

BRITISH WEST AFRICA, PAST AND PRESENT

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I

THE culture of British West African territories, as of most of the territories of French Africa, is more or less homogeneous. All these territories belong to the Sudanese group of African languages, in contradistinction to the other great group commonly called the Bantu group to which belong the rest of non-Arab and non-European Africa.

The similarity in the social and political structures of these West African territories derives from the fact of their common origin in the ancient and medieval empires and civilizations which at different periods embraced them all. According to the writings of certain European and Arab scholars who visited these parts at various times, Ghana appears to be the earliest and greatest of these empires and was at the height of its power in 300 A.D.

It was succeeded by Songhai which was itself later overshadowed by Mali, Mali by Sosso, Sosso by Walata, Walata by Mossi which, according to Delafosse, was found intact when the French incorporated it in the seventeenth century in French West Africa, of which it still forms a recognizable part. Ghana itself was not finally over-run and razed until 1076 A.D. when the Almoravides and the Tuaregs came for the last time for plunder of its gold and agricultural resources. Thus was destroyed the empire of Ghana which in the fourth century of the present era consisted of sixteen principalities with a paraphernalia of imperial officials, courts of justice, mosques and ancestral shrines (because one section had become Moslem while the other remained traditional), well-organized armies, large agricultural farms and a flourishing commerce in gold, damask, and other products either manufactured locally or imported from abroad.

The political organization of ancient Ghana, which enabled it successfully to withstand successive hordes of Almoravides and Tuaregs for nearly eight centuries, must have been based on an art of government and administration now lost to its dismembered remains under British and French rule today. Ghana at one time embraced the whole of the territory from Senegal to

Northern Nigeria, but largely excluding the coastal areas.

The successor empires to Ghana, though never as long-lived or better organized, managed to achieve varying degrees of material and spiritual greatness. There was, for instance, the great irrigation works which Askia the Great caused to be built, during his reign, across the upper reaches of the River Niger as a means of promoting the fortunes of his subjects' large-scale agricultural farms which were at that time being threatened by the advancing Sahara desert.

On the cultural and spiritual side we may recall the significant contribution to learning and enlightenment which the university of Sankore made at Timbuktu from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. It has been said that subjects studied there included astronomy, algebra, geography, philosophy, government and, of course, Islamic and Comparative Theology.

For the slave-raiding Arabs of the fifteenth and following centuries had been preceded by the all-conquering Arabized North African invaders of the West African Coast. In the later stages of their adventures they had combined plunder with token settlements, and had no doubt served to introduce Islam and its culture into the territories subject to their sway. But they intermarried with and were largely absorbed by the indigenous African majorities. All this serves to account for the fact that the language of instruction and of the records later found at Timbuktu is Arabic; and there is a certain family resemblance between certain of the extant Timbuktu chronicles and the various Kano and Sokoto chronicles of more recent times.

We must be grateful to later travellers like Mungo Park who in the eighteenth century recorded for us a graphic account of the manner of life of the various peoples of West Africa through whose territories he journeyed in his search for the source of the Niger. Park described, often in detail, the systems of government he found in each place, the types of agriculture practised, the smelting of iron and its manufacture into hoes and cutlasses and knives, the weaving of cloth by various kinds of looms and the dyeing processes used to obtain the colourful patterns so familiar to us on our modern robes and wrappers. He was impressed with the essential fairness of the indigenous judicial process, and emphasized several times the impartiality and hospitality of the vast majority of his African hosts in numerous places along his route.

Almost all these features of life in West Africa, French as well as British, may be said to characterize our societies at the advent of the European early in the nineteenth century. The presence of large-scale political groupings of the peoples, the settled practice of large-scale agriculture, the proliferation of large towns and villages (e.g. the Yoruba town of Ibadan in Nigeria had an indigenous population of just under half a million), the widespread indigenous industries of cloth weaving and dyeing and sewing, the carrying on of trade and commerce from the Ghana days of "silent trading" to those of later times for which the currencies of exchange were cowries, gold weights, small iron rods, etc.—in addition, of course, the simple barter. And there were well-established guilds of smiths, weavers, dyers, and the rest, with rules and regulations for the Practice of their craft—very reminiscent of medieval England and parts of Western Europe.

The result has been an unmistakable similarity in the modes of dress and social attitudes of, say, the Bambara of Senegambia, the Woloffs of Gambia, the Ghana (Gold Coast) Northern territories peoples, the Mende of Sierra Leone, and the Hausa and Yoruba of Nigeria. Even today, it would be difficult to tell a Mende in his traditional dress from a Yoruba. And the Hausa language is almost a *lingua franca* for many of the indigenous peoples of West Africa today, particularly in the hinterland.

