

**BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY IN AFRICA**

Dominic Akpan

**Introduction**

Discussing the British Colonial Policy in Africa is in essence tabling the indirect rule system of government adopted by the British to exploit and pillage the Africans. It is seen that between 1900 and 1929 Britain had fashioned the ugly policy in the colonized territories. It was the period when the British regarded their African territories as their possessions for economic exploitation, political subjugation and social humiliation to please and develop the 'mother' country. To the British, their coming to Africa was to change the face and initiate the Africans into modern civilization. John Gunther [1955:332], quoting Lord Lugard opined that:

For two or three generations we can show the Negro what we are: then we shall be asked to go away. Then we shall leave the land to those it belongs to, with the feeling that they have better business friends in us than in other white men.

The British colonial policy in Africa was the policy of indirect rule. But in clear terms in some areas the British entered into direct administration of the natives as exemplified through conquest as in Northern Nigeria in the period 1900-1906.

Indirect rule, as originally defined by Sir Frederick Dealtry Lugard [later Lord], the first high commissioner of Northern Nigeria [later Governor General of Nigeria] meant the government, by an alien race, of a people of "inferior culture and inferior civilization" by the means of their own indigenous political institutions, and through the class of

OYARI O. OKEREKE, Editor



persons who were their traditional rulers in Pre-British times [Okonjo, 1974:74]. James Coleman [1956:50] defines it as a system of local administration in which "the essential features were the preservation of traditional political institutions and their adoption, under the tutelage and directions of the British administration, to the requirements of modern units of local government. The objective of the policy by definition, was to rule the people much as they [British] respect African mores, not being 'barbaric' but with good conscience and natural justice and to regard the Africans as trusted friends and future partners in governance and economic union [Okonjo, 1974].

However, it should be known that Lugard was not the author of the idea of indirect rule. It has always been a popular policy of imperialists throughout history. The district officer was the court of appeal to all the native authority courts, in his area and the power to execute the decisions of the court lay with him. The ultimate purpose of the government in carrying out its policies, like the building of roads to make trade move freely, was primarily for the collection of taxes, and the maintenance of law and order in the rural areas. All these became associated with Lord Lugard.

### **The Origin and Philosophy of Indirect Rule**

Indirect rule was not adopted in error. It was imperialist policy that the conquered people should be ruled through that policy. The philosophy behind the adoption in Africa and subsequent development was taken from the experience Lugard had in Asia especially in India as a British administrator. Lugard's experiences are on two phases. Firstly, there was lack of trained staff, fear of opposition from the natives if direct rule system was introduced. The second phase was inadequate fund to man these vast territories. The Indian experience would not allow the British to sink in funds from Britain to develop these areas because they were not sure it would be permanent. For illustration, the British in 1857-1858 after the Indian mutiny against them undertook great economic developments such as building of railways, and irrigation works. For these developments to be possible, the bulk of the finance for these projects came from Britain. Indeed,

after the mutiny, there were still growing tensions, resistance revolts and nationalist movements for independence. After years of political opposition and resistance to British rule, India became independent in 1947. With this in mind and coupled with the acephalous nature of African societies the British became careful in their dealings with Africans.

Another issue related to fund was that it would have been impossible, and equally far too expensive, for the British and indeed any other colonial power to bring from Europe the vast numbers of officials necessary to man and administer every district, hamlet, village and town in each colony acquired. In addition, she found that, no matter what she thought about our political institutions, they could not easily do away with them. The African institutions were well established among the people and an intrinsic part of their lives, hence to dislocate them would wholly undermine their cultures [Akintoye, 1976].

