

THE PROBLEM OF AFRICAN INDEPENDENCE

An Answer to a Reader's Criticism

By H. RATHBONE

[The following letter has been received from Geoffrey Gorer, the author of "Africa Dances," in criticism of a review of his book which appeared in the LABOUR MONTHLY of November last year. He writes :

Sir,

In his account of my book, "Africa Dances," your reviewer accuses me of believing that "bad colonial conditions result from the low wages of the administrators . . . and similar defects," and of stating that "a better government would suffice to make life for the inhabitants of colonial countries all right." I have neither thought nor said anything of the kind. The political portions of my book are almost entirely descriptive. I found, as I think any traveller would, that the Negroes in the Gold Coast had a higher standard of living and relatively greater freedom than their neighbours in the French colonies, and I tried to account for this by the historical reasons of the earlier colonisation of the Gold Coast, when the colonisers renounced the possession of land which was too lethal for them to live on, and the continued policy of indirect taxation, which necessitates a relatively high standard of living in the taxpayers. I never suggested any solution of the problem of colonial peoples for the very good reason that I have never found one which seems to me practical and desirable. Your reviewer apparently has however for he writes "their independence is the primary condition for the improvement of conditions there."

In so far as this is not merely a pious hope it seems to me to be untrue, standing without qualifications. Within the memory of living men Dahomey and large portions of the Ivory Coast had their independence. Dahomey was an absolute monarchy, with a ruling class who lived by war, raiding and the slave trade : the greater part of the population of the country and the neighbouring tribes were in a state of abysmal poverty and fear. In the Ivory Coast tiny tribes with no common language eked out a miserable existence in a country and climate which they had no machinery for dealing with. If the colonisers of these countries were removed to-morrow, and if no other imperialist power grabbed them, Dahomey would certainly revert to its earlier historic position, for members of the ex-royal family are still

alive : the tribes of the Ivory Coast on the other hand have been so demoralised that almost certainly anarchy would be quickly followed by extinction. The more "civilised" Negroes on the Coast are so corrupted by white bourgeois mission ideology that they would certainly exploit their poorer compatriots just as harshly as the colonisers do.

I do not mean by these arguments to support imperialism in any way, though I think it may be a historically necessary phase if the inhabitants of tropical and sub-tropical countries are to have a new and higher standard of living : what I wish to point out is that independence, by itself, is no solution. The situation in Africa is made extraordinarily complicated by the fact that the great majority of Negroes have no feeling of racial (as opposed to tribal) solidarity, and no common language. Until they acquire these attributes independence will surely merely be a mockery. It is theoretically arguable that Africans would have been better off if Europeans had never set foot in their continent : but such an argument is a complete waste of time. What has to be considered is the actual condition of Africa, and how its inhabitants can gain freedom from exploitation and a reasonable standard of living. If the LABOUR MONTHLY could produce a practical policy—and not merely pious generalisations—it could perform a most useful service by illuminating one of the most complicated problems of the present day.

I am, Yours etc.

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The problems raised here are of very much wider interest than would be contained in the immediate question of a reply to this letter. The LABOUR MONTHLY therefore prints the following article to deal with these problems.]

THE central question raised by our correspondent is whether the policy of full independence is a practical policy for the peoples of the African colonies, whether in the words of the review "their independence is a primary condition for the improvement of conditions there."

In order to answer this question it is necessary to see in what imperialism consists, what are its essential characteristics, whether it is possible under it permanently to effect any alleviation in the present conditions of exploitation and extreme oppression which exist in the colonies or whether these are in reality the very essence of imperialism.

Is Extreme Colonial Exploitation the Very Essence of Imperialism?

One of the main characteristics of the imperialist stage of capitalism, the monopoly stage as opposed to the previous stage of free competition, is not only the rule of monopolies but the fact that the export of capital becomes the most typical feature instead of the export of goods as in the period of free competition. In the principal home or metropolitan countries huge aggregates of capital had accumulated. This could be called

surplus capital in the sense that capitalism was of its very nature unable to use it at home, for instance by raising the standard of living of the workers or filling in the gap between the low development of agriculture and the relatively advanced state of industry. For otherwise, as Lenin pointed out in chapter iv of his work on Imperialism, capitalism would not be capitalism ; for the wretched conditions of the masses and the unequal development of economy are the fundamental conditions for the existence of this mode of production.

