

The Role of the ‘Unholy Trinity’ in European Domination of West Africa

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Abstract

The history of West Africa has been that of continual contact with foreign elements beginning from early times. These past contact ranged from friendly, conflictual and suspicious interactions to outright war in some other cases, and have indeed had profound impact on the present state of being in Western Africa and also has a greater implication for her future. This essay's focus is on the activities of the Tripartite -Merchants, Missionaries and Explorers – who were present in West Africa prior to its colonisation and how these agents played active roles in the eventual domination of the sub-region by their home country. It investigates this subject side-by-side examining how some factors that resulted in the evolution of the international economic system influenced the course of history of West Africa by extension.

Keywords: West Africa, International Economic System, Slave Trade, Colonialism

1. Introduction

West Africa is a term used to designate one of the five geographic regions within the continent of Africa. It has an approximate land area of 5 million square kilometres. It lies between Lake Chad and the Atlantic Ocean, along the southern part of what might be called the “bulge of Africa”. The United Nation's definition of West Africa includes the following countries: Benin Republic, Burkina Faso (Upper Volta), Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo (Armstrong & Hunkins 1989, Encyclopaedia Britannica 2000, Hirsh 1988). In the period under consideration however, these fairly new political enclaves were non-existent and what we had in their stead were socio-political entities organised along the lines of family and kinship and may be likened to either a communal or feudal system depending on society (Rodney 1972).

The time frame for this paper spans from the fifteenth century through the nineteenth century starting from the era where non-Africans began to establish contact with West Africans and terminating at the colonisation of our area. It is however worthy of note that the history of this sub-region cannot be delinked from that of the world, especially the early international system under multiple European powers and thus cannot be divorced from the other. Changes that occurred in the international system over time had by extension affected the history of the region. In the 15th century the central political economic idea was mercantilism. It became the dominant economic policy in Europe as the feudal system declined at the end of the middle ages (c.450-c.1500). The central tenet of mercantilism (in its most primitive form) was that the wealth of nations could be measured in the amount of precious metals - gold, silver etc - available in a country's reserve (McLean & McMillan 2003). This ideal combined with the forces of the European renaissance catalysed many exploration voyages in order to discover new areas where these European powers could extend their influence to, in terms of trade, in a bid to further national interest.

The ‘unholy trinity’ is a term representative of the forerunners – merchants, missionaries, explorer – to European colonisation and domination of West Africa. It would be naïve to think that these agents were not aware of their instrumentality in the eventual domination of the region by their home country as they played active roles in the process of this occupation.

2. Merchants

The first agent of European colonisation that came in contact with the people of Western Africa were the merchants. From about the middle of the fifteenth century, Europeans began to explore the West coast of Africa (Oni 1980). They did not come as conquerors, but as customers. The Portuguese came with the dual aim of seeking a route to the far East and in hope of establishing contact with the fabled gold-mining country of ‘Wangara’ in order to divert the gold trade from Islam North Africa, via the trans-Saharan trade route, to Christian Europe (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2000, Fyfe 1965). The interest of the Europeans in the area as a source of Gold was spurred firstly by the renowned Malian King, Mansa Musa who sojourned to Mecca on pilgrimage (1324) with an approximate 30000 lbs. of gold carried on camels and each slave carrying a 4lbs. gold staff. This flamboyant journey stimulated the desire in many European nations to reach the source of this incredible wealth (Dan Lyndon 2010). In 1471 the Portuguese made a momentous discovery; they came in contact with the Akan people of an area which later became known as the ‘Gold Coast’. They not only had gold in large quantity compared to the then standard, but were also willing to exchange their gold for manufactures

and other commodities they required. This proved a challenge to Portugal which was not a major manufacturing nation, consequently, the Portuguese established contact with other African societies such as Benin, in order to provide for the needs of the people of the Gold Coast (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2000, Oni 1980).

The Westernisation of the international system which was a product of scientific and technological breakthrough resulted in a momentous shift in Great Britain from an agrarian society to one dependent largely on industries. This revolution quickly spread to the rest of Europe and to other countries in the West. A direct consequence of this was that these industrialised countries of the West needed to find resources and markets to fund capitalist expansion. These countries began to carve out for themselves territories in the New World, resulting in a shift from the gold trade to the slave trade in Africa (Ajayi 2002).