### **The Pattern of British Rule**

The pattern adopted by the British to administer their territories was never taken as a development of democratic procedures. For instance:

- above the Governor, in ascending order, was the Colonial Office, the secretary of state to Colonies [who must of course be a member of the British parliament], the Cabinet, the House of Commons and the Crown - Her Majesty's Government in London. The Governor is responsible to all these, but he was not responsible to a local electorate;
- no colonial constituencies were represented in the House of Commons. Whereas in France numerous deputies from Africa sat in both the National Assembly and the Senate; the British system did not permit this, although in theory, an African born person resident in England could stand for the House of Commons;
- most British colonies and protectorates in Africa had an Executive council, commonly called the EXCO. This was appointed by the Governor, and was equivalent to a cabinet, in that each member had limited administrative authority over a certain field -



native affairs, finance, education, public health etc. But it was not a true cabinet in the British sense because the members were not chosen out of parliament. An EXCO correspondents more closely to the American Cabinet, in which members are responsible to the President only;

- underneath the EXCO was the LEGCO or Legislative Council. This used to pass the local budget and most local laws. The degree of its power depended on the general state of advance of the colony. However, there were slight differences between the Colonies in West Africa and East Africa. West Africa then was much more advanced politically than East Africa. Moreover, the LEGCO cannot dismiss a government, even if it out votes it on some bill. EXCO could not be compelled to resign, as a British Cabinet must resign if it was beaten on an important issue in the House of Commons; and
- London reserved to itself other safeguards. For instance, a governor in most colonies has what were known as "reserved powers", those were, however, never used. The colonies office could in certain exceptional cases, invalidates legislation passed by the colony. Above all, in case of extreme emergency [as happened in British Guiana] the Queen-in-council, which meant in effect the United Kingdom Government, the constitution of a colony could be suspended and a rule established by decree [Gunther. 1955:340].

### **Agents of the British Indirect Rule Policy and Countries' Results**

The agents used by the British to rule the colonies were the existing political structures - chiefs of different dimensions in whatever name they took in a country represented the same thing and notion. And where there were no chiefs as in the case of Eastern Nigeria - the Warrant chiefs were created by the British.

#### **Nigeria**

Nigeria presents a class structure that is not common in many parts of Africa. Nigeria to many has three

societies - North, West and East. The Political Structures were quite different from each other because the cultures were different. To some, indirect rule system was successful in the North because of the feudal system. The power to Command and exact obedience rested on the Emir. The Emir ruled his people and British officers were to interfere in the government of the emirates mainly to check abuses of power.

In the West, the Obas, who owed allegiance to the Alafin of Oyo headed the Yoruba states. However, the powers of Alafin was declining towards the late 1890s, and besides the Yoruba Oba did not possess autocratic powers, for in all his dealings with his subjects need consultation. The idea of taxation was almost strange, the Yorubas showed dislike for it and only slowly and reluctantly accepted it.

In Eastern Nigeria, the people were used to village democracy and egalitarian nature of the society. There was near or complete absence of traditional authorities able to command the obedience of their people. Besides, by the time indirect rule permeated through Eastern Nigeria, many people were already used to British ideas of direct administration. The factor that aided this closeness to the British was the inland extension of British protectorate authority since 1893 [Coleman, 1956]. For the British to solve the problem of lack of traditional chiefs they created "Warrant Chiefs". The Warrant chiefs were empowered with the powers people have never witnessed in their societies. The use of these unpopular warrant chiefs to introduce taxation in Eastern Nigeria sparked off protests which later led to the Aba Women's Riot of 1929. The riots dislocated and undermined British administration not only in Eastern Nigeria but the whole of Nigeria.

#### **Kenya**

Kenya like Nigeria is a plural society, comprising mainly people of Indian decent, the white settlers and the Africans. With this, Kenya was rightly described for the most part as land of stateless politics, of confusing clusters of people whose societies were so structured as to make it virtually impossible for an outsider to distinguish any obvious traditional rulers. Faced with the necessity of



establishing administrative super-structure, the British resorted to the device of dominating those Africans best known to them – traders, interpreters, ex-soldiers – to act as chiefs or leaders. This policy was soon found to have many disadvantages. By 1912 administrative offices were describing them as "so called chiefs", as "a partly detribalized riff raffs because they enjoyed no confidence among their tribal groups [Hallet, 1980:585].

