

Book Review: *West African Resistance: The Military response to colonial occupation*, by Michael Crowder (ed.). New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1970. Pp. xiv + 314. Illustrations and maps. \$15.00.

*West African Chiefs: Their changing status under colonial rule and independence*, by Michael Crowder & Obaro Ikime (eds.). New York: Africana Publishing Corporation and Ile-Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife Press, 1970. Pp. xxx + 453. Tables, diagrams and maps. \$18.00.

If there is one clear notion that has emerged from the last decade and a half of scholarship concerning Africa, it is that of purely African creativity and initiative from the building of Zimbabwe by the Shona to the original combinations of trade and politics developed in the Niger delta in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Corollary to this, and equally significant, is the persistence of African processes of development under colonial domination, processes that were often affected strongly by European influence but rarely 'destroyed' as is so often asserted. These themes were well developed in Michael Crowder's excellent general work *West Africa Under Colonial Rule*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968. Now he (with Ikime in *Chiefs*) gives us compilations of papers which deal with specialized aspects of these themes. This review will focus on questions and themes raised in the two books. Such an approach seems to me a useful one when the number of articles is so large and when they are included in volumes as closely thematic as these are. Some specific comments concerning the usefulness of these books will be made at the end.

The myth that the European takeover of Africa was easy and relatively bloodless has been exploded again and again though it still crops up occasionally in general works. The trouble lies in that the blood is seen to be all lost by the African armies. Studies of resistance concentrate on such themes as the complexity of African-European interaction involving a multifaceted array of resistance, accommodation, and collaboration. In this milieu, many studies that include violent resistance tend to focus on the political and ideological organization backing the army in the field. Actual military operations leading to eventual defeat are usually dismissed with vague references to maxim guns and other superior weapons possessed by Europeans. One is thus still left with the mental vision of hordes of disorganized Africans flinging themselves blindly on to stalwart British and French squares and being slaughtered wholesale, a vision that does a great disservice to the tactical capabilities of African Military commanders and to the high state of organization developed in many African armies.

Both the threat and the actuality of African military capability often proved more costly and delayed the European advance much more than what was expected by the colonial power. *West African Resistance* proposes to focus on precisely this overlooked area and consider the actual mechanics of African military resistance.\*

As in all edited works the foci and quality of the papers vary considerably. Nine major resistances are presented with a nice balance of four from former French colonies (Samori, Mamadou Lamine, Tukolor, and Dahomey) and five from former British colonies. Predictably three of the latter are from Nigeria (Ebrohimi, Sokoto and Ijebu) with one each from Ghana (Ashanti) and Sierra Leone (Bai Bureh) and none from the Gambia. None are from segmentary societies, continuing the curious neglect of the famous Baule resistance in southern Ivory Coast and others such as the Igbo of Nigeria and the Balante of Guinea-Bissau.

Crowder's introduction is able, as always, in summarizing and comparing the individual contributions. The focus, however, is strangely ahistorical. The introduction is organized around three "points of common interest to the nine case studies:

The size, composition and equipment of the invading armies.

The size, composition and equipment of the African armies which opposed them.

The reasons for the failure of the African armies. (p. 6)

In effect, this is a synchronic approach to the resistances since the concentration is on the actual moment of resistance which is merely the tail end of a long process of development, not only of political relations between Africans and Europeans but of African military skills as well. It would be more profitable to consider such questions as how the African military systems had been changing through the nineteenth century and where they were headed at the time of European invasion. More specifically, what sort of changes in tactical formations, strategic planning and army organization, had occurred as a result of interior nineteenth century wars in Africa and how were new weapons being integrated into these military systems? The answers to such questions could help make clear why Africans made specific military decisions on how, where and under what circumstances European armies were to be faced once the politics was over and the advance of the armies had begun. They also would be useful for understanding what limitations there were on choosing a potentially more successful line of military operations.

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\*Aspects of this process have been considered in the recent plethora of articles on weapons in the *Journal of African History*.

In practice, most of the articles do deal with aspects of these questions, most notably that of Yves Person on Samori. The most disappointing article in this regard is that of Robert Smith on the Ijebu; strangely disappointing, I might add, since the author has written prolifically and well on Yoruba warfare elsewhere. Crowder's introduction, despite the criticism levelled earlier, is really an excellent piece that indeed goes beyond his own suggested framework. Only a few key points from the book can be commented on here.

