

**COLONIAL OFFICE EMPLOYMENT POLICY  
IN THE GOLD COAST 1920-40<sup>1</sup>**

**Fewzi Borsali  
University of Adrar**

**Résumé en Français**

La politique coloniale britannique en matière d'emploi dépendait des intentions quant au transfert du pouvoir aux Africains, qui n'était même envisageable à long terme. Cette vision détermina les autres politiques relatives à la formation et à l'emploi. Le recours au travail forcé en collaboration avec les autorités traditionnelles était un moyen utilisé comme une alternative aux taxes directes. La grande partie des postes était réservée aux Européens dont les salaires exorbitants étaient pourvus par le trésor de la colonie .

**Introduction**

Colonial domination depended to a great extent on voluntary or forced collaboration of some of the colonized people without whom management of the colonial human and material resources would have been difficult or very expensive. Such management required the establishment of political and administrative machinery under the control of expatriates, notably the British in the case of the Gold Coast. A basic principle of British colonialism was that the management of a colony shouldn't be a burden to the British taxpayer; its expenses should then be met from local sources. The employment of Africans into subordinate positions would be cheaper and in conformity with such principle. But since employment policy evolves in dialectical relationship with economic and educational developments on one hand, and on colonial objectives as to the transfer of power on the other, it will be then necessary to discuss Colonial Office employment policy in the light of its approach to education and colonial politics during the period 1920-40 .

**1. Background to colonial administration**

Colonial establishment in the Gold Coast started in 1821 on the coast, fifty years later (1874) in Ashanti after several wars and in 1896 in the Northern Territories. Being ignorant of the African societies they were to govern, Colonial Office officials and those on the spot were convinced in the beginning that keeping the traditional institutions as a suitable basis for the administration of the colony would be best to meet the exploitative aims of colonialism: to exploit the colonial resources for the benefit of both the colonizer and the indigenous inhabitant. The tendency in the early stages of local administration consisted in entrusting power to traditional chiefs and then progressively to councils and native authorities in the 1930s. This kind of system was known as Indirect Rule, in other words, the progressive adaptation of native population to modern conditions, whereas at the central level, the Colonial Governor was assisted by an Executive Council

composed of officials who were primarily heads of the technical departments. The development of these departments was to depend on the availability of qualified staff and the colony's economic and financial absorptive capacities, which altogether would depend on the short and long term political objectives of the Imperial power .

## **2. The Educational or Training Factor**

The missionaries were undoubtedly the first European agencies to provide Africans in the Gold Coast with some form of modern schooling and consequently to enable them to be recruited in some services of the Colonial Government departments. But their type of education was strongly criticized by colonial officials who considered literary education as politically dangerous, a feeling that was shared by the American Phelps Stokes Commission which visited West Africa in 1920 and found that sending students to Europe or America was politically dangerous and culturally disadvantageous .

In the Gold Coast, apart from some training provided by the government departments, the Gold Coast government decided to establish a college following the recommendations of the Education Committee of 1920, appointed by Governor Guggisberg (1919-1927). This college, known as Achimota College, started courses in 1927. Though the Colonial Office encouraged this local initiative, the European typical response in the Gold Coast was that 'the Africans were not ready for it'<sup>2</sup>. This Europeans' attitude could be related to their subconscious fear that they could lose their jobs in the future and that higher education would produce politically conscious Africans or even seditious agitators like in the Indian case<sup>3</sup> .

In conformity with the constitution of Achimota College, an inspection was carried out in 1932 by four members appointed by the Gold Coast Governor<sup>4</sup> who were aware of the demand for political advance and employment that might result from education. The Inspectorate Committee reported that there were university courses similar to those of London with 11 students in arts, 2 in science, 1 in premedical, 4 in engineering and 126 in teacher training<sup>5</sup>. The establishment of some courses at the College, mainly engineering and pre-medical showed the College's effort to contribute to colonial development by training qualified staff required for some services in the government departments. Yet, discussions between the Colonial Government departments and the Committee of Inspectors reveal some vagueness and uncertainty as to the role Achimota College was expected to play in this respect. Furthermore, the officials in charge of those departments could not even plan the rate of the absorptive capacities in their respective services because of the financial difficulties and economic priorities. The 1930s financial stringency affected the progress of the College in that it retarded the progress or realization of some schemes such the introduction of an agricultural degree course .

The question of training and employment opportunities or policy was on the

agenda of the conference of the Directors of Education meeting in Lagos in 1935. The officials were inclined to strengthen the intermediate courses rather than proceed to more advanced studies; they believed that there should be a need for conditioning progressively African opinion to accept local degrees on one hand, and to avoid creating an imbalance between the production of graduates and the number of vacancies in higher posts .