Of these West African peoples, two are known to have invented indigenous alphabets and the remnants of one of these are still extant. The Vai of the interior of Liberia, patterns of whose writings have been preserved, and a Cameroonian people have each managed to produce autouchthonous scripts. Arabic has, of course, been the language of instruction and of educated speech since the days of the University of Sankore, and has for that reason survived to this day as probably the only vehicle of our medieval literature. It is certainly the language of most contemporary writing among the majority of Northern Nigerians, Northern territories of modern Ghana, the Joloffs of Gambia, and of the Senegalese; it is of no less importance in French West Africa.

But the lack of an indigenous alphabet and, therefore, of a wholly indigenous literature in the vernacular is in part made up for by our works of art. The famous Ife and Benin bronzes, ivory and wood carvings, the justly renowned Ashanti figurines and gold weights, the Ivory Coast sculptures and paintings, the

Dahomey artistic achievements—all presuppose an efflorescence in art that must have taken place some eight or nine centuries ago. The recent discoveries in Northern Nigeria, popularly referred to as forming the Nok Culture have been scientifically dated back to about 1000 B.C., while the recent French excavations of town and city sites have largely confirmed the early historians' accounts of the old empires and kingdoms in West Africa.

II

Now, despite the wars of plunder and attrition which the invaders from the North waged against successive African empires and kingdoms in the Western Sudan, there was little contact with the outside world. True, some of the medieval rulers made religious pilgrimages to Mecca, after the manner of their Islamic mentors. But, apart from bringing back or inviting occasional scholars and savants from Arabia, there was hardly any other form of commerce with Europe or Asia.

It would seem that five main factors had been responsible for the almost complete inclusiveness of the character of West African culture. The first was, of course, the hegemony of the Islamic impact which resulted from the ceaseless raids and wars of the Almoravides and Tuaregs from North-North-West Africa, who had themselves been long Islamized through Arab conquest of the Mediterranean littoral of the continent. The second was the great physical barrier of the Sahara Desert which effectively shut in the inhabitants of ancient Ghana as it did those of seventeenth-century Mossi. The third was the existence of vast and frequently impenetrable forests which discouraged adventures beyond as well as into their borders. The fourth was the inhibiting effect of the climate on the efficacy of most worthwhile human effort. The fifth factor was that the main rivers like the Niger, the Volta and the Gambia—that should have formed alternative outlets to the Atlantic Ocean—were full of cataracts and rapids that defied all alien attempts to penetrate into the interior of the continent from the sea. Of the same order are other big African rivers like the Congo, the Zambezi, the Limpopo, and the Nile. The whole of the continent of Africa is like an up-turned plate

The wonder, then, is not that so little progress was made in terms of contemporary European advance in the art of letters and in industry, but that, thrown as they were almost upon their own resources, they had managed to evolve such works of art,

such economic and political systems, such self-sufficient industries as soap-making, weaving and dyeing, iron-smelting and coal and gold mining, the tanning of leather and shoe-making. The conclusion seems irresistible that peoples who could have done so much for themselves might have achieved greater horizons had the main stream of medieval European culture not passed them by for the reasons we have just stated in the preceding paragraph.

III

That this is not a mere pious assumption may become clear from a brief survey of developments in West Africa since the European advent. Although certain European adventurers first came there as early as the fifteenth century, and although trading and token settlements took place along parts of the coastal fringe in later centuries (respectively by the Portuguese, the Danes, the Dutch, the French and the British), effective contacts with the indigenous peoples did not begin until towards the close of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth century.

The needs of the American and West Indian plantations led to slavery and slave-dealing on a large scale, and both caused no end of depopulation and destruction of the surrounding countryside. The eventual abolition of slavery in 1807 and of slave-dealing in 1833 led to the development of legitimate commerce between Europe and West Africa before and since the latter date.

Gambia became British in 1783; Sierra Leone (Freetown only) was settled in 1787 with the first batch of repatriates from Britain who were the descendants of the African slaves who had fought on Britain's side in North America; the coastal parts of the Gold Coast were first annexed and put under Sierra Leone in 1821; Nigeria, which had begun to welcome British and other European traders and travellers since the first three decades of the nineteenth century, only became British as to the coastal area of Lagos in 1861. It was at the Berlin Conference of 1884-5 that better delimitations of spheres of influence between Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Portugal, took place. But the final boundaries of the British and French territories were not fixed until after the proclamation of the protectorates of Gambia, Sierra Leone, Gold Coast and Nigeria between 1890 and 1902.

