

CHAPTER 7

COLONIAL RULE AND ITS IMPACT

Objectives

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:

- define the concept of direct and indirect rule;
- compare and contrast the practice of indirect rule in Northern and Southern Nigeria;
- explain the reasons behind its use by the colonial government in Nigeria;
- account for its success and failure in the Northern and Southern parts of Nigeria;
- relate the impact of colonial rule in Nigeria.

The advent of the white rulers particularly in Nigeria ended the pre-colonial era. It brought about cataclysmic and social changes in Nigeria. The colonial power sacked the kingdoms and empires of ethnic societies and brought them under one single colonial Government.

7.1 Definitions of Direct and Indirect Rule

Colonial rule or imperialism took the centre stage when from about 1800 AD the imperial British subdued all the indigenous kingdoms. Their acquisition and penetration of what we know today as Nigeria was gradual, piecemeal and took successive stages to accomplish. In 1861, Lagos was conquered and made a crown settlement and by 1866, it was declared a colony. By 1897, the Southwest except Egbaland became part and parcel of Lagos colony. This meant that the British crown directly ruled and administered Lagos colony.

Direct rule by this instance means a direct rulership of a conquered territory by the imperial government. This was true of the French West Africa with Dakar in Senegal being directly administered by the French Government in Paris as a unit of France. Direct rule was more associated with the policy of assimilation adopted by French imperialist over the francophone West African colonies. The policy permitted the colonies to be directly ruled by the colonial masters in total disregard to the traditional political institutions. Instead, the citizens were administered in line with what obtained in France and therefore, were completely annexed. It was only in crown colonies like Lagos and Accra in the Anglophone West Africa that the indigenes were directly governed by the grown imperialists and by that experience became British subjects.

While the crown colonies were ceded or settled colonies, the protectorates were vast areas conquered by the imperialists through the use of force and arms. These areas, however, were not directly administered by the British. Most of these areas were in the hinter land and dominated by primitive and traditional societies. The British as a result of many factors made use of the indigenous

political organs and authorities to achieve their governance of the people. The natural rulers and monarchs were supported, empowered and protected by the British powers to perform their administrative functions.

Indirect rule in earnest was a policy through which indigenous people were governed by their own traditional rulers who, having become British agents were licensed to administer their territories on behalf of the British over Lords.

This was first introduced in India, Uganda and later, in Northern Nigeria by Lord Frederick Lugard. The traditional ruler although under a British over Lord had power to appoint his cabinet members, preside over local courts in line with the traditional laws and British ordinances, levy and collect taxes to defray costs and embark on reasonable projects and payment of workers, salaries. They were however accountable to the resident officers in their domains who in turn were responsible to district officers and the colonial central government.

Defined as local administration which made use of existing traditional socio-political institution to extend the rule of the British powers over the local people. Three principal things were practised in indirect rule system. These were practised in indirect rule system. These were: the appointment and recognition of a traditional ruler following the existing custom; that local native authority should rely on their popularity and power to develop their areas, and that the native authority so appointed must be allowed to use their initiative and freedom of action within the statutes to administer their domains of influence.

7.2 Indirect Rule in Northern Nigeria

It was the policy of Lord Lugard to allow each locality to be ruled as before by their own helmsmen and not through the direct rule of the British officers. To establish this, there must be a strong centralized authority and traditional bureaucracy to foster this. The parts that later became the Northern protectorate was originally made up of centralized states with functional emirate system.

The emirs combining both the political and theocratic authority was the rallying political point. He was an absolute monarch as he commanded respect and obedience. He had his ministers or cabinet members directly under him to help in the administration of the emirate. He had powers to levy taxes, raise army, pass a decree and take meaningful decisions on behalf of his subjects. Together with his ministers, he made laws, execute projects, co-ordinated religious worship and activities and adjudicate cases.

By 1900 when Lord Frederick Lugard became the Governor of the Northern protectorate and by 1906, he applied the indirect rule policy which the British colonial office adopted as a policy. The three major reasons Lugard adopted indirect rule in the North were:

1. The vastness of the area which made direct rule near impossible because only very few British officials accepted to work in the hot and arid land.
2. The British government needed to conserve its funds as it would not want to waste its lean finance on salaries.

