Africa—Togo and Kameroun. German colonialism was too short-lived to establish a coherent administrative policy. German African colonial experience essentially amounted to thirty years (1884-1914) and was characterized by bloody African rebellions. However, their harsh treatment resulted in intervention and direct rule by German government. The German colonialists envisioned a “New Germany” in Africa in which colonialists would be projected as members of a superior and enlightened race; while Africans were projected as inferior, indolent, and destined to be permanent subjects of Germans.

Actual Administration

The Germans had a highly centralized administration. At the top of government was the Emperor. The Emperor was assisted by the Chancellor, who was assisted by Colonial Officers, who supervised the administration. At the bottom were the *jumbes* or subordinate African staff. These men had been placed in the stead of recognized leadership.

European Economic and Social Policies in their West African Dominions

The cardinal principles of the European colonial economic relationship in West Africa were to: (1) stimulate the production and export of West African cash crops including palm produce, groundnuts, cotton, rubber, cocoa, coffee and timber; (2) encourage the consumption and expand the importation of European manufactured goods; (3) ensure that the West African colony's trade, both imports and exports, were conducted with the metropolitan European country concerned. The colonialists thus instituted the Colonial Pact which ensured that West African colonies must provide agricultural export products for their imperial country and buy its manufactured goods in return, even when they could get better deals elsewhere.

To facilitate this process, the colonialists therefore forced West Africans to participate in a monetized market economy. They introduced new currencies, which were tied to currencies of the metropolitan countries to replace the local currencies and barter trade. Railroads were a central element in the imposition of the colonial economic and political structures. Colonial railways did not link West African economies and production together. They did not link West African communities together either, rather they served the purpose of linking West African producers to international trade and market place; and also connecting production areas to the West African coast. Moreover, railroads meant that larger amounts of West African produced crops could be sent to coast. All equipment used to build and operate the railroads were manufactured in Europe, and brought little to no economic growth to West Africa beyond reinforcing the production of West African cash crops for the external market. What was more, thousands of West African men were forced to construct these railroads; and many died doing so.

The key to the development of colonial economies in West Africa, was the need to control labor. In the colonies, this labor was forced. There were basically two types of forced labor in Africa. The first, was peasant labor. This occurred in most parts of West Africa where agriculture was already mainstay. In East, Central, and South Africa, Africans performed migrant wage labor on European owned and managed mines and plantations.

The colonial masters also imposed taxation in West Africa. By taxing rural produce, the colonial state could force West Africans to farm cash crops. West Africans had to sell sustenance crops on the market for cash. Then use cash to pay taxes. Taxes could be imposed on land, produce, and homes (hut tax). The requirement to pay tax forced West Africans into the colonial labour market.

West African Response and Initiatives

The imposition of foreign domination on West Africa did not go unchallenged. West Africans adopted different strategies to ensure survival. Some West African people living outside the cash crop areas found that they could get away with very little contact with the Europeans. Others exploited the system for their own gain by playing on the colonial government's ignorance of specific regions' histories. Still others pursued Western education and Christianity while holding strong to their identities. West African people struggled against the breaking up of their historical states as well as any threat to their land through petitions, litigations, uprisings

Early Protest Movements

West Africans organized protest against colonialism in form of the assertion of the right to self-rule. Some of the most notable movements included: (1) The Fante Confederacy (1868-72) of the Gold Coast, which recommended British withdrawal from all of her West African colonies; (2) The Egba United Board of Management (1865) of Nigeria, which aimed to

introduce legal reforms and tolls on European lines, establish postal communications in Lagos; (3) The aborigines Rights Protection Society (1897) of the Gold Coast was formed to oppose government proposals to classify unoccupied land as crown land (meaning that the land belongs to government). In the 1920's colonial administration succeeded in breaking alliance by supporting chiefs against the elite; (4) The National Congress of British West Africa (1920). The Congress was formed in Accra in 1920 under the leadership of J. E. Casely-Hayford, an early nationalist, and distinguished Gold Coast lawyer. Its aims were to press for constitution and other reforms, demand Legislative Council in each territory with half of members made up of elected Africa. They opposed discrimination against Africans in civil service, asked for a West African university, and asked for stricter immigration controls to exclude "undesirable" Syrians (business elite).