There were two interconnected reasons why, when actual shooting began, European armies usually won. The first is the obvious one of superior armaments. Little need be said to add to the familiar trilogy of maxim guns, artillery, and repeating rifles. The second is that quality usually referred to as the 'discipline' of European armies when what is actually meant is the kind of tactical efficiency in the use of modern weaponry that had been developed over a period of centuries. African armies were usually as 'disciplined' as European ones, if by that word is meant the instantaneous execution of orders, but what was lacking were soldiers highly trained to fire well aimed rounds from highly maintained rifles in concert with their companions. The famous 'squares' against which Fulani cavalry charges broke as did Napoleon's cavalry at Waterloo are cases in point. The total potential amount of lead that an African army, which usually though not always greatly outnumbered the European one, could deliver in a given period of time was often equivalent or even greater to what a European one could. In practice the potential was rarely reached even in set ambushes (see Smith's account of the few casualties afforded the British by the Ijebu at the Battle of Yemoiji - pp. 187-190). Person suggests, and Crowder adopts, the phrase 'fire power' for this combination of weaponry and efficiency in tactical employment of modern weapons. The contributors to this volume are in agreement that lack of fire power, certainly not lack of will or bravery, was a key factor in African defeats.

Why should this be so? There are some possible answers suggested in the articles. Armies seem to be a conservative force virtually everywhere. They are controlled by people with vested interests in the state structure who are charged with maintaining state institutions. They are composed of people who have often spent years acquiring skills in the use of certain weapons. The advent of new weapons systems into a society in which the military is an important part of the state structure can represent a need for a major institutional shakeup and as a minimum will require the lowly soldier to learn a

whole new set of weapons-handling skills, never an easy process in even the best of armies.

Muffet's able piece on the Sokoto Caliphate shows how the Fulani were unable to break from the use of a massed cavalry charge as their major battle technique because of their reverence for the tactics developed by Muhammed Bello that were so successful during their jihad and despite the great difficulty of using rifles from horseback. Cavalry's function during a battle is to rapidly close with the enemy, hopefully frightening him in the process, break up his formations in hand-to-hand conflict, and then pursue the defeated remnants. If the fire power of an infantry unit is sufficient to keep a cavalry unit from getting inside its lines, the cavalry loses. The Fulani did avoid, however, that mistake of many other Sudanic states which chose to defend their cities rather than fight in the countryside and who consequently suffered heavy losses due to long-range artillery fire before the final European charge.

Flexibility and imagination are of limited availability in every society and yet they were precisely the qualities African needed in the face of the European threat. Highly centralized states with well developed military traditions such as Dahomey and Ashanti had a certain degree of flexibility in that charismatic leadership at the top was less essential to carry out meaningful resistance. The regiments needed only the order to go into battle. Prempeh, the Asantehene, for instance, was arrested before the final resistance of the Ashanti began. On the other hand, centralized states seemed less able to be innovative in the final struggle with the Europeans. Conversely, less centralized social systems (the Temne of Bai Bureh) or newly formed states (that of Samori) could not afford to lose their leaders or all hope of effective resistance was over yet were to be the most capable of organizing innovative resistance.

Contributors to this volume suggest that guerrilla warfare would have been the most effective means possible to delay the European take-over. Some even suggest that Europeans, had more Africans used this method, might have had to pay so high a price for conquest in certain areas that public opinion in the metropole would have forced a substantial postponement of the conquest. Ashanti and Dahomey are faulted for fighting set-piece battles with the Europeans and for not adopting guerrilla tactics. The Tukolor retreated to their cities. Only Samori and Bai Bureh and to some extent Mamadou Lamine were able to develop a

guerrilla strategy that successfully delayed the European take-over for a while.