However, the Kenyan problem with the British policy was that numerically, the white settlers were very few that Kenya was to become another South Africa. The reason was that many of the Kenyan settlers were members of the English aristocracy. They were the caucus members in government and were well represented. The Africans had no say or adequate representation in the government.

Indeed, the young Kenyans started showing disrespect and resisted the British authority, which finally gave birth to the resistant group called the Mau Mau society. Mau Mau, a pressure group, comprised of Kikuyus who were disenchanted with the British suppressive rule in Kenya. They organized themselves into a terrorist gang made up of about 1,500 people mostly men and stormed the government House. Its immediate aim was to cause trouble; the eventual aim was probably nothing other than to drive the white man out of Africa. Basically, it was a reaction against white rule.

Actually, the demonstrators were looking for the Governor General, Sir Evelyn Barrings. For as long as the British ruled them, never would they show respect to the governor. By January 26, 1953 the Kikuyus had to call off the British bluff. This was an embarrassment to the governor as he hosted the sultana of Zanzibar – a guest in the Government House. To sum it, by far, the greatest numbers of those butchered at the early stage of the rebellion by the Mau Mau were Africans. It was so because they were Kikuyus who remained loyal and accordingly refused to take the Mau Mau oath, in spite of formidable pressures to make them do so, or because they became informers. The Mau Mau wanted, above all, to enforce conformity. In a nutshell, it was a reaction of the people who showed dislike to the British indirect rule policy because in all, it was exploitative in all its ramifications.

Having acquired new territories in East Africa, the colonial governments in London and Britain were anxious that the people of those territories should be able to pay the expenses of administration as soon as possible [Were & Wilson, 1974: 221].

### **Uganda**

Uganda like other British territories at the time was administered using the local chiefs. However, the arrival of Sir Philip Mitchell in 1935, as governor, but which experience he got from working under governor Cameron in Tankayinka, [now Tanzania] accepted the fact that the native authorities should be allowed to enjoy a measure of autonomy. He contended that the British administrators should not be controllers of administrators but advisers to the native authorities. It was that condition cum policy that led to a marked relaxation of British supervision of local affairs [Hallet, 1980:584].

It should be known that before the arrival of the Europeans in Uganda, they had Kings who took the title, Kabaka, a court, a system of justice, a parliament [the great Lukiko], and a code of chivalry [Gunther, 1985: 332].

With the British relaxation of supervision of the administration leaving the mantle to the Kabakas government and the chiefs, the oppressive regime was born. The local people were chastized, oppressed and subjected to hardship by the Kabakas and the chiefs. The indigenous people were required to pay taxes, worked for the whites in their farms with little pay or, in most instances, without any wage. As Gunther cleverly put it:

The Africans have the responsibility for such unpleasant details as tax collection; then the British spend the money [Gunther, 1955: 332].

Gunther views the interplay between the Africans and the white-masters as being lopsided. The European at the expenses of the Africans derived the joy and the benefit. But Hallet's were on the contrary; he saw the chiefs rather than the native, as beneficiaries from this apparently liberal approach. It could be accepted because though the British administrators were mere supervisors, the chiefs and the



Kabakas were accountable to them. The Africans were exercising the "new found power" to please the European masters and to curry favour and respect from them. This was translated to mean 'master-servant relationship'.

Indeed, the relationship among the Kabakas Chiefs and the natives were soared as the days went by. And in 1945 and again in 1949 the disenchantment on the part of the natives gathered momentum and the centrifugal and centripetal forces disbalanced. Uganda [Buganda] became a scene of widespread riots directed not against the British administration but against the Kabaka's government and the chiefs.