3. The urge to preserve the pre-colonial administrative heritage of the people which they accepted were efficient and properly established.

Before the British conquest of the North, Uthman Danfodio had captured the entire North through the Islamic Jihad (1804-1810) and established the emirate system which later became known as the Fulani emirates or Empire. The entire North was then divided into two major provinces. In the West the Sokoto caliphate led by the Sultan of Sokoto co-ordinated the activities of all the emirs under its province, whereas in the East the Emir of Gwandu (the Shehu of Bornu) took charge of the emirs in the eastern province.

Lugard therefore, divided the entire north into 12 provinces each manned by an emir. A colonial officer called British resident supervised the emir and the council whereas a chief resident remained at the headquarters of the sultan of Sokoto and was in charge of all other resident and district officers within the 12 provinces.

However, these residents and district officers were mere political advisers to the emirs. The Alkali courts and the chief's courts served as the judiciary dispensing Islamic and customary laws. There were provincial courts presided over by the residents to also checkmate travesty of justice. The Maaji, the treasurer was allowed the duty of tax collection as the colonial power allowed only one single tax system whose revenue was shared between the colonial government and the emirate. Other forms of taxes which were abolished by the colonial government were knaraj (land tax), Jangali (livestock tax); Lizya (tax levied on slaves and strangers) and Zakat (tax on movable properties used on the needy).

Emirs were barred from keeping military forces as the colonial government had established standing army and the police force. Legislation equally became the preserve of the colonial government. Physical structures such as health services, abattoir, dispensaries, construction of roads, etc were done through the proceeds from taxation. To execute these tasks, the emir retained the services of most of his cabinet. Officers such as the Galadima (administrator of the capital), Sarkin Fada (head of the palace workers), Sarkin yan doka (intelligence officer), Maaji (treasurer), Sarkin Ruwa (in charge of fishing), Yari (Prisons officer), and Sarkin Pawa (incharge of butchers). There were also the Khadi and grand Khadi who were judges of the Sharia courts.

7.3 Indirect Rule in Southern Nigeria

Achievement recorded in the North informed the decision of the colonial government to establish indirect rule system in the Southern Nigeria immediately after the amalgamation of 1914. The Southern protectorate comprised of the Western and Eastern areas.

7.4 Indirect Rule in Yorubaland

In the West which is predominantly Yoruba, indirect rule never flourished like it did in the North. The reason was that the Yoruba Obas were more or less constitutional monarchs who only acted in concert with cabinet officers. There was no absolute centralized authority. The Oba was responsible to his cabinet chiefs. He could be forced to resign, commit suicide, and go on an exile or outrightly

dethroned if he attempted a unilateral decision-taking. The Oba lacked power to impose taxes or levies of any kind without the consent of his cabinet chiefs.

The Oba's position made it difficult for him to successfully head the Native Administration. Indirect rule therefore upstaged the Yoruba political system as it made the Oba a "Sole Authority" with effect that some Obas became intoxicated with power. The people repudiated the unorthodox rule and rejected the introduction of regularized taxation in place of yearly tributes to the Oba. Since these were against established tradition, it squared the Obas against their subjects the people's culture against its European invasion and desecration. This inadvertently led to the 1916 Iseyin Riot and the 1918 Adubi war (Abeokuta Riot). The British never understood the difference between an emir and Oba. The Oba could not execute any law without the approval of his council as he was controlled by it, secret societies and representatives of the people. His authority was predicated on the principle of Oba-and-council. The system worked only to the extent that the Oba shared powers with the council of title holders. This was a major setback council of title holders. This was a major setback of indirect rule in Yoruba land.

7.5 Indirect Rule in Igboland

At the extreme part was the segmentary or stateless society of the Igboland. The Igbo were republican and autonomous people with no centralized government and "anointed decision-takers". Since the indirect rule required a traditional chieftaincy and administrative auxiliaries, the system came to a deadlock. Although there were Igbo kingdoms like Onitsha (Obi of Onitsha), Calabar with an Obong, Nembe with the Anayanobo and Oguta with the Obi of Oguta, these rulers exercised little influences on the people.

