

LIGHT IN THE DARK CONTINENT: BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN WEST AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper will examine the British colonial system in West Africa and the effect it has had on the African people at the time of conquest and until this day. I will try to find things that are troubling the people and area and tie it to the colonial system that was in place. Corruption, prejudice, and misunderstandings are but a few of the reasons for troubles in this region, along with British policy itself, but I will look deeper to see what the underlying themes and causes are and if they can be traced to British colonialism. I hope to find something that can be traced back to colonialism and then maybe the problem can be better understood and remedied.

Introduction

Throughout the course of history, nations have promoted their power and greatness through the acquiring of other territories and expanding of their own empires. The conquest of Africa by European powers was no different. This rich, relatively unexplored landmass was a great opportunity for nations to flex their imperial muscle. This paper will focus on the imperial muscle of Great Britain in West Africa during the modern imperialism period of 1870 to the early 1930s. The empire of Great Britain was the largest ever held by a nation and is even more impressive due to the motherland's size. The relatively small size of Britain, and the contrary size of their empire can be seen as an amazing feat of organization and ability to control these assets or a great accomplishment in subverting foreign areas and exploiting them to the homeland's benefit. Some [Brits], of course, go to make money, some to get out of a scrape at home, some because they command in West Africa though they serve in England.¹ There are good sources out there, primary and secondary, that deal with these issues and correspondence letters from the time period provide first hand evidence of policies and actions of the British and may shed some light on these issues.

In 1957, the British territory known as the Gold Coast gained independence and became the nation of Ghana. Three years later the British colony of Nigeria also obtained independence followed quickly by Sierra Leone. The British Empire was ousted from West Africa after the tiny Republic of Gambia gained its independence at the beginning of 1965. As is such a common theme in imperialism, the native societies and cultures

¹Maj. A. J. N. Tremearne, *The Tailed Head-Hunters of Nigeria*, (London: Seeley, Service & Co. Limited, 1973), 18.

suffered immensely during these phases of profound change, and constantly felt the clash with invaders in the contact zones, but the occupying people also incorporated aspects of native cultures and ways of life into their own. Many times this was done to appease the natives in an area to ensure the empire is run as efficiently as possible, or to take advantage of a system that already placed the white man in power.

There will be a number of things discussed in this paper dealing with the British Empire's treatment and policy regarding the native people in their colonial holdings in West Africa and what effects, if any, are still lingering in these nations after independence. Economic, political, social, and religious practices all came under great changes because of the British influence in West Africa. This paper will examine the extent of this influence and how great of a role it plays in these young nations' current situation by looking at economic, political, social, and religious changes the indigenous people would have dealt with.

Brief History of British West Africa

The imperial history of West Africa started centuries before there was actually any interest in what this area could provide, besides slaves as human commodities. The presence of white men was few and scattered and mostly confined to coastal regions near slave trading posts. Venturing to the inland was extremely dangerous, and the fears of the unknown coupled with disease were great deterrents. The slave trade was a major source of labor and income throughout the world for those involved. The European traders benefitted outright, but the slave owners also benefitted in the labor they were gaining, and the native traders who provided the slaves gained technology and enterprise from the white merchants.

In the 18th century, the vicious but profitable slave trade boomed with the expansion of colonies in the Caribbean and North America and the development of cotton manufacturing. Many nations participated in the trade, but by this time, the British were the leading merchants of African slaves to the New World.² The future British colony Sierra Leone was a center for slave trade by Dutch, French, and Portuguese prior to officially becoming British in 1808, and the capital city Freetown was actually a sanctuary for ex-slaves.³ The future colony of Gambia was also a hotbed of slave trade for these nations prior to British rule.

The territories that made up the British colonies of Nigeria and the Gold Coast (now known as Ghana) were also established trading posts prior to British control. The area of the Gold Coast, as the name implies, was known for precious metals and other

² Bonnie G. Smith, *Imperialism: A History in Documents*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 18.

