

The Legacies of British Empire among Akwanga Societies in North Central Nigeria

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Abstract

The British Empire may be politically over in most of its outlandish districts but its legacy has sank its roots deep into the soil and soul of the ex-colonies that the combine forces of time and history may not be able to reverse. This paper takes issue with British policies among Akwanga societies and the lingering crisis, unending bloodbath and division bequeathed on them. It discusses the source of chronic instability in these societies. The documentation and scholarly analysis of colonial policies watershed years of conquest and consolidation of British rule has not been properly done. Nor do the history or standard texts contain much by way of explanations behind motives. This paper aims to remedy this dearth of information. It discusses why after more than fifty five years of political independence, Akwanga societies are still engrossed in litigations and violent conflicts among themselves and their neighbours.

Keywords: Conquest; Colonial Rule; Warrant chiefs; Crisis; Revolts.

1. Introduction

The forceful imposition of a politico-administrative system called Indirect rule on the peoples of Akwanga by British colonialists from 1900 has left its sad legacies of pain, turmoil, endless bloodbath and litigation among hitherto democratic, egalitarian and republican peoples. Documentation and scholarly discourse of these watershed events on the peoples of Central Nigeria and Akwanga in particular has been unfortunately poor. As Kirk-Green(1968) argued years ago, historians have been more interested in tackling the processes of decolonization and post- independence than scrutinizing the periods leading to independence.

The philosophy behind the actual welding together of different peoples and eventual unequal yoking of same into an administrative framework from which Nigeria emerged in 1960 has markedly been less investigated despite classical studies in its operations in government and economics Kirk-Green(1968).Nigeria itself is a creature of empire. Its name was suggested by Flora Shaw on 8 January 1897, the year in which Queen Victoria celebrated her Diamond Jubilee. For Shaw, the name Nigeria was a good title for the agglomeration of so-called pagan and Mohammedan states that British imperialists brought under British protectorate (Kwarteng, 2011).

2. Conquest of Akwanga Societies

The conquest and subjugation of Akwanga peoples was part and parcel of that of Northern Nigeria as a whole. What began as the activities of the Royal Niger Company was subsequently replaced by the West Africa Frontier force. Akwanga societies first encountered the military might of British colonial power in 1900. This first military assault of the British imperial force did not achieve what the British desired. This was because this invasion was met with stiff and unexpected resolve of the societies to maintain their independence (NAK, 1916).

The second attempt to subjugate the area was in 1907, after a period of about six years. Within the interval, the British colonial idiom that 'the merchant was expected to create empire' (Robinson & Denny, 1981) was attempted. The British invaders attempted to open up the area by encouraging trade through Hausa middlemen. In an address to the British parliament in 1897, the British prime minister launched a paean of praise for British business and dismissed the claims of glory seeking in their imperialism. He argued that:

The objects we have in our view are strictly business objects. We wish to extend the commerce, the trade, the industry and the civilization of mankind. We wish to throw open as many markets as possible, to bring as many consumers and consumers into contact as possible, to throw open the great natural high ways, the great water ways of this great continent. We wish that trade should pursue its unchecked and unhindered course upon the Niger, the Nile and the Zambezi (Vandeleur, 1898: 263)

This second military assault was led by Lt Routedge through Andaha against the so called stubborn villages of Kemwa, Kenzwe, Ninghaan and Kenmgbo. This expedition lasted between December 1907 to January 1908. The expedition also returned with little or no success. For example, when the expedition reached Nigha'an, it discovered that the whole village had been deserted and even livestock carried away. This demonstrated to the colonial army that the Mada system of intelligence gathering was unique (NAK, 1915).

Ngharen (1990) has chronicled in detail the economic agenda behind British imperialism, which eventually propelled the conquest and subjugation of the societies of Akwanga by 1917. But suffice to say that the subjugation of Akwanga societies by the British imperialists as from 1900, was basically an aspect of British diplomacy. The brutal subjugation was not only a first and introductory step, it debunks earlier dubious claims of George Goldie and European historiographers that Africans ceded their lands to foreign invaders.