The riots were manifestation of growing pains. The Ugandan people who lived above the subsistence level and gained access to education, did not like what they saw, and began to protest. In other words, the few that had access to education constituted themselves into rationalists and kicked against the divide and rule system of the whites. At the peak of this disenchantment was the speech made by Oliver Lyttelton, then the colonial secretary in 1953 in London, which he mentioned casually that East Africa might some day be federated: meaning that Kenya, Tanganyika, and Uganda might be consolidated into a unit. Back home, the speech became a flame, was an indication that the British government planned to create a 'white dominion' in East Africa like the federation in central Africa. The Baganda developed the fears that they would be forcibly attached to Kenya against their will as the Nyasalanders [now Malawi] had been attached to Rhodesia [now Zimbabwe] against their will, and worst still Uganda would in consequence cease to be a black African state. It became difficult for the British to convince them otherwise. That was the beginning of a serious crisis in Uganda often referred to as the Kabaka crisis of 1953 [Gunther, P. 434]. Kabaka the ruling King was abducted and taken to Britain by the British lords.

Many lives were lost. The British took strong action to restore law and order, and later returned to a tougher and tighter control over the affairs of the Bugandans. In spite of the outcome, the British never discredited ruling through the chiefs.

### The British Political Policies Towards Indigenous People

By the words of Akintoye, no colonial power pursued policies consciously aimed at encouraging national unity and national loyalty in any of its colonies, although the general attitudes of some might have tended to do so [Akintoye, 1976:3].

The British tended to see and regard their African subjects as Hausas or Yorubas or Kikuyus, instead of dealing with them as Nigerians or Kenyans. In this respect, loyalty to the ethnic group or the old state tended to receive attention and consideration. In the French system, she tended to pay little attention to the ethnic origins of their African subjects, in terms of whether they are Togolese, Senegalese or Algerians. That explains the reasons the old states had little place in the French policy of administration.

It is also observed that colonial policies were deliberately aimed at preventing the growth of national unity. This was seen in Kenya. In the early 1950s when Britain was confronted with serious armed revolt in Kenya, they encouraged suspicion among the Kenyan people in order to weaken them. It was to be found, as earlier discussed, among the Kikuyus during the Mau Mau uprising. In the same way, when colonial control was derailed or faced with a serious threat, the colonial masters tended to adopt the silly tactics of divide and rule. Divide and rule have the germ of weakening and worsening the problem of national unity, which African states, had to grapple with: or in most instances, set the trap for such hostilities in future. For instance, British administration and its manoeuvring showcased itself in the growing fear expressed by the minority ethnic nationalities in most British colonies in the last years of her rule [Akintoye, 1976:4].

It was rather tragic to witness that the British had no conscience and natural justice were abandoned in the administration of the Africans. It is also difficult to say whether the Africans were still trusted friends of the British with reference to her exploitative attitudes towards the colonies. Moreover, few analyses under labour and employment as shown by Rodney justify our argument. The



companies or mines. It is also contended that whenever it happened that a white and a black filled the same post, the white man was sure to boss the black and to be remunerated considerably more. There were slight differences in the payment of wages to Africans in British colonies. For instance, African salaried workers in the British colonies of Gold Coast [now Ghana] and Nigeria were better off than their brothers in many other parts of the continent, but were, to a large extent, restricted to the junior staff level in the civil service. Before the Second World War, European Civil servants in the Gold Coast received an average of \$40 per month in addition to enjoying free living quarters and other privileges such as cars, etc. Comparatively, on the same post, Africans got an average salary of \$4 per month. In other instance one European in an establishment earned as much as his twenty-five African assistants put together. Indeed, outside Civil Service, Africans were found obtaining jobs in building projects, in mines and as domestics. By mere classification the above jobs are menial [Rodney]

### Conclusion

The British claimed that they were out to use what we [Africans] had to lead us to civilization. Actually, the British tried to place Africa in the corridor of world civilization. But human and material exploitation it engendered altered whatever good the British indirect rule policy offered Africa. Colonialism wholly placed Africans on the dependency realm.

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