³ Anthony Ham and others, eds., *West Africa* (Hong Kong: Lonely Planet Publications Pty Ltd, 2006), 293 & 747.

luxuries that were highly prized by Europeans. The ivory trade was ever present here as well, as the neighboring area would become known as the Ivory Coast. These valuable items would be continually extracted from these areas to the benefit of Europe. The area of Nigeria was valuable because of geographic features like; large river systems and coast lines, natural resources, and port systems that were already in place and had established trade.⁴

Fig.1



Source: http://www.afropop.org/img/world_music/african_music/wa/m/wstafmap.gif

⁴ Ibid., 329-331 & 621-623.

British Imperial Economics

All the territories mentioned above were already settled areas with European ties and commerce being practiced, but after the abolition of the international slave trade, the rising ideas of industrializing Britain, and the loss of American colonies to revolution, a more hands on approach to African colonies was needed. After the 1870s, the number of explorers mounted, as did clashes and international rivalries for territory in Africa. With their industrial advantage, the British had mapped out “spheres of influence” in which their trade would predominate.⁵ This rush to acquire the most territory in Africa, along with control of as many natural resources as possible has come to be known as the “Scramble for Africa.”

The continent of Africa, and the control and management of this extensive area, was such a crucial issue to all the imperial powers, from 1884-1885 there was a conference held in Berlin to essentially divide up the continent among the major powers. Most notable for West Africa are Great Britain, Germany, and France. This conference set up the rules for claiming new territories in Africa and what nations had to do in order to legitimize their claim in the eyes of other powers. Below are two consecutive articles from the Berlin Conference explaining how new territories are set up and recognized;

General Act of the Berlin West African Conference, 1885:

Art. 34: Any power which henceforth takes possession of a tract of land on the coasts of the African continent outside of its present possessions, or which, being hitherto without such possessions, shall acquire them, as well as the Power which assumes a Protectorate there, shall accompany the respective act with notification thereof addressed to the Signatory Powers of the present Act, in order to enable them, if need be, to make good any claims of their own.

Art. 35: The Signatory Powers of the Present Act recognize the Obligation to ensure the establishment of authority in regions occu-

⁵Smith, *Imperialism*, 42.

ped by them on the coasts of the African Continent sufficient to protect existing rights, and, as the case may be, freedom of trade and of transit under the conditions agreed upon. . . ⁶

What these two articles announced was that in order to make a claim on a parcel of land and have that claim recognized by other imperial powers, the claiming power must have intentions of establishing authority and order in the new area it is claiming. In other words, a nation may not just claim land to keep it out of the hands of another nation, there must be plans for this new territory that will benefit the ruling country.

The old ways of Imperialism, in which the ruling government or monarch would be the person to reap the vast benefits of conquest, were now being challenged. The Industrial Revolution that began in England in the late 18th century and spread across the continent increased economic competition immensely. New inventions and scientific advancements made the demand for new sources of raw materials even more insatiable, while booms and busts in the economic cycle made them desperate for a wider base of secure markets.⁷ The competition now was between businessman and businessman, as well as nation against nation. Nations could see progress and profits if they made available to their businessmen a much larger area for materials, and network for trade. Establishing political power over a larger amount of territories and more ethnic groups would help them achieve this security of resources and trade, and reach their goals of profit and industrial progress.⁸ The British government often gave territory to Companies through charters, which granted the private companies power over these areas, and promoted the civilization Europeans will bring with.

⁶Smith, *Imperialism*, 42-43.

⁷Ibid., 11

⁸Ibid.

In this Charter from 1886, the British government grants territory to the National African Company;

Victoria, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Queen, Defender of the Faith. . . .

[W]hereas the Petition. . . states that the Kings, Chiefs, and peoples of various territories in the basin of the River Niger, in Africa, fully recognizing after many years experience, the benefits accorded to their countries by their intercourse with the Company and their predecessors, have ceded the whole of their respective territories to the Company by various Acts of Cession specified in the Schedule hereto. . . .