The second and more difficult stage was in establishing colonial rule and making it acceptable to Akwanga peoples. Sciortino (in NAK, 1918) and Ames (1934) after several failed attempts to understand the dynamism of gerontocracy, described the leadership provided by the elders as '.....automatic decentralization which has increased the difficulty of administering the people'.

Pre-colonial Akwanga republics were open and egalitarian in nature. There was no any single person or group of persons that welded person or appropriated the labour of others. Without chiefs, police, standing army or any institution of government as we have today, these communities maintained law and order and governed themselves in complex ways that amazed the outsiders. The elders' councils provided leadership and direction for the day to day running of the communities. Decisions were taken after exhaustive discussions and consensus.

No one or group could impose decisions on the people. Everyone including the elders and other spiritual functionaries were equal before the law. It was a society where everyone acted well his part. Deviants were sanctioned by force of culture. Moral standards were ever high since economic prosperity or lack of it depended on the purity of members of the community. This socio-political arrangement suffered some rude blows with the advent of colonial rule. The British imperialists without studying the people, imposed a system of administration which endowed criminals, nonentities and strangers with powers backed by the sanction of force both different and superior to any permitted them by custom.

After the subjugation of Akwanga societies, and obsessed with the doctrine of indirect rule, the British started shopping for someone who had some semblance of authority and could command some respect and authority. Such were not hard to find but the British had developed a disdain for anything culture since they blamed the protracted resistance to colonial conquest on the elders of Akwanga societies and other religious functionaries (Ngharen, 2014). The kind of people the British needed could only be found among the Nunku because some of them had embraced Islam from trading relations with Jama'a. The first person hired for this ignoble task was a community leader of Nunku by the name Nzoja.

Nzoja after experiencing rejection and recognizing the dangers of his new job as a traveling and tax collecting puppet, disappointed the British by resigning his appointment. The colonial agents traded carefully on this and requested Nzoja to recommend his replacement. He recommended Zumbi son of Mbienzu to the British. Zumbi was known for his treachery, untruthfulness and as a lover of filthy lucre. It was this Zumbi who became the first British "recognized" warrant chief of Nunku and who assisted the British in their conquest of other Akwanga villages (Ngharen, 1990). Zumbi was recognized as warrant chief in 1912 by the British. The Resident Plateau Province writing on the creation of this stool said: *This cannot be a hereditary appointment. There was no paramount chief of Northern Mada prior to the advent of British administration. The title is an artificial creation of our own* (NAK, 1918). *The warrant chief soon fell out of favour with those that hired him. He could not mobilize drafts to construct the road from the Jema'a – North Madaboundary to the North Mada – Central Mada District. This inability to mobilize men to construct the road was seen as incompetence by the District Officer. It should be noted that building of roads obviously facilitated both the preservation of British authority, for easy movement of troops and the extraction of the products, which was, of course, the reason for instituting that rule in the first place.* (NAK, 1918).

For demonstrating such incompetence, the warrant chief was fired by those who hired him. District Officer Patrick justified the removal in a memo to the Resident Plateau Province thus:“I have no further use for this man who is a liar and a drunk and also strong suspect as regards slave dealing” (NAK,1918).

Noticing the overwhelming rejection of British rule as manifested in the disdain for British created warrant chief institution, but determined to keep trade unimpeded, the British appointed Mangar to replace Zumbi as warrant chief. His confirmation was subject to the completion of task given to him; that of constructing the road his predecessor failed to construct. Though Mangar completed the road on the 3rd September 1919, it was at a great cost to his pride and integrity. He earned for himself so much disdain before his people who saw him as a puppet of the whites.

Mangar was so despised and rejected by his people and out of frustration committed suicide in his palace on 5th August 1923. The colonial agents played down on this by simply referring to the incident as gun blast. The incident was neither properly reported nor investigated (NAK, 1926-1951).Mangar actually deliberately took his life.

Yamusa was appointed as the warrant chief in November 1927. Yamusa arbitrarily elevated headmen as village heads charged with the duty of collection of taxes from their wards. Under Yamusa, the social and political structure of the people lost its originality. Village heads and elders though appointed by him were later relegated to the background and power became concentrated absolutely in the hands of the warrant chief who grossly misused it. Matters which had normally been debated and settled in the village councils for example, marriage, custody of children, debt, breach of customs, theft and disputes were transferred to the district native court for decision. This was seen as an aberration by the people.

