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The second world war and the development of higher education in British west Africa

Amakievi Okien Ijeoma Gabriel

Institute of Foundation Studies, Rivers State University of Science and Technology, P.M.B. 5080, Port Harcourt.

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ABSTRACT

The Second World War that took place from 1939 to 1945 involved the people of British West Africa who fought on the side of their colonial masters, the British. However a positive change in British colonial policy engendered the set up of Asquith and Elliot Commissions that favoured the establishment of institutions of higher education in some of the colonies in the post-war years. In this regard, the war was a catalyst to the emergence of university colleges in Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Ibadan in Nigeria. The British Labour Party government's welfare scheme for the colonies and nationalists demand for higher education were also factors that made university colleges to develop and they were affiliated to the University of London. They maintained a high standard quality of education. Data for this discourse were generated from secondary sources.

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Introduction

Higher education is provided by universities, colleges, polytechnics, institutes amongst others, depending on the nomenclature adopted. It is a post secondary school education. Consequently, it includes both undergraduate and graduate (post graduate) levels of education. Higher education creates windows for more career choices, specialization in specific disciplines, better accommodation of other people's views, higher social mobility and leadership role amongst others. This was much needed in British West African Colonies where most of the high and middle level colonial officers had to leave their administrative positions for Britain, particularly between 1939 and 1945 the Second World War years. West Africans were to occupy their positions and direct affairs of the society. What then was the situation?

This discourse examines the state of higher education in the pre-second World War years, the forces that stimulated the establishment of university colleges and the improvement in human capacity development after 1945. Again, despite the hardship during the Second World War, the economy of some British West African countries were stimulated to generate revenue that gave them the leverage to establish university colleges for higher education.

Higher Education: Pre Second World War British West Africa.

British West Africa (B.W.A) consisted of the following countries, Gambia, Gold Coast (Ghana), Sierra Leone and Nigeria that were colonized by Britain. Western education was introduced early in the nineteenth century into this African sub-region by European missionaries. It was on February 18, 1827 that Fourah Bay College in Freetown, Sierra Leone was established by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). It was the first western style University College in West Africa having been affiliated to Durham University. Africans from Nigeria, Gold Coast(now Ghana), Ivory Coast (now Coted' Ivoire), and so on had access to higher education in this institution so much so that Freetown became known as "Athens of Africa" as a consequence. However, it offered only liberal Education in the Arts Commerce and Education. Bachelor of Arts degrees were in Biblical Studies, English Language, Classics, Mathematics

and English History (Falola, 2004). Courses in Law, Medicine, Agriculture, Technology and Science were not offered. For several decades Fourah Bay College remained the only degree awarding higher institution in B.W.A. Most of its graduates were priests, teachers and administrators.

Achimota College, in the Gold Coast was BWA's great co-educational school. It was a secondary school, teacher's training college and university rolled into one. It was established in 1925 at the cost of £660,000 (Six hundred and sixty thousand pounds) with an annual maintenance cost of £50,000 (Fifty thousand pounds). It was formally opened on 28 January, 1927 by the Governor of Gold Coast, Sir Fredrick Gordon Guggisberg. It was earlier known as Prince of Wales College and School in honour of the Prince of Wales, Edward VIII who was the guest of honour at the opening ceremony. It had high academic standard and culture from where many notable Africans emerged in diverse fields of human endeavour – politicians, academics, doctors, lawyers, educators and so on.

Yaba Higher College was established in 1932 in Yaba, Lagos colony in Nigeria. It was a tertiary institution that provided education in vocational subjects and teaching. Vocational training was in agriculture, forestry, medicine (the special medical school was at Kings College), veterinary science, surveying and civil and mechanical engineering. Secondary school teachers were trained mainly in science subjects (Wikipedia- the free encyclopedia).

The establishment of this college was conceived by E.R.J. Hussey, the Director of Education in Nigeria in 1929. The aim was to train assistants to work in government departments and private firms. Its standard was low and offered limited diplomas. However, it opened in January 19, 1934 as the first higher education institution in Nigeria. The desire of many Nigerians was for a university with unrestricted courses.

Gambia was a poor and small country and was not as populous as the other BWA colonies to demand for higher education. Their citizens and many others from Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra Leone who could afford higher education in universities trained in the United Kingdom and United States of America.