There is a sense of inevitability about the conquest. This is compounded by a host of issues raised in some of the papers yet not touching on the core focus here. Fundamental, of course, was the problem of obtaining enough modern weapons and ammunition. Some local manufacture was attempted, notably by Samori, but usually guns had to be obtained through trade with Europeans. Also, recognition of the real enemy was often a problem for Africans right up to the last moment. Indeed other African states were often seen as more to be feared than Europeans. Because of such intra-African conflict most European armies had African allies while few African states were able to make any wide-ranging alliances against Europeans. Conversely, since the 'scramble' came at a time of peace in Europe, Africans were not able to make use of Europeans as military allies against other Europeans with a few individual exceptions. Finally, the European armies were European in name only since the rank and file were usually Africans trained in European techniques and armed with modern weapons, with the exception of the three battalions of British regulars that Wolsey used against Ashanti in 1873-4. Thus while the blood spilled during the conquest did not come solely from African armies, as was asserted at the beginning of this review, it did come mostly from Africans.

One should not conclude from this discussion of why African armies failed that they really were the disorganized mobs so often shown in Hollywood movies. It should, as a matter of fact, be self-evident by now that though army organization varied widely across West Africa, as indeed it did across Europe at this time, that many African armies were highly organized, well led by experienced, battle-wise officers and sufficiently well-equipped to carry on campaigns over great geographical and chronological distance. Indeed the effectiveness of a states army was one factor leading to a decision to resist or not. There was little of blind faith in innate invincibility, however. The war-making power of European armies was usually well-appreciated and diplomatic attempts by Africans to postpone conflict were universal. The key decision to resist seems to have come at that moment when it became clear that African sovereignty was being jeopardized. Virtually all African leaders had friendly relations with Europeans at one time or another and were often willing to assist and be assisted by them in respective policies. But when basic questions concerning which power would administer the law and who would control the land came up, the die was cast.

Such questions provide a natural transition to the issues raised in *West African Chiefs*. This book is derived from an international seminar held at the Institute of African Studies of the University of Ife in December, 1968 whose focus was a comparative one on the role of chiefs under the French and British colonial systems. It was felt that "far too many comparisons between French and British rule had been made without the benefit of detailed knowledge of its operation at the local level and that unless such detailed knowledge was brought together it was not much use pursuing the argument further." (pp.vii & viii). Crowder should know since he has been a prime participant in the argument. A further aim was to increase knowledge of chieftaincy generally. Included are nineteen articles divided into six unequal groups on the basis of themes or area relationships. Nine deal with chiefship in Nigeria which is more than all of French West Africa combined gets (six). Three are on Ghana and one on Sierra Leone. One can't help but wonder when studies of German administration and resistance to the Germans in Togo and Cameroun will start creeping into English language conferences on West Africa.

Contributors to the conference were asked to consider seven questions:

1. Were the chiefs who ruled during the colonial period ones who traditionally would have had the right to assume the chieftaincy?
2. How far did the colonial power interfere in the selection of candidates for appointment as chiefs?
3. Did the chief rule over the same area that his pre-colonial predecessor did?
4. What was the relationship between the chief and the European political officer?
5. How far did the chief retain his legal powers as a dispenser of justice and the one responsible for the maintenance of law and order i.e. did he preside over criminal as well as civil cases? Did he maintain a police force? Did he run the prisons?
6. How far did the chiefs lose or gain popularity under colonial rule?
7. What changes in the economic position of the chief took place under colonial rule? (pp. viii & ix)

Once again we have that famous 'undynamic duo', the categories of 'traditional' and 'modern,' although in this case modern is replaced by "the colonial period." In this view, there was virgin Africa with its traditional and static institutions just waiting to be revamped by the change-

bringing Europeans. For example, with respect to question No. 1, the basis and method for choosing chiefs was changing in many parts of West Africa before the European takeover. It is doubtful whether the Emir of Abuja, who still refers to himself as Sarkin Zazzau, would see any Fulani as the rightful Emir of Zaria in the traditional sense. In most of the western Sudan where eighteenth and nineteenth century jihads were changing the religious basis of chiefship, who were the traditional chiefs when the French arrived? The rise of 'stranger chiefs' to ruling positions in the hinterland of Sierra Leone during the nineteenth century is another case and there are many others. In these conditions of change the question is almost a meaningless one. Leaving aside the red herring question of traditional rights, it might be possible to ask whether the man who actually became chief during the colonial period was the man who would have become chief had the Europeans not been in control, but this is iffy history. Question No. 2 is more pertinent and more useful here. Questions 3, 6, and 7 seem to assume that the changes referred to were caused by European control when more distinctly African processes of change undoubtedly had great effect. The other questions seem fair given the focus of the conference. In any case, once again, these processes are often brought out in the articles and in an otherwise excellent introduction.