3. History & Experience of Akwanga Peoples

Apart from the fact that the traditional system of government which was government by elders (gerontocracy) was rudely put aside or ignored by the British and their warrant chiefs, the socio political and economic changes were too hasty and drastic. The revolts of the 1940's and 1950's showed that the overriding of the indigenous system of local administration which had never been understood or studied had been a mistake. The changes introduced had being so swift that in many cases the people scarcely had time in which to devise methods of adjustments or of balancing the various conflicting interests.

The warrant chiefs constituted themselves into a class and ruthlessly oppressed the people. For example, the village heads appointed by Yamusa were despised by their people and humiliated by the warrant chief. They were only called upon during tax collection. Yamusa surrounded himself with relatives and hangers-on who battered on the peasantry and helped the warrant chief to extort on a District wide scale. Three of his relatives were given titles and were referred to as 'the owners of the nation'. They were the principal aiders and abettors in Yamusa's misdeeds. Because of the activities of these men, the people revolted against the warrant chief in August 1943. The District Officer compelled the warrant chief to strip them of those titles.

Kwarteng (2011) has rightly argued that:

The most significant product of indirect rule was the enhancement of the status of the various emirs', who became more autocratic in their attitude towards the mass of the people". This was the fault of empire which granted too much authority to rogues, criminals and the wrong people. The revolts and restlessness of the people of Akwanga during and after the colonial period were revolts against colonialism and its collaborators. In addition to the miseries of conquest, the warrant chiefs became a burden on the people who were forced to feed them. Nearly every chief of the time was guilty of corruption, extortion and oppression. They defrauded the peasants and labourers of their wages and got supreme control over them (NAK, 1926).

On the 17th November 1942, Sergeant Davies (NAK, 1927) calculated the available dubious fines of Yamusa and discovered that just within two years, the Sarki made over #500.00 from peasants. Yamusa and his aides were also reported to have confiscated fifty bundles of corn from Nunkuchu, took large bundles from Akwanga, seized a room full of corn from Anjagwa, demanded and collected chickens from surrounding villages. They were discovered to have been forcing people to work in Amari mines for them, deprived people of personal liberty, collected 1/-per head every adult male after all the tax had been collected.

On the situation of force labour practiced by the warrant chiefs, Major J. A. G. Budgen writing of Akwanga land said:

“It has hindered progress and administration; it has caused much dissatisfaction leading to unrest and emigration” (NAK, 1927) The warrant chief forced people to work on his private farms kept private prisons in Nunku town with some five or six prisoners in each. Women were also taken from their villages on flimsy charges and kept in Nunku. Young girls were also taken and kept in Nunku for sexual satisfaction of the chief. All forms of extortions seemed to have been practiced. In April 1943, Yamusa was sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment in Kaduna for the afore mentioned deeds.

Captain C. Money who had earlier praised the Yamusa for doubling the tax later wrote:

Unfortunately the interior administration cannot say to be other than entirely unsatisfactory... He is a man who has not the least sympathy with the people whom he misrules (NAK, 1926). Corruption and abuse of office under the watch of the British was so common to the extent that even the palace guards and messengers of the warrant chief were levying fines on their own accord and forcefully abducting ladies from the surrounding villages for their sexual satisfaction. The general characteristic of the palace staff was ruthlessness, lack of compassion and inhumanity in dealing with perceived enemies of the warrant chiefs. G. Davies reported in 1942 that:

Pseudo justice has been administered, unlawful fines have been imposed and in numerous cases people have been imprisoned for considerable periods (NAK, 1928)

Under such pressures, peasant revolts in 1940s became very common and normal. Walmsley(1926)wrote to the secretary Northern provinces concerning the situation in Akwanga and made it clear that there were many signs of reactions and that “these reactions (revolts) are expected.” Realizing the fact that colonialism had impinged on the peasants to intolerable points, the colonial agents at Akwanga met with all the village headmen at Andaha on the 14th April 1943 and admitted that indirect rule system had failed woefully among the societies there. They demanded the headmen to decide on a new system, stopping short of preferring gerontocracy which they had dismissed as nationalistic.

