

THE POLITICS OF DECOLONIZATION IN GHANA AND NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION: The concept of decolonization ordinarily suggests- the negation of colonization, which is the imposition of political control by a country over a less powerful one. In reality, it is the gradual transfer of political power from the European imperial rulers to the Africans in what is popularly known as the decade of independence. The corollary of this is liberation struggle, that usually involves armed struggle and violence as witnessed in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique and the white settler colonies of Kenya, South Africa and Algeria. The place of the colonial era in Africa has evoked a major debate: whether it was the beginning of African History as Eurocentric scholars like Trevor Roper had argued or a mere episode in the long history of Africa as Ade-Ajayi and others have argued.¹

Irrespective of the view that one holds on this debate, there is a general agreement that the imposition of imperial rule on Africa was preceded by the Scramble and Partition of Africa, particularly between 1875 and 1914. The Gold Coast, Nigeria, Gambia, and Sierra-Leone came under British control and were collectively known as British West Africa. For political expediency and administrative convenience, the British adopted a system of administration called the indirect rule. This colonial government rested on three administrative pillars: the native authority, the native court and the native treasury. Not only was the system of colonial administration in the Gold Coast and Nigeria similar during the entire period of the

colonial rule, the Lagos Colony was actually controlled from Accra from 1874 to 1886. The head of the political administration then, the Governor, was residence in the Gold Coast. The highest political officer in Lagos then was the Lt Governor. It took a strong protest from the very vocal educated elite in Lagos to force the British to terminate this arrangement. They were impatient with the length of time required to obtain even the Governor's view on mails dispatched to him from Lagos on matters beyond the competence or jurisdiction of the Lt Governor. This was the period when the ship was the only means of communication and Elder Dempster ruled the waves.²

And while it took just two decades from 1880 for European imperial powers to partition and occupy Africa, it took a longer period for the African colonies to regain their independence. The process was however dramatic especially after the end of the second world war in 1945. The independence of Ghana in 1957 seemed to have opened the way for the other colonies. By 1960, eleven colonies had gained their independence, nine of them in 1960 alone; the next two between 1961 and 1965 and the last two in 1973 and 1974. In British West Africa, Ghana's independence was on 6 March 1957; followed by Nigeria on 1st October 1960, Sierra-Leone on 27 April 1961 and the Gambia on 18 February 1965. Again, opinion differs on the assessment of the colonial era. Some have described it as an unmitigated disaster for Africa, others see it as a mixed blessing. Yet, others

regard it as an infinite good for which they expect Africans to be eternally grateful to the European imperial masters.³ A balanced assessment, however, will show that colonialism had its positive and negative aspects. The negative aspects sowed the seeds that led to its destruction.

PATTERN AND TRAJECTORY: The process of decolonization in the Gold Coast and Nigeria followed the same pattern and trajectory, in two historical phases. The discussion of the politics of decolonization in the two countries will involve the analysis of the processes, the personalities and the institutions involved. To aid our understanding, we shall adopt the thematic and comparative approach in the historical narrative. The first phase of decolonization in the two countries was the stage of non-violent protests which Funso Afolayan called "proto-nationalism".⁴ The protests were led by the few educated elite in the Coastal cities of Lagos and Calabar in Nigeria and Accra in Ghana. Their grievances centered mainly on their exclusion from the corridor of power under the British administration. Funso Afolayan explains the objective of the protests in these words, "They sought accommodation within the colonial order, rather than a recovery of their sovereignty. They were reformists, not revolutionaries. Their quest was for a better deal for themselves as elites and for their people in the colonial enterprise".⁵ Dennis Austin similarly argues, "The intelligentsia felt they

had been passed over, denied their proper place as heirs of the British whose institutions they knew and, for the most part admired.”⁶

In the process, the educated elites vented their anger on the traditional rulers whom they perceived had displaced them from their rightful position of the vanguard of a new civilization. In reality, the Indirect Rule was a system that stresses continuity rather than a break with the existing political arrangement. In principle, the goal was to administer the ‘natives’ through their own local chiefs and traditional institutions. However, in implementing the Dual Mandate, the British administration created paramount rulers where they did not exist and invested some with the political authority they did not possess in the pre-colonial era. In Nigeria, Captain Ross extended the power and influence of the Alafin of Oyo far beyond his traditional domain in Yorubaland.⁷

