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Rethinking Imperialism and Resistance in West Africa: Historiographic Connections for the Classroom

Michael Christopher Low

Even in the postcolonial era, West African history remains plagued by Eurocentric myths and media-driven stereotypes. Though specialists have been struggling with this problem for decades, a rift remains between the elite world of academia and the African history being taught in American schools. In an attempt to bridge this gap, this essay provides a case study and a list of suggested resources designed to help non-specialist world history teachers rethink European colonial power and its impact on our conception of African history. Through its examination of how West African responses to imperialism interacted with, adapted to, and were ultimately conditioned by European power structures, this essay touches on a range of topics, including pre-colonial African history; the partition of Africa; decolonization; linkages between slavery, colonial labor coercion, and the spread of capitalism; and the continuing impact of colonial rule on present-day conflict in the postcolonial African states.

Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness . . . and darkness is not the subject of history.

—Hugh Trevor Roper, 1962

It has always happened in the struggle for freedom that such a people, formerly lost in an imaginary maze, a prey to unspeakable terrors yet happy to lose themselves in a dreamlike torment, such a people becomes unhinged, reorganizes itself, and in blood and tears gives birth to very real and immediate action.

—Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 1963
The foregoing quotations from Hugh Trevor Roper and Frantz Fanon should collectively serve as a reminder of Michel Foucault’s explanation of the relationship between power and knowledge (Gandhi, 1998, pp. 74–75). According to postmodern and postcolonial thinkers, most notably Foucault and Edward Said, “knowledge transforms power” from an aloof governmental-power to an all-encompassing system of social exchange, which is in turn “reproduced in discursive networks” (Gandhi, 1998; Foucault, 1970). It is in these ever-expanding web-like systems of beliefs, assumptions, and propaganda that postmodern and postcolonial thinkers have identified the most enduring foundations of colonial domination. Unfortunately, even in this supposedly postcolonial era, the history of West Africa still bears the crushing weight of such Eurocentric belief systems (Blaut, 1993). As Barbara Bush argues in Imperialism, Race, and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919–1945, the discursive tentacles of “cultural imperialism” that “stamped the imprint of backwardness on ‘non-European’ cultures” are still alive and well in the writings of many established imperial historians, many of whom “have remained stubbornly resistant to incorporating postcolonial insights” (Bush, 1999, pp. xiii, 3). Bush concludes that in light of recent humanitarian and governmental crises in Africa some imperial historians have even drifted toward the “moral rehabilitation of imperialism,” extolling the virtues of empire as a “civilizing force that swept away primitive rituals,” and recasting the imperial project in Africa as an “empire to be proud of” (Bush, 1999, pp. 2–3). Thus, it would seem that, much like Frantz Fanon’s imagery of the struggling freedom fighter, historians, teachers, and students are still, more often than not, lost in a discursive maze of false ideas, generated by colonial-era historiography, but still projected into the history being written in the postcolonial era.

In all fairness, it should be noted that specialists in the field of African history have long been interested in rectifying the mistakes of Eurocentric historiography; however, it would appear that such efforts have not been adequately popularized. Despite the fact that this essay is by no means an empirical study of classroom reform, based on my own teaching experiences, anecdotal experiences related by respected colleagues, and a familiarity with the frustrating dearth of quality teaching materials available for teaching African content, it seems safe to report that there is a deep divide between the elite sphere of African history being recorded in academic journals and monographs and the African history being taught in middle schools, high schools, and even the survey courses at colleges and universities. In response to this problem, this essay seeks to take the historiographic perspectives of specialists and make them more accessible to the non-specialist world history teacher. While this project was originally slated to be a more “scholarly” study of British and French colonial regimes and the resistance movements they precipitated in West Africa, after participating in the travel and lectures associated with Kennesaw State University’s Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad in Ghana and Mali, which were the impetus for this
As a result, the relationships between European imperialism and West African resistance movements have been employed more as points of departure. Thus, the primary goal of this essay is to suggest readings and a historiographic perspective necessary for the average teacher to weave a more accurate, coherent narrative of West African history for their students.

