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HIST 4020: Imperialism in Britain and Africa, 1800-1970

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The Setting Sun of British Africa

In the 1950s and 1960s, virtually every African colony in the British Empire gained its independence. From the British perspective, independence came suddenly and unexpectedly. However, a careful examination of British Africa between the 1920s and 1960s reveals that changes within the colonies, particular with respect to how Africans interacted with their governments, led to independence. The changing landscape of colonial rule must be discussed in the context of the world wars, which profoundly altered the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. The growing – and partially antithetical – ideologies of Pan-Africanism and nationalism empowered Africans to seek better conditions for themselves and their countrymen. As the British Empire declined during the course of the twentieth century, many Africans interacted with colonial rule using nonviolence when they could and violence when they had no other option.

The two world wars significantly changed how Africans viewed the British. It is difficult to describe two wars in the context of an entire continent, but there were broad trends common throughout. Africans who served in the British military during the wars gained a different perspective of the world than their countrymen. Soldiers saw firsthand whites slaughtering each other, destroying any notion of a unified or invincible “white race.” World War II in particular made clear the extent to which the British depended on its Empire for foodstuffs and other supplies (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 75). African soldiers serving in the military often gained close bonds with European soldiers, bringing into question systematic white supremacy back home (Matthews 499). As Waruhui Itote – a Kenyan soldier – put it, whites and blacks alike were “left [with] only our common humanity and our common fate, either death or survival” (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 81).

Africans scarred by the horrors of war held the British government and their collaborating chiefs responsible. One veteran expressed his dissatisfaction with the government by proclaiming “The British could not be trusted” (Osborne and Kent 140). Overall, the world wars diminished the status of British both in the colonies and globally, as imperialism fell out of fashion.

Beginning in the twentieth century, Pan-Africanism gave Africans worldwide a broader sense of their identity. In 1919, just before the time period in question, the first Pan-African Congress met in Paris. This meeting bolstered the Pan-African views that would become prevalent in later decades. The demands of the Congress were relatively moderate, including that “the natives of Africa must have the right to participate in the government as fast as their development permits” (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 42). This movement inspired many Africans to view themselves as Africans, distinct from the British. Thus, they were entitled to some level of self-determination, a belief becoming popular worldwide. Groups such as the West African Student Union heavily advocated Pan-Africanism by holding meetings and organizing protests (Osborne and Kent 153). The situation heightened in 1935 with the Italian overthrow of the Ethiopian King Haile Selassie, a symbol of pride for African peoples worldwide. Much to the dismay of their African subjects, the British did not respond to the Italians’ actions. Later, the reinstatement of Selassie during World War II by black African soldiers would strengthen Pan-African feelings.

As Pan-Africanism became more prominent, so too did nationalism. The first catalyst for nationalist expression came in 1905, with the defeat of a white power, Russia, by a non-European power, Japan. Though this predates the time period in question, it sparked nationalist attitudes that would persist throughout the twentieth century. During World War II, many soldiers gained a sense of their identity as part of a nation because of their deployment to different parts of the world. Waruhui Itote remarked that World War II made him “conscious of [himself] as a Kenya African (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 75). Stationed in India, which was on the verge of its own independence,

he was asked, “Why don’t you fight for your own countries?” (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 78). To this question, presumably on the mind of many soldiers fighting far from home for a distant island nation, he had no answer.

The notion of tribe, as well, brought about a form of nationalism among the colonized. The British understood tribes to be as rigid as nationality is for Europeans, while the tribal identity of an individual is fluid and can change with political or economic circumstances. In identifying groups together rigidly, the British often created ethnic distinctions, leading to ethnic nationalism within each group. Many of these groups used their collective bargaining power to their advantage (Osborne and Kent 155-156). Heightened ethnic identity sometimes bolstered nationalism, as in the case of Egypt, and sometimes hindered nationalism, especially in states without a majority ethnicity, such as Nigeria.

