



# Mitochondrial Eve

*Journal of Humanities Post Graduate Studies Imo*

*State University, Owerri, Nigeria.*

*Vol. 1 No. 3 September, 2024*

<https://mejhpqs.online>

## Indirect Rule and its Aftermath in Nigeria

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### Abstract

This research work on indirect rule and its aftermaths in Nigeria tends to highlight the pattern of administrative framework, the British adopted in running or administering Nigeria as one of her colonial territories after the scramble and partition of Africa by European colonial powers which ended about 1900. The work will examine the origin of the indirect rule in Nigeria and what compelled the British to introduce the policy in Nigeria. The work will also examine some effects of this policy with a few references on other African countries.

**Key Words:** Indirect Rule, its Aftermath, Nigeria, Policy, History

### Introduction

This presentation is geared towards a holistic and analytical review of the indirect rule system which was one among the two colonial administrative systems adopted by Britain in running and or extended and established her authority over her respective colonial territories in West Africa, Nigeria being one of such colonial territories. This was after 1900, after the scramble and partition of West Africa and Africa as a whole had been

completed and territorial boundaries settled by the Europeans among themselves. These European nations included Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Portugal and Spain.

The first of these two colonial administrative systems which I think calls for a little discuss before doing justice to the indirect rule system was the direct rule system. The British adopted this administrative system in the coastal areas in their West African colonies in the

coastal areas of sierra Leone, Nigeria, Gold coast (now Ghana) and coastal towns of Lagos, Calabar, Bathurst, and so on. The reason for this was that the inhabitants of these areas had become acquainted with European life style and ways due to long contact and trade with the Europeans. These coastal areas had Europeans settlements like European officials, merchants and missionaries who resided in them and where therefore under their strong influence. According to K. B. C. Onwubuike in his book “Under the system of direct rule, the British governed these areas or Towns directly through local British officials”<sup>1</sup>.

They were responsible to the colonial secretary in London for the good government of colony entrusted to their care.<sup>2</sup> From about the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British began the Introduction of legislative councils in their colonies of Gambia (1843), Gold coast (1850), Lagos (1862) and Sierra Leone (1863). The legislative council of each colony made laws for that colonial secretary”.

### **Definition of indirect rule system**

James Coleman defined it as:

“a system of local administration in which the essential features were the preservation of traditional political institution and their adaptation, under the tutelage and direction of the British administration, to the requirements of modern units of local government”<sup>3</sup>.

K.B.C Onwubuike in his book defined it “As a system of administration under which traditional rulers were allowed to rule their people under the supervision of British officials”<sup>4</sup>.

In other words, the British Administrators ruled the traditional rulers who in turn ruled their people. By this system the day to day government and administration of areas both small and large were left in the hands of traditional rulers, who gained prestige and stability and protection afforded by the colonial power. The British officers were to interfere in the government of the traditional rulers mainly to check abuses of power. Indirect rule was a system of governance used by the British and others to control parts of their colonial empires, particularly in Africa and Asia.

### **Origin of indirect rule system in Nigeria**

It is common historical fact that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was the scramble for and then the partitioning of Africa among the European nations of Britain, France, Spain, German, Belgium, Italy and Portugal. In fact with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, the whole of Africa was by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the European colonial rule. There were a number of reasons that made these European nations to acquire colonies in Africa and which includes:

First was economic reason. European countries had in mind to exploit the huge economic and human resources of Africa to develop Europe. News had spread to Europe that Africa was a land replete with Gold, ably represented by the emperor of Ethiopia reputed to be the world's richest kingdom filled with Gold, silver, diamond and other precious stones. The discovery of the largest Gold deposits in the world in the Rand in South Africa in 1886 gave credence to this news. History also had it that it was reported that Africa was a continent filled with men and women who had very high immunity such that they could work under any condition be it

under the day and night, under the sun and rain, under the winter and summer, under the heat and cold without any problem. Consequently the Europeans including white men from the Far East began to flock to Africa in order to explore and exploit these passive abundant natural resources heavily domiciled in Africa.

The second was the European belief that their civilization was the best in the world and that it was their duty to extend this civilization to Africa and their colonial subjects all over the world<sup>5</sup>. The two reasons above could be aptly represented in the book written by Lord Fredrick Lugard after his retirement from the colonial service in 1919 where he wrote:

“that Europe was in Africa for the mutual benefit of her own industrial classes and of the native races in their progress to a higher plane, that the benefit can be made reciprocal and that is the aim and desire of civilized administration to fulfill this dual mandate”<sup>6</sup>.