In Eastern Nigeria, the British administration in utter disregard for the republican spirit of the Igbo people created ‘Warrant Chiefs’ whose authority was based on the government. The excesses of these certificated rulers resulted in the popular Aba Women riot of 1929. Even in Northern Nigeria where the Indirect Rule system was very successful, the emirate system freed some groups from the control of their neighbours but imprisoned many non-Hausa communities in the emirate box. The story was not too different in the Gold Coast. In 1927, *The Gold Coast*

Leader roundly condemned the unfettered power enjoyed by the Chiefs under the British. It wrote:

The time is coming when a chief once installed will sit firmly on the neck of the people, like the old man of the sea, and rule them in his own way without any means of getting rid of him.⁸

In the Gold Coast and Nigeria, the colonial administration did not only ignore the political grievances of the educated elites but proceeded to castigate them. For instance in Nigeria, Governor Hugh Clifford was full of disdain for the agitators whom he ridiculed as pretentious and presumptuous Black Englishmen who had no roots in the communities they claim to represent.⁹

The racial policy of the colonial government united the educated elites against the British. In both countries, educated Africans were either not employed or made to occupy inferior positions in the government or colonial civil service irrespective of their qualifications. In 1919, the *Gold Coast Independent* complained bitterly against this policy.¹⁰ The fate of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe also tells the same story in Nigeria. Azikiwe returned to Nigeria with two masters degrees from a reputable American University in 1934. After he was denied employment in Nigeria, he migrated to the Gold Coast where he became the editor of the *African Morning Post* from 1935 to 1937. The paper was very critical about the colonial government. To avoid the constant harassment, Azikiwe came back to Nigeria in

1937 where he founded the *West African Pilot* that became the mouthpiece of the nationalist leaders for many years. In essence, the press in the Gold Coast and Nigeria played a very crucial role in the politics of decolonization at every stage.

Another common feature of the politics of decolonization in both colonies was the level of youth involvement in the nationalist agitations. In the Gold Coast, J. B. Danguah convened the first National Youth Conference in 1930. The second was held in 1938 and the third in Kumasi in 1939. By 1914, the "young men" had formed a partnership with the 'intelligentsia' to pressurize the colonial administration to introduce series of reforms that culminated in the 'unofficial majority' constitution of 1946.¹¹ In Nigeria, the Lagos Youth Movement was formed in 1934. The movement changed its name to the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) in 1936. The NYM provided the first broad based platform for the criticism of the colonial policies. The leadership of the Movement included Ernest Ikoli, Samuel Akisanya, Dr. J. C. Vaughan and H. O. Davies. Notable students from Northern Nigeria, including Mallam Jumare who was dismissed from his position as a teacher, joined the group. The NYM called for the reform or abolition of the Indirect Rule System, the appointment of Nigerians into the higher cadre of the civil service, representation of the provinces in the Legislative Council and better working conditions for African employees in European firms.¹² The goal of the NYM was to build a united Nigeria out of the motley of communities that

the colonial enterprise had brought together in the Nigerian State. The NYM dominated the political landscape until internal dissension among the leadership crippled its activities and it was subsequently replaced by a new political party, the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons in 1944.

It is important to stress that the first phase of the nationalist movement in the Gold Coast and Nigeria profited from Pan Africanism that originated from outside the African continent. By then, the Blacks in the New World began to connect their struggle for civil rights with the demand for self-determination of Africans under colonial rule. The prominent leaders of this movement include Booker T. Washington, E. B. Du Bois and the Jamaican born Marcus Garvey. Bookier T. Washington believed that functional education was crucial to black emancipation. This idea influenced J. K. Aggrey, the Fante clergyman and educationist who founded the popular Achimota College in Ghana. E. B. Du Bois was impatient with the long range approach of Booker T. Washington. He wanted immediate political and economic freedom for blacks everywhere. The approach of Marcus Garvey was different from the others. His goal was to repatriate some 400 million negroes back to Africa to take over the continent politically, socially and economically.¹³ Between 1919 and 1945, five Pan African Congresses were held. The first was at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and the fifth was the Manchester Congress of 1945. Some of the nationalist leaders in Gold Coast and

