

Book Review:

Northwest Tanzania Under German and British Rule. By Ralph Austen. Yale University Press, 1968. pp.307.

Reviewed by Joy Stewart

The question of the impact of colonization on Africa and its positive and negative legacies has become an academic controversy among historians of Africa. Certain historians would like to maintain that the colonial experience was of positive value to many, if not all, sectors of the African community; and a great deal of academic apologizing has been put forth in attempts to justify imperialist activity in Africa. *Northwest Tanzania Under German and British Rule* by Ralph Austen is a recently published addition to the school of thought which supports a benign assessment of the European interference in African affairs. This particular bias would not be sufficient to discredit the book in itself were it not for Austen's inadequate handling of the problems and issues involved in any discussion of the Afro-European interaction during the colonial period. His brief introduction and equally cursory conclusion do contain a wealth of ideas that reveal varying degrees of insight into the forces at work during this period in African history. Yet, unfortunately, the remainder and bulk of the work fails to compare with these supposed summations of his general themes, and even serves to contradict many of his major assertions.

Austen purports to have undertaken a study which would "place colonialism in a more *indigenous* (emphasis added) perspective by focusing on a very parochial historical setting, the interplay between German and British rulers and African subjects in one province of a former colony." (p. 1) He qualifies this aim by stating that "the materials, the causal factors, and the instances of decision making from which such a study must be constructed have proven to be overwhelmingly weighted toward Europe rather than Africa." (p. 1) This general assessment of the biases of the available source material seems to have served Austen as a sufficient excuse to present an overly simplistic and one-sided analysis. Contrary to his professed intentions, he proceeds to outline the significant events of foreign rule from 1889-1939 from an almost completely European standpoint, both contextually and analytically.

Austen leaves one with the impression that prior to the coming of the Europeans, northwest Tanzania was politically characterized by a system of petty warring chiefs essentially vying for nothing but increased chiefly ascendancy over larger areas of territory and for such accompanying benefits as "the traditional indulgences of the *bakama* (chiefs)--literally wine, women...and song." (p.96) The European powers are alleged to have happened upon this situation against their will (Austen supports Robinson and Gallagher's thesis presented in *Africa and the Victorians* that imperialism was characterized by a cautious and quite conservative official mind), but once accepting the fact that they had to be there, they began attempts to rectify the deteriorating African situation

through the suppression of the slave trade and the substitution of legitimate commerce, the prevention of inter and intra-tribal warfare, and the general betterment of the African population by means of Christianization and exposure to other aspects of European civilization. Austen describes some of the African chiefs and kings involved in resisting these Europeanizing efforts as "intransigent", "perennially recalcitrant", "personally weak and alcoholic", "opportunistic", "obsessed with local political intrigue", "totally incompetent", and "petty warfaring". Those who co-operated are deemed "relatively reliable", "enlightened", and "progressive".

This skeletal view of Austen's presentation of the African side of the events in the colonial era indicates his failure to fully investigate the dynamics of the African response. He fails to fully consider that the Germans, and later the British, were an alien invading force trying to superimpose their will and authority on a pre-existing, perhaps centuries old, set of African cultural solutions to particular ecological situations. A deposed ruler's "intransigence" was most likely a superficial manifestation of a more profound resistance to the European disruption of traditional social structures. Austen fails to delve into these aspects of the issue. Such revelations as that explaining the *bakama's* initial hesitation to participate in the British administration's newly created *Bakama Council* (1926) because of a traditional fear of the fatally dangerous nature of encounters between rulers of different kingdoms (p.161) give insight into the nature of the traditional forces at work. Unfortunately such insights are neither adequately presented nor adequately investigated in Austen's book.

If Austen serves to unnecessarily denigrate the image of the chiefs, the injustice he does to the masses of the native population is even more striking: he virtually ignores their presence and their ability to influence the course of events. His concentration on interaction between chiefs and European officials fails to account for the traditional bases of the power and authority of the chief. Granted, chiefs eventually came to depend on European and not African support and control, but surely the masses were not so passive as to allow the seemingly arbitrary and externally imposed depositions and enthronements of their chiefs to go unnoticed. Austen makes casual reference to the east lake (Lake Victoria) peoples' deposition of almost all the German appointed chiefs during World War II when German military cadres were occupied elsewhere (p. 121), but no in-depth analysis is attempted to explain why this did or did not occur in certain areas.