In the 1500s the major article of trade from the region was no longer gold but slaves. In this era other European countries entered into the scene continuing the relationship of exploitation that had been established earlier between Africa and the Western world. In exchange for these able bodied men and women who were transported across the Atlantic and were employed to create wealth, Africans got mostly manufactures in return e.g gun powder, musket (a cheap variety made for the African market), spirit, tobacco, ornaments and metal wares. They were mostly consumer goods which had no economic value. Hence the trade was an unequal exchange (Fyfe 1965, Rodney 1972). The British were by far the highest offenders in this trade.

After the transatlantic slave trade was abolished in 1807 by Britain and afterwards by other European and American nations, the 'legitimate trade' in forest product was introduced into the region. Nevertheless, because the slave trade was lucrative it went on side by side with legitimate trade. However several European mercantile companies had gained in route into the region (West Africa) attracted by the profit of the legitimate trade. In the lower Niger, these companies were faced with the challenges of halting the slave trade and foreign competition, thus in order to stamp out local resistance and competition from other European mercantile companies, the British mercantile companies, for example, put pressure on their home government to dominate the region of their interest. In 1851 they dethroned Oba Kosoko who believed in the slave trade and was at loggerhead with the British who at this time had begun to play an active role in putting a final stop to the trade in humans to ensure that her company's profit from the legitimate trade (Onwubiko 1973).

More so, these mercantile companies were instrumental in occupying and maintaining 'effective' presence in the areas taken by home countries. For example in the lower Niger region, the Royal Niger Company played not just an economic role in maintaining British authority in the Niger and but also extended this authority to areas in present day called Northern Nigeria. Hence making it easy for the British to lay claims to this region in the period of the scramble and partition, in line with the stipulation of the Berlin Conference - 'effective occupation' (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2012, Onwubiko 1973).

3. Missionaries

In the Bight of Benin British interest began with the establishment of Christian missions at Badagry and Abeokuta. Trade followed missionaries. The missionaries led in calling for British intervention in Lagos – J.F.A Ajayi (sited in Onwubiko 1973).

Christian missionary activities began first in the West African sub-region during 15th century. These Christian catholic missions attempted to introduce Christianity in the region but they faced so many challenges. The major factor being that they were limited in number. Hence after these Africans were converted no attempt was made to indoctrinate them hence these new converts easily relapsed back to their traditional religion. In the nineteenth century however due to the revival in Europe which had spread to America, many protestant missions came to (West) Africa – the dark continent – to convert the people and this second attempt was marked with success. There were numerous reasons for the success of this second attempt, however we would emphasise the fact that as at this time the industrial revolution was already underway and the mercantile companies sponsored these Christian mission's from the profit of their trade activities, these missionaries came to Africa with the message of the 'bible and the plough', taking "...emphasis away from the 'human products' of Africa in bid to use more fully her abundant natural resources" that was in demand in European industries. This made the environment conducive for eventual domination (Ayandele 1980).

More importantly, the missionaries cooperated with the colonial powers in the extension of the latter's authority and influence in various parts of West Africa. Their object for supporting European colonisation of the interior was to ensure protection for themselves by getting colonial government to apply force, where necessary, to impose law and order and to suppress the slave trade. Long before the scramble and partition they began to furnish the European governments, through local officials with geographical and strategic data about West African hinterland. Such data found their way to the war offices and were used for military intelligence.

4. Explorers

Direct contact between West Africa and Europe began in the fifteenth century; however it was only in the nineteenth century that the exploration of the hinterland began motivated by factors that certainly went beyond

mere exploration (Ayandele 1980). The explorers had desire to know more about Africa's geography and people. They were also motivated by the need to know the natural resources available in the interior of West Africa that could act as a substitute for the trade in humans, as well as the infrastructures on ground- communication and transportation –that would enable them move these products to the coast.

Explorers located vast reserves of raw materials; they navigated rivers, identified population centres which could be a market for manufactures from Europe (Eluwa *et al* 1996). This discovery made the region much enticing to the Europeans who desired to colonize it in order to gain monopoly for its effective exploitation of the wealth of the nations. This contributed greatly to the mad rush into Africa in the early 1880's and with the Berlin West Africa Conference (1884) where rules were laid down for the partitioning of Africa, the floodgates of European colonization was officially opened.

5. Conclusion

The relationship between the global north and western Africa has essentially remained the same over the years. Although the actors have changed yet this relationship remains characterised by exploitation. Like in the past, however playing more significant roles, these foreign companies are today symbols of imperialist domination of our economy. There are a host of Multinational Corporations located in West Africa. One can without doubt assert that they are representative, direct or indirect, of their home governments and as such have helped to further their interests within our domestic boundaries thus becoming active participants in domestic politics. More so, the local leaders like in the past, connive with these companies to ensure a smooth process of exploitation.

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