

British Indirect Rule

By George Padmore

SINCE the ignominious collapse of British Imperialism in the Far East, there has been considerable American criticism of Britain's colonial administration in Asia and Africa. Apart from purely military considerations, it is generally agreed that the reason why Britain was unable to mobilize the enthusiastic support of the native populations in Malaya, Singapore and Burma, was because her administration had no roots among the indigenous races. It could not be otherwise, for the traditional method of governing primitive communities through local tribal and semi-feudal authorities—officially known as Indirect Rule—only serves to arrest the development of the democratic aspirations of the nationalist and labor movements in the colonial empire. Consequently, when Britain's imperialistic rival, Japan, struck, the overwhelming majority of the Asiatics demonstrated their resentment against the status quo by assuming an apathetic attitude, while minority groups joined the invaders against their British overlords.

What is this system of Indirect Rule? How did it originate and how does it function?

The father of Indirect Rule was Sir Frederick, now Lord Lugard, one of the foremost exponents of the "White

The author of "How Britain Rules Africa" goes here into an illuminating discussion of a question much in the minds of those who are thinking of colonies in the post-war world

Man's Burden," and for years the representative of His Majesty's Government on the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations.

Lugard, like Cecil Rhodes, was largely responsible for adding extensive areas in East and West Africa to the Empire. He justified these annexations on the ground of economic necessity. "As long as our policy is one of trade, we are compelled to seek markets, for old ones are being closed to us by hostile tariffs, and our great dependencies, which formerly were consumers of our goods, are now becoming our commercial rivals. It is inherent in a great colonial and commercial empire like ours that they go forward or backward. . . . We are accountable to posterity that opportunities which now present themselves of extending the sphere of our industrial enterprise are not neglected, for the opportunities now offered will never recur again." (*The*

Rise of Our East African Empire, p. 585.)

Not surprisingly, Lugard chose to go forward, and proceeded to conquer the country of Uganda in 1890, and Northern Nigeria in 1900. It was in these countries that the system of Indirect Rule, or Native Administration, was first innovated.

Puppet Governments in Nigeria

In Northern Nigeria, the British found the Muslim populations living under highly developed feudal social institutions. After breaking the military power of the Fulani emirates, Lugard set up puppet governments by utilizing the services of certain of the Sultans, Emirs and Chiefs. These native rulers now stand in the same relationship to the British Raj as the various Quisling regimes in Europe to the Nazi overlord.

Lugard was no visionary humbug. He did not enlist in the service of the East Africa Chartered Company in order to spread Christianity and western civilization among the blacks, but to promote British trade and to secure those markets and raw materials which he recognized as being so vital to the British imperialist structure.

"The tropics," he wrote, "produce in abundance a class of raw materials and foodstuffs which cannot be grown in the temperate zone and which are so vital to the needs of civilized men that they have in very truth become essential to civilization. It was the realization of this fact, (as I have said) which led the nations of Europe to compete for control of the African tropics." (*The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, p. 43.)

In 1885, the Imperial Government granted a charter to the Royal Niger Company—an organization of merchant adventurers—to open up and exploit the Niger regions of West Africa. The company surrendered its charter in 1900, whereupon the Foreign Office despatched the then Colonel Lugard to take over control and extend British power into the hinterland, so as to prevent the French and Germans from annexing the northern parts of Nigeria, upon which they had been gradually encroaching. Upon his arrival, Lugard's first task was to organize a native army, which he recruited chiefly from the indigenous Hausa, who hated their Fulani rulers, alien conquerors from North



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South African troops serving in the English colonial army pose with their mascot, an eleven months old lioness. These men are a part of the labor battalions engaged in building advanced landing fields in the Western Desert.

Africa. With this native force under British officers and N.C.O.'s Lugard marched northward, and by 1903 had completed the conquest of the Mohammedan sultanates of Kano and Sokoto.

Problem of Administrative Forms

Having achieved his military objective, Lugard was faced with the immediate problem of establishing some form of administration which would efficiently maintain "law and order" over a population of some ten million natives scattered over a vast area. The difficulties were increased by the fact that the country was still far from being pacified. Many tribes were hostile, and guerilla bands were in control of areas beyond the British garrisons.