Also the industrial revolution in Europe created the desire to find new markets for the purchase of raw materials by manufactures and sale of surplus

manufactured goods. The industrial Revolution meant more profit for manufactures which in turn created the need to find new market where the surplus capital could be invested profitably. The industrial Revolution also created unemployment in Europe as workers were displaced in industries by the use of machines which in turn meant that Europe had to find a new place or colonies to settle these teeming paupers.

The third factor was political and which was an extension of the international rivalry and struggle for power and supremacy in Europe among these powerful Europeans nations. These European nations joined the scramble and partition of Africa for reasons of prestige. In fact it got to a point that the possession and acquiring of colonial overseas became a matter of prestige and honour for European countries and their nationals who assisted in acquiring such colonies.

Once these European powers established in Africa, a number of other problems stared them on the face. The first was how to convince Africans to recognize their authority over what the Europeans now consider their territories. One of the ways

European nations secured this territories was through the treaties of protection which they had signed with these African leaders to protect them and their kingdom against other European Nations. When therefore these colonial powers began posting their officials in their bid to set up administration in their territories, many African rulers resisted since they were unwilling to lose their power to the Europeans. These of course led to series of wars.

The second was the problem of administering these newly acquired territories. The vastness of Africa and its varied landscape, posed great obstacles to efficient administration. The reason for these territorial acquisitions was for the benefit of the mother country, an asset and not a liability.

The third was the difficulty of acquiring enough European personnel to man the new colonial administration due to lack of fund to pay the European staff and run and maintain essential services like roads, railways and so on. Also the unhealthy African climate prevailing at that time particular in Nigeria due to malaria caused by mosquito bite made it difficult to

recruit the required number of European staff.

The fourth was the existence of indigenous political institutions in African States such as the Zulus, Benin, Oyo, Dahomey, Asante and the Fulani emirates of northern Nigeria. The colonialist were at a dilemma as to what to do with these native political institutions vis-a-vis the colonial administration. Where they to integrate them into the colonial administration or to discard them.

The fifth was the difficulties created by the existence of a multiplicity of languages and differences in culture and customs since people of differing languages, history of rivalry, were included in most of the new African nations. These situations made it impossible to have over a whole area a uniform administrative system.

The European nations to tackle these problems developed different methods of administering their colonies. The French and Portuguese adopted the assimilation policy. They administered their African territories as if they were part of their home land or mother land. They regarded their colonies as overseas provinces. The

British adopted the indirect rule system in Nigeria and Africa in general. In West Africa, this system was first introduced in Northern Nigeria by Lord Frederick Lugard. Lugard had witnessed the system in India and Uganda during his service as a colonial officer. In India, the British allowed large part of the country to be ruled by India princes and in Uganda, the British ruled the Kabaka of Buganda. This was how the indirect rule system came to be in Nigeria. It must be pointed out that even the French, Dutch, Belgians and Portuguese adopted this indirect rule in some of their colonies. The French adopted it in Algeria and Tunisia, the Dutch in the East Indies, the Portuguese in Angola and Mozambique, the Belgians in Rwanda and Burundi. These dependences were often called "Protectorates or truciial states".

The indirect rule system was very successful in the northern part of Nigeria due to the existing political set – up. The Emirates were more suited to the needs of a modern bureaucratic state, mainly because of their centralization and relatively large size. The Fulanis who were in charge of the emirates ran a

centralized form of administration with their hierarchy of officials for the maintenance of justice, law and order and their well – developed procedure of tax assessment and collection. The centralized form of administration meant that the Emirs had absolute power and control over the emirates so while the British officials ruled the emirs, the emirs ruled their people. It was only in the middle belt of Tivland, Abuja, Igbirra that imposition of indirect rule encountered little challenge. Here the kings had limited powers and taxation was traditionally not collected on regular basis. Lugard tackled this challenge by creating in these areas, chiefs and emirs<sup>7</sup>.

In the southern province or region of Nigeria, the success of the system was very limited. In the South-west because the administrative system of governance was semi – centralized, the Obas or kings did not enjoy absolute powers and therefore did not have absolute control over their subjects. His power and authority was subject to checks and balance by some traditional institutions. Therefore the British officials could not truly control his people by controlling

him. The locals and educated elites also engaged in series of revolts against the system due to imposition of taxes, the new power given to the Alafin under the system and exclusion of the educated elites from taking part in the administration. The most notable revolt was in 1918 by the people of Egba that were opposed to the indirect rule system. In that revolt railway lines were destroyed, stores looted and with a number of people killed<sup>8</sup>.