In an attempt to shed some of the Eurocentric baggage that plagues the teaching of West African history, it is necessary to rethink not only the purposes and organization of European power, but also how West African responses interacted with, adapted to, and were conditioned by European power structures. Traditionally both historians of European imperialism and Africanist specialists have tended to geographically compartmentalize West Africa into British and French spheres, emphasizing nationalistic and imperial rivalries and the supposedly vast differences between their methods of administration (Asiwaju, 2001; Crowder, 1968, pp. 162–238). By insisting on the divergence of British and French policies, historians have repeatedly denied, or at least obscured, the overwhelming similarities between these empires and their economic goals in tropical Africa as well as similar methods of resistance that each regime engendered in their West African subjects. Time and again, historians have gone to great lengths to distinguish between the supposedly milder British system of “indirect” rule and the comparatively heavy-handed French system of “direct” rule (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 16–25). By contrast, this essay seeks to reexamine the colonial experience of both British and French West Africa by questioning the binary categories of direct and indirect rule. While it would be counterfactual to suggest that there were no differences between British and French methods of administration in colonial Africa, it is perhaps more important to emphasize their similarities. In other words, what common goals did both regimes share? What were these regimes designed to foster and what were they designed to prevent?

Unity, particularly for the purposes of teaching of African history, is a highly underrated concept. Geographically speaking, the partition of Africa, formally inaugurated at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, has trained us to think of Africa as a continent of divisions and arbitrarily-imposed colonial and national borders. Aside from conditioning a jigsaw-puzzle-view of African geography, this emphasis on the partition of Africa, European conquest, and colonial rule has also led historians and teachers to ignore equally important topics, such as the existence of strong pre-colonial states; pre-colonial trade contacts with Europe; important

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1. While it would be impossible to adequately express the gratitude owed to Dr. Akanmu Adebayo of Kennesaw State University, it seems appropriate to mention his efforts in organizing the U.S. Department of Education grants and travel arrangements, which allowed a small band of Georgia teachers and professors to intimately experience West African culture and history. Aside from Dr. Adebayo, an expression of thanks also goes to my fellow participants, our in-country liaisons in Ghana and Mali, and my colleagues and friends at Avondale Middle School, Dekalb County Schools, and Georgia State University.
connections between capitalism, industrialization, and slavery; and the relative effectiveness of African attempts to resist European domination throughout most of the nineteenth century, all of which require knowledge extending well beyond the partition of Africa in the 1880s. How then can we, as teachers and professors, integrate all of these topics into an intelligible narrative?

Because both geography and the narratives of African history offered by imperial historians, and subsequently passed on in the textbooks provided for our students, are, more often than not, fragmented into sections, which jump from slavery to colonialism to decolonization, treating the entire story from the European or imperial perspective, the role and agency of Africans, particularly pre-colonial Africans, tends to get lost. Yet, as John Thornton notes in *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*, pre-colonial states, such as Ashanti, Dahomey, and Oyo, exercised control over the nature of their interactions with Europeans, possessed manufacturing skills, substantial purchasing power, state organization, and military prowess. Unfortunately, perspectives like Thornton's remain buried beneath a landslide of assumptions about African weakness and poverty generated by colonial historiography and present-day media perceptions (Thornton, 1990, pp. 7, 122–125). In an attempt to remedy this situation and the image of passivity and helplessness that it suggests, the first generation of postcolonial historians emerging in the 1960s and 1970s eagerly forged a more sensitive brand of history, one that more accurately reflects African resistance to imperialism. As Frederick Cooper’s review of African historiography, “Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History,” points out:

African resistance to European conquest and colonization both ratified the integrity of pre-colonial polities and structures (themselves a major topic) and provided a link between them and the nationalist challenge to colonial rule. Resistance was the key plot element in a continuous narrative of African history (Cooper, 1994, p. 1520).

Indeed, the studies created by postcolonial or anti-colonial intellectuals, focusing on African resistance, have not only shown the cruelty of European imperialism, they have also shown that:

colonial conquests and heavy-handed interventions into African life were vigorously challenged, that guerilla warfare within decentralized polities was as important as the fielding of armies by African states, that women as well as men engaged in acts of resistance, and that individual action—moving away from the tax collector or labor recruiter, ignoring orders, speaking insolently, and criticizing the claims of missionaries, doctors, and educators—complemented collective actions (Cooper, 1994, pp. 1520–1521).