J.E. Casely-Hayford, archive of Northwestern University, 2013.

The African Church Movement or Ethiopianism

In the religious sphere, the Creoles played an important role in Christianizing many parts of West Africa including, Sierra Leone, Lagos, Abeokuta, and the Niger Delta. However, they soon met with the same kind of British racial arrogance encountered by West Africans in the colonial government. The British replaced Creole archbishops and superintendents with Europeans. A European succeeded Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, and no African was consecrated to this high office again for next sixty years.

The West African response to this was to break away from European churches and form new, independent West African churches. These churches included: the African Baptists, United Native African Church, African Church, United African Methodists—all in Nigeria, the

United Native Church in Cameroon; and the William Harry Church in Ivory Coast. By 1920, there were no less than 14 churches under exclusive African control. In Fernando Po, Reverend James Johnson was leading figure of the African church movement until his death in 1917.

The Independence movement among churches demanded that control be vested in West African lay or clerical leaders. Many churches incorporated aspects of West African ideas of worship into their liturgies, showing more tolerance for West African social institutions like polygamy.

The Prophetic Church Movement also emerged during this time, propelling the establishment of at least three prominent churches in West Africa which related Christianity to current West African beliefs. These prophets offered prayers for the problems that plagued people in villages, problems which traditional diviners had previously offered assistance in form of sacrifices to various gods. The Prophet Garrick Braide movement Began in 1912, ending with imprisonment in 1916. The Prophet William Wade Harris movement began in 1912, reached its height in 1914-15, spreading his gospel in the Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Gold Coast. The Aladura (people of prayer) Movement in Western Nigeria, began during the influenza epidemic (1918-19), achieving its greatest impact during Great Revival of 1930.

The African Church and prophetic movement was represented a nationalist reaction against white domination in religious sphere, which encouraged Africans to adopt African names at baptism, adapt songs to traditional flavors, and translate the bible and prayer books into West African languages.

Despite the rapid spread of Christianity in West Africa, Islam was spreading even more rapidly. West Africans embraced Islam as a form of protest against colonialism because it offered a wider world view devoid of the indignity of assimilation to the colonial master's culture.

The Role of West African Newspapers

The emergence of African owned presses and newspapers played an important role in sowing the seeds of early nationalism. The West African elite, through their newspapers and associations, acted as watchdogs of the colonial government, protecting their citizens against its abuses. Isaac Wallace Johnson and Nnamdi Azikiwe, for instance, were active in the West African press; and the press served as an important element in keeping the elite united. The *Sierra Leone Weekly News* was founded in 1884, and the *Gold Coast Independent* first published in 1885. In Nigeria, the *Lagos Weekly Record* was established in 1890 by John Payne Jackson. He propagated racial and national consciousness in Nigeria during the period. All worked to spread nationalism among West Africans. The press was in fact the single most important element in the birth and development of nationalism in British West Africa.

West Africans Abroad

Many of West African's future nationalist leaders, including, Leopold Senghor, Kwame Nkrumah, and Nnamdi Azikiwe studied abroad. They obtained necessary education to fight white domination effectively. The fact that they often suffered from white racism while abroad made them far more militant. Azikiwe and Nkrumah studied at the Historically Black College, Lincoln University (United States of America).



Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972). Wikipedia. CC BY-SA 3.0.

In London, the West African Student Union was founded in 1925 by Nigerian law student, Ladipo Solanke. Solanke, one of fathers of Nigerian nationalism, toured West Africa to raise funds for union which published its own journal. Members stressed cultural nationalism and emphasized the greatness of the African past. One of members, Ghanaian J. W. de Graft-Johnson, published book called *The Vanished Glory*. Members believed that West Africans should seeks their independence in near future.