Being ignorant of the traditional political setting, the British appointed a natural ruler which they styled "warrant chief" in areas without defined chieftaincy. These warrant chiefs were commissioned by the British to do all the emirs were doing in the North. The "warrant chiefs" among whom were social miscreants wielded enormous powers. They also carried out the tax collection duty with force of arms. As "Sole Authorities", they worked more on the side of the British and subjected the people to hardship and oppression. They equally imposed taxes on women. The women led by Margaret Ekpo assembled in Aba and rioted against the imposition of tax on women, and against colonial rule in general. This became known as Aba women Riot of 1929.

The Igbo's generally rebuffed the "artificially created chiefs and the idea of regularized taxation since they saw it as aberration of their tradition and core value system. There existed mutual distrust and conflicts between the warrant chiefs and the masses. This paralyzed indirect rule system in the land.

7.6 Features of Indirect Rule

Certain features stood out in the experimentation of the indirect rule system in colonial Nigeria. These are:

- i. Indirect rule used the existing political system customary to the people as was supposed by the British.
- ii. It depended heavily on regularized tax system.
- iii. It was meant to cut down administrative cost.
- iv. Indirect rule piloted the native authority system.
- v. It introduced the native police.
- vi. It recognized the status of the traditional ruler. Where none existed, warrant chiefdoms were created.
- vii. Traditional customs and laws not repugnant to conscience and right reason were allowed to operate.
- viii. The native authorities were supervised by British officials who exerted their influence indirectly on the people.

7.7 Reasons for British Introduction of Indirect Rule

Many reasons have been adduced by historians regarding the introduction of indirect rule system in Nigeria.

- i. Its successful experimentation with foreign states: This system having been first introduced in India and Uganda by Lord Lugard proved successful. He therefore considered its re-enactment in Nigeria first as the governor of the Northern protectorate and lastly, as Governor-General of Nigeria.
- ii. Lack of foreign personnel: Lord Lugard who doubled as the British High Commissioner in the North had very few British personnel with him. At the time when Africa was dreaded as the “White Man’s grave” only few Europeans accepted to work in the continent.
- iii. Paucity of funds: Even if there were foreign personnel, Lugard was faced with inadequacy of funds to meet with administrative cost as Britain was reluctant to spend money on colonies following the end of the First World War with its emergent global recession especially in the 1930s.
- iv. The bid to preserve customs and traditions: The British flair for antiquities and preservative culture informed Lugard’s decision not to disarticulate the political system of the people so long as it served the colonial interest. This was why natural rulers were used.
- v. Involvement of traditional rulers: The assumption that every traditional ruler was a centralized authority and gateway to the people’s support and loyalty encouraged the idea of using traditional rulers who should be familiar with the terrain and the people.
- vi. The British idea about external colonies: Unlike the French imperialists, the British colonial power knew they would someday grant their colonies independence and so, were not willing to incur expenses on colonial administration. Besides, the system itself proved inexpensive.

- vii. Favourable political climate: The political climate of the North was amenable to indirect rule system owing to strong Islamization and well established administrative set up by the emirate system and so, the idea of imposing a new system was almost inconceivable.
- viii. The system was used to create roles for the traditional rulers in a transitional era and setting. It also united the imperial powers and the chiefs in the game of colonial complicity.
- ix. Largeness of the areas: The North was quite vast and Nigeria as a whole was too big for few European officials to administer. The adoption of indirect rule became indispensable.
- x. Poor transport, communication system and lack of knowledge of the areas so governed: Apart from the crown colony of Lagos and the coastal areas, the vast portion of Nigeria was undeveloped, primitive, savageous and impenetrable. Indirect rule was the only weapon to reach the unreached areas. Again, due to the primitive nature of the areas, there were bad road networks, ineffective means of transportation and language barriers.