Three years later, the Principal of the College, Rev H. Grace, proposed an inspection of the College, and subsequently the Governor, Arnold Hodson (1934-41) advised the Secretary of State to consider the advisability of appointing a commission with a view to inquiring into the question of coordinating higher education in West Africa. But the Secretary of State was inclined to the view that such examination by a commission should not precede the proposed West African Governors' Conference of 1939 .

The 1938 the inspectorate body was composed of W. Pickard Cambridge, late Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University as chairman, G. P. Dunn and F. S. Stead, both retired school inspectors, Miss Oakden, HMI, and H. Vischer, then Joint-secretary of the Colonial Education Committee of the Colonial Office. Their report shows that there were 11 students in the intermediate arts, 7 in intermediate science, 4 in first medical, 9 in engineering, and 2 in preliminary science, having a total of 33 in 1938 compared to 18 in 1932 in the university classes whereas the number of students rose from 126 to 152 in the teacher training department from 1932 to 1938 respectively<sup>6</sup> .

This limited increase was thought to be caused by a number of factors such as insufficient accommodation facilities, a minimum success in the entrance examinations, orientations towards teacher training, limited scholarships, high costs of further studies and employment policy of the colonial government. The College authorities recommended an extension of the university classes which could result from cooperation with the other West African colleges. But the Committee of Inspectors was sceptical as to the progress of such cooperation<sup>7</sup> because they would need to wait :

"Until some indication of a change in the practice of government and industry as regards appointments, before encouraging the production of any considerable number of graduates who may be doomed to disappointment so as long the alleged indifference of government and employers to the graduate qualified Africans remains "(Achimota Report)

When the Colonial Governors of West Africa met in Lagos in August 10-18, 1939, they recommended that the progress of higher education institutions should be on a limited scale so as to avoid the creation of a class of discontented educated Africans. The Gold Coast governor, T Hudson proposed the introduction of a pass degree in some subjects with reference to the needs of the people. This degree would, in his view, help students to find employment either as a secondary school teacher or as members of the government services in the new intermediate

grades which the colonial government intended to create shortly in a few government departments. But Bourdillon, Governor of Nigeria (1935-43), was of opinion that this degree factory "would create a class of university graduates who would claim for lucrative posts in the government service"<sup>8</sup>. T Southern, Governor of Gambia (1936-42) rejected the Gold Coast argument on academic and employment grounds. The West African Governors' Conference underlined the necessity of appointing a local commission to examine the details of a coordinated scheme leading to the development of higher education in West Africa .

The recommendations of the Committee of Inspectors and those of the Conference were before the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies of the Colonial Office in its meetings of April and May of 1940. The minutes of the meetings reveal the official worries regarding training and employment of Africans. While Professor Macmillan believed that a pass degree would help to obtain African clerks of a better quality for the district officers, Bourdillon (Governor of Nigeria) and Hussey (Director of Education), agreed that such clerical staff was certainly needed, but they didn't see how the introduction of a pass degree would solve the problem. In Bourdillon's view, this would create a danger in producing graduates who would ask for higher posts than clerkship. The other points of discussion concerned the training of agricultural officers. In Pickard Cambridge's opinion, chairman of the 1938 Inspectorate Committee, training should begin with the general science course offered at Achimota, followed by intermediate courses in science at Bunsu. Sir F Stockdale, Agricultural Adviser of the Colonial Office, agreed with Bourdillon's proposals and suggested that Achimota should concentrate on biological science whereas the Agricultural department should provide the vocational training<sup>9</sup> .

Given the complexity of the relationship between training and employment policy, the Colonial Office Advisory Committee on Colonial Education recommended the setting up of a sub-committee to consider the recommendations of the West African Governors' Conference. The sub-committee was under the chairmanship of B. Mouat Jones; Rev H. Grace, G. Anderson, ERJ Hussey, W. H Macmillan, H. Burney, Cox and Channon. The Sub-committee generally agreed with the Conference's recommendations, but they observed that there was no reference to the desirability of training Africans for responsible posts in veterinary and forestry services. Unlike the West African Governors, the Sub-committee members thought that some provision of legal studies should be made to meet the training of Africans for the colonial service in administrative capacity. The Sub-committee preferred not to recommend the introduction of engineering mining courses in the near future because of the possible complications that might result from the appointment of graduate Africans in higher posts in the mines .