And whereas the Petition further states that the condition of the natives inhabiting the aforesaid territories would be materially improved, and the development of such territories and those contiguous thereto, and the civilization of their peoples would be greatly advanced if We should think fit to confer on the Company. . . . Our Royal Charter. . . .⁹

Companies with rights to trade with and govern a region regularly used violent means to extract the raw materials they wanted from local people under their jurisdiction.¹⁰ In order to understand what kind of control was given to companies such as the National African Company, the articles of the Charter make this clear;

1. The said NATIONAL AFRICAN COMPANY, LIMITED. . . is hereby authorized and empowered to hold and retain the full benefit of the several Cessions. . . and all rights, interests, authorities, and powers for the purposes of government, preservation of public order, protection of the said territories, or otherwise of what nature or kind soever. . . .

7. The Company as such, or its Officers as such, shall not in any interfere with the religion of any class or tribe of the peoples of its territories, or of any of the inhabitants thereof, except so far as may be necessary in the interests of humanity. . . .

12. The Company is hereby further authorized and empowered, subject to the approval of Our Secretary of State, to acquire and take by purchase, cession, or other lawful means, other rights, interests, authorities, or powers of any kind or nature whatever, in, over, or affecting other territories, lands, or property in the region aforesaid, and to hold use, enjoy, and exercise the same for purposes of the Company. . . .

14. The customs duties and charges hereby authorized [that

⁹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁰ Ibid., 59.

the Company shall collect] shall be levied and applied solely for the purpose of defraying the necessary expenses of government, including the administration of justice, the maintenance of order, and the performance of Treaty obligations. . . .

The Company from time to time, either periodically or otherwise, as may be directed by Our Secretary of State, shall furnish accounts and particulars in such form, and verified, in such manner as he requires, of the rates, incidence, collection, proceeds, and application of such duties. . . .¹¹

I chose these articles because they each show how much power the Charter gives the private Company. The wording of the charter is such as to extend a large source of power to the National African Company as well as a way for the British government to protect itself. The first article is a straightforward authorization of power. The second article shown, at first glance, seems like a beneficial clause for the indigenous people in the National African Company's jurisdiction, until the last sentence. This sentence contradicted the rest of the article because any type of conversion could be seen as "necessary in the interest of humanity." The third article is another straightforward authorization of power, but this one extends the Company's power to outside its current boundaries if deemed necessary. The fourth is a statement justifying the action of taxing the territories, in order to pay for expenses inherent in running the colony. The last part of this document shows the relaxed attitude the British government had towards their Company, merely saying reports and updates are done whenever one is needed or requested.

The new ideas that the Industrial Revolution sparked gave way to a host of additional ideas that fueled the flames of imperialism across Africa and the world. A number of these ideas were used to justify the reason for conquering new areas and people. Ideas such as civilizing the natives, bringing Christianity to the area and

¹¹ Ibid., 44.

spreading European culture, were all used but the focus on trade and economics often seemed to be the ulterior motive. The impetus for trade and conquest came from elite groups such as politicians and merchants, but imperialism was also a popular phenomenon, one that captured the imagination of Europeans and stoked their appetites for new goods, just being members of nations that owned colonies was a source of pride.¹²

As Sir Andrew Cohen says in his book of memoirs and chronicles about his time and travels through Africa, and his service as head of the Africa Division of the Colonial Office;

The Governments of the Territories, supported by missionary effort and private enterprise, have spread education and medical services, extended communications, provided water supplies, introduced cash crops, improved cattle-keeping, forestry and fisheries, developed trade, and so on. All over these countries British officers-administrators, doctors, educators, agriculturalists, engineers, and many others-with the Chiefs with whom they have worked, have been the leaders of the people.¹³

It is in the economic arena that the British hoped their newly acquired territories become valuable assets. Raw materials taken from the colony were used for sale in the global market or were used by the British to further their own industrial prowess. It is obvious the kind of wealth a cache of gold or precious stones can bring a nation, but the agricultural benefit of the amount of land has numerous applications. The large areas of land could also be used to supply Great Britain with more food for her subjects, as well as providing new exotic foods to the British public. The conquest of territories also allowed

¹²Ibid., 12.