The Ethiopian Crisis, 1935

West Africans were jolted towards radicalism by Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Ethiopia held a special significance for colonized Africans. It was an ancient Christian kingdom, an island of freedom in a colonized continent. Ethiopia was taken as symbol for

African and African Christians. Nkrumah who was in London at time later recalled, “at that time it was almost as if the whole of London had suddenly declared war on me personally.”

Effects of WWI, 1914-1918

WW1 had far reaching political and economic impact on West Africa. French West Africans were more affected than those in the British colonies. It is estimated that 211,000 Africans were recruited from Francophone Africa. Of these 163,952 fought in Europe. Official figures say that 24,762 died, but this number is assumed to be low, and did not account for Africans missing in action. Compulsory military service was introduced in 1912. From 1915, French West Africans actively resisted, as wounded and mutilated Africans began to return home. It soon became obvious that no adequate provision made for families of absent soldiers. Few Africans fought in British Africa. They took part in the conquest of Togo and Kameron. 5000 carriers were sent from Sierra Leone, and over 1000 Nigerians and Ghanaian were killed or died of disease there.

Effects of the War

1. After war, following the decisions reached in the Treaty of Versailles, German colonies were taken away and handed over to Britain and France to be administered by them on behalf of League of Nations. Thus, the British and French occupied German Togo and Cameroon. Colonies consequently converted into mandated or trusteeship territories.
2. WW1 influenced African Nationalism: African soldiers from both French and English territories fought Germans in Togo, Cameroons and Tanganyika. During those campaigns African soldiers gained some knowledge of outside world which widened outlook. They fought side by side with Europeans and discovered their strengths and weaknesses. They returned home with experience which deeply influenced desire for freedom and liberty
3. WW1 led to the arbitrary division of Togo and Cameroon between France and Britain as result of Treaty of Versailles: The division was made without reference to peoples, and this offended the latter's sense of justice and fair play. Thus, the people developed a strong hatred for colonialism. For instance, the Ewes of Togo were split by division, and thus, organized “Ewe Union Movement” to appeal for reemerging of their ethnic group.
4. WW1 allowed West Africans access to external wartime rhetoric, which had tremendous impact upon the thoughts and aspirations of literate West Africans. Woodrow Wilson (US) and Prime Minister Lloyd George of Britain made statements about principles of self-determination. West Africans believed that these principles were just as applicable to the colonies as to occupied territories of Europe.
5. WW1 led to tremendous decrease in West African import trade and revenues from customs declined.

Negro World Movements

The 1st Pan African Congress was held in Trinidad in 1900 and attended mainly by West Indians. Like early nationalistic movements, this Pan African Congress was elitist and concerned with issues such as the disabilities of black civil servants. The 2nd Pan African Congress was held in Paris in 1919 under the initiative of W. E. B. DuBois, the founder of the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who hoped that the problems of black people would be included in discussions of the Peace Conference at the end of WW1. Resolutions made at this congress were moderate. Few delegates from English West Africa attended. Later congresses in 1921, 1923, and 1927 were even weaker and less influential.



W.E.B. DuBois in 1918, by Cornelius Marion (C.M.) Battey (1873–1927). Wikipedia. Public Domain.

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940)

Marcus Garvey was the founder of Universal Negro Improvement Association. A Jamaican resident in New York, he influenced West Africans profoundly. He spoke of pride in black identity and said that to be an African was a matter of joy and pride, and that black men

everywhere would gain their rights by militancy and not by supplication. Branches of the movement were established in Lagos and Gold Coast. Garvey urged black people in the New World to return to Africa and fight for what was their own. Liberia was going to be the launching point for this return. He founded a shipping company called the Black Star Line to strengthen links between Africa and Afro-Americans.