Given the close relationship between education and employment, B. Mouat Jones' report stressed the fact that it should be necessary for both the Colonial and Imperial governments to express their views on employment policy before the

formulation and official declaration of policy towards higher education in West Africa and the Gold Coast in particular<sup>10</sup>. Colonial employment policy was determined by both political and economic factors .

### **3. Political Factor**

Colonial powers never intended to grant self-government without having to face strong pressure from the colonial people claiming for their basic rights and dignity; however, concessions were from time to time made so as to regulate the balance of power and the process of control over the colonial resources and assets which were to a great extent, vital to the metropolitan survival within an imperial network. In this framework, the British officials, like the other European ones, had to reformulate after the First World War their conception of relationship with their colonial empire underlining the principles of Dual Mandate or Trusteeship, enunciated by the League of Nations in 1922. This implied that colonial powers had a mandate to exploit and develop the colonial resources for the progress of the colony itself on one hand, and was to be committed to contribute with such resources for the development of the world on the other. There was no indication that colonies would be granted independence neither in the short term nor in the remote future, which determined to a great extent employment policy, the solution of which was partly incorporated in the system of Indirect Rule, a very practical and cheap way for running colonial administration. It consisted in keeping the native rulers as local political managers with a view to keeping both employment and the new social educated category of Africans under control .

The 1925 Gold Coast Constitution reinforced the position of chiefs though it introduced the elective principle and admission to the Legislative Council and municipal machinery for the educated category. It provided three seats for elected members out of thirty in the Legislative Council. Different groups, the Aborigines Rights Protection Society (ARPS, 1897), National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA, 1920), West African Students Union (WASU, 1925), Pan African congresses, youth movements of the 1930s, and some professional associations, condemned the indirect rule system. It must be noted that this educated category comprised initially simple reformists seeking to participating in the colonial system rather than aiming at its abolition. But some groups tended to move to more and more antagonistic attitude against colonial domination .

No constitutional progress was even made in the interwar period despite rising claims for more employment opportunities; Colonial Officials were deeply convinced that Africans were not ready for self-government, which determined, to a large extent, their employment policy and consequently the rate of university development. It may be remembered that De La Warr commission, reporting on higher education in East Africa in 1937 warned against any overproduction of graduates because of the limited absorptive capacities of the colonial economies. One year later, the Secretary of State in the Colonies, M. Macdonald (1938-40), believed that transfer of power to the colonial people might not take place before

generations or even centuries<sup>11</sup> that is before creating the preconditions of such transfer, the guiding principles of which were to be formulated in the policy of Colonial and Development and Welfare of 1940<sup>12</sup>.

The colonial practice, which aimed at reconstructing collaboration with the traditional authorities, tended to create discontent and political trouble among the educated social category, antagonize them and consequently threaten the stability of the colonial system.

Colonial officials believed that constitutional reform would partly involve Africans in the achievement of development plans, but they were not probably aware of the political implications which employment policies could involve. A prevision plan for the employment of Africans in the senior posts of the public services had been already drawn in 1925-26 during Colonial Governor Guggisberg rule (1919-27). Under this plan it was envisaged to create 231 senior posts to be held by Africans by 1945-46. But evidence shows that there were only 31 in 1938 and 46 posts by 1942<sup>13</sup>. Captain Lynch, then Under-secretary of the Gold Coast Secretariat, attributed the failure of the 1925 Africanisation plan not to the unwillingness of the Colonial Government to appoint Africans but to a lack of suitable candidates with academic qualifications. This ambiguity existing in cause-effect relationship between employment and educational policies can only but express this vicious circle between politics, economics and education.

The number of Africans in the senior posts of the Gold Coast government was 17 in 1928 to increase to 31 ten years later<sup>14</sup>. The various services totalled 23 including: Accountant General Department, Agriculture, Air Services, Animal Health, Audit, Co-operation, Customs, Education, Clerical, labour, Law, Medical, Police, Political Administration, Post and telegraph, Printing, Prisons, Public Relations, Public Works Department, Railways, Secretariat, Supreme Court and Survey. The only services to which 17 Africans were appointed in 1928 totalled 11 out of 23; these were: Accountant General Department (2), Agriculture (2), Audit (1), Customs (1), Education (2), Law Officers (1), Medical (3), Public Works Department (1), Secretariat (1), Supreme Court (1), and Survey (2). In 1938 some of these services had got additional staff: Agriculture, Customs Department, Medical, Secretariat, Supreme Court; Post and Telegraph, and Police, but others lost the post already held in 1928: Accountant General Department, Audit Department, Public Works, while the Survey Department saw a decrease from 2 to 1, and the Education Department kept the same number of posts (2). It should be underlined that some of the services listed above had never had any Africans appointed to them: Air Services, Animal Health, Co-operation, Clerical, Labour, Political Administration, Printing, Prisons, Public Relations and Railways.