Nationalism became an important guiding principle for African states after gaining independence. For all states but Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah, Pan-Africanism burned out (Osborne and Kent 154). Tanzania’s independence poses an interesting example of how new African states responded to colonialism with nationalism. In the 1960s, the Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere implemented a precolonial government structure with the Swahili language to try to inspire ethnic harmony and Tanzanian nationalism. His plan worked in some regard: Tanzania remained relatively peaceful throughout its history. But as a consequence of his language policies, coupled with his pre-colonial African socialism, called *ujamaa*, the country struggled economically until changes were made. Still, Nyerere’s commitment to nationalism demonstrated how the ideology could be used in newly independent states.

Perhaps the greatest expression of nationalism came with the rise of Nasser in Egypt and the subsequent Suez Crisis. In 1952, General Abdel Nasser took wrested control of Egypt from the British-backed King Farouk. In the midst of tense Cold War atmosphere, Nasser established close

relations with the Soviet Union and subsequently nationalized the Suez Canal. This action enraged French and British stakeholders. When the British and French tried to militarily retake the Suez Canal in 1956, they were rebuffed by US intervention. Ultimately, the nationalist Nasser ended up victorious against the two greatest former imperial powers (Osborne and Kent 185-187). The role played by Egypt inspired nationalists in other African nations to seek their own independence from the waning British Empire.

In addition to prescribing to political ideologies, many elite Africans took nonviolent, organizational approaches to negotiating their circumstances within the colonial system. From the beginning of colonial rule, those who pursued some level of assimilation with British culture, especially through the missions, constituted a middle ground between the British and the Africans. Some could afford to go to the US or the UK to get an education at larger universities, often forming student groups in the process. These groups included the Union of African Descent, the African Progress Union, and the previously mentioned West African Students' Union (Osborne and Kent 152-153). Many of these groups later evolved to form the political movements that lobbied for better circumstances within the colonial framework (Osborne and Kent 153). John Kenyatta, part of the Kikuyu Central Association in Kenya, spoke with members of parliament in 1929 to advocate moderate positions: that Kenya remain a protectorate and not a colony, that native Kenyans retain control of their land, and that Kenyans have a say in their government (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 116). In addition, he sought "ways and means of establishing our schools" (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 117). His initial approach emphasizes comfortability with the British system. Indeed, African calls for independence would not come until later. Broadly speaking, these wealthy African elites did "not believe in violence at all, but in discussion and representation" (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 118).

Many common people used protests and strikes to make their voices heard. The government sometimes met these movements with concessions, and sometimes with bullets. In response to the

oppressive pass, or Kipande, system in Kenya, Africans threatened to burn their passes en masse. The government conceded and “in 1950 the Kipande system was abolished” (Worger, Clark and Alpers 69). Some protests ended with violence, such as the 1922 gathering in Kenya to seek the release of Harry Thuku, in which over 20 were killed. When strikes flared up during and after World War II all across the colonial world, including in Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, and Tanganyika, the government was forced to make concessions. Together, these protests helped shift the colonial attitude toward one of “development” and “partnership,” although these ideals were often far from reality (Osborne and Kent 154).

The best example of the mixed success experienced by African nonviolent mass movements came with the Nigerian Women’s War in late 1929. In Igbo society in southeastern Nigeria, counting people is traditionally taboo and prone to cause a backlash. As warrant chiefs – or “big men” artificially supported by the British government – began a census of Igbo women for the purpose of taxation, the women responded angrily. They protested by using traditional Igbo practices, such as “sitting on a man,” which involved large gatherings of women dancing and singing near the man they were trying to shame. Igbo women, having experienced “a whole list of injustices,” under British rule redoubled their efforts and gathered at local colonial headquarters (Kent and Osborne 157). At one such gathering, women looted Barclay’s bank and warehouses filled with palm oil but “refrained from harming people” (Kent and Osborne 157). The palm oil is particularly important, women were the primary producers of the product. At a number of these gatherings, British and Hausa troops fire on the women, killing more than 50 in total (Kent and Osborne 157). During the course of the protest, women received guarantees that they would not be taxed, showing that this movement, which relied on Igbo culture, was an effective means of challenging colonial officials.