Consequently, this surplus of capital is exported to countries whose economy is relatively backward, where, in consequence of the fact that raw materials are cheap and wages are lower, capital can earn a higher rate of profit than in the home countries. Capital, therefore, in the popular jargon seeks in these colonies " fields of profitable investment." For just because of the backward nature of economy in these countries the current money equivalent of the value of labour power, *i.e.*, the labour time necessary to maintain and reproduce labour power, is ever so much less than in imperialist countries. Consequently, a rate above the normal profit, a super profit, is made not only out of the direct exploitation of the labour power of these peoples in these colonies, but also out of the export of goods, a great many more goods mainly raw materials being possible to import into the imperialist countries and exchange for a given quantity of manufactured goods exported than if these manufactured goods were exported to a fully developed capitalist country.

On the basis of this system of imperialism these super-profits have become an indispensable asset to the home capitalist, not only to facilitate the keeping of the workers in subjection at home by granting them small reforms and concessions, but also by helping to swell the special bodies of armed men, as Lenin called them, the army, navy and police force, etc., which are necessary to keep the working class at home and in the Empire under the heel of capitalism by forcible means, and also to extend that Empire.

Already therefore we see that in a very actual sense Marx's repeated statement that no workers of one nation who oppress another can themselves be free, has very real economic significance quite apart from the political conclusions to be drawn from it.

This situation has of course been intensified by the whole general crisis of capitalism and by the post-war economic crises. Super-profit is more vitally necessary than ever before to maintain the capitalist system of Britain. What is more, as capitalism always exploits most those sections of the oppressed who are least organised and least advanced, capitalism has tended to throw the burden of its crisis more particularly on the colonial peoples. In addition, while the crisis, being one of over-production particularly of raw materials, has had the effect of menacing the normally high super-profits which capitalism used to make out of the

exploitation of the colonies, this has only led it all the more to try and compensate itself by intensifying colonial exploitation.

This gives some explanation for the facts which we will cite below with regard to several of the African colonies, showing that the whole apparatus of colonial oppression has been enormously intensified in the last few years.

Consequently, if we examine the contention that reforms in the colonies are possible without directly menacing colonial exploitation, we find that every economic development particularly in these countries is leading exactly in the opposite direction. Any fight on a programme of immediate demands therefore of an economic *or* political nature will be the more bitterly resisted by imperialism and will even more openly, than in a similar struggle in the home country, reveal the real nature of imperialist exploitation and the dictatorship by which it maintains itself.

Nevertheless there are more opportunities to-day than ever before for just such a fight on immediate demands. There are an increasing number drawn from almost all sections in Britain to-day, as is more fully explained in the concluding portions of this article, who, while not prepared to stand out for the complete independence of the colonies, nevertheless will be found to be prepared to give their support to, if not actively co-operate in, the struggle of the colonial peoples for the elementary right of freedom of meeting, organisation and the press, as well as for certain economic issues. The ignominious defeat of the Hoare-Laval robber proposals together with the wide support given to Abyssinia's fight for independence with all its repercussions has shown this clearly enough. The very essence of imperialism which has already been characterised and the consequent fierce resistance that will be put up to even such limited demands will in itself advance the struggle to a higher stage as well as lead to much closer relations and understanding between the colonial peoples and the mass of the people here in imperialist Britain.

The Origin of the Backward Africa Theory

Now, having shown that the extreme forms of oppression characteristic of colonial conditions are of the very essence of imperialism, let us discuss in general what is behind the argument brought up by Geoffrey Gorer in his contention that independence is no practical solution at any rate for the African people. Behind this argument is a complete under-estimation of the capabilities of the African peoples—of their capabilities for revolutionary struggle and all that that implies. The imperialists, for their own purposes, have long tried to perpetuate the theory that there were people who were biologically, etc., inferior to others, were incapable of development and therefore of necessity required to be ruled by other peoples. This theory stage by stage has come to be broken