¹³ Sir Andrew Cohen, *British Policy in Changing Africa*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1959), 63.

for the British to implement the growth of cash crops on a larger scale. The concern about adequate land use was now more relaxed. Whole areas could be cultivated for profitable cash crops with less worry of food shortages, and more emphasis on capital gain in newly acquired areas. They often did so by making treaties in which African leaders signed away rights to land and natural resources, allied themselves with the great power or their agents to fight rivals for control, and agreed to pay taxes and tribute.¹⁴

The labor that the natives provided worked in the favor of the British as well. To get cash to pay the new imperial taxes, they [natives] moved into wage labor.¹⁵ The British hired the natives of the area and taught them how to grow what the British people wanted. The pay was little and the work was hard, new and strange. When it came to work life in colonized areas, technology and economics usually brought about the devastation of an older way of life as plantation labor replaced the family farm, and new colonial taxes forced rural people to work on imperialists' projects like railroad building instead of remaining self-sufficient farmers.¹⁶

As a result, natives were no longer growing the food they needed or hunting as much for their villages as they were previously. The new system of working for wages in order to buy the food was backward and illogical to African tribes, but the taxes levied on the natives meant that they had to work in order to pay. This system left many tribes confused and hungry, paying whatever the British deemed fit for food they could have grown themselves. These crops did bring revenue into the villages of native people and wealth was slowly accumulated.¹⁷ This should not be interpreted as the natives just

¹⁴ Smith, *Imperialism*, 42.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁷ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 178.

welcoming these labor and economic changes into their lives. There was resistance and violence to these new ways every step of the way, and the native populations were the ones that suffered the consequences of their actions due to the technological and military superiority of the British. In fact, as imperial entrepreneurs muscled their way into traditional routes of trade and upset local economies and ways of life, and as settlers wrestled land from those who controlled it, violence escalated. It is a superiority in arms, even warfare waged by well-trained imperial armies, that is usually said to have made the imperial seizure of land and resources possible.¹⁸

The technology that accompanied and aided the British during their occupation was not always of negative consequence to the native populations however. Many native Africans benefitted directly from incoming British technologies and almost all natives that had any sort of contact would have benefitted indirectly. "Colonized peoples in the middle and upper classes held a range of views about the value of such technology, some embraced it wholeheartedly, some rejected it outright, others choosing varying degrees of acceptance and rejection. . . it was not hard for colonized peoples to see technology as one source of that power and to want it for themselves."¹⁹ Whether through actual technology acquired, or new British and European ideas passed on to them, these natives gained important aspects, such as weapon knowledge and training, that would come into play during their struggles for independence.

The spreading of technology, for the most part, is an economic enterprise. This would have been advantageous to Britain in the obvious manner of financial gain, but this also was seen as fulfilling their duty of civilizing the savage people of their territories.

¹⁸ Smith, *Imperialism*, 56

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

Technology was an inescapable part of being colonized, as railroads, steamships, weapons, electricity, cameras and ultimately radio and film moved in with the imperialists.²⁰ Any monetary gain from such technologies would go to the British Empire, or affiliated companies, as well as bragging rights for spreading the technology and civilization to her new subjects.