Nigeria, notably Kwame Nkurumah and Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe, were inspired by Pan Africanism and other interterritorial movements such as the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA) organized in 1919 under the leadership of J. E. Casley Hayford of Ghana. The congress held its first meeting in Accra in 1920 and demanded from the colonial administration, the introduction of franchise and equal opportunities in the civil service and the establishment of the West African University.¹⁴

The second phase of the decolonization in the Gold Coast and Nigeria reveals many striking similarities. First is the timing of the event. This second phase, which is from 1945 to 1960, coincided with the period that the colonial masters needed the support of their colonies more than ever before. Having just emerged from the Second World War, the economies of Britain, Italy, France and Belgium were in shambles, as well as the critical infrastructures. Hence, they naturally looked up to the colonies for support. Besides, Britain like France also introduced liberal reforms that reflected in the establishment of a new university for Nigeria and the Gold Coast, increased budget allocation for health and agriculture in the hope of placating the nationalist agitators.¹⁵ These liberal or better colonialism failed to save the situation for many reasons.

One of these was the radical orientation of the new mass political parties that emerged in the Gold Coast and Nigeria during this period. In 1947, J. B. Danguah

had formed the United Gold Coast Convention. The approach of the Party to the issue of self-determination and independence was rather cautious. In 1949, Kwame Nkrumah broke away with this party and formed his own Convention People's Party that mobilized the masses through what he called positive action to dismantle colonial rule. In Nigeria, the Action Group, under Chief Abafemi Awolowo and the National Council for Nigeria Citizens and the Cameroons also began to make outright demands for independence in contrast to the more conservative Northern People's Congress under Tafawa Balewa:

Another striking similarity is the cult image of these new political leaders. Nkrumah was projected as Africa's man of destiny, the star of Ghana, and Osagyefor, that is the redeemer, and the founder of the nation. Several myths were similarly created around the personality of Chief Obafemi Awolowo who was popularly called Awo by his supporters and associates. The aura surrounding the legendary "Zik of Africa" was no less visible. Indeed, a group of youths formed the Zikist Movement that was dedicated to the physical protection of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and his ideals. The movement was proscribed in 1952 by the government.

The third factor was the role of ex-service men in the agitations of the post 1945 era. To begin with, the experience of the ex-service men during the world wars helped to debunk the myth of European supremacy. They saw that the Europeans were also subject to fear and death like themselves. For instance, Nigerian soldiers

were recruited to fight in Congo and Burma. These ex-service men served as agents of enlightenment in the post war era. In the Gold Coast, war time hardship made it difficult for the British administration to pay the allowance of the ex-service men in 1948. This made the ex soldiers to lead a widespread riot over the rising cost of living. The riots in Accra, Kumasi and other towns were brutally suppressed.¹⁶ The UGCC capitalized on the protests to demand for immediate independence. As could be expected, the British government set up a Commission of Enquiry – Watson Commission. The UGCC was implicated and many of the leaders were arrested and held in prison for months. The riots compelled the government to revise the constitution of 1946. Consequently in 1949, the government appointed an All African Committee under Justice Coussey and with Dr. J. B. Danquah the UGCC leader as a member. The outcome was the Coussey Constitution of 1951 that reserved half of the seats of the parliament for the chiefs and their nominees. The difference of opinion on the merit of this constitution damaged the relationship between Danquah and Nkrumah beyond repair. While Danquah felt it was a good concession, Nkrumah rejected it and called for more strikes and riot to force the government to grant immediate independence.

Again, in both colonies, workers and labour unions played a crucial role in the decolonization process. During the war the colonial government established marketing boards in the Gold Coast and Nigeria to control prices, particularly by

keeping the prices low. The situation became worse in the immediate post war period. This policy subsequently affected all sectors of the economy – mining, industry, banking, shipping and agriculture. In the Gold Coast, the economic hardship resulted in a wave of riots in the second half of 1947, which was particularly strong among the miners and railway workers. The cocoa farmers, profiting from their experience of the cocoa hold up of the 1930s, stoutly resisted government attempt to destroy the allegedly diseased cocoa trees. The galloping inflation was attributed to the activities of the European firms and the shylock Syrians in the Gold Coast. The people therefore began to boycott foreign goods; championed by Nii Kwabena Bonne II, an Accra chief, until the government forced the firms mentioned to reduce their prices.¹⁷