down. When brought up against the facts of the history of the Eastern peoples, it was soon shown to have no validity at all as regards these peoples, many of whom had civilisations much older than those who would impose their rule on them. Then for many years it was seriously put forward as valid for those of Negro blood. Scientifically, this theory in turn was exposed as completely false several years before the war, but in spite of such an exposure it was, and is still, maintained by a very great number of imperialists and their hangers-on. For practical politics, however, the previous simple justification for imperialist rule over the African peoples as being scientifically necessary for ever has been modified so that, as the Mandates Article (22) of the League of Nations Covenant reads, these peoples are now characterised as "not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world" and therefore, in the name of what is called a "sacred trust of civilisation the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations." While it was further laid down that such tutelage should be "temporary," no sort of guidance as to the conditions which must exist before terminating this tutelage was of course indicated.

On this basis, which provides full justification for the imperialists to impose their rule on the African peoples, no opportunity has been given them to develop. What is more, of necessity, as the general crisis of capitalism intensifies, attempts are being increasingly made to stop up every loop-hole that still exists for such development.

Seeing the apparent backwardness of these peoples, many sections of the Labour movement have come to accept the backwardness as inherent in their stage of development, disregarding the force which prevents development and the facts that show that this inherent backwardness theory has no basis. Consequently, the underestimation of the capabilities of the African is prevalent throughout the movement and even in certain sections of the left-wing is quite sincerely held. Yet the experience of the developments which have taken place in the Soviet Union since the revolution in what were formerly the colonies of the Tsarist Empire should have gone far to dispel any such underestimation. Enormous vital forces were released amongst these nationalities by the revolution. Not only has illiteracy already been almost completely abolished, but what was largely a traditional and oral culture has blossomed forth into permanent written form already challenging comparison with the culture of what was formerly Russia proper. In addition, the economy has been revolutionised by the growth of great centres of industry, geological surveys have been undertaken revealing enormous hidden resources, and innumerable and ever-increasing numbers of outstanding figures have arisen from what was formerly treated as an illiterate mass under the Tsarist dictatorship, in all the various branches of industry, science, literature and art. And yet some of these peoples before the revolution

were not very much further advanced eighteen years ago than the peoples of Africa at the present day.

Geoffrey Gorer, along with many others in the Labour movement on the basis of what seems to be the backwardness of these peoples, then puts the question: well, then, if independence was granted to-morrow would there not be chaos, anarchy, etc.? But this is putting the question in a completely unhistorical manner. No peoples who have ever been subjected to other peoples at any period of history have ever suddenly found themselves free to-morrow, as it were. The process of winning independence is a historical process. In this process what appear to be insuperable barriers between different nationalities, religions and languages which militate against the growth of solidarity necessary not only to gain independence but to organise the independent state, will be found to have been broken down.

Let us take the actual events in the struggle in the various African colonies in order first to see whether these struggles do not prove that the underestimation in the Labour movement in Britain of the capability of the Africans for revolutionary struggle is a fact and that this underestimation, as one would expect, naturally follows from the theory of the Africans' inferiority (we will also see that this same underestimation also exists very widely among the imperialists themselves—an important factor which contributes largely to the growing concern as revealed in recent bourgeois writings for the safety of their African empire as also to the almost panic-stricken measures which these imperialists are now taking to try and prevent any conscious movement from growing). Secondly, we will see how these facts will show that the barriers of nationality, language, etc., mentioned above, are actually being broken down in the historical process of the struggle.

At the same time we will refer in most cases to the methods used by the imperialists in their endeavour to suppress these movements and also to the attitude of the Labour Party towards these movements in order to emphasise once again how much the capabilities of the Africans are underestimated and how grave the consequences of this have been not only for the Africans, but also for the British workers as well.