A group that greatly benefitted from colonial expansion into West Africa was those involved in the medical field. The need for those educated in medicine was abundant due to the constant warfare that imperial expansion brought but also because of the threat of new diseases in the regions. The advances in medicine eventually led to further colonial expansion in West Africa but also serve as another justification for the European presence and skyrocket the medical profession;

Tropical diseases, along with battle wounds, attacked these soldiers, causing medical men and scientists to look for cures for malaria and yellow fever. The development of quinine in the mid-19th century as a remedy for malaria thus facilitated conquest, allowing deeper penetration of the tropical interior... The imperialists attributed the weakened condition of Africans to their own poor hygiene and saw European medical science as a boon the conquered people would appreciate... Doctors in many colonized regions used their status as colonial professionals to invade people's houses, force them to be vaccinated against smallpox, and completely rebuild (or destroy) local villages according to the outsiders' ideas of hygienic practices.²¹

The effects of British colonial economic policy and the extent at which materials were taken out of their holdings in West Africa is evident in these countries current economic status. The British suppression of their colonies' economies for so long undoubtedly had a major affect on the nations' ability to recover on their own after British withdrawal. The practice of private companies mostly concerned with profit and what could be taken out of the territories being placed in charge of large regions can account for lack of development. The oppression of the labor force during the same

²⁰ Ibid., 65.

²¹ Ibid., 71-72.

period is also another reason these economies are struggling. There are few skilled workers to perform the jobs that require certain training, and the few skilled workers that can perform the needed tasks will get paid better for the same work elsewhere. People from these former British colonies might learn special skills, but there is no guarantee they will use these skills in their homeland.

Social and Cultural Changes in British West Africa

The social aspect of the native African life was also affected greatly by the coming of the British, as the British brought their European comforts and social ideas with them in order to keep the new and wild settlements from feeling too savage and hostile. The social atmosphere is also where we see a number of justifications for British colonizing the native peoples of their West African holdings. Many social functions the British served for the native people could be put into a number of different categories: politics, religion, education, military practices; these all supply on some level a social aspect of life in colonial West Africa but could also be put into their own categories.

“Colonial bureaucracies composed of both local people and colonizers grew. Increasingly, foreign bureaucrats brought their wives and families with them, making new intrusions on the colonized. . .while missionaries felt it even more urgent to Christianize newly occupied regions. Settlements for these foreign residents sprang up, usually modeled after those of the home country, deliberately insulated as much as possible from native life. Once regions became the focus of multiple economic interests, investors joined traders in the work of developing wealth in the new market areas.”²²

The last statement is a great example of how new economic opportunity is the underlying factor behind endeavors into colonial territory.

Ideas of religious conversion, civilization and education are all used as reasons to expand into new territories and interact with new tribes, but as soon as the moment was right, the British in power would use all their influence and superiority to exploit the new market for self gain.

This is not saying that those involved in the initial campaigns were not genuinely interested in their endeavor and the impact they could make on a new part of the world and those that lived there. There were those that more than enjoyed their activities, like

²² Ibid., 75.

missionaries bringing salvation to savage people, then there were others who enjoyed their activities but with less positive effects. Here is a diary account written in 1890 of a British administrator in Africa by the name of Sir Frederick Lugard, showing the extent of his past time activities;

I used the meat proportionately; those who had marched most willingly, carrying the heaviest loads, and giving no trouble, received the largest share, while some, who had been laggards and grumblers, got none. Such a division, of course, takes much time; but I found that there is no more effective way of maintaining a good spirit in the caravan, and saving the necessity [of] flogging and such like punishments. The common custom, I believe, is for the meat to be thrown, as it were, to the dogs. . . either scrambled for or left to the head man to divide with what favouritism or carelessness they like. . .²³

This letter by Sir Frederick Lugard shows typical British thinking and reasoning in the colonial areas. The idea that the white man is the provider and all the Africans in his hunting party are dependent on him for their meat, and ultimately the choice of who gets how much meat is at the prerogative of the white man. This power over a highly venerated form of food is what many British settlers used to exert their colonial power in their societies, ignoring the fact that these natives have been hunting large game for centuries with primitive weapons such as the spear and bow and arrow. The massive slaughter of indigenous species with new weapons from the west was a dishonorable and cowardly way to hunt and greatly affected the native tribal communities. The inherent weaknesses of the areas the British were in control of were obvious to the British and they knew exactly what the colonies needed in order to transform into a civilized territory.