Youth Movements of the 1930s

In the 1930s, a series of new movements sprang up in Nigeria, the Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone. They called themselves Youth movements, not because their members were youth—they were often middle aged—but because the word, youth, was often used in West Africa to symbolize one's rejection of the past. One such movement was the Gold Coast Youth Conference (1930), organized by J. B. Danquah. It was not a political party, but a discussion center which brought together larger numbers of debating clubs to discuss issues of national importance. In 1934, the Lagos Youth Movement was founded by a group of young men led by Ernest Ikoli, Samuel Akinsanya, Dr. J.C. Vaughan formed. In 1936, it changed its name to the Nigerian youth movement. The movement was restricted first to Lagos, then Nnamdi Azikiwe and H. O. Davies joined on their return to Nigeria in 1937 and 1938 respectively, and the movement became nationalistic in its outlook. The West African Youth League was formed in 1938. Organized by Sierra Leonean, Isaac Wallace-Johnson, it favored Marxism. Wallace-Johnson had international background. He had visited London and Moscow and had worked for communist newspaper in Hamburg. On his return to the Gold Coast, he was jailed for sedition.

Effect of WWII

WWII accelerated the growth of nationalism and shook the foundations of imperialism. The economic impact of the war on West Africa was tremendous and far reaching, resulting in (1) an increased economic importance of West Africa to the world market. Europe began to depend more on tropical Africa to supply rubber, cotton, cocoa, palm produce, and groundnuts. Thus, West African colonies increased the production of these cash crops. In Nigeria for instance, value of exports rose from 10,300,00 pounds in 1931 to 24,600,00 pounds in 1946. Imports rose from 6,800,00 pounds to 19,800,00 pounds during the same period. (2) West African workers developed grievances as a result of the colonial government introducing price control, controlling marketing of export crops, introducing wage ceilings, and pressuring for more production, Moreover, African businessmen were excluded from the import and export trade which was now reserved only for European firms. (3) The rise of trade unions emerged as a result of the rise of the cost of living without corresponding rise in wages. This provided stimulus for organizational activity among the labor class. In Nigeria the number of trade unions rose from 5 to 70, and the Nigerian Trade Union Congress (1943) became central coordinating body. Trade unions cooperated closely with nationalist leaders in pressing for the end of colonialism. (4) War resulted in speedy growth of cities as result of people flocking into cities to take up new jobs. Many West

African cities more than doubled their population. Lagos rose from 100,000 in 1939 to 230,00 in 1950. Accra rose from 70,000 in 1941 to 166,00 in 1948. Towns became overcrowded with discontented job-seekers and workers who witnessed whites living in comfortable, spacious European reservations with paved streets and beautiful lawns and gardens, while they were living in slums. The people therefore became receptive to nationalist appeal and would become the first willing recruits into militant nationalist movements. (5) War gave impetus to education in West Africa. Because of increased prosperity resulting from war-time economic boom, more parents could afford to send children to school, literacy spread, and newspaper readership increased. Newspapers became a powerful tool in the hands of nationalists to push for political, economic and social development. (6) In spite of more job opportunities, thousands of school-leavers remained unemployed. For the first time, West African cities developed a new class of unemployed people especially in cities. They became disgruntled and blamed colonial government and European firms for their plight. They were easily won over by nationalist agitators. (7) The most decisive factor that accelerated the growth of nationalism was however the return of ex-servicemen. Over 176,000 men from British West Africa served in British colonial army during war. After war, large numbers of survivors returned. About 100,000 returned to Nigeria, and 65,000 returned to Ghana from the Middle East, East Africa, Burma and India. Ex-service men had seen life in more developed countries and enjoyed high living standards in army. They had seen the strength of nationalist movements in Asia and fought side by side with Europeans and seen weaknesses which exposed the myth of European racial superiority. They came home with burning desire for better life for themselves and people and urgent demand for extension to Africa of freedom for which many of them had fought and died. Many joined ranks of militant nationalists.