The effects of the climate were felt by whites more than now, when hygienic methods and prophylactic measures ensure against the worst results. Few Europeans in the early part of the century could be induced to settle in West Africa, which bore the title of the "White Man's Grave." Furthermore, the Home Government was just then deeply involved in the Boer War. The War Office was in no position to send the reinforcements which would enable Lugard to complete his military occupation, while the Treasury was against spending more money on African adventures. It was in these circumstances that Indirect Rule came into being. Lugard was obliged to improvise with the resources at his disposal, in the hope that things would turn out well.

Instead of banishing the Sultans and other chiefs who had surrendered, which was the usual British custom, "Lugard called all the leading men in each chieftainship together and gave a letter of appointment to their new ruler, promising to respect their religion and customs as far as humanity allowed; but he made it clear that the British were now over all." (Margery Perham: *Africans and British Rule*, p. 41).

Indirect Rule was soon discovered by the British officials in Nigeria to be a cheap method of governing huge territories peopled by primitive races. The experiences of these early political officers were collected and later rationalized into a theory—a new philosophy of colonial government. Books have been written extolling the benefits which Indirect Rule has conferred upon the Africans. One of the most enthusiastic theoreticians and prolific writers on the subject is Lord Lugard's niece, Miss Margery Perham, lecturer on Native Administration at Oxford. Miss Perham's views have been expounded at some length in her book, *Native Admin-*



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One of the African chiefs allowed by the British to remain in office. He is Sir Osei Agyeman Premph II, K.B.E., Paramount Chief of Ashanti, in full ceremonial dress

istration in Nigeria, which has become a sort of official guide book for British public school and university graduates appointed by the Colonial Office to official posts in Africa and Asiatic colonial territories like Malaya and the Straits Settlements. For purposes of study, it is for them an obligatory handbook.

Indirect Rule, or Native Administration, then, originated in historical circumstances at the beginning of the century, when Northern Nigeria was being opened up to British trade and commerce. Lugard's improvisations were dictated by "Hobson's choice." Since then, many changes and modifications have been made. Today, Indirect Rule no longer resembles the crude makeshift affair it was in those early pioneering days. As "peace and order"

were established throughout the country, Lugard (who became the first Governor-General) and his successors, especially Sir Donald Cameron, evolved the present elaborate governmental machinery of native administration, which is auxiliary to the central government.

What the conquerors have done is simply to superimpose a diffuse native bureaucracy upon the old feudal and tribal systems. Prior to the coming of the British, the chiefs (except in the northern emirates ruled by the powerful Moslem autocrats) derived their authority from the indigenous natives, through elders and counsellors. Now all this has been changed. The chiefs are no longer subject to the democratic control of their people, for under the system of Indirect Rule, "a native authority or

native administration derives its powers direct from the Government; its powers are limited by Government and the native administration becomes an integral part of the machinery of government." In plain language, the chiefs have become merely instruments of the central government. They can be dismissed by the Governor under the Appointment and Deposition of Chief's Ordinance should they fail to carry out his orders.

Nevertheless, the advocates and champions of Indirect Rule seek to justify the system on the ground that it educates the Africans in self-government. "Native administration," says Sir Donald Cameron, "is designed to adapt for the purpose of local government the tribal institutions which the native peoples have evolved for themselves, so that the latter may develop in a constitutional manner from their own past, guided and restrained by the traditions or sanctions which they had inherited, moulded or modified as they may be on the advice of British officers and by the general control of those officers."

This is a vast deception. People denied education and the most elementary democratic rights and civil liberties are in no position to develop self-government. How is it possible for people terrorized by a native despot backed by British authority to learn the art of self-government?

Functions of Native Administration

The principal functions of native administration are:

1. to maintain "law and order";
2. to administer "justice";
3. to administer certain branches of local government;
4. to collect taxes;
5. to supply forced labor.

In Nigeria and other territories where Indirect Rule operates, the country has been divided into tribal administrative units. Each of these native administrations is presided over by a paramount chief assisted by a Council, the composition of which must be approved by the British Government. The connecting links between the various native administrations and the British Government are European officials known as Residents, Provincial and District Commissioners. They act as "advisors" to the chiefs and superintend the fulfilment of the duties assigned to the native administrations by the Governor, the local representative of the Colonial Office.