²³Ibid., 80.

The new colonizers announced upon arrival that the regions they had conquered lacked governments, economies and social institutions. This was not true: instead, the colonized peoples in fact faced an increased number of rulers and competitors for resources, because the newcomers added a layer of government to the already existing local and regional princes, chiefs of ethnic groups, heads of clans, and other local officials.²⁴

Another massive change that the British brought to their colonies was Christianity. Christianity was already in the area due to previous contact with other European groups centuries before, but with the influx of technology and advancements in medicine during the 19th and 20th centuries, the ability to penetrate farther into Africa also meant more natives to conquer, and more souls to be saved in the name of God.

The reason why missionary work was so successful in West Africa is a difficult and complex question to answer, but in a simplified manner, it had to do with the harshness and difficulties that imperialism brought, let me explain. The conditions of normal native life had been drastically disrupted by all the new people and policies the British had put in place. Violence, war and poverty were a common daily theme and even security of provisions was not guaranteed. The missionaries had roofs over their heads, food to eat, British government protection, and sometimes additional protection from the order itself, and provided a western education, and all that these missionaries asked of you is to believe in something and convert. Sounds like a great deal, but at what cost? The loss of religion and its cooperating functions is a massive blow to West African tribes.

²⁴Ibid.

The arrival of the British to West Africa did not only bring hardships for the native peoples, there were some advantages to be taken and some natives found the new way of life preferable to the old one. The opportunities that the British brought were a way for some natives to advance themselves socially, economically or both. Mastering the colonizer's law, medicine, science, technology, languages, and social sciences put one in a different social niche.²⁵

British government also took advantage of the status change people received by working with the imperial power. In order to have any chance at ruling these far-off realms, much of the time imperialists used local bureaucracies that were already in place, employed local chiefs, or designated as "chief" a local personage who caught their eye as being particularly useful. These local rulers entered the imperial system with both their new and old roles to play.²⁶

The advantage to the British was when they appoint someone to a role with some power in the British system, who was not as influential or powerful in their native system. This native feels as though he is accomplishing something great with his new power, but actually he is being used to undermine the traditional methods and practices of authority by the British system. The people chosen by British administrators to act as mediators and represent village-groups are known as Warrant Chiefs²⁷. These Warrant Chiefs proved to be of no real use to the British as found in Igbo writer, Victor C.

Uchendu's book, *Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*:

The warrant chiefs were not in any way representative of the village-groups they were supposed to serve. Most of them were "new men" who had no status in society; if they had any claim to leadership, it was confined to their extended family. Reforms came in 1918, when the

²⁵ Ibid., 76.

²⁶ Ibid., 82.

²⁷ Victor C. Uchendu, *Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 47.

Native Court Ordinance abolished the office of district commissioner in the courts and thus made the courts really “native.” Nevertheless this reform created many other problems. The withdrawal of the district commissioners gave the warrant chiefs an opportunity to abuse their powers. They became more corrupt, some even holding their own private courts.²⁸

When we look at the position of the people the British placed into power as warrant chiefs, it is not difficult to see why they became so corrupt. During their lives their own society had not afforded them the status and prestige they, as village members, believe they deserve. When a chance came to exert their new found power and turn the tables on the ones who previously had power over them or did not show proper respect, that opportunity was taken.

The impact of tribal members leaving their native faith and the problems that arose from this are evident in Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*. The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles, and who like a madman had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians.²⁹

The lure of Christianity and the British world was too much for some natives, even if they did not fully understand what they were doing. Ogbuefi Ugonna had thought of the Feast in terms of eating and drinking, only more holy than the village variety. He had therefore put his drinking-horn into his goatskin bag for the occasion.³⁰ There was also a feeling of hopelessness among the native tribes with some of their members leaving for a western life. “How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with

²⁸ Victor C. Uchendu, *Igbo of Southeast Nigeria*, (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 47.

