Activity One - Indirect Rule and Informal Empire in West Africa

Local potentates meeting the Prince of Wales, Gold Coast, 1925
The National Archives

‘It is manifest that there exists a fundamental difference between those countries in which there is a dense native population, and Europeans and others enter for a more or less temporary residence, and those in which the climate attracts European settlers, and the sparsity of the native population admits of the settlement of non-natives – European and Asiatic. The group of West African colonies and protectorates are typical of the former, and… their population and the volume of their trade with the outside world is much greater than that of all the remainder’

- Frederick Lugard, The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa (p.282)

Task 1

As you read the following summary, think about the above quotation and the assumptions it makes about the purpose of imperialism, the role of Europeans in world history, and the importance of climate, trade and population in the history of the British Empire. How could some of these attitudes have developed and persisted?

World history is not all about empires; broadly stated, its goal is to address historical questions
where a more 'traditional' approach emphasising the centrality of nations and states would make no sense. These include questions of difference and commonality, of cultural and social interactions between groups of people over large distances, and can range from studies of a handful of individuals to large-scale works covering hundreds of years. It is fitting, then, that in seeking to understand the British Empire from a world history perspective we should begin by looking at one of the locations which least resembled the 'classic' imperial model. Britain had four colonies in West Africa: the Gambia (captured from the French 1758, British colony 1783-1965); Sierra Leone (settled by former slaves 1787, independence 1961); Gold Coast Colony (British rule 1821, independence 1957, as Ghana); and Nigeria (Lagos Colony established 1861, Oil Rivers Protectorate established 1884, Southern- and Northern Nigeria established 1900, independence 1960). Togoland, a former German colony, was also under British rule from 1916-1957, after being captured during the First World War. However, the history of interactions and interconnections between West Africa and Europe go back a great deal further than the establishment of the British colonies in the region.

The interest of European merchants in the region dates back to the fifteenth century, and is evident in the place names traders used: the Gold Coast, Pepper Coast, Ivory Coast, Slave Coast, and Oil Rivers (the Niger delta, originally a source of palm oil though from the 1950s also of petroleum). At various times Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Lithuanian (Courlander), French, German and British trading posts have been established along this stretch of coastline. The British interest in the region began with the establishment of chartered companies, in much the same way as the East India Company in India or the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada. However, with the failure of company rule in India and the outbreak of rebellion in 1857-58, that colony moved to a system of direct rule, with a British government administration and a Viceroy acting as the Crown's representative. Not so in Africa, which saw the continuation of a system of 'indirect rule' – securing
the tacit consent and deference of local potentates to company rule instead of developing a central bureaucracy – and, after the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, the chartering of even more companies, who became the *de facto* colonial administration over much of Britain's territory.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century two rather unique colonies of settlement were established in West Africa; Sierra Leone and Liberia. After the American Revolutionary War, the British began to re-settle captured slaves from North America (some of whom had in the meantime been shipped to the Caribbean, Nova Scotia or England) in Sierra Leone. After abolishing the slave trade in 1807, the British began re-settling illegally traded slaves from captured ships there as well, with the assistance of missionary societies. In the nineteenth century these ‘Afro-Victorians’ helped to build Britain’s empire under the assumption that they would benefit from its successes. However, poor provisioning, hostility from the indigenous population and the threat of re-capture by slave traders took a heavy toll on this 'black colony'. From 1820, former slaves and free African Americans from the United States were re-settled in Liberia, and, despite facing similar problems of disease and violent resistance from the native inhabitants, declared a sovereign state in 1847. The social problems persisted.

**Indirect Rule**

By 1884, British interests in the form of the National African Company – later to become the notorious Royal Niger Company – had already monopolised trade on the Niger River. This system, where companies were allowed free rein in the interior of the country after securing recognition of sovereignty from local elites, was highly favoured by the British as it allowed them effective control over large areas of territory for very little expenditure. The Royal Navy protected the 'effective administration' in the colonies, and their trade routes, from the machinations of other imperial powers on the high seas. However, outside the exploitation of exportable items like diamonds, gold and palm oil, the West African colonies attracted little outside investment, and, even as company rule was replaced by British government administration in the twentieth century, the colonies remained largely underdeveloped. This was the result of the continuing policy of indirect rule.

While this 'hands-off' arrangement, companies like the Royal Niger developed in a unique way in West Africa. Indeed, the outcomes of this system were all too familiar in the broader history of colonialism: placing central authority in the hands of a private company ensured that any development or capital investment was geared towards expanding the activities of the company. Areas which were not directly related to resource extraction or trade were effectively choked off
from the outside world. Port cities like Accra saw widespread expansion and westernisation, while rebellious elements like the Ashanti Kingdom were dealt with severely. Meanwhile, the expansion of informal empire provided more outlets for the investment of Britain's surplus capital, and the wealthy financiers of London, the 'gentlemanly capitalists', began to gain greater political and economic power and ally themselves with the traditional ruling class of the landed aristocracy.

**Task 2**

Who, in your opinion, could be considered the beneficiaries and victims of indirect rule? Is it easy – or necessary – to draw such distinctions? Was there an internal sensibility to the policy of indirect rule, or do you regard it as an unsatisfactory compromise which was ultimately doomed to failure?

*The construction of the modern African state: draughtsmen in Accra, 1925, The National Archives*

One of the foremost proponents of the system of indirect rule was Lord Frederick Lugard, an army officer, functionary of the Royal Niger Company and eventually Governor of Nigeria. In 1922 he wrote the following passages about his grand experiment:

‘Missionaries – as in Uganda or Nyasaland – were often the pioneers, and it was in defence of their interests that the Government was forced to intervene… for law and order cannot exist side by side with barbarism. In the west traders such as the Royal Niger Company took the lead as pioneers… When, however, the ‘Scramble for Africa’ followed the Berlin Act of 1885, the popular demand that Britain, as the foremost colonizing power, should not be backward in claiming her share was irresistible, and it was due to this popular demand to ‘peg out claims for futurity’… that we owe our African empire of to-day… The Government viewed with alarm the great cost of effective occupation, as that phrase was translated in England. But the British public
never considers the cost of its demands… It mattered not that tribal chiefs had no power to dispose of communal rights… treaties were duly attested with a cross, purporting to convey the assent of the African chief… obtained by the gift of a pair of boots, or a few bottles of gin… Elsewhere, by a show of force, or by vague promises, which were unrecorded and later ignored… It was thus that the conscience of Europe found relief. Ignorance of African conditions, and perhaps a latent feeling that the end justified the means, induced the rulers of the nations of Europe to accept these treaties without too close a scrutiny, and to persuade themselves that the omelette had been made without breaking any eggs’.¹

Studying indirect rule gives us a wider insight into the conditions of empire, and reveals some of the aspects of the imperial project that were important to people at home, for example, the role of missionaries in advancing the cause of the ‘civilising mission’.

**Task 3**

Lord Lugard discusses in the above passage some of the justifications for empire which were popular in the early twentieth century. Given what you have learned about indirect rule, and of subsequent developments in West Africa, how likely to succeed were these justifications? How credible could they have been to Europeans at the time? To Africans?

In a conscious effort to sum up the struggle of the Ghanaian people in 1961, the modernising prime minister and pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah gave this speech, illustrating the impact of the imperial past from the point of view of an African cosmopolitan nationalist. It provides an intriguing insight into a generation of political leaders determined to break with the colonial past:


¹ Lugard, *The Dual Mandate*, extracts pp. 10-17