



COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION

The first modern survey of African history, *A Short History of Africa* by Roland Oliver and J. D. Fage (Penguin, Harmondsworth and Baltimore, 1962), treated the colonial period in three phases: first, the establishment of colonial over-rule, leading up to the World War I; second, the nature of established colonial administration, in theory and practice; and thirdly, economic development and welfare, from the early exploitation of minerals to the colonial development funds of the 1930s to 50s. The contrast between this early survey and more recent accounts of the period lies in its focus on the colonial viewpoint as the primary initiator of change through this period of history. African potential initiative is not disrespected in any way, it is just that the plethora of major works, especially on the theme of resistance – primary and secondary – were yet to be completed and published, during the course of the 1960s and 70s. Nevertheless, Oliver and Fage's *History* established a theme for African history of the colonial period that was to dominate many of the surveys that were to follow – namely the nature of colonial administration. It is interesting to note, however, that in Oliver and Fage's view of colonial administration, there was, for all the theorizing to the contrary, little practical difference from the African viewpoint between the administrative approaches of the two major colonial powers, Britain and France.



Created by Yuvika Koul
from Noun Project

It was the British historian Michael Crowder, writing in the late 1960s, who delved deeply into the subject of colonial administration, at least in west Africa, devoting a whole seventy-page section of his *West Africa Under Colonial Rule* (Hutchinson, London 1968) to the subject. Crowder made a clear distinction between different 'systems' of colonial rule, as developed by the various colonial powers. Initially, practices were *ad hoc*: no colonial powers came to Africa with a clear perception as to how they were going to govern the vast territories they had awarded themselves. In the period of conquest, little thought was given to the subject. It was really only from about 1907 that serious thought and debate was given to the subject in colonial metropolitan circles. 1907 was important because it was the year of the conclusion of two great African rebellions in German South West (Namibia) and East Africa (Tanganyika), both of which the Germans suppressed with scandalous

brutality. It was also a time when international condemnation of the appalling violations that characterised Leopold's rule in the Congo 'Free State' were reaching a peak – such as obliged the king to hand control of his personal fiefdom to the Belgian Government the following year. So reform, and ordered forms of maintaining 'law and order' in colonial Africa, were very much in the air.

In analysing the administrations that were henceforth developed for Africa, Crowder made a clear distinction between French and British forms. The French had assumed that their initial colonial ports on the coast of Senegal were part of France, and their urban citizens, with whom they traded, were therefore also French citizens. They did not see skin-colour as a barrier, so long as numbers were only small, and these *assimilated* citizens adopted French material culture and language. As soon as the numbers of colonial peoples became large, in the late 19th century, the French evolved a distinction, the newly incorporated peoples became 'subjects' rather than citizens, for whom *assimilation*, with its accompanying citizenship, rights and privileges, was held out as a distant aim, allowed to only a few. Crowder called this policy '*selective assimilation*'.

In apparent contrast to this was the British policy of 'Indirect Rule', which operated on the assumption that Europeans and Africans were so different culturally that it would be unwise to attempt to assimilate them into British culture. Furthermore, in practice, it was far easier to rule colonial subjects through their pre-colonial rulers, or at least those of whom the British approved. It was, however, clearly still 'British rule', even if the final tier of administration was in African hands. Thus colonial governors and their British district administrators directed policy and codified those parts of African 'customary law' of which they approved, and then left local African chiefs (whom they had approved or appointed) to handle the fallout from unpopular policies, as well as collecting taxes and providing labour for public works. Crowder's book spends some time discussing the distinctions between the two administrative systems and concludes that in due course they converged into a similar compromise, which he labels '*paternalism*'.

This Eurocentric emphasis on colonial policy and colonial initiatives was reflected in other general works of the period: L. H. Gann and P. Duignan, *Burden of Empire* (Pall Mall Press, London, 1967); L. H. Gann and P. Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa, Volume Two* (CUP, Cambridge, 1970); P. Gifford and W. R. Louis (eds.), *Britain and France in Africa* (Yale UP, New Haven, 1971). The trend began to turn with the publication in 1978 of the first edition of *African History*, edited by Philip Curtin, Steven Feierman, Leonard Thompson and Jan Vansina. But it was not until the mid-1980s, with the publication of the *UNESCO General History of Africa, Volume 7, 'Africa under*

Colonial Domination, 1880-1935, edited by the Ghanaian historian A. Adu Boahen (Heinemann, London, 1985), that the Eurocentric approach was turned on its head.

Two years later Adu Boahen published *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore, 1987). This short but influential book summarised the approach he had taken in the UNESCO volume. He devotes a mere three pages to the colonial manipulation of traditional rulers for administration, the minimal infrastructure developments that they set up mainly for the benefit of colonists, and their economic policies, directed to extract maximum return for the colonial project. These, according to Boahen, “are the usual questions that are dealt with in most of the existing works on colonialism” (pp58-9). By contrast, he devotes a full thirty pages to “the African initiatives and responses in the light of all these colonial activities” (p58). As a result there emerges a very different picture of the colonial period, one in which Africans take centre stage in their own history. These African initiatives range from continued and periodic open resistance, to the rural poor’s response of flight across colonial boundaries, to the peaceful demands and criticism of African journalists through their own numerous newspapers, to the promotion and protection of cultural values through cultural and welfare associations, to independent Church movements, boycotts and numerous other strategies, leading to trades union activities and nascent political parties – all underway before the post-World War II political surge towards independence. For an important recent work that has built on Boahen’s approach, see Jonathan Derrick, *Africa’s ‘Agitators’: Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939* (Hurst, London, 2008).

A number of textbooks on African history and designed for the undergraduate market have emerged and gone through several editions over the past decade. Erik Gilbert and Jonathan Reynolds’ *Africa in World History. From Prehistory to the Present* (Pearson Education, New Jersey, 3rd edition 2011) gives a very nuanced and detailed consideration to colonial administration, delving into the thinking behind the ‘assimilation’ and ‘indirect rule’ philosophies of the two dominant colonial powers, France and Britain. Robert Collins and James Burns’ *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge UP, Cambridge UK, 2nd edition 2014) covers similar ground, though in slightly less detail, and includes consideration of Portuguese and Belgian rule. By contrast Richard Reid’s *A History of Modern Africa, 1800 to the Present* (Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2nd edition 2011) prefers to focus on economic, religious and cultural issues, with special attention paid to ethnicity; and John Iliffe’s *Africans: the history of a continent* (Cambridge UP, New York, 3rd edition 2017) gives no attention to the motivations of the colonial powers and their styles of administration, preferring to present a story of the colonial period that is entirely centred on African experiences and perceptions.