What later came to be known as the Crown Colony system of government was first set up in Sierra Leone in 1808, although

the first Legislative Council was established only in 1863. The Gold Coast was given its first Legislative Council in 1850, although Ashanti and the Northern Territories had none until nearly a century later. Nigeria has its first Legislative Council in Lagos in 1862. Gambia and the other three were all governed centrally from Sierra Leone between 1866 and 1874, when the Gold Coast and Lagos were separated and established under one administration till 1886, when Lagos Colony was in turn separated into an independent territory. From the late 1870's onwards Africans were nominated, one or two at a time, to serve on the Legislative Councils; but their numbers slowly swelled after the First World War.

The Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, which is affiliated to Durham and which awards Durham University degrees, had been established in 1826 under missionary auspices. By 1832 the first two African barristers had returned from England and, when the great grammar schools were established in Sierra Leone in 1842 and in Lagos in 1859, there were African members of the staff. The various christian missions and the colonial governments in West Africa were the first beneficiaries; the commercial and trading firms soon began to have their first batch of clerks and middlemen. In short, the foundations of an ever-widening middle-class, as we all too imperfectly understand the terms today, were laid in this formative era of West African re-awakening between 1830 and 1880.

Though there had been several local instances of agitation against alien rule in the British West African territories, organized political action was undertaken on a joint territorial basis only in 1919, when the leaders of the then Gold Coast, Nigeria and Sierra Leone demanded internal self-government based on fifty per cent of the total number of seats in their respective Legislative Councils. And, although their delegation in London failed to achieve their immediate request, the British government proceeded to allow in the Legislative Councils the first *elected* members in Nigeria in 1922, in Ghana in 1925, and in Sierra Leone in 1926. But all the other African members of these Councils were merely *nominated* by the Governor of each territory.

IV

On the eve of World War II, there would appear to be five major grievances of the British West African politicians. The first was, of course, the system of *nominated* African members of

the Legislative Council. The second was the Crown Colony principle of a permanent official majority in the legislatures. The third was the total absence of any African from the Governors' Executive Council, which was the policy-making body in each territory. The fourth was the introduction and operation of the system of indirect rule which centred all local administration on the chief and his council, from which educated Africans were normally excluded. And the fifth, a corollary of Lugard's system of indirect rule, was the exclusion of the protectorate areas—often the much larger part of each British territory in West Africa—from the work of the Legislative Council.

By 1946, all but the first of these five grievances had been met by the British administration. The politicians were, however, in no mood to accept half-measures, and movements for greater reforms were instantly promoted. In particular, they much resented their not having been consulted by the various Governors when the new constitutional provisions were being prepared. By 1951, a Ministerial system of parliamentary government had been established in Ghana and Nigeria. Sierra Leone and Gambia soon followed suit with what was until 1953 called the Member System—a half-way house between the old Executive Council and the new quasi-Cabinet in the two larger territories.

Nigeria, which had been a unitary state since Lugard amalgamated the protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914, became a Federation of five territorial units in 1954, in consequence of the demand by its political leaders at a Constitutional Conference held in London in 1953. Ghana attained full Dominion Status within the Commonwealth on March 6, 1957. Sierra Leone and Gambia have recently taken further great strides towards the same goal.

V

A number of tentative as well as crucial questions remain. One broad feature of all these feverish, post-war constitutional experiments and changes has been the emergence in all four British territories of the protectorate peoples to the forefront of the political leadership. The present Federal Prime Minister of Nigeria is a Protectorate man from the North, while the Prime Minister of Sierra Leone is a Protectorate man from the interior. Dr. Nkrumah, though not a Protectorate man, is nonetheless a person from humble origins in the little-known,

village of Nzima, south-west corner of Ghana. It is not yet certain on whom the mantle of Prime Minister may fall in Gambia, but the common people seem now to be stirring there too.

Industries, mostly small-scale but sometimes of larger scope, have sprung up in the last fifty years, and these have been of an order hitherto unknown in West Africa. Trade unionism has largely displaced the former indigenous guilds of craftsmen, tractors have replaced the hoe and the cutlass, machines have lightened manual labour, the railways and the aeroplanes have annihilated distance. New ways of thought and action are abroad.

The old territorial organization of society has been greatly modified, sometimes by realignments, often by mergers of formerly semi-independent units. Men's physical and mental boundaries have been widening, and new horizons are looming.

Whither will all these tend for the family or the individual? The new morality that will be adequate to the new needs has yet to be born, while the old that once served so well has in places ceased to have validity. Aspects of the old system in West Africa can still help us to evolve, if we would, a *via media* for example, in our trying to find the answer to the contemporary problem of political stability, one can learn from patient study of the mechanism of government which sustained ancient Ghana for seven and three-quarters centuries from 300-1076 A.D., and which embraced African peoples of diverse ethnic and religious communities in a tolerant and human fellowship.

How to reconcile individual liberty with political independence of the State is probably one of the most live issues in British West Africa today. The best solution will not be quick or easy, but we must persevere.