The introduction is lucid, detailed and interesting. It raises and attempts to answer a vast array of important questions. What, for instance, does the word 'chief' mean considering that it has been indiscriminately applied to such diverse figures as the powerful Emir of Kano, a subordinate of the Sultan of Sokoto, and to Limba village headmen who were subordinate to no one. A chief for the purposes of the conference became those people designated 'chief' who, under colonialism, were "primary executive agents" of the British or French, whether or not they had any claims to such status not derived from the colonial power. (p.xi). A discussion of legitimacy leads to a consideration of the earlier changes in chieftaincy mentioned above though in an unfortunate context since the concept of a 'legitimate' chief is as unuseful as the concept of a 'traditional' chief. It is perhaps sufficient to repeat their opening statement, "In a very real sense none of the chiefs who 'ruled' under the French and British were legitimate" since the right to rule was determined by the colonial authorities rather than indigenous African sources as had always been the case before. (p. xi).

French attitudes, derived from a Republican background, were hostile to aristocratic traditions and consequently French

administrators were less hesitant to replace chiefs who displeased them. The British, on the other hand, sought actively to find 'legitimate' (their own word) chiefs through which to rule. It was from such seeds that the different colonial systems developed. Chiefs under the French system became seriously downgraded in status to often become mere functionaries of the French administration. British chiefs, though they lost their sovereignty, retained some control on the key areas of taxation, land rights, and judicial functions and thus were important officials in the colonial system. Indeed, British chiefs under 'indirect rule' usually increased their power over their subjects since they were no longer subject to any African checks and balances.

There is a good deal more concerning changes during the colonial period and independence but suffice it to say that chieftaincy is still changing rapidly in form and function. For instance, the chiefs in former British colonies who came to independence with significant political power are now being used by the independent African governments, which are staffed by western-educated elites, much as the French used their chiefs and are thus being reduced in influence and increasingly alienated from their people. It is hard to say what is the future of chieftaincy in West Africa though few postulate its total demise. The most likely future is that chiefs will maintain symbolic and ceremonial roles demonstrated regularly through popular pageantry much as the British monarchy has done.

Some of the articles have particular features worth pointing out. Pierre Alexandre demonstrates in his two articles on chiefs in French West Africa that he is intimately acquainted with French colonial policy and doctrines and the sources for studying them, but his notions of pre-colonial Africa are governed by a simplistic structural-functional schema that reaffirms the dogma that "African societies are, or were, essentially conservative and tied to the past." (p.27). This is coupled with a political evolutionism (extended families become tribes, become states etc.) that culminates in the familiar great Sudanic empire trilogy; Ghana, Mali and Songhai. His analysis leads him to the inadequate conclusions of two decades ago, "static" African institutions thrown into upheaval and "partially destroyed" by dynamic Europe. (p. 35). Alexandre's second article contains an interesting appendix of French documents concerning chieftaincies that starts with a treaty made by de Brazza and ends with an address by President Senghor of Senegal on the question of chiefs. J.A. Asiwaju's

article is an interesting use of the comparative technique for studying French and British administrative differences since he has selected two geographically close Yoruba rulers, the Alaketu of Ketu and the Onimeko of Meko, one of whom was under the French system in Dahomey (Ketu) and the other (Meko) under the British in Nigeria.

The book is studded with additional eminent scholarship. Jean Suret-Canale does an excellent encore of his now famous article on the end of chieftaincy in Guinea. Others include, to name only some of the luminaries, Elliot Skinner, G.I. Jones, and Ivor Wilks working on their respective specialties of the Mossi, the Eastern Region of Nigeria, and northern Ghana.