7.8 Roles of Traditional Rulers in the System

Indirect rule presented the native authorities with certain specified functions. These included the following:

- i. The native rulers were empowered to collect taxes on behalf of the colonial government. On this, the Obas (in the west) and warrant chiefs (in the East) met with strong mass resistance.
- ii. They assisted the British to assess individual's wealth.
- iii. They administered justice through Local Courts where they served as presidents.
- iv. They were empowered to establish native police force which gave them tremendous powers.
- v. They helped in executing colonial projects and policies since they related directly with the people.
- vi. On this capacity, they served as a bridge between the colonial government and the local people.
- vii. They enacted bye-laws. Some, who were members of the legislative councils helped in making colonial laws.
- viii. They had the responsibility of building and maintaining local facilities and infrastructure.

7.9 Reasons for the Success of Indirect Rule in the North

Introduction of indirect rule rather consolidated powers and relevance of the emirs. With its convenience to the traditional system, indirect rule was absorbed and practised. Other reasons put forward for its success across the north are:

- i. **Absolute monarchic system as practiced by the emirs:** The emir by right of enthronement, was both a political and spiritual head. He could often take unilateral

decisions. He was influential because he exercised unlimited powers. The centrality of power which the emirate presents fitted well into the job of the native authority who reigned over his people on behalf of the colonial powers.

- ii. **Cohesion provided by the Islamic religion:** Through the practice of Islam, the North inherited one faith, moral codes and disposition to divine authority. The emir was a religious leader and could not easily be disobeyed as he was both Lord spiritual and temporal. He combined both political and spiritual authorities.
- iii. **Culture of submissiveness and humility:** This disposition was engrafted in the Hausa/Fulani people through the successes recorded by the Uthman Danfodio's Jihads. Islam taught obedience, subservience and master-subject mentality. These were all the indirect rule needed to sail through.
- iv. **Bureaucratic nature of the emirate administration:** The emirate system as the British met it, had a powerful emir who was surrounded by carefully chosen officials who contributed to the effective and efficient running of the emirate. This structure was in line with the indirect rule requirement.
- v. **Educational attainment:** By the mid-1930s the North had only a handful of educated people unlike in the South where education was embraced. As a result of mass illiteracy, the North could not challenge both the emirs (the direct operators and beneficiaries of the indirect rule) and the colonial officials.
- vi. **Organized system of taxation:** Before the advent of colonial powers, there was already an efficient system of taxation and its sharing principles between the caliphate and their sub-ordinating emirates. The tax system was multi-linear whereas the British colonial government modified it to a single line or unilinear tax system with the proceeds shared between the colonial office and the native authorities.
- vii. The principle of non-interference with existing tradition, a posture adopted by Lord Lugard obliterated any mutual distrust. The people had nothing to lose since their religion, culture and cherished customs were left intact.
- viii. **Fear of military invasion:** A lot of the emirs conceded to the British directives owing to the perceived superior military power of the colonial officials. The fear of being removed and destroying the emirate system informed their co-operation.

7.10 Reasons for the Failure of Indirect Rule in Southern Nigeria

While indirect rule succeeded in the North, it recorded an abysmal failure in both the Yoruba and Igbo enclaves of the Southern Nigeria. The reasons for this as advanced by political historians are:

- i. **The Oba's limited powers:** The Yoruba Oba was a constitutional monarch. He has no absolute powers. He ruled with his council of chiefs. Hence, he was not regarded as highly influential.