Some Africans responded to colonial rule creatively: using their experiences as a muse for cultural expression. Africans, for example, found opportunities to express their grievances in the

literary scene. Mugo Gatheru published an autobiography detailing his experiences in Kenya under the colonial government, helping contribute to a narrative of the country's history and culture (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 68). Colonial experiences also “produced an extraordinary outpouring of music and culture” in South Africa (Osborne and Kent 173). Africans expressed their shared “hellish aspects of life” created “African jazz” as a fusion of American and African music (Kent and Osborne 173). Culture also became a tool of resistance, as women in 1960s Tanganyika used dances to strengthen ties between women and build solidarity (Osborne and Kent 177).

When backed into a corner, Africans often resorted to violent resistance, as they did in the Mau Mau revolt in 1950s Kenya. The colonial government in Kenya had for decades been favoring white settlers so much that Africans essentially could not succeed. As these white settlers mechanized their farms, many Africans were left unemployed and frustrated. Some Kenyans, like Kenyatta, pursued changes that would help the middle and upper classes but did not address the grievances of the lower class. Many of these poor, feeling betrayed and hopeless, took oaths that bound them together as Mau Mau fighters. Being a part of Mau Mau brought a sense of community to its fighters. Fellow Mau Mau told Wambui Otieno that this movement could “[get] rid of the colonialists and their black collaborators” (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 120). Indeed, it was the final group that bore the heaviest burden of Mau Mau, as nearly 20,000 Kikuyu were killed – in comparison to 36 Europeans. The British could not effectively combat the movement until they revived the use of concentration camps from the South African War. Many African chiefs, especially those belonging to the Kamba ethnic group, used the conflict to “procure benefits and education for the Kamba” (Osborne 85). Thus, the conflict was not as straightforward as black versus white or loyalist versus Mau Mau, but instead a web of interactions with the colonial government, ranging from violence to lobbying for better circumstances. It serves as a picture of how people all over Africa reacted to colonialism.

South Africa took a different path in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than did many of the other African colonies, although African interactions with the colonial government in many ways mirrored the rest of the Empire. South Africa enacted some of the most rigid white supremacist legislation in all of Africa, dubbed apartheid. In response, South Africans formed a variety of political organizations, most notably the African National Congress and South African Indian Congress, which began a campaign of nonviolence resistance in 1952. Protestors ignored the pass system, disobeyed curfews, and defied segregated trains (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 108). Despite rigid government censors, leaders like Nelson Mandela encouraged the movement to “consolidate” and “strengthen” to continue resistance under the “M Plan” (Worger, Clark, and Alpers 112). Women used boycotts and protests defend their right to brew beer and thus were a pivotal part of the movement (Osborne and Kent 193). Colonial officials responded frequently with violence. In particular, the massacre of more than 60 protestors in Sharpeville in 1960 hardened the resolve of the resistance movement (Osborne and Kent 194). However, reform in South Africa would take time: it was not until the end of the twentieth century that apartheid was overturned.

Between 1920 and 1970, the African colonial landscape changed profoundly, giving Africans more room to negotiate better conditions and, eventually, push for independence. Pan-Africanism and nationalism arose, both of which led Africans to view themselves as distinct from the British. Those Africans who had adapted to European culture early found themselves successful in this period, and often pushed for moderate reforms that left the larger system intact. The rest of African society used whatever means was at their disposal: strikes, protests, cultural expression, and occasionally violence, to create better lives for themselves. With time, even the moderates pushed for independence. African responses to colonialism, when added up, determined the course of history in their respective countries. Even as most of colonial Africa nears a half century of independence, the legacy of imperialism is still felt strongly in its people.