While recording the frequency and variety of resistance methods employed was certainly one of the major tasks taken up by Africanists of the postcolonial era, another major obstacle was to trace the historic connection between nineteenth-century “primary resistance” efforts, such as the armed struggles of the Ashanti and Tukolor empires, and “secondary resistance,” such as the efforts of modern strike-leaders, anti-colonial circles of the West African intelligentsia, Pan-Africanists, and modern nationalist parties. As T. O. Ranger insists, resistance efforts, however small in scale or ineffectual at the time, must be viewed as part of a longer tradition stretching from before the partition of Africa in 1885 until the decolonization processes of the 1950s and 1960s (Ranger, 1968).3

However, because the semi-official historians of empire in Britain and France have typically characterized African resistance efforts prior to the formation of nationalist political parties as fragmentary, isolated instances of “tribal” rebellion, representing reactionary, backward-looking segments of society, Western-influenced methods of political organization and resistance have been privileged in most survey texts. This perspective has also been reinforced by a tendency to separate so-called rural/traditional and urban/modern forms of resistance into separate, unrelated categories. Of course, this begs the question, from where does this unnecessary bifurcation of rural/traditional and urban/modern resistance originate? Simply put, the form of colonial rule shaped the nature of revolt seeking to dismantle it.

Both the British and French colonial regimes were organized to ensure that rural and urban forms of resistance were kept separate and fragmented. According to Mahmood Mamdani’s (1996) groundbreaking study, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, the West African colonial state was purposefully “bifurcated.” Designed for a small minority of white administrators to control numerically superior populations of Africans, the colonial state depended on a layered system of legal dualism and ethnic pluralism. Urban populations were directly ruled through assimilationist policies, which reflected the paternalistic rhetoric of the “civilizing mission,” modernization, and the dangling promise of rights associated with citizenship. By contrast, the colonial administrative method of indirect rule was employed for rural populations. It was a flexible, decentralized system designed to uphold traditional or “tribal” authority, so-called customary laws, and ethnic divisions (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 1–23).

3. Similarly, the “Ibadan” school of historiography emphasized the integrity of pre-colonial societies and their importance as precedents for post-independence African nations. In the words of J. F. Ade Ajayi, colonialism was an “episode in African history,” which broke an otherwise continuous tradition of African political agency. Ajayi’s train of thought is also echoed in a similar Francophone discourse on the “colonial parenthesis.” For example, see Ajayi (1968). The Continuity of African Institutions under Colonialism. In T. O. Ranger, (Ed.). *Emerging Themes in African History* (pp. 189–200). London: Heinemann.
The architect of this strategy of indirect rule was Lord Frederick Lugard. Lugard developed indirect rule in both Uganda and Nigeria and eventually wrote a kind of colonizer’s handbook on the subject in 1922, titled *The Dual Mandate in Tropical West Africa*. According to Lugard, the first step in building a regime of “indirect rule” is to “endeavour to find a man of influence as chief, and to group under him as many villages or districts as possible, to teach him to delegate powers, and to take an interest in his ‘Native Treasury,’ to support his authority, and to inculcate a sense of responsibility” (Kirke-Green, 1969, p. 53). As Mamdani points out, Lugard’s tribalized system of indirect rule in rural areas was able to “create a dependent but autonomous system of rule, one that combined accountability to superiors with a flexible response to the subject population, a capacity to implement central directives with one to absorb local shocks” (Mamdani, 1996, p. 60). Thus, local chiefs were responsible for maintaining day-to-day order within their particular British district or French cercle. Essentially, these native authorities were co-opted as representatives—desperately needed, given the paucity of European administrators available—of the British District Commissioner or, in the French system, the Cercle Commander. However, far from independent, each chief was subject to appointment and dismissal by their colonial masters. As the French Resident at Futa-Jalon (Guinea) coldly stated in 1897: “The chief will attend to the tax and furnish manpower, or he will be smashed like glass” (Suret-Canale, 1988, p. 155). As Adu Boahen succinctly puts it, indirect rule “was the most indirect way of ruling directly” (1986, p. 127).