¹ Capt. J. A. McKenzie, M.C. Address to the Federal Council of the Western Provinces of Nigeria. Reported in *The West African Review* (London), May, 1941.

Within many of these tribal political units there exist ethnic enclaves comprising tribal minorities. These groups in many cases have objected to being placed under the jurisdiction of extra-tribal chiefs, and the British authorities have solved this problem by placing their administration under the direct control of British officials.

Branches of local government entrusted to the native administration are those concerned with the maintenance of roads, the upkeep of public buildings, essential services, and the like. Its most important functions, however, are the collection of taxes and the supply of forced labor. For as Lady Simon points out in her book, *Slavery*, "Almost every colonizing Government today is exacting forced labor for what it calls 'public works.' . . . The tendency is to regard almost any kind of Government service as of general public benefit. Forced labour on roads, railways, bridges, as carriers, paddlers and hunters—these and kindred obligations make up an ever-increasing burden upon the millions of coloured peoples in the territories of tropical Africa and elsewhere. . . ."

"The burden which modern Governments impose on the natives is indeed

enormously heavier than that imposed by the chiefs in former times. . . . The right to exact this form of labour, which places in the hands of administrators everywhere an easy, if doubtful, method of exacting cheap labour for Government works, is the cause today of a great antipathy by the natives towards 'Government,' which is ceasing to figure in the eyes of the inhabitants as an institution for the administration of justice and the maintenance of public order, and is coming to be regarded simply as a piece of powerful machinery for exacting toil." (*Slavery*, pp. 177-179)

Systematic Abuses

As to taxes, these supply one of the main sources of the revenue of the central government. In all African colonies the natives pay some form of hut, poll, or dog tax, often all three. The amounts vary from 4s. to 30s. The Governor, as head of the Central Government, decides upon the amount of tax to be paid and instructs the Provincial and District Commissioners as to the amount to be collected from each native administration. The Commissioners summon the chiefs and their councils to explain the

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Members of the Kunasi, Ashanti home guard, pass in review before their Paramount Chief, who stands at the extreme right in military dress

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order of the Governor, since the chiefs and not the Commissioners are made responsible for the collection of the taxes. Native defaulters are liable to arrest and imprisonment by the chiefs, who are invested with judicial powers.

To raise money for their taxes, the natives are encouraged to leave their villages and seek employment in the mines and plantations owned and operated by European capitalists. Thus, quite apart from strict economic necessity, the system of direct taxation is a means of supplying cheap labor to private enterprise. A part of the money collected in the form of direct taxes and court fines is retained by the chiefs for the upkeep of their establishments. The bulk of this money, however, is squandered on the salaries of the native rulers, defraying the upkeep of palatial quarters and large retinues, and is providing durbars for visiting Governors and Provincial Commissioners.

Direct taxation in Sierra Leone, officially known as "the ancient and loyal colony," has been a subject of protest for over two generations. When the British established their protectorate over the hinterland of this territory all chiefs were instructed to collect from every native a hut tax of 10s. for handing over to the British Government, which would make the chiefs a rebate of 5s. The enforcement of the tax led to an uprising in 1898, and an official enquiry under the chairmanship of Sir David Chalmers condemned the tax as "obnoxious to the customs and feelings of the people." However, it was decided to retain the tax but to reduce it to 5s., and it is still being collected. (See R. L. Buell: *The Native Problem in Africa*, Vol. I, p. 863)

Chiefs who fail to hand over the amount estimated for their districts by the Central Government forfeit the deficit from their subsidies. Consequently, they frequently resort to the most barbarous methods to collect taxes. They hold women and children as hostages; flog and torture defaulters. Red Guinea pepper, salt and the sjambok—the raw rhinoceros hide whip—are the instruments which have been used as "an official warrant" for the purpose of extorting taxes from the natives in the Sierra Leone protectorate. Sometimes cases involving death through torture come to the attention of Parliament. For example, on May 24, 1941, Rev. Reginald Sorensen asked the Secretary of State for Colonies "whether the Sierra Leone Government have been asked to institute an enquiry into the charges made to

them of flogging and the administration of pepper employed to induce the prompt payment of government taxes in the colony and, in particular, at Bunumbu; or what steps have been taken to refute them?"