By 1938, the President of the Joint Provincial Council of the Colony had already underlined the need for considering again colonial policy towards the

Africanisation of the services. In a letter he sent to the Secretary for native Affairs of the Gold Coast Government he wrote :

“in view of the Joint Council of 1938, it is highly desirable that representations be made to government to considering opening the door of the responsible posts in the political administration to deserving Gold Coast Africans”<sup>15</sup>

In reply to this request, the Executive Council expressed the view that time was not ripe for the appointment of Africans to posts of this nature justifying its position on the attitude of the native authorities in the Nigerian case. This case, which was reported in *Nigerian Gazette* shows that ‘the native authorities strongly resented being compelled to turn for advice in administrative as opposed to technical matters to Nigerians coming from other parts of the Colony’<sup>16</sup>. For Gold Coast officials there was little prospect for the Native authorities to offer employment to this type of Africans who wish to be appointed to a senior post in the government service. The native authorities couldn’t either have sufficient money to attract young university graduates .

Malcolm Hailey, Political Adviser at the Colonial Office, observed during his tour in the colonial African dependencies in 1940 that ‘ *racial consciousness had taken the form of standing antagonism to a government of alien composition, its leaders had usually been in the better educated and more socially advanced element in the native population*’<sup>17</sup>. Though the exclusion of educated Africans was caused by a lack of commitment on the part of the Imperial government to promote self-government before the early 1940's. Hailey did not find it easy to justify it on substantial grounds. He added that colonial employment policy which consisted in avoiding the appointment of Africans in their own respective ethnic areas for fear that their official duty might clash with their tribal or ethnic loyalty was rejected partly by the traditional chiefs; the latter were not ready wet to accept younger Africans from outside their ethnic group. In addition to these reasons, obstacles to the employment of Africans were linked to behavioural causes. According to MacLean, member of De La Warr Commission on Higher Education in East Africa of 1937, the African was unable to resist bribery, unfitted for higher posts, and on the other hand, the Europeans neither were ready to accept them nor were they engaged on the understanding that they were to assist educated Africans in their training<sup>18</sup>. J. L. Keith of the Colonial Office Social Service Department warned against the exclusion of Africans :

"we have a curious position where a few highly educated Africans are able to take higher posts in administrative cadre which is largely European except in its lowest grades ...unless Africans can be brought into the services of the central government in large numbers therein, and that all posts are open to them when they are qualified to take them, they will look upon the central government as an alien

institution and give vent of their feeling in political agitation"<sup>19</sup>

In 1939 Hailey thought of a wide range of posts in the intermediate rather than in the higher stages of employment. He underlined that higher education should be developed for a long time upon employment. The creation of intermediate posts was thought equally desirable by Hodson, Governor of the Gold Coast, for educated Africans with a pass degree. Lord Moyne, the Secretary of State believed that the rate of progress after the war might largely depend on an adequate supply of subordinate staff. The extension of the intermediate services with a view to meeting African demands for employment was based on both political grounds and economic principles. While it would reduce pressure on the colonial system through control, the inclusion of Africans would be more economical than the employment of expatriates, i. e. , they were to be fewer leave passages, shorter leaves and lower salaries. The employment of larger numbers would require more economic activities and more revenues .

#### **4. Economic Factor**

Since the basic principle of British colonial administration was that a colony should not be a burden to the British Treasury, on the contrary, it should be financially self-sufficient. Colonial revenues had to derive from export and import duties and direct taxation, which were necessary for the payment of the newly established colonial government. But direct taxation was not introduced until 1936; in the beginning, the British in the Gold Coast had recourse first to slavery before its abolition in 1874, then to forced labour until 1920 as an alternative means to taxation. Forced labour was administered after the 1930s by the native authorities since they were responsible for the maintenance of roads, and other local public works .

This kind of exploitation and diversion of colonial resources for metropolitan benefits was clearly stated in 1940 when the Colonial Secretary for Colonial Affairs admitted in the House of Commons that the primary purpose of Colonial Development Fund enacted in 1929 'was not to help colonial development for its own sake, but in order to stimulate that development, mostly to bring additional work to idle hand in this country. It was devised as part of our scheme to solve our own unemployment problem'<sup>20</sup>

Allocations from the Fund tended to concentrate on schemes most relevant to metropolitan industrial interest. The major implication of the 1929 Act was that colonial self-sufficiency was no longer relevant policy and that financial assistance became necessary with a view to increasing production of export commodities as a means to greater revenues, which, it was thought, could contribute to Britain's financial crisis along the depression years. In fact, during the Ottawa Conference of 1932, an imperial preferential system was adopted and imposed upon the British colonies. The new arrangements included favoured treatment for metropolitan manufactures in African markets. Furthermore, tariffs were imposed in West Africa

with the object of preventing cheaper Japanese cotton from driving out more highly priced British goods .