The Nigerian Women's Movement Against Taxation

Let us first take the 1929 protest of the Nigerian women against taxation which was most ruthlessly suppressed, at least fifty women having been massacred, shot down in some cases by machine-gun fire, and in others driven into the rivers and left to drown (reports that have reached here indicate, however, that in all probability many more than fifty were massacred). We have at our disposal in this instance the report of a very complete enquiry into the massacre (this enquiry was the second,

the first having been merely a white-washing affair ; this second enquiry was forced on the Government owing to very widespread protests in Nigeria and several Africans were put on the Committee). Though the report stoutly denies that the Government ever had any intention of taxing women, nevertheless they admit that certain actions of officials in starting counting arrangements in some of the villages might have given cause for such rumours, especially as in 1926 a deliberate "deception" (in the words of the report) was practised in counting the inhabitants, including some of the villages concerned in the protest, while concealing from them that this was for the purpose of taxation of men. Contributory factors, the report further admits, were (1) discontent caused by taxation of men ; (2) "widespread discontent at the persecution, extortion and corruption practised by the so-called Warrant Chiefs or Native Court members"¹ and (3) the low prices ruling for produce and the high prices for imported goods (page 94, Report of the Aba Commission of Enquiry, 1930).

The protest we learn covered an area of over one hundred miles long by eighty broad in one of the most thickly populated, but at the same time so-called backward, areas of Southern Nigeria. On one page (95) the Report refers to "this unprecedented mass movement of women . . . such energetic, purposeful initiative taken by women is unheard of in native history." One of the minority reporters goes even farther in this direction and says in referring to the Warrant Chiefs as being deeply distrusted by the women :

"Therein," he says, "lies to my mind, the real explanation of the absolutely independent massed action of the women which is so utterly inconsistent with accepted ideas of the political and general dependence of women on their menfolk in this part of the world" (page 130).

And this, as he said, happened in areas some of which "were the most backward parts" (page 131)—we would add, in this most "backward" region of Nigeria.

Here we would only say is conclusive proof that the barrier of women as an "inferior" sex, the barrier created by the complete dependence of women on their menfolk, was broken down and utterly disappeared in the course of the struggle (it should be noted that it is the custom in this part of the world for women not to leave their houses at all except with the express permission of their husbands).

Now in describing the women's organisations, which the report asserts were behind the protest movement, one of the District Officers is quoted

¹These Chiefs are really nothing but Government agents, in very few places being in any way recognised, let alone elected, by the tribes or sub-tribes over whom they are supposed to have authority. The Native Courts themselves are also admitted by this report to be only artificial graftings on native customs. These two institutions it may be said in passing are two of the main props of the much belauded system of Indirect Rule "invented" by Lord Lugard and sedulously propagated as being part and parcel of African life.

with regard to the younger women's organisation (which came into existence, by the way, immediately after the conquest of Nigeria by British imperialism) in describing how it was built up, as saying that :

The towns are grouped into areas which are made to correspond to Native Court areas, *irrespective of clan or tribal distinctions* (our emphasis, H.R.) (page 4 of Appendix III., 1).

This statement can be taken together with the evidence of one of the demonstrators who testified to the fact that a certain section of one of the demonstrations was "from different towns and tribes," herself saying that this section spoke one language which she did not understand (page 22 of Appendix III, 14a) ; this was repeated by others and confirmed by the Government Secretary of the province himself. It shows clearly that one of the chief barriers mentioned by Geoffrey Gorer, the barrier of language and tribal differences, was broken down in the action of the demonstration, prepared as it was by the fact that one organisation at least itself disregards tribal distinctions.

Lastly, we shall quote the following in order to prove how a movement which started primarily as a protest against taxation quickly took on much deeper significance with much wider demands as it developed.

It is clear from the Secretary's own version of events that the movement was a culmination of the tremendous body of bitterness that had been growing for several years as a result of the various forms of oppression : the spark was the preparation that seemed on foot to tax women, but in the words of the Secretary himself, "every grievance is connected either directly or indirectly with the Government" ; then referring to "the multifarious demands that were subsequently made by the women," he proceeds to claim that :

It is no exaggeration to say that the movement finally assumed the character of a revolt against forms of established authority and control. Had stern measures not been taken to stem the tide of the outbreak there is every indication to show that the women's disturbance would have culminated in a general rising of the young men and women against all authority (page 42 of Appendix III., 1).