Fearing that the situation could explode into a full blown crisis, the young inexperienced British adventurers turned administrators convened four other meetings at short intervals at Ancho, Andaha and Akwanga. They used the opportunity to engage the stakeholders, an exceptional situation during the colonial period.

There was an open acknowledgement that the institution of paramount ruler had failed to rally the people together and importantly for the British, it had also failed to effect tax collection and mobilization for corveelabour. The colonial officers wanted to scrap the institution because it had become the cause of retrogression and instability.

The general consensus from the meetings with stakeholders was outright rejection of warrant chief institution. In rejecting the institution, the stakeholders reasoned that:

1. The chieftaincy institution was strange, alien, difficult to operate and therefore unworkable
2. They complained that the warrant chief system was splitting society into classes and causing disaffection, jealousy and division.
3. The warrant chief system was corrupt and strange and an insult to the people and annoying to the gods.

However, those young pith-helmets -wearing zealots made the mistake of not clearing from their superiors before engaging the stakeholders. The memo detailing the engagements with the stakeholders, the resolutions and recommendations were outrightly rejected by the Secretary Northern Provinces. He ordered that the warrant chief be given more policemen and be supported to coerce submission and compel loyalty (NAK, 1928).

In frustration, Philips (1928) denouncing the institution and accepting its unworkability confessed that it was “a... form of native authority which has over a considerable period been a failure.” The people’s reaction to the insensitivity of the Secretary, Northern Province and the coercive activities of the colonial police was an explosion of revolts which were the expressed resentment of the people against colonial imposition and oppression.

The resistance of the people manifested itself in many ways including sabotage, attacks on village heads, Hausa traders and government couriers. The irreconcilables decided to migrate to other places outside Akwanga Division. Today, the spread of Akwanga people shows a supreme disregard for political boundaries. The people became rebels with a cause, exiles in their own land.

4. Continuation of Crisis

The British colonialists maintained a dual society in Akwanga and perhaps were more than glad to lower the union jack in this outlandish part of the empire by 1960.

The lowering of the union jack did not ease the feelings of isolation, dispossession oppression and resentment. The people saw the departure of the British as opportunity to wrest free from the warrant chief system. They also saw the departure of the British as good riddance to bad rubbish. The departure of the British did not rid the society of their legacies and seeds of discord that have not only germinated but flourished under the soil of greed, sentiments and religious bigotry.

This resentment continued until Chun Kaya, the last Nunku warrant chief died in 1976. The people saw his demise as an opportunity to break free from the oppression of the British warrant chiefs system. They demanded for the democratization of the stool as the best compromise. The struggle for the democratization was fierce because privilege classes don't easily give away their privileges. Intrigues and religious sentiment came into play and made matters worse. So much litigation has taken place from lower courts to the Supreme court and back. .

The clamour for democratization was so loud that Nunku also submitted them to the ballot and expectedly lost woefully. IliyaRini became the first democratically elected warrant chief. Though this was supposedly a new dawn for the Akwanga peoples, they treated it with suspicion and cautious optimism. Stakeholders from all the clans met at Ngapwar and swore never again to be subservient to any power. The new warrant chief was given a few rules of engagement that the elders felt were critical for sustainable respect and loyalty. The warrant chief had to undertake never to:

1. Seize anyone's wife
2. Seize any one's farm land and must
3. Ensure that the hard won stool was not converted into any one's family property (Ngahren, 2014).

Chun Rini kept these commandments for just about two years and then broke all of them. This led to his rejection and subsequent demotion by the government. He died sad and was succeeded by Chun GamuYaren who wrestled with litigations for over twenty years until his demise.

5. Conclusion

A new paramount ruler over a nation weary of over a hundred years of crisis, heavy casualties and huge litigation spending in the middle of cultural and socio economic confusion. The next crisis may not be another round of litigation or imposition but festering problems that could turn into crisis that may require costly and controversial interventions given the contemporary complexities occasioned by continuous government patronage of this moribund institution and continuous resistance and questioning of its historicity and relevance.

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