²⁹ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 174.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one.”³¹ In another section of Achebe’s novel he shows this helpless feeling among natives while simultaneously showing how little white presence there was, but how far power and authority extend.

“Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers and we would be like Abame.”³²

There are only two white men in the settlement of Umuofia, and yet the native Igbo feel unable to contest them because of their fellow tribesmen’s new loyalty to the British and the broad reach of power the imperialists possess. The following is an excerpt from an official report done in 1919 by the British governor of Nigeria explaining the system of indirect rule through African chiefs, and how the division of power is revealed and with whom the actual authority lies:

The policy of the Government was that these chiefs should govern their people, not as independent but as dependent Rulers. The orders of Government are not conveyed to the people through them, but emanate from them in accordance where necessary with instructions received through the Resident. While they themselves are controlled by Government in matters of policy and importance, their people are controlled in accordance with that policy by themselves. A Political Officer would consider it as irregular to issue direct orders to an individual native, or even to a village head, as a General commanding a division would to a private soldier, except through his commanding officers. The courts administer native law, and are presided over by native judges (417 in all). Their punishments do not conform to the [British] criminal code, but on the other hand, native law must not be in opposition to the Ordinances of Government, which are operative everywhere, and the courts. . .are under the close supervision of the District Staff. Their rules of evidence and their proce-

³¹ Ibid., 176.

³² Ibid.

dure are not based on British standards, but their sentences, if manifestly faulty, are subject to revision. Their prisoners are confined to their own native gaols [jails], which are under the supervision of the British staff. The taxes are raised in the name of the native ruler and by his agents, but he surrenders the fixed proportion to Government, and the expenditure of the portion assigned to the Native Administration, from which fixed salaries to all native officials are paid, is subject to the advice of the Resident, and the ultimate control of the Governor.³³

This policy clearly shows that the native people that were given some power by the imperial government were really only charged with maintaining the people the British would not bother with on a face to face level. The British would only step in if their own laws were at stake, and if there were taxes or tribute at stake.

³³ Smith, *Imperialism*, 83-84.

Changes for Women

Women were greatly affected by the British imperial machine on both sides of the dividing line. Native women found themselves in a completely new type of life, a life now that was influenced by western gender roles and identity, much like their male counterparts. On the other hand, British imperialism in West Africa provided for some new opportunities to women of both British and West African descent, even though the opportunities are as different as night and day. Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries brought intense sexual contact, mostly between men from the imperial powers and women, girls, and boys among the colonized peoples.³⁴ The changes in labor organization and ideas fueled the contact between sexes and placed women in the middle of an occupation and way of life that previously was unknown. These sexual encounters involved prostitution, rape, and sex with children to satisfy the physical desires of the imperialists and their workers. The large cities to which displaced rural people flocked had tens of thousands of prostitutes in hundreds of brothels, specialized as to male or female houses.³⁵

With cities forming around labor areas as settlements for the laborers trying to make a wage living, and the vast number of people displaced due to land seizure and war, it is easy to see how cities grew quickly and sexual contact was not only inevitable, it was encouraged. Colonial officials sponsored brothels for members of the armed forces and

³⁴ Smith, *Imperialism*, 76.

³⁵ Ibid.

recognized that the growth of cities based on the labor of single men uprooted from their families in rural areas would encourage prostitution.³⁶

This was not always as bad as it would seem. Some women proved to be very good at the business aspect of prostitution. After all, it is a service performed for a fee, so economic power will follow. “Historians judge that in regions like Africa, prostitution became a well-regarded way for women to boost their earnings and gain social status.”³⁷ This is awkward because prostitution is not a desirable source of income to many women, but there were some that took full advantage of the situation they were placed in and only they can judge if their decisions were right for them at the time.