- ii. **Educated elite:** At the time of the introduction of indirect rule, both the Yorubas and Igbos had highly educated people who questioned the rationale of indirect rule and reason for preferring traditional rulers other than the elite.
- iii. The people of the south were less submissive to authorities. The region was an amalgam of acephalous societies and semi-centralized states. The people were not easily subjected and brought under one central power.
- iv. Diverse religious beliefs helped in the dysfunctioning of the system. In Yorubaland, there were both Christians and Moslems with members of both religions at daggers drawn. In the East, Christianity and indigenous religion were exclusively practised. Christianity itself is not conservative like Islam. It asked questions and required interpretations.
- v. **Conflictual encounter between the Yorubas and Lord Lugard:** Lugard tried to restore the authority of the Alaafin of Oyo preferring him to the Ooni of Ife which the Yoruba nationalists resisted. The Ooni of Ile-Ife occupied a central office as Oduduwa, the patriarch of the Yoruba nation, lived in Ife. From the onset, the Yorubas suspected the sincerity of the colonial government.
- vi. **There was absence of a well-organized system of taxation:** The Yorubas and Igbos led tax-free lives because the traditional ruler was not seen as a general burden but general heritage. This explains why there was no centralized administration.
- vii. **Violation of Egbaland treaty:** The Yoruba of Abeokuta extraction had a pact or treaty with the British in 1893 which granted Abeokuta or Egbaland quasi-independence. The amalgamation of Nigeria and introduction of indirect rule were breaches of the treaty. This prompted their resistance of it. In the same way, Lugard's attempt to subordinate Ibadan to Oyo was met with stiff opposition by Ibadan people.
- viii. The fragrant appointment and imposition of warrant chiefs on Igbos regarded as sedentary region sparked off crises which climaxed in the 1929 Aba women riot. These pseudo chiefs were oppressive, corrupt, stiff-necked and rascally. The British mistook the segmentary nature of the Igbo society for chiefdomlessness and disorderliness. An attempt to impose pseudo-chiefs (warrant chiefs) on them never went down well with the Igbos who saw indirect rule as an affront on their traditions.
- ix. **The system alienated the educated and propertied classes:** The educated elite saw the traditional rulers as unschooled in the art of modern governance and too docile for the colonial government. On the other hand, the chiefs held on to it as the only window to their relevance as the leaders of their people.

7.11 Defects of Indirect Rule

As a system and doctrinaire, indirect rule had obvious pitfalls which rendered it unpopular and retrogressive. Some of these can be itemized as follows:

- i. Indirect rule alienated and segregated against the educated elite who were emasculated and left in the lurch to fight against the British colonial government while the native authorities took side with the British. The effect was fractionalization of social classes.
- ii. Indirect rule immuned traditional rulers with dictatorial powers alien to their traditional disposition.
- iii. The power to appoint, select or elect their rulers or even depose them as custom demanded was taken over by the British.
- iv. The few traditional rulers being agents or compradors of the white men forged an alliance becoming a ruling cabal against the interest of people who they were supposed to defend.
- v. Indirect rule was a clog in the wheels of constitutional development agitated for by the nationalists and radical majority of who were the educated elite.
- vi. Due to over-concentration of power on local chiefs, abuse of power became prevalent; this lead to socio-economic and political upheaval in Igboland in particular, and Nigeria in general.
- vii. The system brought ethnicism, divide and rule in Nigeria. The North who enjoyed the system sabotaged the efforts of the South to attain independence much earlier than later.
- viii. The system never worked out how Nigeria could have been centrally governed. It could not be universally applied or accepted because it was fraught with exploitation, mismanagement, bickering and undemocratic principles.

7.12 Impact of Indirect Rule in Nigeria

The impact of indirect rule on Nigerians can be broadly discussed under three platforms namely political economic and social.

a. Political Impact

- i. Indirect rule added impetus to the administrative knowledge of the traditional rulers. Through it, they learnt modern methods of taxation, better ways to make laws, of policing the people, executing programmes and generally organizing the people.
- ii. This system brought with it some political revolution. Its introduction changed the political tone of the local people. The people's political consciousness was awoken leading to the transition from traditional life style to modern ways of living.
- iii. Owing to the alienation of the educated elite, the spirit of nationalism was enkindled to protest against colonial domination and brazen injustice.
- iv. Indirect rule was the germ which at the long run brought the segmentary societies like the Igbos into administrative units. It infused some measures of centralization and native authority in hitherto scattered "pockets of republics" that made up the Igbo nation.
- v. Indirect rule was used to avoid a direct face-off with the people by the British colonial powers.

