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Book Review

Kwame Arhin, ed., West African Colonial Civil Servants in the Nineteenth Century: African Participation in British Colonial Expansion in West Africa. Research Reports No. 25, African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1985, pp. vi 56. Dfl 7,50.

This slim volume consists of three biographical essays on notable British West African colonial civil servants of the nineteenth century: George Ekem Ferguson of the Gold Coast, by Kwame Arhin; Thomas George Lawson of Sierra Leone, by David E. Skinner; and John Augustus Otonbo Payne of Nigeria, by G.O. Olusanya. They all played crucial roles in forming the present day character of the countries in which they worked, especially in (respectively) their economic geography, administration and legal system. There is also a short introduction by the editor.

Together these essays provide an unusual opportunity for insight into the lives and times of members of the educated class on the coast during the period when the foundations for the nation states of today were being laid, even if the individuals concerned did not think in quite those terms. There is a tendency to think of the period of imperialist expansion as a hostile intrusion into West African life, between the pre-colonial and the modern periods of political independence, during which Africans were not active shapers of policy, but merely the fundamentally passive bearers of a conservative traditional

system. That is, they are thought of as resisting change, not initiating it. Such a view implies that West Africans were not the major actors in their own history during that time. It further implies that they are not responsible for the character of the states they inhabit today, for the boundaries of those states, with all their economic and political implications, and the way relations have developed within them between the traditional and the modern ways of doing things, are held to be a totally European creation imposed upon West Africa by imperialist might. The editor of these essays is to be congratulated on having been able to look beyond this essentially Eurocentric view of the matter.

What we are told of the lives of these three men is extremely provocative, in many directions. The editor points out (pg. v) that Ferguson's ancestry was partly British, but the other two were entirely African. However, it is noteworthy that Payne and Lawson were also in some way separated from traditional life. Although Payne seems to have claimed Ijebu identity, he was born in Sierra Leone where his parents were re-captives, i.e. freed by the British during the suppression of the slave trade, and we are not told the origins of his mother, or that his father ever returned to Nigeria, or that Payne himself ever actually spent time in Ijebu land apart from visiting on missions. Lawson was a full-fledged member of a ruling clan, but chose to make his career away from home. It is true that this was probably influenced by his English education (his home was Anecho), but it is also true that in Freetown he could distance himself from traditional life in a way that would have

been difficult if not impossible at home. Even Ferguson, who returned from education in Freetown and London to his birthplace, seems to have spent most of his brief but brilliant career on trek to places that in those days (or even today) an Anomabo man would not consider "home".

It is clear from these stories that the expectation of leaving home to study and sometimes to work developed early on the west coast, and one would like to know more about education in those times and how the affected individuals reacted to it. Perhaps, in the absence of personal letters that express personal feelings (as well as facts), this is too much to hope for. Similarly, Skinner's piece on Lawson provides fascinating glimpses of 19th century Sierra Leone high society and its mores - for instance, it seems to have been the in thing to marry from the Anglican cathedral, but be buried from the Baptist chapel. Again one wishes for more, and wonders whether the necessary material exists.

One also wonders about their informal education. All three were regarded by the European colonial authorities as extremely knowledgeable experts on everything to do with the native peoples and their customs. It is not obvious how they acquired this knowledge, since even Lawson, the only one who may have had a strictly traditional childhood, had left home by the age of eleven (pg. 24). Ferguson clearly got most of his knowledge by fieldwork. His main advantage over European colleagues was linguistic, and this was no doubt the case for the others: Payne presumably spoke Yoruba, and we are told that Lawson had a "vast knowledge

of African languages" (pg. 24) - this reader at least is curious to know whose judgment this was, and how arrived at. All were in a position to manipulate the attitudes of the colonial authorities, but it appears they were also themselves influenced by European attitudes of the day (see e.g. page 16). Europeans in Africa at this time and later are often to be found working quite schizophrenically, one moment devoutly quoting the authority of current anthropological and philosophical speculation about racial and cultural inferiority, and the next moment quite sensibly discussing observations and data that make nonsense of those armchair theories. (See e.g. Johannes Fabian, Language on the Road: Swahili in Two Nineteenth Century Travelogues, Hamburg 1985 for an interesting discussion of this phenomenon in Swahili studies). The development and interrelatedness of academic, colonial, and indigenous attitudes and beliefs about West African national and cultural identity is a fascinating area, which could bear further exploration.

The careers of the three principals invite comparison in several respects, but the articles themselves are not always as helpful as they could have been, and as closer editorial attention might have made them. The reader will naturally wonder to what extent the three were contemporary. The title of the article on Ferguson gives his dates as 1864 - 1897, which are, as is normal, the dates of his birth and death respectively. It also turns out that his active career began in 1881, ending with his death. The dates given in the title of the article on

Lawson, 1846 - 1889, turn out to be the dates of his active career, and it is only by careful reading and arithmetic that the reader discovers he was born in 1817 and died in 1891. This matters, because one then realizes that Ferguson started out half a century later than Lawson, at a much earlier age, and then got ahead much faster (comparing their salaries at different stages). Their careers overlapped in time very little, Ferguson's apparently being much more involved in the "scramble for Africa" than Lawson's.

Payne was born in 1839 (pg. 44), twenty-two years after Lawson and twenty-five years before Ferguson, and began his career in 1863, but we are not told when he retired or died. Payne's situation and career must have been rather different from both Lawson's and Ferguson's, for Governor Rowe of the Gold Coast (in 1879?) is quoted as saying he was not to be trusted with any mission (pg. 50). This contrasts greatly with official attitudes to the other two, but we are not given enough information to be able to judge why. Indeed, the author seems less concerned with investigating the career of his subject than with defending him against the charge of being an agent of imperialism. I find this a great pity. Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, "imperialism" was very far from being the term of opprobrium that it has become today, when the term "imperialist" is often used as a general insult. For many thinking people, both African and European, imperialism as a political and economic policy meant

progress, and to be against it often meant to be against local development and native education. Whether it was the correct course to follow from the West African point of view is another matter, but it does not do justice to Payne's undoubted intelligence to insist so strongly that he did not know what he was doing when he acted in the interest of British imperialism.

The book is attractive and easy to handle, and the print, reduced typescript, is clear and easier on the eyes than most productions of this kind, although there are too many minor spelling or typing errors. At the price, we can hardly complain, but only ask for more.

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