HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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AFRICAN GOVERNMENT

Contents

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Postclassical Sub-Saharan Africa

Overview This was a major period in African political history, particularly through the establishment and expansion of several important states in West Africa. A government tradition had already been set in the northeast along the upper Nile, partly in relationship to the Egyptian state, and a Christian monarchy in Ethiopia continued to flourish in the postclassical period. At the same time, large stretches of the subcontinent remained stateless, some with hunting and gathering societies, others with flourishing agricultural economies but without formal government. A few states arose about which information is lacking: a major fortification called Great Zimbabwe, in the southeast, must have served as an important royal capital, in a city that may have housed 10,000 people; but there is no further record, and the kingdom ultimately failed for some reason. But along much of the Indian Ocean coast new trading activities prompted important local governments, while the West African empires constituted the most striking innovation.

Ethiopia Successive Ethiopian kingdoms in the period, following the collapse of more expansive governments in Axum, were frequently isolated because of the spread of Islam in surrounding territories. At one point the government was clearly a theocracy. At another, a major kingdom actually did not establish a capital city, but moved among tent complexes. Though beleaguered, Ethiopia did send emissaries to Jerusalem, where they had contact with European crusaders, and after the collapse of the crusades at one point dispatched a large delegation to various parts of Europe, seeking help against Muslim encroachments. This was a lively period in Ethiopian history, but less in terms of government than religion and art.

The Swahili coast Expanding trade with the Middle East formed the basis for at least 35 city-states along the Indian Ocean coast. All were monarchies, ruled by a sultan; some clearly sponsored significant public works, building some of the largest structures in the whole subcontinent. Bureaucrats were drawn from the large merchant class. Interestingly, with one exception, the city states made no effort to conquer the neighboring African interior, instead relying entirely on trade relations. The network would be violently disrupted by the Portuguese in the 16th century.

West African kingdoms: Ghana Increasing trade between West Africa and North Africa, and particularly the introduction of the camel in the 3rd century CE, formed the basis for more complex societies. The empire of Ghana began to take shape from about 300 onward, though its origins are not clear (and in general, direct records are lacking for the whole period). Rulers began to accumulate considerable, power and pomp – the latter long a feature of African monarchies. When they held audiences to hear grievances from their subjects, they wore splendid garments and were surrounded by many gold objects, with hosts of pages in attendance. Their revenues derived from taxes on trade and from control over gold production; kings claimed possession of all gold nuggets, leaving gold dust for wider use. Kings also developed some control over vassal states, in what was, overall, a decentralized regime. (Some historians have compared this to European kingdoms in the same period, though the African states were larger and lacked formal feudalism.) Bureaucrats were drawn in part from the royal family, but later Muslim officials began to gain ground (some directly from North Africa) – because they had greater experience and also brought literacy. But the state never developed a religious mission, as most subjects remained polytheist, and education remained largely local and oral.

Mali It is not clear why Ghana declined – though the formation of rival neighboring monarchies may have played a role. By the 13th century another empire took shape, with the military expansion of a local kingdom. The Empire of Mali became the largest territorial unit in West Africa, famous for the wealth of its rulers – displayed among other things in the famous pilgrimage of Mansa Musa to Mecca in 1324-6, where the amount of gold he brought with him prompted significant inflation to Egypt. Like Ghana, the empire ruled over a number of vassal states, whose rulers, defeated in battle, retained power on condition of loyalty to the emperor. A periodic "great assembly" brought delegates from many different clans, presumably with some powers of advice. Government reforms included measures to improve the treatment of slaves and prisoners. Local villages and towns also elected their own leaders, though only from certain families, with little interference from the central state. At the regional level, appointed governors did receive direction from the imperial government, though here too selection was reflected separate regional procedures, not central appointment – though the officials were subject to approval by the emperor and might be replaced if he found them unreliable. Even currencies were regional rather than empire-wide. Government revenues centered on taxing all trade in gold, copper and salt. The emperor commanded a full-time army, and each region was required to fill its quota of soldiers. Even more than Ghana, imperial administration employed a large number of Muslim officials, responsible among other things for considerable record-keeping.

Legacy Mali began to decline in the 15th century and disappeared entirely two centuries later, increasingly challenged by rival kingdoms. But the political tradition of West Africa persisted, as a number of regional monarchies formed, again frequently emphasizing a combination of royal splendor with administrative decentralization in practice, with government functions focused on provision of justice (including elaborate royal audiences) and military activities, along with protection of trade. Some historians have argued that the tradition of royal splendor would survive in a valuation of "Big Man" rule in African politics. After 1500, the existence of strong states in many parts of West Africa limited and conditioned activities by European traders who had to negotiate their entry.

