Resistance and Rebellion in Colonial Africa

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During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European governments began to establish and consolidate colonial territories across the African continent. While the strategies of colonial administration varied across different European empires, systems of violence, exploitation, and oppression were always at the foundations of colonial rule. Repressive European hierarchies were not accepted or endured passively by African men, women, and children who found themselves living under colonial rule. Exploring the pervasive and multifaceted strategies of resistance used by African colonial subjects across the continent, this essay argues that colonized people and communities in Africa found novel ways to adapt and subvert European rule, which ultimately contributed to the end of colonialism in the mid-twentieth century. To demonstrate African subversion of systems of domination, I will explore how colonial subjects adapted, remade, and expressed anti-colonial sentiments through European efforts to control alcohol, introduce colonial sports, and infuse African youth with manufactured loyalty through the Boy Scouts. The history of anti-colonial resistance in Africa proves that European cultural constructs, whether applied through direct or indirect rule, most often failed to erase African cultures and identities.

European efforts to control alcohol engendered adaptive resistance on the part of native Africans who refused to renounce the drinks which held significance both as cultural foci and as a lucrative market in the oppressive colonial economy. Since the European impetus to restrict African drug markets interacted with both extant native traditions and Islamic polity,[1] the history of colonial prohibition provides a discursive insight into the abiding resilience and imminent adaptability of native African traditions under two different hegemonies. Records exist of both European and Muslim programs of prohibition and of the fluid strategies implemented by native Africans to subvert or circumvent each. Further - considering "prohibition" as a law or decree which proscribes any drug, not just alcohol - the saga of khat, a mild stimulant which also faced colonial prohibition across Kenya, Somaliland, and Aden, exposes fundamental failures across colonial governments which extend beyond their inability to control the liquor trade.[2] Khat grows wild throughout most of mainland Africa, and its cultivation as a trade good, a bride price item, a work enhancer, an aid for meditative religious practices, and a political ritual among elders predates colonialism by at least two hundred years.[3] And as with alcohol, moral panics about the social and medical perils of khat and khat prohibition policies emerged contiguously with times of social upheaval throughout colonial Africa, though khat trade and consumption survived the colonial period and continue in the present.[4] The history of khat proscription also represents an exploration of "[h]ow certain substances come to be viewed as undesirable [which] speaks of underlying social, cultural, and economic processes" and intersects deeply with Europe's failures to suffocate native Africans' liquor traditions and trade.[5]

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[1] Heather J. Sharkey, "Christians among Muslims: The Church Missionary Society in the Northern Sudan," *The Journal of African History* 43, no. 1 (2002): 51–75. 51-2.

British efforts to implement and enforce the prohibition of alcohol in colonial Nigeria, a region which had experienced the rule of a Northern Muslim elite under the Sokoto Caliphate since 1804, are among the most pronounced of these failures. Honoring their Qur'anic devotion to abstinence, Northern Nigeria prohibited participation in the native alcohol trade by Muslim rulers well before the arrival of the British in the South. However, those affected by this proscription were only one sector of a populace which was mostly represented by non-Muslim peoples who freely satisfied their taste for homemade *peto* brewed without yeast from guinea corn and millet after a successful harvest.[6] Indeed, the consumption of local homebrews and palm wine, as well as various liquors carried in a thriving import market, had been a part of life for people throughout the totality of Nigeria for centuries, Muslim rule or no.

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[2] David Anderson and Neil Carrier, "Khat in Colonial Kenya: A History of Prohibition and Control," *The Journal of African History* 50 no. 2, 377-397, 377.
[3] Anderson and Carrier, "Khat," 379-80.
[4] Anderson and Carrier, "Khat," 383.
[5] Anderson and Carrier, "Khat," 377.

Faced with only a limited number of administrative personnel on the ground in their colonies, Great Britain relied upon indirect rule by Northern Muslim elites to implement its local prohibition policies. Both hypocritical and racialized, these policies banned liquor consumption for Nigerians who lived in and around the Northern areas where Islamic governance was entrenched and certain peoples who were thought to be more susceptible to alcoholism.[7] British policy also established a system of licensed traffic centered around government stations, which allowed Europeans to partake as they pleased in drink and in the money to be made off of its import and sale.[8] This tendency to apply designations which privileged or disadvantaged certain groups according to racialized arbitration is a pervasive theme throughout the lifespan of colonialism in Africa, and often unintentionally opened opportunities for native Africans to "challenge, circumvent, and thereby destabilize colonial authority."[9] Historian Simon Heap argues that Nigerians who lived within the prohibited zone found five distinct ways to sidestep or exploit the system which sought to exploit them: "by legally drinking indigenous alcohol, by obtaining colonial liquor permits, by smuggling, by substituting unusual alcoholic beverages, and by purchasing liquor cleverly made in the north itself."[10] Each of these methods represents a successful effort by Nigerians to take advantage of some inherent weakness of British colonial systems and impose novel methods of resistance. For example: in addition to homebrewed *peto*, Nigerians used locally sourced alternative ingredients or imported non-potable alcohol like the *alcool de menthe* in French mouthwash or the methylated spirits, which were typically used in lamps to produce, distribute, and consume alcohol in the face of colonial prohibitions.[11]

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[6] Simon Heap, "We Think Prohibition is a Farce: Drinking in the Alcohol-Prohibited Zone of Northern Nigeria," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 31, no. 1, 23-51, 26.