Tele:

E-mail addresses: jonesalali@yahoo.com

The Second World War years: 1939 – 1945.

The Second World War (WW2) lasted from 1939 to 1945. It involved the world's great powers that formed two opposing military alliances, namely: the Allies and the Axis. Britain, France, United States and Soviet Union among others were the Allies while Germany, Italy, Japan and others were the Axis. It was not surprising that Africans fought for their colonial masters, Britain and France particularly in this WW2. Their exposure in Europe and Asia as well as their war experience contributed to their quest for independence and reforms.

The war years engendered a lot of hardship for people in Britain and their colonies in West Africa. As Jack (n.d.) remarked, Britain's involvement in the war resulted in great hardships, but it also led to many positive changes in British Society. Indeed, there was a strong belief that there would be full employment, a universal education system, social welfare, a National Health Service and redesigned and modernised towns and cities- all the social amenities that lacked for the majority of the people before the WW2. Winston Churchill's coalition government in 1940 contributed to a new attitude on welfare. Jeffery (1987) credited this to Richard Titmus discourse on Problems of Social Policy who stressed that the exposure of widespread social deprivation made central government fully conscious for the first time of the need for reconstruction, leading to a 'welfare state'. The influence of labour ministers in the coalition, it was also argued made the government to embark on radical changes/reforms.

A second critical factor was the anti-imperialism fervour of the period. In spite of the usefulness and ego of having an empire to Britain, the moral and intellectual ambience during and after the war was profoundly anti-imperialist especially in the international arena. The WW2, because of the ideological requirements of a war against Nazi imperialism and pressure from the United States of America (USA), redefined colonial principles. Again, the Atlantic Charter of August 1941 had in its third clause an agreement between the British and USA governments, the respect of the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them (Shillington, 1995).

A denial by the British Prime Minister, Churchill who signed this agreement with the United States President, Roosevelt that Clause Three of the Charter did not apply to Africa enlivened protests by Africans who demanded political independence. The West African Pilot, a newspaper founded in Nigeria in 1938 published this report and its denial on the Atlantic Charter. For Mazrui (1980), the WW2 had been an internationalizing experience at the end of which many Africans were ready to agitate for freedom and independence.

The emergence of two world powers Soviet Union and USA rather than Britain or Western Europe was another critical factor. They mounted pressures on European Powers to decolonize Africa. The stage was set for significant changes given these forces. It was clear that colonial rule could not continue forever. Thus, a fundamental step toward African self-government was the need for educated elite. Colonial government therefore began to invest in education in the colonies.

There was indeed a turning point. The British since the inter-war years no longer favoured alliance with unprogressive chiefs. The need for educated elite was strong. Consequently, two Commissions were set up in 1943 for the development of Higher Education in Africa and British West Africa respectively. The Secretary of State for the British Colonies was instrumental

to this reform, having earlier in the year requested British Universities to assist Africa in the creation of "Colonial Universities" to train future leaders.

The Commission on higher Education in Africa was headed by Mr. Justice Cyril Asquith (coverage of North and South Africa was not part of their terms of reference). Their task also covered West Indies. Its report was published on 19th June, 1945 with the following recommendations:

1. The establishment of University Colleges in colonies where they did not exist.
2. University Colleges should be residential, research oriented and concentrate on liberal Arts and Science.
3. University Colleges should have special relations with the University of London.
4. There should be an Inter-University Council (IUC) for Higher Education in the Colonies to supervise the college.
5. The IUC would recruit staff for the Colleges and allocate funds to them while the University of London would vet the syllabi, examination questions and scripts (Falola, 2004).

Rt. Hon Walter Elliot headed the other Commission that was to describe the organisation and assess the existing facilities of higher education in British West Africa. It had three representatives each from Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Ghana. These African members wanted Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, Achimota College, Ghana and Yaba Higher College, Nigeria to become full-fledged University Colleges to be co-ordinated by a West African Council on Higher Education rather than from London. They also wanted Arts, Science and professional degrees to be offered by the university colleges.