Similarly in Nigeria, there was the railway workers strike and the general strike of 1945 led by Michael Imoudu, who is widely acknowledged as the father of labour movement in Nigeria. On 18 November 1949, the miners of the Enugu Coal mine protested against their condition of service. The Enugu Colliery shooting of Iva Valley resulted in the death of 21 miners and injury to 51 others. As in the case of the Gold Coast, the government set up a Commission of Enquiry with little consequences. However, the event became a catalyst in the decolonization process as moderate and radical politicians and students united against the British colonial administration.¹⁸ Indeed, following the protests in Port Harcourt, Aba and Onitsha

a committee of eighteen prominent Nigerians was set up as a National Emergency Committee to coordinate a protest on crime against humanity.

One other common feature of the decolonization in both colonies is the important role the urban centers played in the nationalist agitations. The political campaigns as well as the riots and protests took place in the cities. The population of the urban centers, and their political and economic status, made them ideal instrument for mass mobilization. Frederick cooper has shown that the population of Gold Coast major towns of Accra, Kumasi, Sekondi – Takoradi, and Cape Coast increased by about 55% between 1939 and 1947.¹⁹ The same phenomenon was noticeable in the Southern Nigerian cities of Lagos, Ibadan, Calabar, Enugu, Aba and Onitsha that became the hotbeds of the politics of decolonization during the same period. For instance, the population of Lagos, which was no more than 325,218 in 1950, had increased to 762,418 in 1960.²⁰

Finally, the process of decolonization in both colonies was through constitutional reforms as distinct from armed struggle. The 1914 Constitution in the Gold Coast and Nigeria created the Legislative Council for the two colonies respectively. The 1922 Clifford Constitution in Nigeria that introduced the principle of election had its equivalent in the Guggisberg Constitution of 1925 in the Gold Coast. The Richard Constitution of 1946 that brought the Northern and Southern Provinces of Nigeria together for the first time in the same parliament also has a parallel in the

1946 Constitution of Gold Coast. Although the 1946 Constitution in both colonies had been hailed as a major advancement on the existing one, the politicians in both colonies soon found fault with it. In Nigeria, the main complaint was that it was imposed on the people. In the Gold Coast, Nkrumah and his supporters felt the reform was not enough. The widespread complaints led to the introduction of a new constitution in the Gold Coast and Nigeria in 1951. Both colonies got another constitution in 1954. The Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 is very significant in Nigerian political and constitutional history since it introduced regionalism into the administration of the country. In Ghana, the 1954 Constitution granted self-government to the people. It was this 1954 Constitution that paved the way for the Independence Constitution of both Countries – 1957 for Ghana and 1960 for Nigeria. The pace of progress was the outcome of events that took place in the Party Secretariats, the Government House and the Colonial Office in London.

CONCLUSION: The Gold Coast was the first colony in Black Africa to obtain independence. This was in 1957. Although Sierra-Leone was the oldest British colony in West Africa, the Gold Coast was the most politically advanced. As already shown, the fate of the Gold Coast and Nigeria were closely connected during the colonial era. Events in one colony seemed to have immediately inspired similar occurrences in the other colony. By 1948, the colonial officials in Nigeria were already jittery that the rapid pace of political development in the Gold Coast

would have a backlash in Nigeria. In 1953, Governor Macpherson of Nigeria demanded a guarantee from Governor Arden Clarke of the Gold Coast that full self government would not be given to the people of the Gold Coast in another four to five years.²¹ But tried as he did, he could not stop the turning of the political wheel in the Gold Coast or silence the nationalist leaders in Nigeria. It was in March of that same year that Peter Enahoro of the Action Group Party in Nigeria moved a motion for self government by 1956. This motion drew a wedge between Southern and Northern Nigeria whose leaders stated that they were not yet ready for the giant leap forward. Similarly, in the Gold Coast the regionalist stance of the Ashanti led to their support for the National Liberation Party, while the issues of the Northern Territories and the partition of the Ewe across the Ghana- Togo international boundary threatened to delay the independence.²² At any rate, the Victory of CPP in the 1956 elections prepared the way for the independence on 6th March 1957. On the other hand, Nigeria obtained her own independence on 1st October 1960.

