

Africans

The history of a continent

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peoples and small chiefdoms launched many local revolts, but they generally lacked the organisation to threaten European control on the scale achieved by Ndebele or Asante, even when they utilised institutions stretching across political divisions such as the Nyabingi cult, which led opposition to German and British control on the border between Rwanda and Uganda until 1928, or the secret society which organised the Ekumeku resistance to British rule in western Igboland between 1898 and 1910. One exception to this narrowness of scale was the Maji Maji rebellion of 1905–7 in German East Africa (modern Tanzania), which spread widely among stateless peoples through the leadership of a prophet, Kinjikitile, who operated within the framework of a territorial religious cult, spoke with the authority of divine possession, and distributed water-medicine (*maji*) alleged to give invulnerability to bullets. Elsewhere, however, large-scale rebellion by stateless peoples took place only under Islamic inspiration. The Sudanese Mahdi's revolt against Egyptian rule had employed the same combination of divine authority and multi-ethnic appeal as Kinjikitile's. The chief Islamic revolt against early European control took place in Niger in 1916–17, when Tuareg tribes besieged Agades at a time of French weakness and decline in the desert economy. Christianity inspired only one significant rebellion, in 1915, by plantation labourers in southern Nyasaland led by John Chilembwe, an African clergyman with American training. His followers harboured millennial expectations and launched a brief and bloody attack on their employers but gained no widespread support, for Christians were still few and engaged in building up their strength within the colonial order, a task to which most Africans turned once armed revolt was defeated.

Colonial rule

Because most African colonies were acquired in hope of long-term advantage, their early governments were only holding operations. Their subjects were impressed by their strength, as the memoirs of literate Ganda show, but Europeans ruling Buganda were more conscious of their weakness in the face of 'something like a million fairly intelligent, slightly civilized negroes of warlike tendencies, and possessing about 10,000 to 12,000 guns'.³ To maintain a precarious order, if necessary by swift use of violence, was therefore the administrator's first priority. The second was to do it cheaply. 'Get to know your district, and your people. Keep an eye on them, collect tax if possible, but for God's sake don't worry headquarters', as a veteran Native Commissioner in Southern Rhodesia remembered his duties.⁴ To collect tax for his impecunious government was the purpose for which his office had been created. 'In assessing you,' the Governor-General of French Equatorial Africa warned his officials in 1903, 'I shall base myself above all on the results which you will have obtained with regard to the native tax.'⁵ A poor colony like Nyasaland introduced direct taxation from the moment it was created in 1891, generally requiring each adult male to pay the equivalent of one or two months' wages

– a common pattern in eastern Africa, where tax was seen not only as a source of revenue and a ‘sacrament of submission’ but also as an ‘educational’ measure compelling Africans to supply produce or labour to the colonial economy. Early tax collection involved much brutality and provoked much resistance, notably the Sierra Leone Hut Tax War of 1898 and the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906 in Zululand. There are accounts of men in Uganda killing themselves when unable to find the cash to pay tax.

For most individuals, however, tax was probably less burdensome than early colonial demands for labour. Long Africa’s scarcest commodity, labour was doubly so when European rulers added new demands for porters and construction workers before they introduced mechanical transport. This was why forced labour was the most widespread abuse of the early colonial period. The French required each man to work unpaid for up to twelve days a year. They also conscripted Africans for longer periods of paid labour and for military service, taking about half a million men from the continent during the First World War alone, despite widespread evasion and armed resistance. The Congo Free State’s labour tax, as codified in 1903, was forty hours a month, although the reality was arbitrary impressment. Forced labour remained common there until at least the Second World War, as also in Liberia and in Portuguese colonies, where it was not abolished even formally until 1961–2. In British colonies it generally ended during the early 1920s. Until then a Ganda peasant might theoretically owe five months’ labour a year: one month (in lieu of rent) to his African landlord, one month of local community labour, two months (in lieu of tax) to the state, and one month of compulsory paid (*kasanvu*) labour for the state or (rarely) a private employer. Recruiting for private employers was often an early colonial official’s most distasteful duty.

Administrators took more pride in their fourth basic task: to judge cases and administer law. Early district officers were as eager as Ethiopian Emperors and Asantehenes to attract cases into their courts, and for the same reasons: it augmented their political power, implied confidence in their rule, and enabled them to impose their notions of justice. Historians have neglected the process by which colonial governments destroyed rival African jurisdictions, repressed blood feuds, and asserted a sole prerogative to take life, but Africans remembered it vividly and officials thought it a crucial achievement, for many African societies had been violent and cruel. Yet early colonial justice was itself often oppressive. Many early officials were brutal men, recruited only because they were available. They were entrusted with overwhelming firepower and were remote from control by superiors or public opinion. Their quality improved enormously after the First World War, but even the most just among them represented alien and impersonal regimes: an Igbo masquerade caricatured ‘Government’ as a faceless figure clutching a sheet of paper. Their courts mainly enforced their own orders and prohibitions. And when these ‘student magistrates’, as an African described them, tried to enforce indigenous law, its unwritten character left them in the

hands of the elderly men they consulted, who often reshaped custom to their own advantage, chiefly at the expense of women and the young. 'The white men brought . . . peace between Igbo communities,' an Igbo later recalled, 'but they have not brought peace within the communities.'⁶