The Elliot Commission report was also published on 19th June, 1945. The report had majority and minority versions. The majority report recommended the establishment (possibly the upgrading of the three existing higher education institutions in West Africa) of three institutions of higher education in British West Africa. The minority report however, recommended the establishment of only one institution of higher education. These versions of the report generated a lot of controversies as to which version should be implemented. The Colonial Government and British West Africans were deeply involved in the arguments in favour or against the development of higher education in BWA. Expectedly, the Africans favoured the establishment of three universities while it was under pressure that Britain eventually facilitated the establishment of two university colleges in the region.

Post Second World War and Higher Education Development in British West Africa.

The Second World War (WW2) ended in 1945 and the Coalition Government passed the 1945 Colonial Development and Welfare Act, which increased the funds made available for investment in British colonies to £120million (One hundred and twenty million pounds) over the next ten years. It is worthy to note that out of this sum, £4.5 million (Four million, five hundred thousand pounds) only was for the development of higher education. As Nwauwa (2013) remarked, Roger Louis observed that such a colossal increase from the 1940 Act in the face of British wartime debt, adverse balance of payments and domestic financial austerity 'was truly the turning point in British commitment to improving economic efficiency and production, and to raising the standards of health, education and welfare in the colonies'. Nwauwa also stressed that with the increased funds and the conducive political climate, the Colonial Office swiftly moved to implement the Asquith and Elliot schemes.

The Labour Party's victory in the British election in mid-1945 at the end of the WW2 provided a new stimulus to colonial reforms. Labour party as Jack (n.d.) reported indicated their intention for reforms in their manifesto that stated 'let us face the future', this indeed reflected the mood of the times and Britain. In fact the Party promised the establishment of a socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain – freely democratic, efficient, progressive, public spirited, its material resources organized in the service of the British people. Following Labour Party election, George Hall emerged as the Secretary of State for the colonies while Arthur Creech Jones one of the signatories to the Elliot Minority report became the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State. George Hall despite his years as Parliamentary Under-Secretary during the war years Coalition Government was not conversant with and did not hold pronounced views on colonial issues so as to be able to take liberal decisions affecting the colonies. He was a trade unionist with interest on issues relating to labour, working conditions and trade unions. Arthur Creech Jones on the other hand was knowledgeable on colonial issues, especially Caribbean and African matters. He was a leading figure in the Fabian Colonial Bureau and regularly received detailed research reports and had frequent personal correspondence with a host of African and Caribbean leaders. According to Nwauwa (2013), he was for almost ten years Labour's acknowledged "authority" on colonial affairs in the House of commons.

In 1945 the governments of the Gambia, Gold Coast, Nigeria and Sierra Leone received a despatch from the Secretary of State, George Hall, indicating his decision to establish only one university for BWA and this was the Minority Report recommendation. He wanted the university to be founded in Nigeria but should be governed by a Council 'fully representative of the four British West African Territories'. Hall wanted his decision to be published so that public opinion and reactions on the issue would be ascertained. It was unusual to seek such public opinion over despatches from Colonial Government in the colonies. This exception was probably due to the new spirit of partnership ushered in by the post WW2 reforms which provided the colonial peoples the opportunity to play an increasing role in deciding their future development. This was a great opportunity for the educated elite in BWA and 'nationalists' to affect and shape implementation of new policies on higher education.

Several memoranda from the BWA colonies were generated as a result of Hall's despatch. For example, various groups, educational, political, and social organizations and interest groups reacted in the Gold Coast (Ghana). According to Nwauwa(2013). The Joint Provisional Council of Gold Coast Colony memorandum supported the Majority Report and so did those of the Gold Coast Bar Association, the Old Bays Association of Achimota College and the Gold Coast Teachers Union. From Sierra Leone, the Fourah Bay College Council rejected the Minority Report. The Sierra Leone Board of Education favoured the implementation of the Majority report. Gambia was the poorest and smallest of all the colonies in BWA and so did not present any demands.

The Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) founded in 1936 focused mainly on the issue of educational reforms by the colonial government. Indeed, it debated the issue of higher education particularly as members were educated. This group's radical stance and that of radical nationalists who were dominated by those who had acquired higher education in Europe and America vehemently demanded the establishment of universities in Nigeria.