In both countries, since independence, successive administrations have tried to tackle the problems of national integration and national development. We would recall that the political leaders had raised the hope of the people concerning the benefits of independence. Kwame Nkrumah had admonished them to 'seek ye first the political kingdom and other things will be added unto you.' In Nigeria,

independence was expected to usher in the Eldorado. The rising frustration had created tension and occasional violence in both countries. In the search for the solution to the myriad of problems confronting the two countries, and indeed the whole of Africa, the importance of the lesson of history cannot be overlooked. This is the message that is symbolically conveyed by Sonkofa, an Akan bird whose body is well positioned to forge ahead but has its head turned backward to profit from hindsight.

NOTES

1. See L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan, eds. *Colonialism in Africa, 1870 – 1960: The History and Politics of Colonialism*, Cambridge, The University Press, 1969.
2. It would have taken a minimum of one month to get a reply to a mail sent from Lagos to the Gold Coast by Elder Dempster. It is also important to note that some of the colonial officials served both in Nigeria and the Gold Coast. For instance, Sir Alan Burns was formerly the Deputy Chief Secretary of Nigeria and acted as the Governor of Nigeria in 1942 for five months. He wrote *History of Nigeria*, published by George Allen and Urwin Ltd, London in 1929. He was the Governor of Gold Coast in 1942. Sir High Clifford was Governor of the Gold Coast 1912 – 1919, Nigeria, 1919-1925 and Ceylon, 1925-1927.
3. The colonial period has also provoked a huge debate on the place of colonialism in nation building in Africa.
4. Funso Afolayan 'African Nationalism, 1914 – 1939', *Africa. Colonialism in Africa: 1885 – 1939*, Vol. 3 Toyin Fiolola (ed.), Carolina Academic Press, Durham, p. 282.
5. Funso Afolayan, 'African Nationalism', P. 282.

6. Dennis Austin, *Ghana Observed: Essays on the Politics of a West African Republic*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1976 p. 13.
7. J. A. Atanda *The New Oyo Empire: Indirect Rule and Change in Western Nigeria, 1894 – 1934*, Humanities Press, New York, 1973.
8. Funso Afolayan, 'African Nationalism', p. 286.
9. For the view of Sir Hugh Clifford on the educated elite in Nigeria, See J. S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism*, California University Press, Berkeley, 1958, pp192-194. For a good account of the constitutional development in Nigeria, See G. O. Olusaya. 'Constitutional Development in Nigeria, 1861-1960,' *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Obaro Ikime (ed.), Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, Ibadan, 1980 (4th edition) Pp. 518-544.
10. David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana: The Rise of Gold Coast Nationalism*, Clarendon press, Oxford, 1963.
11. Dennis Austin, *Ghana Observed*, p. 14.
12. P. N. Chikendu, *Imperialism and Nationalism* Academic Publishing Company, Enugu, 2004, P. 80.
13. Edmund David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Improvement Association*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1962, p. 66.

14. J. S. Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1958, pp. 187 – 196. The other interregional groups included the West African Students Union founded by Ladipo Solanke in London in 1925 and the West African Youth League founded by Isaac Wallace Johnson in 1938.
15. These development projects were executed under the British Colonial Development and Welfare Acts of 1940 and 1945.
16. The riots resulted in the death of 29 People and 237 injuries. See Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 50.
17. Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940*, p. 50
18. S. O. Jaja “The Enugu Colliery Massacre in Retrospect: An Episode in British Administration in Nigeria” *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 11, No. 3 & 4 (Dec 1982-June 1983) Pp. 86-106.
19. Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940*, p. 50
20. For instance, the population of Lagos increased from 25,000 in 1866 to 37,452 in 1881 and 41,487 in 1901. By 1963 it rose to 1.1 million. Today, it is close to 20 million. See R. T. Akinyele, “Lagos is our Land: Indigeneship Associations and the Protection of the Right of Lagosians Since 1950”, *Lagos Historical Review*, Vol. 15, 2015, p. 91.

21. Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004, P. 29.

22. Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence*, P. 29.