How useful are these books? There are three ways such edited collections can be worthwhile:

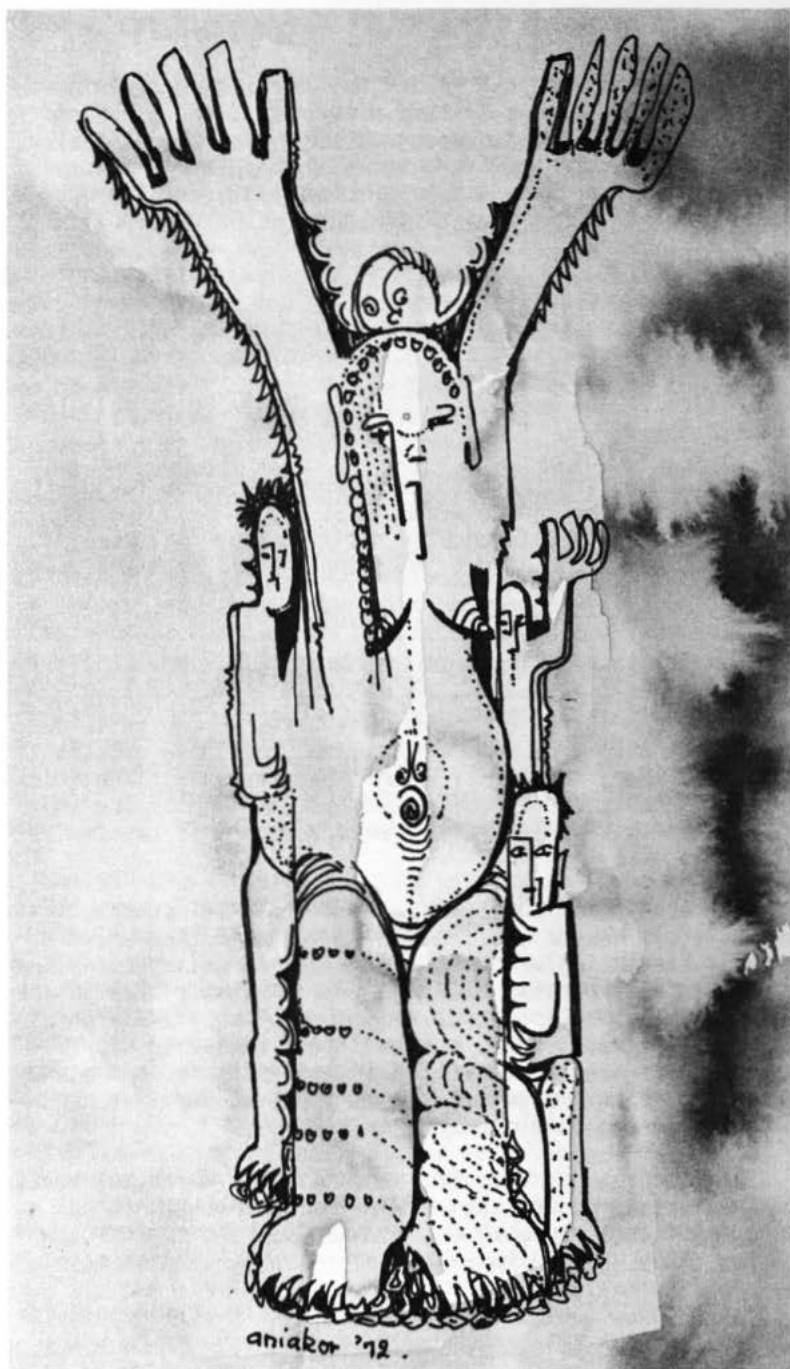
1. As a handy reference on resistance or chiefship.
2. As a way to lay out 'emerging themes' so as to spark new research.
3. As a way to report well developed research in progress.

Students seeking to use these books as a reference will have limited success. No uniform format for references was imposed by the editors so that while a few of the articles have both a bibliography and footnotes, most have only footnotes, and some, incredibly enough, have neither. The indexes in both books appear to be good and technically the books are adequate with only a few minor typographical errors and misspellings.

The other two items are more difficult to assess. Generally, it can be said, that *Chiefs* is a better book in terms of presenting well-developed research while *Resistance* is more of an 'emerging themes' study. Probably this is due to the longer scholarly focus on the problems of chiefship than on resistance and to the fact that in dealing with colonial governments there is plenty of written documentation, an advantage not enjoyed by those studying pre-colonial African developments.

In sum, they are the kind of books well worth having in your university or African Studies Center library, though perhaps not in a personal collection given their exorbitant prices. They are disappointing, in some ways, yet chocked full of interesting ideas and good information. The general themes of African initiative and the persistence of African institutions have been worse served over the years.

- Raymond Ganga



Drawing

by C. C. Aniakor