Austen adheres to the thesis that a European "official mind" directed the course of colonial policy. He asserts that this policy was characterized by the conscious, formalized goals of continuity and order, and was the product of "conservative elites concerned primarily with the effect of...changes upon the African population." (p.3) Yet his own exposition of the facts of colonial policy points out that there were always other concerns influencing the formation of policy, most often to the detriment

of African welfare. Facility of administration, European public opinion, international diplomatic relations, and the nature of imperialistic capitalism itself, all contributed to the extra-African aspect of policy. In Austen's own words:

The rule of the British as newcomers and the various needs - particularly economic - of their first years of occupation created an atmosphere encouraging an often abrupt, direct, and total intervention in African affairs. Institutions and relationships...were now to be vigorously reshaped and adapted to ends dictated by the administration. (p. 133)

Austen does not make it clear whether or not he considers the local administrators - men on the spot - to be representatives of the official mind. His factual presentation, however, makes it clear that their pragmatic and often opportunistic manipulation of local situations contributed to the breakdown of African political stability and order. The positions of the chiefs were varyingly strengthened and weakened, seemingly at the will of the particular administrators; the power and influence of white settlers was restrained under certain officials, only to be allowed free reign under successive administrators, many of whom held "little affection for traditional African institutions or their representatives" (p. 180); and the role of the missionary was officially enhanced or discouraged depending on the particular goals of the administrator on the scene.

If these administrators represent aspects of the "official mind", their actions do not support Austen's contention that official policy evolved along lines of primary concern for Africans. If they are not representatives of the official mind, then Austen has not shown that the official mind had any influence over developments in Africa, for his exposition presents the men on the spot as extremely powerful in the implementation, and even the formation, of colonial policy.

The material comprising Austen's analysis could easily form the basis of a scathing critique of the European ineptitude at effective colonial rule. Yet Austen attempts throughout his work to lend invalid support to a benign assessment of colonial policy:

The one feature most clearly distinguishing British rule in Tanganyika...from the earlier German East African regime was a persistent official commitment to developing the territory "along native lines"; that is in the interests and according to the ideas of the African population. From a long-range historical perspective, the sincerity and significance of this position can scarcely be questioned. The British did take steps consciously designed to promote a kind of self-government...that would help prepare the way for Tanganyika's relatively smooth transition to independence after World War II. (p. 147)

Austen's own evidence refutes this generalization. The policy of Indirect Rule, as applied to this area, developed not as a set of consciously derived principles allowing for native development along African oriented lines, but rather as a functional, methodological means of

...conveying the European civilization...to the mass of the native population by advising or influencing the tribal chiefs without, as a rule, approaching the individual natives directly. (p. 72)

This policy did not include the recognition of indigenous political institutions as viable organs of government, but saw them rather as instruments for the effective control over populations with which the majority of the Europeans had neither the ability nor the desire to communicate.

It appears that the British did not even make formal attempts to discover the interests and ideas of the African population (the first academic anthropologist arrived in Tanganyika Territory as late as 1930), but were guided in administration by concerns for immediate, not long-range, stability and order, and economic productivity. Such an orientation was not conducive to the development of political acumen or awareness on behalf of the African populace, nor was it in the best interests of the African peoples. When independently formed African organizations (clubs, churches, trade organizations) did begin to emerge, they were squelched if they displayed even an inkling of potentially anti-colonial politicizing.

Such British actions as the strengthening of the Western Bantu rulers while "consciously freeing them from various traditional bonds of superstition and parochial particularism, as represented by their sorcerers and the village leaders" (p. 49), reveal the European ignorance of the traditional mechanisms which checked autocratic chiefly rule. The superstition and particularism referred to were embodied in the various age-grades, religious cults, and other integrative structures of the particular societies. Within Western conception their demise might be viewed as a positive goal, but colonial administrators failed to realize that tampering with the internal supports of societies would introduce structural chaos. The only preventative to chaos would have been the substitution of equally functioning and effective structures - a feat to which neither the Germans nor the British proved themselves capable.

Austen attributes the failure of indirect rule to the European colonizers' inability to find "any true resonance in traditional African political systems" (p. 225), and to "the general lack of political resilience among the local tribes" (p. 41). He appears to be laying the blame for the failures of colonial policy to benefit the masses of Africans on the African chiefs, not only for the supposed inadequacies of the traditional structures of which they were a part, but also for their failure to take the initiative in the introduction of "progressive" features in their respective communities. Austen fails to account for the fact that no really progressive features could possibly have been introduced by the

chiefs as long as the chiefs and the people were kept in economic and political enslavement by the colonial administration. If fault is a relevant historical issue, it would appear to lie more with the Europeans who held the superordinate power in the situation and yet failed to use their strength to enforce any type of consistent policy in line with consistent goals. The colonizers' failure to meaningfully delineate priorities - education, Christianization, economic productivity - resulted in their failure to effectively pursue any of them.

It seems quite evident that the spirit of colonialism was carried out within an overwhelmingly Eurocentric framework. If Austen's book is any indication of the recent trends in the Western historical investigation of the era, it is also evident that a perspective on and an understanding of African ways of life have not yet been achieved to a sufficient degree so as to insure a balanced and meaningful interpretation of African affairs.

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