Study questions

1. What were the principal forms of government that developed in sub-Saharan Africa during the post-classical period?
2. Why were most governments either fairly local or considerably decentralized?

Further reading

Dierk Lange, *Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa* (J.H. Roll, 2004)

Nehemia Levtzion and Jay Spaulding, *Medieval West Africa: views from Arab scholars and merchants* (Markus Wiener, 2003)

F.-X. Fauvelle, *The Golden Rhinoceros: histories of the African Middle Ages* (Princeton University Press, 2018)

19TH CENTURY

Imperial regimes in Africa

Timing and geography The race for empire in subSaharan Africa accelerated after the 1860s, fueled by competition between Britain and France but with Germany now also a player, and Belgium participating as well. Successful wars and treaty arrangements gave Europeans control over virtually the whole subcontinent. Liberia, governed by former slaves from the United States, remained independent. The longstanding Ethiopian kingdom withstood a war with Italy in 1896, though the Italians would return in the 1930s. The new European holdings were still developing their governments by the late 19th century (except in older centers in South Africa and Angola). Virtually all the colonies were carved up without regard for African ethnic or religious divisions, a factor that would complicate administration of the colonies and, even more, the success of independent governments once decolonization began in the second half of the 20th century. Overall, the full imperial period would last only about a century. It did see the notion of formal government more widely introduced in the subcontinent, including some sense of the

major functions involved and lower-level administrative experience for some Africans. But, in what was still a predominantly rural, agricultural society, many government initiatives were far too limited to have great impact on ordinary life.

Governing approaches British administration in most of the colonies was rather decentralized. For a time, some colonies were ruled by trading companies, rather than the government itself. Ultimately, each colony had a governor general appointed from London. But control of much of the territory devolved to a network of African chiefs, who wielded considerable power on condition of accepting colonial rule. In several colonies, such as Nigeria, the British also pitted ethnic groups against each other, favoring those who were particularly loyal (the Belgians did the same in some of their holdings, creating durable resentments that would burst out, for example, in the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s). The French approach was more centralized, though for a time new colonies were simply administered by the military. In the 1890s however the government began to rein in the military, establishing a federation of West African colonies with a single minister based in Dakar, reporting directly to Paris, with viceroys under him for each of the individual colonies The French also created local units, or *cercles,* headed by a French official overseeing a number of villages, in principle with absolute authority. However, Africans served as village and canton leaders, responsible for collecting taxes and administering customary law, with the right to arm a small number of guards. Finally, as a few Africans completed higher education in France, they were regarded as "evolved" and granted French citizenship, even serving in government or military within France itself – another difference from the British approach which the French regarded as evidence of their superior approach to race.

Functions The main goals of most of the colonial governments involved maintaining stability, appropriate tax collection, and opportunities for Western businesses, ranging from mining to the processing of sugar cane; this latter goal could inspire some road and railway development. Some reforms were instituted, notably an effort to abolish slavery; however essentially compulsory labor continued in many colonies, most notoriously the Belgian Congo. Some measures introduced more Western-style family laws, usually designed to bolster the authority of husbands. But efforts to combat polygamy and, in the northeast, female genital mutilation, were not pushed very vigorously, for fear of rousing opposition. British officials sometimes sought to punish Africans accused of cruelty to animals, ironically subjecting them to whipping. Colonial governments sponsored or encouraged some schools, though much of this was left to the initiative of missionaries. (Efforts were somewhat more extensive in South Africa, but aimed primarily at the White population.) By 1900 a sufficient number of Africans were educated in European languages to serve as lower-level officials in the colonial administrations, though opportunities were more limited than in India at the same time. After World War I, under more pressure to demonstrate responsible concern, educational efforts expanded. The British set up a commission to work on African education, and the French began to expand a primary school system, even sending out officials to recruit children against initial village opposition. Some public health measures were also introduced, if only to provide greater protection for the Europeans involved. Between the wars also, many colonial regimes began to face more varied opposition, including the emergence of some nationalist agitation (in South Africa, the African National Congress had actually been launched in 1912), which led to heightened police efforts and prison terms for some leaders – a pattern that would accelerate during the first years after World War II.

Study questions

1. How did the imperial approach to government in Africa compare to that in India? What were the implications of the differences for post-colonial governments?
2. How were the major colonial administrations organized? What were the major differences between the British and French approaches?
3. What were the principal limitations on government functions?