[7] Heap, "Prohibition," 26-27.

[8] Heap, "Prohibition," 26.

[9] J.N.C. Hill, "Imperial Classifications and Anti-Colonial Resistance in Northern Africa," *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 3, 464-74, 464-467.

Further, northern Nigerians commonly adapted southern methods to distill their own liquor, a feat accomplishable with only some pots, pipes, and a kerosene tin, underscoring the mobility of Nigerian technologies as they moved fluidly through colonized geographies.[12] Additionally, while the British were able to combat smuggling by river and by rail with some success, their policies of prohibition were doomed by both the enormous enforcement costs of those policies and by the Europeans' love of alcohol, as colonial officials legally imported as much as they liked for themselves, plus enough to sell on the black markets which typically arise around prohibition in any region. This culture of casual corruption was also exploited via the racialized British liquor licensing system that banned alcohol for "at-risk" northerners but issued permits for purchasing spirits through overworked and outnumbered colonial administrators to more than 2,000 "non-native" workers.[13] Colonial administrators would sometimes sign off on licenses *en masse* to save themselves time and effort, and even when they did personally screen each license, they operated with extremely limited capacity to discern who was from which region. Because of these limitations in will and ability among administrators, liquor licenses for northerners were often no farther away than a change of clothes or a fake accent. Worse for the

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[10] Heap, "Prohibition," 24.
[11] Heap, Prohibition," 51.
[12] Heap, "Prohibition", 48.
[13] Heap, "Prohibition", 37.

British, Chima J. Korieh argues that Nigerians resented colonial suppression of "their natural folkways… [and] questioned the government's right to make such judgements", leading to some direct actions of anti-colonial resistance, such as when the Ndom Ebom people confronted local police and forced the release of 37 people who had been arrested for "possession of production apparatus and liquor."[14] District Officers despaired of prohibition ever meeting with success in the face of Nigerian resentment and resistance, offering evidence of its failure and arguing for its cessation despite metropolitan demonization of traditional brews as a degenerative threat to society. This condescension also played out in the colonial prohibition of khat, which grows wild across most of the African continent with a deep history of traditional use. As with alcohol prohibition, khat prohibition eventually crumbled under the weight of its own impractical application, subsumed by a European-assisted black market and indigenous defiance. Justified through paternalist pseudo-medicine, khat prohibition was structured and enforced much like alcohol prohibition, with sale restricted to certain ethnic groups, licensing, and dispensation around government posts all present, and all equally thwarted by native African resistance.[15]

Strategies of resistance in African colonies also extended to the cultural import of soccer, or football, as Africans used the sport to subvert foreign rule in stadiums, cities, towns, and other colonial spaces throughout the continent." Sport has been a vessel for the expression of identity across the world throughout most of the 20th century to the present, and in colonial Africa, this manifested as another form of anti-colonial resistance. Laura Fair argues that sport, particularly football, was introduced largely to promote the "muscular Christianity" of Europe's highly gendered societal structures and to unconsciously train native Africans to accept their place within the colonial hierarchies. Instead, African players “symbolically undermined” those hierarchies when they were able to publicly dominate European athletes who were their supposed racial betters.[16] Indeed, Darby asserts that as soccer was diffused through African elites who mostly cooperated with its program of “cultural imperialism” and down through the indigenous working class, it became less of a hegemonic tool and more of a vessel for protest and resistance against colonial domination.[17] For example, in South Africa, football came to be viewed by politically dominant whites as “the cultural domain of lower-class blacks,”[18] and such racist snobbery allowed black South Africans to create their own autonomous leisure culture which served to alleviate the misery of life in a depressed and oppressive economic system, provided icons of indigenous excellence as players became heroes, and fostered a space for political conversation and debate where anti-colonialist sentiments could be expressed, heard, and gain traction.[19] And in Mozambique, African players moved within their own particular aesthetic of kinetics and physicality that were unique to the region and embodied “precepts from old traditions… amulets, fumes, and concoctions adjusted to the world of football” that Mozambiquan poet and journalist Jose Craveirinha called “witchcraft practices.”[20] Mozambiquan witchcraft practices on the soccer field were an irruptive force of cultural defiance, a radical and reimagining of European sport into an explicitly African expression of art and spirit that created a space for local Mozambiquans to cope with the deeply imbalanced power dynamics of a colonized polity. As with prohibition, the subversion of sport highlights native Africans' enduring refusal of colonial authority, their will to resist, and their ingenuity in doing so effectively. Like prohibition, sport is a useful lens through which to study anti-colonial resistance in Africa because it existed at points of tension where indigenous norms and identities were simultaneously denigrated and offered legitimacy by the colonial hegemonies.