The Impact of European Colonialism on West Africa

Belgium's King Leopold, speaking at the 1884 Berlin West Africa conference, was attributed with saying, "I am determined to get my share of this magnificent African Cake." Tragically, as history reveals, Leopold did get a considerable share of the "magnificent African cake," which he exploited with unimaginable brutality. While European colonialism in West Africa lasted for a period of only about eighty years, the basic impetus for colonialism was to control existing West African markets, its mineral wealth, as well as to control its future economic discoveries. Portuguese dictator Marcelo Caetano put it this way, "[West African] Blacks are to be organized and enclosed in economies directed by whites." Indeed, European colonial rule took much more from West Africa than it gave it.

Colonialism was a double-edged sword. While the European colonialists saw to the building of roads, railroads, ports, and new technology in West Africa, the infrastructure developed by them, and built with West African forced labor, was designed to exploit the natural resources of the colonies; and advance European colonial presence in West Africa. Effective

colonial government control demanded a more efficient system of communications that previously existed in precolonial West Africa. Thus, in colonial northern Nigeria, for instance, railroads were specifically built for this purpose. With the discovery of mineral deposits in areas of colonial Sierra Leone, railways were either extended or spur lines were built to facilitate the exploitation of these minerals. In addition to railroads, the colonialists also improved and expanded the road networks in their various West African territories. This they did, much like the railways, to link production areas to the coasts. These roads however had the added effect of providing the impetus for increasing urbanization in West African cities and towns.



Un Chef de Section, Chemin de fer du Sénégal au Niger
Série N. 4 - Robert Schléber, Kayes

A Section Chief in the building of the Dakar–Niger Railway, pushed by African workers, Kayes, Mali, 1904 - Robert Schléber, Kayes - Collection Jean-Pierre Vergez-Larrouy (1903).

As mentioned above, colonial investments in West Africa were concentrated, for the most part, on extractive industries and trade goods. In order to exploit these raw materials, the colonial governments had to control labor. They did this by encouraging large numbers of skilled and unskilled laborers to concentrate in given locales. This resulted in the tremendous growth of towns and cities in the vicinities of these industries.

Another reason for the growth of new towns and cities, as well as urbanization, was the need to service the new agricultural sectors imposed by the colonial governments. Seaports, in cities like Dakar, Lagos, and Abidjan, thus, registered remarkable growth rates in the fifty years of the twentieth century. The same was true of towns selected by the colonial government as sites for the headquarters of the various colonial districts and provinces.

The introduction of cash economies also had far reaching effects on urbanization in West African societies. By introducing taxation, Europeans could force Africans into the monetarized economy. Young men found it much easier to obtain European currency by working in government or civilian sector jobs in towns and cities, rather than working on the plantations, which many were forced to do. Thus, a greater mobility created by the roads and railroad networks, in addition to greater economic opportunities in certain colonial vicinities, combined to facilitate the rapid growth of West African cities. This growth in cities however had debilitating consequences on West African families. Migrant work encouraged the separation of families.

In addition, the emphasis on cash crops grown for export made West African societies dependent on European economies. Little was done by the European colonialists to develop trade between West African colonies; and as a result, many West African nations still trade more with European countries than with neighboring West African states. Moreover, the land on which the European colonialists established these cash cropping plantations was seized forcibly from West Africans, leaving households landless, and dependent on the Europeans.

While the various missionary societies proselytizing in West Africa, introduced schools of European learning in their West African dominions, as noted above, these for the most part, were far and few between. After the introduction of indirect rule, for instance, the British discouraged West Africans from acquiring higher education by denying them employment in the colonial administrations. They instead subsidized Christian missions to produce more clerks and interpreters. The French government on their part, limited the number of schools in their West African territories. Indeed, Senegal was the only colony that had secondary schools; and of these schools, the William Ponty school in Dakar was the oldest and most popular.

Nwando Achebe