Further reading

M. E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa* (3rd ed., Taylor and Francis, 2011)

Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: the republican idea of empire in France and West Africa 1881-1917* (Stanford University Press, 1983)

Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context* (Routledge, 1995)

20TH CENTURY

Sub-Saharan Africa

Independent states Independence came to subSaharan African nations in various ways from the 1950s onward, though active nationalist agitation was always involved. Many colonies saw nationalist leaders arrested in the years following World War II, only to emerge as heads of new states as decolonization took hold. A few bitter struggles were involved, particularly in southern Africa where White settler minorities tried to retain power. On independence, most new nations issued constitutions assuring elections and a variety of human rights. However, these systems usually crumbled fairly quickly in favor of one-man, one party, or military rule. For the new governments faced a variety of severe problems. Economies were not robust, and Western economic interests continued to wield great power (though some nations, in policies known as "indigenization", tried to promote local ownership); many countries, trying to advance industry, neglected the larger agricultural sector. National boundaries had been defined by imperialists, not by historical communities; a number of countries, such as Nigeria, faced break-way civil war, put down only with difficulty. Many of the new nations also had few leaders with extensive political experience. Hence the tendency to assert more authoritarian control, sometimes with dictators who clung to power for decades. In the 21st century Islamic terrorist groups posed a problem in parts of West and East Africa.

Democratization By the 1990s, a number of key countries moved toward greater democracy, allowing some competitive elections and even transfers of power. Western influence played a role here. So did United Nations human rights campaigns, for example in the area of women's rights, which sometimes elicited more liberal government policies. Nigeria and Kenya were two countries where democracy took greater hold. Some countries, like Liberia (which chose the region's first female president) even recovered from a period of civil war to establish an elected government. Transformation was particularly dramatic in South Africa. A long period of deeply repressive White minority rule, from the 1920s to the 1990s, yielded to a peaceful transition and the election of Nelson Mandela as first democratic president. The nation proclaimed a "rainbow coalition" in an effort to encourage new racial harmony. With all this, however, the subcontinent remained divided; many countries had "elected" presidents who held on for one term after another, despite constitutions that stipulated term limits. Repression of opposition candidates and rigged elections were common.

Truth and reconciliation Though the concept had been pioneered in Latin America (though some claim it was actually first attempted in Uganda in the 1970S), several African nations followed periods of conflict with "truth and reconciliation" commissions, in which representatives of past regimes could admit their misdeeds, clearing the air, often without subsequent punishment, while previous victims could reclaim some dignity. South Africa under Mandela provided the most striking example, after the racist repression of the White minority, but Rwanda undertook a similar effort after a brutal genocide episode in the 1990s.

Failed states At various points, and well into the 21st century, some African nations became what began to be called failed states. The problem occurred in some other regions, but was most pronounced in parts of Africa. Essentially, because of economic weakness, frequently compounded by droughts and famines, but above all because of bitter civil strife, central governments ceased to exercise any real power. Their military and police power was matched or surpassed by factional forces. A host of services, including public health, essentially collapsed. In the worst cases, turmoil was so severe that even international humanitarian agencies had to abandon their efforts. Refugees fled into neighboring countries and beyond. The failed state was not a new problem in history – parts of Western Europe after the fall of the Roman empire showed similar symptoms – but it was striking in an age in which, generally, governments were taking on a central social as well as political role.

Coordination Soon after decolonization began, many new nations began to collaborate toward promoting democracy and human rights. The Organization of African Unity formed in 1963, with a grandiose goal of "eradicating imperialism and colonialism from the continent". The institution transformed in 2001, as the African Union, with a sharper focus on the promotion of democracy. In both its

manifestations the organization helped arrange, often in cooperation with the United Nations, a number of policing efforts to try to promote stability in member nations after internal civil wars.

Functions Not surprisingly, African nations generated no major functional innovations in the decades after independence. Efforts focused on public health, the judiciary, public works and military defense. Few countries undertook significant external aggression, though there a few areas of inter-state conflict. South Africa, notably, after apartheid, drastically scaled back its military forces and became the only country in the world to abandon nuclear weaponry once achieved. Several governments experimented with land reform, a delicate issue in southern Africa given extensive White ownership. A number of governments managed considerable success in expanding school systems and also promoting birth control (often in tandem with efforts to combat the AIDs epidemic) – Kenya was a prime example.

Study questions

1. What were some of the principal "new nations" problems in many new African countries?
2. What is a failed state?
3. What were some of the leading successes of key African governments?

Further reading

Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: the past of the present* (Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Ali Mazrui and Michael Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa from about 1935 to the present* (Heinemann, 1984)

Robert Rotberg, *When States Fail: causes and consequences* (Princeton University Press, 2004)