Officials could not avoid reliance on African agents. At headquarters they depended on clerks and interpreters, one of whom was accused in Dahomey in 1909 of having 'established a court in which he regulates all matters before submitting them to the administrator; this is not done for nothing, chicken, sheep, money . . . have to be paid . . . [He] has said that the white man will believe anything he says.'⁷ For communication with the countryside, officials relied on messengers – the key figures in Northern Rhodesia's rural administration – or soldiers, 'pure barbarians . . . [whose] brutality on the villagers'⁸ was one grievance underlying John Chilembwe's rebellion. Their rural agents might have indigenous authority, but they might be merely appointed 'tax chiefs', as they were known in Côte d'Ivoire, or 'government dogs', as the Nuba of Sudan described them. Many early colonial agents had no better claim than eager collaboration. Some were aliens, such as the Swahili-speaking coastmen whom the Germans used in East Africa or the Fulbe whom they and the British imposed on stateless highlanders in Cameroun and Nigeria. But the most powerful Africans within the colonial situation were the farseeing modernisers who quickly recognised that armed resistance was doomed and that wisdom dictated the manipulation of the colonial order to their own and their people's advantage. The greatest of these was Sir Apolo Kaggwa, Chief Minister of Buganda from 1889 to 1926, a tireless moderniser who led his Protestant party into profitable alliance with the incoming British and negotiated in 1900 a Uganda Agreement which ensured Buganda much autonomy, preserved its monarchy, and empowered its Christian leaders to distribute the kingdom's land among themselves as freehold property. His closest counterpart in West Africa was perhaps Obaseki of Benin, but many lesser men of like mind helped to ensure that colonialism in Africa was not merely an ordeal but an opportunity.

How a colonial administration selected, trained, and controlled its African agents chiefly determined its character. This was more a matter of expediency than of principle. The small West African coastal colonies of the mid-nineteenth century were governed on broadly European lines. Permanent residents of Senegal's coastal towns enjoyed French citizenship. British possessions were Crown Colonies with formal institutions and British law. But these methods were impracticable in the huge territories acquired during the partition. Where occupation was relatively peaceful and foreign trade extensive, as in southern Nigeria, government could be financed by customs duties, so that direct taxation was unnecessary and administration could be confined to a handful of white officials seeking to guide African rulers gradually towards European notions of good government, as had long been the approach of the Cape administration in South Africa.

More commonly, however, early colonial administrators were military

officers who saw Africans as security risks. This was especially the tradition of French officers trained in Algeria. When Colonel Archinard took Segu in 1890, for example, he deported 20,000 of its Tukulor rulers back to Senegal, installed a chief from an indigenous and friendly Bambara dynasty, distrusted his loyalty, summarily executed him, appointed a rival Bambara candidate, and finally abolished the chieftainship and established direct French administration, all within three years. From this security perspective, any powerful African was dangerous. 'We must look on all these chiefs as people to be ruined', Archinard's mentor advised him. British officers took the same view in Sudan, where their initial hostility to vestiges of Mahdism verged on paranoia, and white-settler regimes took it everywhere. As this style of administration settled into civilian routine around the turn of the century it became known as direct rule and was practised especially by French, Belgian, and Portuguese officials who believed in centralisation and saw hereditary rulers as 'usually nothing but parasites', in the words of William Ponty, Governor-General of French West Africa. French and Belgian officials were more numerous than British; in 1926 Côte d'Ivoire had one white official for every 18,000 people, Southern Nigeria one for every 70,000. Frenchmen headed the *cercles* and subdivisions into which the two federations of West and Equatorial Africa were divided. Below them African chiefs administered *cantons* (often the old *kafu* units) and villages. Direct rule forced African political systems into this framework. Monarchs gave way to *chefs de canton* in Dahomey and Futa Jalon, while the Mossi Mogho Naba (Lord of the World) was deliberately deprived of power. Stateless peoples were subordinated to appointed *chefs de canton*, drawn by preference from the local population but chosen mainly for their loyalty, literacy, and efficiency – retired soldiers were often favoured. *Chefs de canton*, in turn, relied on village chiefs, who were normally local men. The early Belgian administration also levelled chiefs downwards and upwards in this way to form the base of a bureaucratic pyramid. Thus even 'direct rule' was in practice rule through Africans; the question was the level in the indigenous society at which the link with the colonial bureaucracy was made and the contradictions of colonial rule were therefore most acute.

That was the originality of 'Indirect Rule' which the British devised in the Sokoto Caliphate (Northern Nigeria) before the First World War and then extended to other colonies. Frederick Lugard, the soldier who conquered the Caliphate and devised the system, brought with him the Indian Army's hatred of 'the politically-minded Indian', which he translated into a loathing of the 'Europeanised Africans' of Southern Nigeria. He wanted a more authoritarian administration and he realised that the Fulbe emirs and their relatively sophisticated institutions could serve his purpose, 'for they are born rulers, and incomparably above the negroid tribes in ability'. Lugard's unusually strong military forces enabled him to defeat and replace ruling emirs without destroying their administrations. 'Every Sultan and Emir', he proclaimed after taking Sokoto, '... will rule over the people as of old time ... but