It is obvious that without greater revenues employment policy was to be undermined though F. Pedler of the Colonial Office argued by 1940 that ' attention might be directed to the economic principle that shows that an increase in the supply of trained personnel should be a decrease in the remuneration of such personnel. ' <sup>21</sup> The economic factor could be regarded as a possibility to counteract the highly status consciousness of the graduate Africans, and might encourage their employment in the native administration which could not afford paying high salaries .

### **Conclusion**

The Colonial Office did little to develop the colonies before 1940, when the Imperial Government decided to introduce new measures for the development and welfare of the colonial people. It was evident or obvious that the transfer of power was not even envisaged and consequently official commitment towards the education of Africans and their employment in the colonial administration as senior partners couldn't be on the agenda of the British officials. However, some changes were to take place during and after the Second World War, which were to bring a new conception of relationship between the British and their colonial people .

### **Bibliography**

#### ***Official sources***

- CO 96/776/31466/42-43, Selection and Training of Africans for Higher Posts
- CO 554/122/33629/1939, Memo on appointments of Africans to responsible posts in the administrative service
- CO 554/121/33599/1939: Extract from the proceedings of the West African Governors' Conference 1939, Lagos, Nigeria's memo .
- CO 554/121/33599/1939, note by F Stockdale 14. 12. 1939
- CO 847/ 18/47029/1940 Mouat Jones Sub-committee report December 1940
- CO 850/137/20695/38: Note by Keith .
- CO 850/137/20695/1938, memo by Pedler 21. 1. 40
- House of Commons debate 7 December 1938, Col 1247
- Cmd. 6175, 1940, Statement of Policy on Colonial Development and Welfare
- Hailey's Report on *Native Administration and Political Development in British Tropical Africa 1940-42* .
- Achimota Report 1932, Gold Coast
- Achimota Report 1938, Gold Coast

#### ***Secondary Sources***

- Ashby, E. A. , *Universities: British, Indian, African, A Study in the Ecology of*

*Higher Education, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966*

- Smith, M. , *Aggrey of Africa, A Study in Black and White*, London, 1929,
- Nigeria gazette N° 38 of July 14, 1938

**Notes**

---

1 this article was presented to the Research Unit: Algeria, Africa and the Mediterranean, University of Oran in 2001 .

2 E. Smith, *Aggrey of Africa, A Study in Black and White*, London, 1929, p. 1292

3 For further details see E. A. Ashby, *Universities: British, Indian, African, A Study*

4 The members included: HS Newlands, CMGM, and Chief Commissioner of Ashanti; E. R. J. Hussey, Director of Education, Nigeria; Mayhew, Secretary of the Advisory Committee on Education in the Colonies, Colonial Office; W. W Waughan, experienced in head mastering public schools in England

5 Achimota Report 1932

6 Achimota Report 1938

7 Achimota was to provide degree courses in arts, engineering and premedical of the University of London, Fourah Bay College of Sierra Leone to offer a degree in Theology of Durham university. Yaba, Nigeria, would give up engineering and offer medical studies .

8 CO 554/121/33599/1939: Extract from the proceedings of the West African Governors' Conference 1939, Lagos, Nigeria's memo

9 CO 554/121/33599/1939, note by F Stockdale 14. 12. 1939

10 CO 847/ 18/47029/1940 Mouat Jones Sub-committee report December 1940 .

11 House of Commons debate 7 December 1938, Col 1247

12 Cmd. 6175, 1940, Statement of Policy on Colonial Development and Welfare

13 CO 96/776/31466/42-43, Selection and Training of Africans for Higher Posts

14 CO 964/12, Memo on Africanisation of Government Services, appendix III

15 CO 554/122/33629/1939, Memo on appointments of Africans to responsible posts in the administrative service

16 Nigeria gazette N° 38 of July 14, 1938

17 Hailey" *Native Administration and Political Development in British Tropical Africa 1940-42*", p. 8

18 CO 859/5/1265/39, memo by Mclean 2. 11. 39, "Practical Training in the government and professional posts of native officials in the colonies"

19 CO 850/137/20695/38: Note by Keith .

20 3. Hansard, May 21st 1940, col. 41

212121 CO 850/137/20695/1938, memo by Pedler 21. 1. 40