Replying to this question, Mr. Malcolm MacDonald, then Colonial Secretary, said "The Governor informs me that while there has been no specific demand for an inquiry, he was asked 'for any report or information which the Government would be in a position to supply' on the matter. An incident at Bunumbu had already been reported, and an investigation begun on 6th February revealed that four persons had been tied up by chieftom messengers, who rubbed pepper on them. These messengers have been dismissed and are liable to action for assault, while a court messenger who was present but took no active part has been punished by reduction in rank. No chief or member of the tribal authority was involved." (Hansard, May 24, 1941)

Hinders National Development

Apart from the fact that Indirect Rule is "cheap, effective and a way of getting into touch with all Africans, however backward," as Margery Perham puts it (*Africans and British Rule*, p. 74), it is being used by the Colonial Office to put a brake on the developing national consciousness among the Africans and to defer the introduction of western democratic institutions.

"Blessed will be the generation of this glorious land that will see the end of the indirect rule system and the end of native administration," declares the leading native paper of West Africa,



Wounded South African native troops return from battle

the "West African Pilot" (March 23, 1941). "Any system of government which nurtures feudalism or advances a baronial class who must thrive at the expense of the lower classes is undesirable. . . . The powerful indirect rulers of the north enjoy good salaries and oriental palaces, they have nothing to complain. But the masses under them have no justice, no education and their health is not enviable. . . . The building up of a ruling class, vested with power, supplied with money and set up to live in pomp and luxury side by side with a very poor and underfed peasant class, will have exactly the same result as such a system has had in other countries—namely, the people seek the destruction of such institutions. When the poor discover that they cannot reach the Government with their grievances except through a stifled organisation their dislike is expressed in a sudden turn to violence and the contagion spreads. We warn Government to read the signs of the times, modernise and modify the relation between the subject people and the native authorities under whom they live."

Indirect Rule most emphatically impedes the economic and cultural development of the masses. For in order to bolster up anachronistic tribal institutions which, left to themselves, would disintegrate under the impact of modern ideas, the authorities use the chiefs to combat all progressive ideology. "There is at the present time a school of thought among Africans themselves which professes to look upon native administration as old-fashioned and retrogressive and not in accordance with the spirit of democracy or of the times," declared Capt. J. A. McKenzie, M.C., in an address to the Federal Council of the Western Provinces of Nigeria. (reported in *The West African Review* (London), May, 1941).

"Most educated Africans, especially in West Africa and the Sudan, criticise and even strongly condemn indirect rule," asserts Margery Perham (*Africans and British Rule*, p. 69). "They say that indirect rule gives power to uneducated chiefs and elders instead of to the educated; that it strengthens tribal feeling and so continues the disunity of the country. It is, they say, part of the old policy of 'divide and rule,' by which an imperial power keeps its subjects weak and prevents their advance towards self-government."

Dictatorial Powers of the Chiefs

Indirect Rule, like Fascism, is essentially undemocratic and dictatorial. The blacks have absolutely no voice in in-

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Most of it as in Latin America was through concubinage but with a surprisingly large number of legal marriages both of white men with colored women as well as of colored men with white women—and much of this was in the South too!

For Florida and Louisiana white colonies of Spain and France never had laws against intermarriage. Rogers digs up one case, that of A. T. Morgan of Mississippi of all places, who had the law against intermarriage repealed so that he might marry a Negro woman. Many white masters freed their Negro mistresses, moved North with them, and later married them. Several instances of this are listed. Many famous Americans had Negro mistresses and mulatto children: Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, Colonel Thomas H. Benton, Colonel Richard M. Johnson, ninth vice-president of the United States, Thaddeus Stevens, and others.

Rogers has also noted many historical sidelights never mentioned in the history texts: that Negroes, both slave and free, were often co-respondents in divorce suits of prominent white men; that upper-class white women often kept Negro lovers; that rich Negroes often had white wives and concubines; that white fathers often sold their mulatto daughters into prostitution; that practically all the so-called Indians on the Atlantic seaboard have Negro ancestry; even many "Indians" of the West are Negroes; that white people were frequently sold as Negro slaves; and that miscegenation, despite the law, goes on today just as merrily as of yore.

Our author shows that with the multiple ancestry of Americans that many famous Americans, some of whom he lists, had Negro blood. He also lists the names of many present-day mixed couples and frequently gives their pictures.