In the south – east, the introduction of the indirect rule could be best described as a total failure. Here the traditional system of governance was based on village democracy. It was the uncentralized or open system type. Here it involved the existence of different levels of administrative units, each carrying out different categories of functions and leadership operations. The British tried to solve this challenge through the establishment of native courts and individuals were given warrant to sit on them. The holders of these warrants were called warrant chiefs and because the warrant chiefs did not have control over the people, the British officials could not

control them. This led to numerous riots, the most famous being the Aba – women riot of 1929 – 1930 which spread to Calabar and Opobo<sup>9</sup>.

### **The aftermaths of indirect rule in Nigeria**

The history of traditional and modern system of government in Nigeria and infact in all the British territories in African cannot be complete without the mention of the indirect rule system. The system had so much impact both positive and negative on Nigeria. The first of such aftermaths was the distortion and destruction of the Nigerian indigenous legal system. The indirect rule system was an imposition of British autocracy on the people in the pretext of training and preparing their traditional rulers for further self-government. Under the system, the existing African government or traditional rulers were responsible to British officials and carried out their orders. If they refuse they would be replaced by anyone ready to do the bidding of the British officials. In the northern and southern parts of Nigeria, Emirs, Obas, Kings, Chiefs, held office at the pleasure of British officials, who

insulted our chiefs and elders by forcing them to supervise grass cutting along the roads as punishment for their independent views. Our rulers and leaders became puppets, and could have their decisions and orders vetoed. Under this system the power and prestige of the traditional rulers were considerably reduced as these traditional authorities became mere agents to the colonial administration<sup>10</sup>. This reliance on the support of British officers rather than on their people led to several clashes between the chiefs and the educated Nigerians. There was impositions of taxes and arbitrary interference with local customs and traditions<sup>11</sup>.

The second was that it was a tactical strategy by Britain to forestall the march of the people of Nigeria towards self – rule. It rather tried to perpetuate European rule in Nigeria and Africa and retard progress to self government. It tried to achieve this by excluding educated Nigerians and Africa from participating in the government of their own people. This was the reason our educated class were critical of it.

The third was that it encouraged disunity and tribal sentiments among different tribal Nigerian groups. This made the bringing together the diverse people of Nigeria into one component and united nation difficult. It encouraged tribal and ethnic politics which Nigeria is still experiencing up till today.

The fourth was change made to accommodate the indirect rule in the traditional system of Government in Nigeria. In the northern part of Nigeria for example, the emir now collected a consolidated tax instead of series of taxes. Again the District heads that were under the emirs, resided in the Districts they administrated, instead of the capital under the watch of the emir. Also the caliph of Sokoto became known as sultan and his authority limited to the district of caliphates capital, while his authority and position was taken over by the British High commissioner<sup>12</sup>. In the Eastern part of Nigeria and in Igbo land to be precise professor Elizabeth Isichei in her book wrote:

“The patterns of traditional Igbo government were hopelessly unsuited to the needs of the colonial state.

Its system of checks and balances, its pursuit of consensus by protracted discussion, its use of religious sanctions, and especially its small scale, rendered it impracticable. The British introduced a system of warrant chiefs originally because they assumed that Africans were ruled by chiefs if not kings<sup>13</sup>”

In Nigeria as a whole, traditional authorities like the emirs, obas, chiefs or warrant chiefs also introduced for the purpose of indirect rule were appointed, removed or deposed by the British High commissioner at his will.

The fifth was that the indirect rule system gave Nigerian people a corrupt, wicked, greedy and uncaring nature. This is because the British in their bid to make changes to accommodate the indirect rule system gave the traditional rulers such power and authority that never existed in the African society. The warrant chiefs in Igbo land for example became so rich through corruption and exploitation. They grew rich through the sale of justice in the courts. In the words of professor Afigbo “Nearly every warrant chief of the time was guilty of corruption”<sup>14</sup>.

This error have come to stay in Nigeria as buttressed by the recent confession of senator Adamu Muhammad Bulkachuwa on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2023 that he helped his wife, Justice Zainab Bulkachuwa influence decisions and she cooperated in delivery judgment during her time as the president and judge of the Court of Appeal.

### Conclusion

Indirect rule system in Nigeria and Africa as a whole was for the benefits of Britain. The British introduced and encouraged it to help solve the political, economic and social challenges facing their home land. It was tailored in such a manner, that it seemed to be for the political, economic and technological growth of Nigeria, but in application it was designed to achieve the reverse. Looking at the Nigeria nation of today this disruptive rather than integrative impact on Nigeria proves the notion that the aftermath of the indirect rule system on Nigeria is more on the negative side than the positive. It was not of a universal formula to assist for the planning of the advancement of Nigeria and other British African colonies. The system was applied with modifications in the three regions of Nigeria.

For instance, the system of government which the British introduced in the northern part of Nigeria and the type they introduced among the Igbo differed in degree, but not in kind.

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