The situations and dilemmas were also made easier by the sheer number of male workers that were now coming into the cities. While serious long term relationships may have been out of the question due to family, these men still needed other services provided to them, such as housework and culturally gender biased chores, and prostitution was just another service in demand. Male migrant workers living under imperialism needed and paid for a variety of domestic services, which allowed for prostitution to blend with ordinary life and for colonialism to function more smoothly than it might have otherwise.³⁸

Native women in British West Africa were misunderstood and strange to British men, not only in their appearance, but also in their actions within their community. This is especially true for the Igbo women that inhabited the area of Nigeria. Women had an active role in parts of Igbo society, particularly politics and religion. These areas were strictly a male domain in British eyes and female involvement confused many Britons.

³⁶ Ibid., 90.

³⁷ Ibid., 76.

³⁸ Ibid., 90.

The most negative effects of Empire on women were because of the colonial inability to understand that African women and men did not have the same types of relationships as British women and men had back in the metropole.³⁹ Igbo women had the ability to gather and voice their opinion to their leaders and these powerful demonstrations were well respected by the men in authority in their tribe, but as the British saw these women gathering to demonstrate, the only thought they had was it had to be an uprising or rebellion.⁴⁰ The ritual use of singing, dancing, and ridicule was what these women were involved in, and misunderstandings such as these, were often to the detriment of the Igbo people, as blood was shed because of misunderstandings.

Violence was not always the outcome of demonstrations however. In 1929 a group of over 10,000 women gathered in southern Nigeria and protested the subordination of women in politics and the new taxes that were levied. This large demonstration is known as “The Igbo Women’s War of 1929.” This was a peaceful rally that called for change in women’s status. Aggression was kept to a minimum when concerned about human casualties, but many native courts were attacked and burned to the ground.

This is the most lasting legacy of the Empire. The new states of Africa lowered the British flag with women not only facing greater work burdens than ever before, but also erased from state hierarchies and confined to the edge of power.⁴¹

³⁹ Diana Jeater, *The British Empire and African Women in the Twentieth Century*, in *Black Experience and the Empire*, ed. Philip D. Morgan and Sean Hawkins, Companion Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 255.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Imperialism*, 154-155.

⁴¹ Jeater, *The British Empire*, 255.

CONCLUSION

All in all, the changes that the British brought to their colonies in West Africa were mostly negative impacts on the native tribes. The benefits gained do not equal how much was sacrificed. We can say, native African tribes would have been better off if the British never came, but then we must consider what position they would currently be in without British influence. How long before electricity would have been harnessed by a native tribesman? How long will it take for great cities to emerge? Amenities like these were brought by the British and instilled immediately in the minds of the natives, but the price paid by natives in the colonies was essentially their own futures at the hands of the British.

The position these countries are in today can tell us how far the countries have come on their own behalf and also to what extent they are still suffering. All four of the former British colonies mentioned in this paper are at or near the bottom of the list in various categories. They all are struggling to become competitive in the global economy, and Sierra Leone did not even make the list for most of the current world rankings.⁴² These countries are all experiencing difficulties in human development areas, as well as gender equality. These countries also are having troubles feeding their citizens as they all made the Global Hunger Index.⁴³ The categories these countries are struggling with are no surprise, as all these areas were focuses of the British Empire, whether the ambition was exploitation or change.

After researching this topic, and hopefully after reading this paper, we can see how the British imperial system has greatly oppressed and changed the native peoples of

⁴² "Country Rankings 2008." Photius.com. 2008. 10 April 2009 < www.photius.com/rankings/ >.

⁴³ Ibid.

West Africa and traumatized their economies and old ways of life. The British did bring the benefits of civilization and modern technologies, but at the cost of many lives and much more honor on the natives behalf. The extent of oppression and exploitation in this small part of the British Empire is evidence that quite possibly Great Britain is responsible for the stagnation of development in more areas, and oppression of more people on this planet than any other nation in history when looking at the whole Empire. The treatment and changes brought on by the British are certainly not confined to this area of the Empire, and given the size of the entire Empire; the British could be seen as the most oppressive group the world has seen in relation to its scale.

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Map

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