The Secretary of State (George Hall) and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Arthur Creech Jones) preferred the implementation of the Minority Report because Colonial Government did not have funds to simultaneously establish three universities. The problem of qualified academic staff and the supply of students and the need to maintain high standards were other sources of concern. If the idea of establishing universities was to foster and expand the class of educated Africans to take over leadership and help in the advancement of the colonies why could colonial government not establish these universities? Why was there a limitation in the number of university colleges to be established? Should some colonies have had educated elites while others did not? The distance between the BWA countries did not also favour the exclusion of any of the countries from having a higher education institution. How can Africans from Gambia go to Ghana, Nigeria or Sierra Leone for higher education given the distance? Again, the contrasts between the colonies in social, economic and political development should have been considered in establishing the higher education institution so that each colonial population, irrespective of its economic, social and political development would produce citizens who would have engendered their country's advancement.

Nwauwa (1993) argued that the American influence that has been overlooked in literature was a longstanding factor in the ultimate decision by Britain to push colonial reforms. With regard to higher education, colonial officials feared the activity of American – educated Africans which they felt could be a major factor in the possible disintegration of the British Empire. American- educated Africans opposed British rule and became 'radical' and were conceived as 'revolutionaries' and non-conformists. Partly for this reason, colonial government indicated the American educational system for imparting to the Africans ideas which were inimical to British interest. Consequently, Africans in British colonies were to be moulded 'wisely' to reinforce the educated elite who were to implement and sustain the new British colonial reforms. This also persuaded Britain to establish universities in Africa.

Post Second World War Higher Education Development in British West Africa

The Majority Report of Elliot's Commission became a blueprint for the establishment of University Colleges in British West Africa (BWA) in 1948. Arthur Creech Jones who had now become Secretary of State yielded to the pressures from various groups and the demands of nationalists as he allowed two University Colleges to be established. Pearce (1982), explained that Arthur Creech Jones in particular preferred the intelligentsia to the chiefs in the administration of the colonies and eventual transfer of political power. Consequently, the establishment of higher education institutions was imperative. In fact the Labour Government's disposition was in favour of the educated elite rather than on the conservation of power in chiefs which necessitated the provision of higher education in B.W.A.

A major step towards the establishment of the university colleges in Gold Coast (Ghana) and Nigeria was taken in 1947 when Late Mr. David Mowbray Balme and Dr. Kenneth Mellanby were appointed Principal designate respectively for the two University Colleges by the Secretary of State (Creech Jones). Mellanby from University of London and Balme from Cambridge University, each influenced their university colleges tradition along the lines of their university's culture. The new university colleges therefore maintained high standards.

Sierra Leone's demand for a university, pressures from the Church Missionary Society, Methodist Missionary Society,

Durham University to which Fourah Bay College was affiliated and other influential interest groups within and outside Sierra Leone did not persuade Colonial Government to establish a university there. Creech Jones according to Nwauwa (2013) felt Sierra Leone did not have the resources to build and maintain a university college and that funds from Colonial Development Welfare Act (CD&WA) could not provide for a third University in British West Africa. Another unfortunate factor was that the Director of Education conveyed his own position in favour of the Minority recommendation in 1946 and to which the Government of Sierra Leone also subscribed. It would be recalled that Creech Jones favoured this Minority Report to which he was a signatory.

Nigeria in the immediate post –WW2 period, enjoyed a favourable trade balance from agricultural products such as groundnuts and cotton from the Northern region, palm products from the Eastern Region and cocoa from the Western Region as Marketing Boards of each region regulated and controlled exports and accumulated surpluses. It is not surprising therefore that the Nigerian Government bore the recurrent expenditure for the establishment of the University College, Ibadan, Nigeria. However, the larger part of the financial support for capital costs to the tune of £1,500,000 (one million, five hundred thousand pounds) only initially, was provided by the British Government from the CD&WA fund allocation to Higher Education in the colonies as recommended by the Asquith Commission.

University College Ibadan began lectures in January 1948 with 108 students who were originally students of Yaba Higher College. They completed their programmes in the new University College. It was in October 1948 that 148 new university students were admitted after a very competitive entrance examination. The following degree courses were offered: Arts (Classics, English, History and Geography); Science (Mathematics, Botany, Chemistry, Physics and Zoology), Agriculture which was introduced in 1949 and Medicine, that was limited to only preclinical courses (in the early years of the University College). They were a replica of courses also offered at the University of London to which University College, Ibadan (ICU) was affiliated. Similarly, the academic, technical and administrative staff recruitment and job advancement were strictly based on British Standards. Materu, et al (2011) noted that these actions were taken in accordance with the recommendations of both the Asquith and Elliot Commissions Reports that “the University Colleges should aspire from the outset to achieve academic standards equal to those of universities and university colleges in Britain”.