To further underscore the contrived and destructive nature of this system, many of these puppet-chiefs were simply appointed and imposed upon areas that did not already have a chief or a recognizable political structure in the eyes of Europeans. Thus, far from maintaining traditional rule or ruling indirectly, such practices illustrate what Eric Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger refer to as “the invention of tradition,” whereby Europeans invented supposedly “traditional” tribes and chiefs, which were expedient to their political needs, but were by no means considered legitimate or accountable to the populations they governed (Ranger, 1983).

As has already been noted, native authorities in the Lugardian system of indirect rule were “shock absorbers,” however, their role as political cushioning for European authority should be placed in a larger context than that of colonial administration. By pointing out the role of the puppet-chieftancy in the colonial system to students, one can expand a lesson on colonial rule into one which encompasses pre-colonial Africa, slavery, and the rise and expansion of capitalism. As Mahmood Mamdani and countless others have asserted, “the end of formal slavery . . . opened the possibility of a new era of compulsions short of formal slavery” (1996). Here lies the importance of puppet-chiefs: local chiefs, ruling rural populations outside of the more urban coastal centers of West Africa, which

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4. See also Mamdani’s discussion of the illegitimacy of chiefs under colonial rule in *Citizen and Subject*, pp. 39–41.
had already been integrated into the capitalist world economy prior to the partition of Africa, became the nexus connecting the world market-economy and the non-market economy of interior Africa. Chiefancy and indirect rule were basically part of a regime of economic coercion, which sought to shift the African role in the world economy from slavery to wage labor and “legitimate” trade in cash crops (Mamdani, 1996, p. 23; Crowder, 1968, p. 169).5

By driving land and labor into the modern world economy, puppet-chiefs served as a regime of coercion for the expansion of capitalism, administering the day-to-day violence of imperial exploitation with a wide range of compulsions: forced labor, forced crops, forced sales, forced contributions, and forced removals. As Nigerian nationalist, Nnamdi Azikiwe, once described it, the puppet-chiefdoms were “the velvet glove on the iron hand” of colonial power and capital (Azikiwe, 1930). Thus, while European notions of the “civilizing mission,” ostensibly dedicated to the “protection” and betterment of “inferior races” were employed by imperial officials to “seduce” their citizens, and “even themselves, into supporting colonization [and capitalism] as force[s] for good,” in actuality these concepts were a mask for a cynical process of economic exploitation with eerie similarities to slave labor (Conklin, 1998, p. 421; Conklin, 1997).

By connecting colonial administrative practice to the objectives of expanding capitalism, students will be better able to comprehend the link between more nuanced forms of coercive labor practice during the colonial era and the rather straightforward evils of slavery. Secondly, by connecting economic exploitation before and after the partition of Africa, pre-colonial history is brought back into the fold. Finally, it cannot be stressed enough, one of the best ways to tie all of these themes together is through illustrations of the continuous process of African struggle and resistance to exploitation.

As Adu Boahen’s Africa under Colonial Domination, 1880–1935 makes clear, armed resistance and rebellions were widespread and lasted all the way up through World War I. As the following list of representative examples indicates, the objectives of these rebellions were tri-fold: to regain independence and sovereignty by expelling colonial rule completely, to redress specific practices of abuse or oppression perpetrated by the colonial regime, and to seek a more equitable accommodation with the colonial regime.

1885–1887: Mamadou Lamine in Senegal
1898–1901: Fode Silla and Fode Kabba in the Gambia
1898: The Hut Tax Rebellion in Sierra Leone
1900: The Ashanti Rebellion led by Yaa Asantewaa
1908–1914: Mossi Rebellions in the Upper Volta
1908–1914: Numerous Revolts in Guinea
1913–1914: Rebellion in Dahomey

However, it should also be noted that armed resistance, especially in light of the often overwhelming technological forces arrayed against West African rebels, was not the only form of resistance employed. This period also witnessed mass migrations protesting harsh conditions resulting from forced labor, collective punishments, and unfair legal practices in a particular area (particularly in French colonies); strikes by urban workers, most notably railway and dockworkers; boycotts, petitions, and delegations orchestrated by elite associations such as the Aborigines’ Rights Protection Society, the Young Senegalese Club, the People’s Union, and the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines’ Protection Society; and ideological and religious/millenarian forms of protests from independent Christian churches, Muslim *mahdist* movements and *sufi* brotherhoods, and practitioners of Traditional African Religions (Boahen, 1985, pp. 68–71).