b. Economic Impact

- i. Indirect rule introduced regularized systems of taxation. In the North, the proceeds were no longer shared as booty by the caliphate and emirate leadership. In the South, where the idea of taxation was novel, the proceeds though shared between the colonial government and the native authorities were used to set up basic infrastructure and facilities like roads, dispensaries, native courts and the emoluments of those employed to work in the new system of government.
- ii. Indirect rule brought about centralized administration and urbanization of administrative areas. It brought with it the “white-collar job” which absorbed employable youths and provides them with means of livelihood. The modern facilities and infrastructure became basic ancillary to economic and social developments in Nigeria.

c. Social Impact

- i. The system was sympathetic to the traditions of the people as it co-existed with the people’s culture though the same could not be said of in the Eastern region. However, the system modernized certain local institutions. Obnoxious customs were rejected, new court system was introduced and new laws were promulgated to suit the new political and social order.
- ii. It obviously forced the traditional rulers to acknowledge the strength and relevance of the educated elite who they eventually worked with to mitigate the harsh treatment of the colonial government.
- iii. The system brought everybody under the authority of the British government and by so doing, brought the colonial rule closer to the people.
- iv. The system benefitted the British economically as it provided the administration or government with a very cheap and easy platform of administering the vast areas of Nigeria.

Summary

- Direct rule applied where the British crown in London conquered and directly governed a given territory with recourse to its traditional political institutions.
- Indirect rule mainly used on British protectorates where as a result of the fewness of colonial officials, the colonial government ruled the people through their traditional political institutions.
- Indirect rule system was successfully implemented in the North owing to its centralized and autocratic political culture while it failed in the south due to practice of constitutional monarchy in the West which denied the Oba absolute powers, and the republic nature of the East where any form of imposition was not allowed to operate.

- The reason for the indirect rule system in Nigeria was based on its accruing benefits to the colonial government over and above the interests of the people.
- Indirect rule to the extent it was practised, had a sweeping impact on the political, economic and social life patterns of Nigeria.

Revision Questions

Objectives

1. A crown colony was administered by the British _____.
 - A. directly
 - B. indirectly
 - C. through a regent
 - D. through a warrant chief
2. In the francophone West Africa, the colonies were _____.
 - A. completely annexed
 - B. completely occupied
 - C. completely destroyed
 - D. completely policed
3. The Lagos crown colony was enlarged to include the South-west in the year _____.
 - A. 1851
 - B. 1861
 - C. 1877
 - D. 1897
4. The principle of indirect rule was based on _____.
 - A. extinction of the people's tradition
 - B. supervision by the British officials
 - C. unilinear system of taxation
 - D. the people's areas of need
5. Indirect rule worked better in _____.
 - A. the sahel savannah region
 - B. the hinterlands
 - C. sedentary states
 - D. centralized societies
6. Indirect rule as an administrative strategy was first applied in _____.
 - A. Tripoli
 - B. India
 - C. Uganda
 - D. Northern Nigeria

7. While the Yoruba Obas sat in the Oba-and-council, the Emirs of the North sat in _____.
- A. Emir-and-council
 - B. Emir-with-council
 - C. Emir-in -council
 - D. Emir-for-council
8. The appointment of warrant chiefs was the remote cause of _____.
- A. Edubi war of 1918
 - B. Aba Women Riot of 1929
 - C. Iseyin Riot of 1916
 - D. Kano Riot of 1953
9. One of the reasons Lugard chose indirect rule was _____.
- A. its semblance with the people's tradition
 - B. its acceptance by the majority of the people
 - C. its employment of the Local populace
 - D. its cheapness in administrative cost and use of few personnel
10. The major obstacle to indirect rule in the South was the emergence of _____.
- A. the warrant chiefs
 - B. native authorities
 - C. educated elite
 - D. the Second World War

Essay Questions

- 1a. Distinguish between direct and indirect rule.
- b. What are the political, social and economic impacts of indirect rule in Nigeria?
- 2. What role did the Emirs play in the furtherance of indirect rule in Nigeria?
- 3a. What led to the 1929 Aba women Riot?
- b. Why did indirect rule fail in Southern Nigeria?
- 4. What was the reaction of the Yoruba with the introduction of indirect rule system?
- 5a. What five reasons informed the British introduction of the indirect rule?
- b. What role did the traditional rulers play to sustain indirect rule?