We have quoted these somewhat highly-coloured words, not because we necessarily think that the movement of itself did in fact take the character of an uprising, but because it certainly had that tendency, a tendency which was forced on it willy-nilly first by the guile of the agents of British imperialism, and secondly by the ferocious use of force that the Government employed in meeting the unarmed demonstrators—a use of force which the Report condemned in all cases but three* as having been "unjustified." Thus, from what started as a peaceful demonstration against the tax rumour developed into a quite consciously anti-imperialist movement. This movement, let it be emphasised once again,

* Out of 13 distinct places at which firing of one sort or another was resorted to.

was organised over a very wide area with complete disregard of tribal differences in a region considered one of the most backward in a backward province by women who especially in this area were traditionally regarded as the inferior sex.

Now, owing to the brutal nature of the way in which this protest was put down, probably some of the solidarity which the struggle brought out has disappeared or has been so driven underground that it is only with difficulty surviving. Nevertheless, what news we have had at any rate of the women's movement on the Coast, shows that several partially successful agitations have since occurred, *e.g.*, with regard to the attempt to compel the market women to pay rent for their stalls on the grounds that they have been rebuilt or compulsorily moved to areas which were not the traditional ones and to land which must be rented, or again with regard to the agitation over burial grounds.

In the case of the 1929 massacre at least, the working-class movement in Britain must bear very great responsibility for the brutal nature with which the villages from where the women came were afterwards punished. For it will be remembered that it was the Labour Government that was ultimately responsible for this repression. The Labour Party, however, which to this day maintains that the Africans are not fit to govern themselves (*vide* their Hastings Conference Statement of 1933 on Colonial Policy) were only logically following out their opinion in putting down this protest through their Government. For if a people can't govern themselves or stand up by themselves as an independent community because of their backward development, they must have a strong government able to carry on in their place. Such governments need revenue and any protest, especially an organised one, against paying such revenue can justifiably be met with stern measures and even with force. Further any suggestion of meeting the representatives of the organisations which were behind this protest in conference to discuss the grievances of their members would, of course, be ruled as useless just because of this backward development.

What would have been the situation, we are entitled to ask, if the Labour Government had, following on this protest, repudiated the Imperialist agents who undoubtedly had been instructed by someone to make preparations at least for a preliminary census of the women with a view to taxation in some form. What would have been the situation had they taken the necessary steps to make it known that they as a Labour Government in Britain were against at least any further taxation at any rate of the mass of the population? What would have been the situation if the Labour Government had seen that the organisation behind this movement was consulted concerning the other grievances which the official report on the massacre clearly brought out that they

undoubtedly possessed. Surely the support given by the Labour Government to such demands would have been one of the main factors in causing this movement to spread, and so *in the struggle training the population* to take over the Government when they had gained their independence. It is clear that this example alone shows that it is the process of the developing struggle against imperialism which enlightens the masses as to the aims of imperialism and at the same time trains a corps of the population who become the leaders of the mass of the people in building up the nucleus of the State which comes into being when freedom from imperialism has been secured.

The Home Rule Movement in the Gold Coast

Secondly, let us take the case of the Gold Coast, where there is undoubtedly a definite Home Rule Movement. It is in this colony where the feeling against imperialism has recently become most vocal. First of all, this is to some extent due to the fact that conditions forced the imperialists when they conquered this country to grant what they call a certain measure of independence to the Gold Coast which the Chiefs look upon as an alliance? This, together with the fact that climatic conditions have made direct rule difficult and to the fact that cocoa has developed into a vital product for British Capitalism—all this has meant that a semblance of nationalism has grown up. But what has caused a very big advance in this area recently is the new policy of imperialism which is being developed in the colonies. One of the biggest factors has been in general capitalism's necessity to increase the exploitation of the colonial peoples in order to compensate for the decline in the aggregate of profits at home as a result of the post-war crises. Further, the collapse of the Gold Standard resulting as it has done in a very large increased price of gold has caused a big development in the exploitation of the gold resources of this colony, a development which was also impossible previously owing to the fact that the technique of gold-mining was not sufficiently advanced, as well as the technique of motor transport, etc.

The imperialists further saw that after the depression in cocoa prices when cocoa was being sold in the Gold Coast for a few shillings a bag, resulting in a mass agitation amongst the small farmers either for complete boycott of the market or for an organised restriction in production, or even for an attempted organisation of independent co-operative sales, that in order to insure an increase in the exploitation of this colony an increase in repression would be absolutely necessary.