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[14] Chima J. Korieh, "Alcohol and Empire: 'Illicit' Gin Prohibition and Control in Eastern Nigeria," *African Economic History* no. 31, 111-134.

[15] Anderson and Carrier, "Khat", 396-7.

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[16] Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001) 1-8, 2.

[17] Paul Darby, *Africa, Football, and FIFA: Politics, Colonialism, and Resistance*, 2002, Routledge, p. 19.

[18] Alegi, “Playing,” 23.

[19] Peter C. Alegi, “Playing to the Gallery? Sport, Cultural Performance, and Social Identity in South Africa, 1920s-1945”, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 50, No. 1, 7-26.

[20] Domingos, Nuno. “The Malicious Football Game: Urban Interactions and Power Relations in Lourenço Marques, Capital of Colonial Mozambique,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 315–34.

Another of these flashpoints of conflict with colonial authority is the Boy Scouts. Seemingly unassuming, the Boy Scouts' conservatism and ingrained amicability to the ethics of whatever status quo dominates their home country can provide a piercing study in social tensions across cultures and nationalities. When the Mau Mau Rebellion sparked in Kikuyu Province over exploitative land use laws and native Kenyans began taking oaths of loyalty to their own people over European authority,[21] the Kenyan Boy Scouts played an important role in the conflict, which highlights tensions across race, class, and gender.[22] Introduced by "colonial officials, missionaries, and educators…to promote social stability and loyalty to the British Empire"[23], scouting was an avenue to prestige and position for native Kenyans, whose uniforms were a badge of civic trust in the eyes of the British Empire and an article of admiration among their own people. Indeed, some native Kenyans believed Scouts to have special powers of woodcraft and survival, but their knowledge of colonial administration was a thing of fact, not folklore, since civics lessons were a part of the Boy Scouts' training.[24] Steeped in this trust and assumed loyalty to British authority, Scouting was even touted as a solution to the unrest of the Mau Mau Rebellion and anti-colonialism in general by colonial Governor Sir Evelyn Baring in 1955, who stated that Scouting would insulate native Africans from anti-British sentiment through "the art of citizenship".[25] However, despite the British forbiddance of local, independent Scout troops, the movement was nevertheless appropriated by some rural Kenyans who made their own uniforms, sometimes admitted girls, and were less inclined to toe the line of European dominance.

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[21] Albert Sengulo Msellemu, "Common Motives of African Colonial Resistances 1890-1960," *Social Evolution and History* 12, no. 2, 143-155.

[22] Timothy H. Parsons, *Race, Resistance, and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004).

[23] Parsons, "Race," 4.

[24] Parsons, "Race," 6.

Scouting's call to political legitimacy, which was designed at the organization's genesis to be tailored and adjusted as needed from country to country, proved an easy vessel for rural troop leaders to disseminate the imperatives of Kenyan nationalism above a manufactured loyalty to their European predecessors. Core values of self-reliance and self-determination syncretized smoothly with calls for Kenyan independence. While many troops did remain loyal to the British, Mau Mau oaths were commonplace among Kenyan Boy Scouts, some of whom took to the forests in armed resistance alongside the rebels. Parsons argues that most scouts "did what they were trained to do in times of widespread unrest…they did their best to support what they considered to be the legitimate symbols of political authority," even if those symbols of authority were African, not European.[26]Even more poignantly, South African Boy Scouts continually used the Fourth Scout Law, which states that a scout is a brother to every other scout, as a rallying cry against the racist injustices of the color bar under Apartheid. What began as an ideology to propagate loyalty to the British Empire became a dangerously subversive creed under Afrikaner oppression.[27] This willful and directed defiance of power elevates their multiracial reading of the Fourth Law from an act of resistance, which can occur in silence and out of sight, to an act of protest, "which assumes a more explicit form of articulation of grievances."[28] It is a tactic that explicitly placed the South African Boy Scouts who adhered to it in immediate physical danger. While many other forms of resistance highlight the brilliant wit of native Africans, this act of protest is a testament to the depth of their enduring courage.

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[25] Parsons, "Race," 4.
[26] Parsons, "Race," 165.
[27] Parsons, "Race," 194.

In conclusion, the reversal of intention from compliance to resistance, which can be seen throughout prohibition, sport, and scouting, is among the most common features of anti-colonial resistance across the African continent. Numerous inversions across vastly different arenas highlight the adaptive and creative character of native resistance to colonial power. The insurrective fluidity of African defiance was an important factor in bringing about the eventual end of colonialism during the 20th century, as system after system floundered on the shifting sands of native resistance to colonial rule. While this essay has highlighted only three subverted systems, the imposition of most constructs of colonial authority was met with novel methods of resistance, many of which share at least one aspect in common with the subjects of this work. Thus, prohibition, sport, and scouting can be seen as microcosms of anti-colonial trends that prevailed across the African continent throughout the entire colonial period.

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[28] Jon Abbink, Mirjam De Brujin, and Klaas Van Walraven, "Rethinking Resistance: Revolt and Violence in African History", 2003, Koninklijke, Lieden, The Netherlands, 8.

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