UCI was a prestigious institution in the then British Commonwealth largely because of its high quality staff (academic, technical and administrative); international academic staff component as only few inherited from Yaba Higher College were Nigerians; high standard physical and other teaching facilities as well as manageable student population for effective teaching. Although UCI was criticized for its highly competitive and elitist admission policy, it was a source of prestige too because only the best candidates were admitted. Its graduates earned the University of London degrees.

The University College of Gold Coast (Ghana) began classes in October 1948 with 90 undergraduates from Achimota College. During the foundation years it shared accommodation with the teacher-training department at Achimota before it relocated to Legon, its permanent site. The Gold Coast Government provided the sum of £1,100,000 (one million, one hundred thousand pounds) only for its establishment while the Gold Coast Cocoa Marketing Board gave the sum of £

1,896,718 (one million, eight hundred and ninety six thousand, seven hundred and eighteen pounds) only for the development of an agriculture department and associated sciences (Nwauwa, 2013). In fact, Gold Coast virtually bore the entire cost of the establishment of its University College when compared with other Colonial University Colleges. It received little from the British Government through the Colonial Development and Welfare Act Fund.

Characteristic of the Inter-University Council (IUC) for Higher Education in the Colonies, a brain child of Asquith Commission; it recruited the staff of the University College of the Gold Coast (UCGC). The IUC also supervised the College. Its courses were also Arts and Science based as those of the University of London to which it was affiliated. The University of London gave final approval to its examinations because its students were awarded the University of London degrees. Consequently, UCGC depended on the IUC for guidance on its broad policy and the University of London for approval and control of details of degree regulations on liberal arts, social sciences, basic science, agriculture and medicine.

The university colleges by their nature imported western traditions and culture that was predominantly based on liberal arts and literary education which according to Mazrui (1980) imported contempt for practical subjects that had characterized the academic ethos of the West for centuries. However, it would be recalled that West Africans had not attained independence that would have afforded them the opportunity to have controlled their affairs and dictated the course of events. In the 1940s at the time of the establishment of these higher institutions the British were fully in-charge of affairs and called the tune. British colonial policy was to establish a local government whereby educated Africans would be expected to assume a leading role in governance. Africa was still to remain a major source of their economy and was to gradually attain self-development and ultimately independence. The establishment of university colleges was a major step towards the development of full fledged universities and other forms of higher education in post-independent British colonies. In fact BWA had more university colleges than other parts of Africa in the period under study.

Conclusion

The Second World War was a ‘delayed catalyst’ in the development of higher education in BWA. Education departments in all the colonies suffered great financial hardship, material shortages and huge losses in teaching and essential administrative staff but the war generated great expectations amongst the colonial subjects for a better relationship with the metropole and improved welfare.

The Welfare Acts of 1940 and 1945, the disposition of the Labour Government members during the coalition with the Conservative Party and their eventual victory after the war facilitated progressive policies that made the issue of higher education development and attainment of self-government attractive and germane to the nationalists in particular and the general populace. The emergence of Soviet Union and USA as powers with anti-imperialism posture during and after the war was a favourable trigger to the quest for higher education, the establishment of universities in particular and independence. Nationalists and the Labour Party were alike in thought that favoured the development of university education from which educated elite who would succeed the colonial officials would emerge.

Asquith and Elliot Commissions that recommended the establishment of university colleges were constituted during the

war years and the implementation of their recommendations, especially the Majority report of Elliot Commission in the post-war period reflect the concrete effect of preparations, thoughts and effect of the WW2 on higher education.

The WW2 therefore was not entirely negative because it engendered positive changes that inspired a truly turning point in British commitment to improving higher education access in BWA. Although finance from the colonies partly contributed to the establishment of the university colleges, British Government could if it so desired, to have not contributed to their establishment as was the case in the pre-WW2 years. The positive change induced by the WW2 contributed to the high standard of these university colleges as a result of their affiliation with the University of London and the intervention of the IUC in their staff regulation, advancement, research and financial assistance. Beyond the negative experiences of the WW2 was a positive development of higher education institutions in British West Africa, in the Second World War years.

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