Consequently, the attack on tribal customs has been tightened up as, for instance, in the arbitrary and increasing number of instances of destoolments² of even slightly recalcitrant chiefs and their replacement

²The stool in parts of West Africa is equivalent to the throne or crown as symbol of kingship or chieftainship. A Destoolment, therefore, is equivalent to forcible abdication.

by puppets of imperialism ; laws or ordinances have been passed such as the Seditious Bill which aims at isolating the people of the Gold Coast from all contact with revolutionary or even progressive movements in other countries. The struggle of the Gold Coast people against, for instance, these two actions of the imperialists has undoubtedly given life to the Home Rule Movement, and also in the process has increased the class division in this movement.

For instance, take the events leading up to the appointment of the recent two delegations to this country from that colony. The first delegation was led by Nana Sir Offori Atta, a paramount chief who at any rate during certain periods had shown his loyalty to imperialism, *e.g.*, during the cocoa agitation when the price of cocoa fell to the lowest depths and the farmers tried to organise against it, at which point he was instrumental in preventing the movement from really becoming controlled by the mass of the small farmers, and secondly when he was for a time director of a gold mining company. This delegation to protest against these laws was suddenly got together with very little mass backing, and came to England refusing to have any contact with any non-Government people or organisations. Further, when they returned and reported that these laws were inevitable and had been passed in the best interests of the Africans to prevent anarchy, etc., etc., they were met in many cases with a very hostile reception. On the other hand, the present delegation now in England, the organisation of which it is stated actually led to the hasty collection of the first, the "loyal" delegation, claims to represent as delegates of the Aborigines Rights Protection Society a vast proportion of the people of the Gold Coast ; further, as a result of its insistence at not being satisfied with the reply given to the Atta delegation, it has had tremendous response in the Gold Coast. Meetings have been held all over the country and undoubtedly in consequence the home rule movement in general and the feeling of solidarity amongst the mass of the population has been growing. Moreover, through the instrumentality of this second delegation various questions have been raised here in Britain with regard even to the conditions in the gold mines, and if more could be done in this direction, particularly with the assistance of the Labour Movement here, the movement in the Gold Coast that is behind this delegation would undoubtedly develop a social programme which, in the struggle around it would not only lead to a still greater differentiation between those who are for or against imperialist rule in that country, but would develop the feeling of solidarity between those of different tribes or languages ; for instance, as in India, where the caste system in the mills is ignored by the workers owing to the conditions of co-operative work, so in the mines in the Gold Coast a similar process would happen.

This is not to say that especially in the mines the imperialists realising the danger will not try and put obstacles in the way of solidarity being achieved. For they will do it in the Gold Coast just as is to be seen in South Africa or even more vividly in certain British owned sugar estates in Portuguese East Africa, where they try and keep the members of one tribe separated from another and hostile to each other in a regular hierarchy of work. For instance, on these sugar estates the white man is exclusively the manager or skilled clerk, then come West Indian Negroes imported as gangers; under them, in a grade of semi-skilled work on the estate are workers recruited from a nearby tribe, and below them doing the most unskilled and menial work are others recruited in a tribe up-country which is regarded there as at a lower stage of civilisation. The pay, of course, is suitably graded and each section of workers is treated with different conditions and of course any signs of hostility between them is encouraged. Nevertheless, even here on certain occasions solidarity movements have been partially successful.

In general, with regard to conditions on the West Coast of Africa, it is very significant that in contradistinction to the myth which exists in Britain that Nigeria is a model colony, the generally expressed attitude on the Gold Coast and Sierre Leone at any rate is to thank their stars that they are not ruled with such oppression as the Nigerians are. Further, they dread the arrival of anyone as a Governor who has at any time been an administrator in Nigeria, as they know that they will get some of the same medicine which is forced on the Nigerians. Concrete proof that this attitude has very real substance is to be seen from the fact that one of the arguments used by the local government's officials in the Gold Coast for imposing the Sedition Bill on the people there against an opposition which has been unparalleled in its extent, was that it was only what had for long been in force in Nigeria.

(To be continued.)

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