While illustrating examples of African agency in struggling toward the mass movements that eventually precipitated Pan-Africanism, nationalism, and ultimately decolonization processes, it should be noted, however, that until the late interwar and post-World War II eras efforts at rebellion and resistance were largely unsuccessful. As both Alice Conklin and Frederick Cooper point out, British and French administrators continued to adapt to the challenges laid down by their colonial subjects. Especially in French West Africa, a growing frustration with the level of rebellion expressed during World War I conscription drives led to a move away from the “civilizing mission,” assimilationist policies, and direct rule. After World War I, a higher priority was placed on “conserving” African society and “tribal” structures. The more conservative views on colonial administration that emerged in French West Africa after World War I closely mirrored the policies of British West Africa (Mamdani, 1996, p. 49). While it might be easy to mistake such policies for a kind of cultural sensitivity or loosening of direct rule, there were political and economic imperatives driving this shift toward indirect, more decentralized rule (Conklin, 1997, pp. 7, 171–175; Copper, 2005, p. 1531).

In an attempt to contain the protests of Western-educated elites in urban centers, both the British and French attempted to vest more and more power in the hands of “traditional” authorities. Clearly the reason for this shift was an increasing “white paranoia,” which reflected growing anxieties that attacks from the urban intelligentsia and labor movements would merge with rural rebellions (Bush, 1999, p. 113). As urban activists challenged the anti-democratic nature of the colonial system during the interwar years, they were met with increasingly autocratic responses from defensive colonial governments, which described their legal and journalistic efforts as the “lying propaganda” of “Bolshevists” and “race-conscious” radicals (Bush, 1999, p. 113). This rhetoric is extremely

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revealing. Accusations of Bolshevism reflected the fear that urban activists would derail the extension of the extractive economy of cash-crop production (cotton, cocoa, palm oil) from being carried out in the hinterland. As Alice Conklin points out, the interwar period marked the height of labor coercion and forced cash-crop production in French West Africa. Thus, it would seem that the adaptations and restructurings of the colonial system were less concerned with preserving political power than protecting its extractive, capitalist economy (Conklin, 1987).7

In an effort to protect their hold on capital and cash-crop production in West Africa, European colonial regimes sought to fragment resistance efforts, separating rural and urban, “traditional” and modern, “tribal” and civil society. As Mamdani explains:

> The form of rule shaped the form of revolt against it. Indirect rule at once reinforced ethnically bound institutions of control and led to their explosion from within. Ethnicity (tribalism) thus came to be simultaneously the form of colonial control over natives and the form of revolt against it. It defined the parameters of both the native authority in charge of the local state apparatus and of resistance to it (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 24–25).

Unfortunately, the effects of European policies of “tribalization” have been far reaching. When the need for fiscal austerity in the post-World War II era drove Britain and France to reconsider the costs and benefits of their colonial responsibilities, they handed power over to the very same Western-educated nationalists they had previously sought to marginalize. As a result of the colonial state’s previous bifurcations of power and resistance, postcolonial African states have been plagued with continued expressions of urban versus rural resentments and “tribalisms” of both ethnic and religious persuasions, which have undermined national governments, civil society, and democracy. And despite having abdicated political authority over West Africa, capital has remained concentrated in London and Paris and exploitation continues in the guise of neocolonialism (Cooper, 1994, p. 1531; Mamdani, 1996, pp. 24–25).8

As students come to the doors of our classrooms and lecture halls with media-driven preconceptions and stereotypes that “write off Africa as a continent of disasters and bad government,” it is our responsibility as teachers to contextualize and challenge these beliefs. Thus, rather than presenting slavery, pre-colonial African history, imperialism, capitalism, and present-day problems as unrelated


lessons, it is our responsibility to weave these themes together and historicize the present. While this essay is far from comprehensive, its goal has been to fill in the gaps in textbooks and lessons that I have observed in my experiences as both a student and teacher of world, and therefore African, history. It is no longer acceptable to claim ignorance. It is our responsibility to expose and attempt to ameliorate the legacy of exploitation and Eurocentric historiography that continues to creep into our classrooms. As a first step toward these lofty goals, I have provided a list of suggested readings to aid in this endeavor.⁹

References


Suggested Reading