This book is a piece of absorbing, illuminating reading with its 76 full-page illustrations, its appendixes, anecdotes, and many case histories.

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fluencing public policy nor in its making. They have one duty, and that is to obey the chiefs, who in turn must obey the white men put over them. Any innocent man can be picked up by the special police, which are maintained by the native administration, brought before the chief's court and thrown into prison. He has no right to legal representation.

The judicial power vested in the native authority makes the chief the dispenser of the law, subject only to the superior jurisdiction of the political commissioner stationed in his district as "adviser." The chief's own police are known in Northern Nigeria as *dogarai*. Quite often the chief is prosecutor and judge combined, and he employs his personal jailors to hold his victims in custody at his own pleasure.

A newspaper in West Africa, the *Nigerian Eastern Mail* (July 20, 1940), reporting a meeting of the Resident, which was held in the High Court,

Enugu, with representatives of the various unions and societies in the district, to discuss the question of the Unugu native court, observed: "It is noteworthy that the general feeling of the meeting was against having anything to do with a native court for Enugu. . . . We ourselves have always been entirely lacking in enthusiasm for these so-called 'native courts.' In our opinion the scandal of bribery and corruption permeates the whole system and we see little likelihood of there being any pertinent improvement in this respect. The authorities tell us that the native court system has proved popular with the people. We are unable to accept this assurance without qualification. . . . The system is of course very popular with the venal chiefs and even among the honest and upright chiefs who are attracted by the dignity and prestige attached to court membership. But there is no educated and enlightened African in Nigeria who would prefer to have his case tried before a native court rather than before a magistrate of the Supreme Court or even a provincial court officer. If there is any educated African with such strange preference, we have never met him.

"In the opinion of Captain O'Connor (the British Resident), objection to a native court would imply that natives cannot be trusted to do justice. We really cannot be expected to take such argument seriously. African magistrates have proved very popular with the Nigerian public, and there is a public clamour for the appointment of African judges. The leaders of Nigerian public opinion feel strongly that we should be judged by legal minds and by Africans of a class and upbringing that makes them impervious to bribery and not by the most conservative and least enlightened of our fellows who, in very many cases, have neither the intellect to appreciate the principle of judicial integrity nor the strength of character to refuse a bribe."

No dictator ever had greater power than these black agents of British colonial misrule. For as long as the chiefs collect the amount of the tax assigned for their districts and supply such forced labor as is called for, the Commissioners avoid as much as possible any intervention in purely native affairs, such as conflicts between chiefs and the people. By avoidance of any embroilment in native palaver, the white official seeks to maintain a superior aloofness as evidence of his prestige.

"The system," says Lord Raglan in his book (*If I Were a Dictator*, pp. 96-97), "is that in each district a man is recognized or appointed as sultan or chief, and is given what in practice are absolute powers. He may rob or torture his subjects; he may waste all the reve-

nue in debauchery, but his subjects dare not complain, and if they did would receive no redress. It is only when there is a rebellion or some glaring scandal which the Government is unable to hush up, that any action is taken.

"The chiefs for the most part have been brought up in an atmosphere of barbarism, and they object strongly to the acquisition of European knowledge, and especially to the learning of the English language by their subjects, and in this they are supported by the Colonial Office, the great aim of which is to prevent any African from learning English."

Indirect Rule has become the most widely used method of British colonial administration. Ironically enough, this brand of Colonial Fascism was introduced into Tanganyika, the former German colony in East Africa, by Sir Donald Cameron, when the British Government took over that territory as a league of Nations mandate. From there it has spread to Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone and Gambia, as well as to the South African protectorates of Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland. Indeed, Indirect Rule has gone for beyond Africa. In Malaya, the Governor of Singapore, who was also High Commissioner for the Federated and Unfederated States of Johore, Kedal, Perak, Selangor, ruled through native chiefs or sultans, who took their orders from British Residents.

Democracy

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co-operative to the students. They are also educating their parents to the value and principles of co-operatives.

The school, by means of the co-operative, is teaching its students the value of getting together, to provide cooperatively for their limited economic needs. They are gaining knowledge which will be of great value to them in the work-a-day world. Students need this knowledge in order to insure democracy and to provide a possible way out from the fear of poverty. This is real democracy—American style.

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