Britain, Decolonisation and the Construction of Nigerian Foreign Policy in the Era of Transfers of Power, 1958-1960

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Introduction

Britain’s decision to embark on colonial reforms after the Second World War was the product of many factors. These included the pressure which the United States\(^1\) and the USSR\(^2\) put on the colonial powers during and especially after the war;\(^3\) the reality of British domestic politics, which pushed colonial issues to the forefront of British public opinion;\(^4\) the official mental turn in the Colonial Office about the future of colonial rule;\(^5\) and above all, the general revulsion of feelings in the colonies, which channelized the aspiration of the colonial peoples for

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\(^1\) A most useful analysis of the contributions of the United States to the decline and decolonisation of British colonies worldwide can be found in Wm. Roger LOUIS, *Imperialism At Bay: The United States and the Decolonisation of the British Empire, 1941-1945*, New York: Clarendon Press, 1978.

\(^2\) Details of the politics of decolonisation as played out by the USSR and the USA in the Trusteeship Council of the United Nations can be found in The National Archives (TNA), CO537/6549.


\(^5\) A useful discussion of the various ideas that were considered in anticipation of the post-1945 colonial reforms can be found in J. E. FLINT, ‘Planned Decolonisation and Its Failure in British Africa’, *African Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 328, 1983.
freedom. Thus in 1947, the first major manifestation of the official mind of the British government about the future of colonialism in British Africa came in the form of a dispatch signed by the Labour Colonial Secretary, Arthur Creech Jones (himself a virulent anti-colonial spokesman during the war), which expressed the desire of Britain to embark on the integration of the educated elites into local colonial administration. The decision to embrace the educated elites who, for nearly fifty years, had been sidelined in the scheme of things meant, in practical terms, that the traditional rulers who had been the bedrock of British indirect rule would have to be jettisoned and their influence gradually wound down. However, the intention to reform colonial rule remained just that, mere intention, until riots broke out in Accra in 1948 and the rise of radical nationalism apparently woke the British up from what can be rightly described as an imperial slumber.

In Nigeria, a major step taken by the British to implement this policy of colonial reform was the decision to recall Sir Arthur Richards (later Lord Milverton) from Nigeria and replace him with Sir John Macpherson as Colonial Governor from 1948. The arrival of Governor John Macpherson in Nigeria marked a significant watershed in the history of Britain’s colonial rule in Nigeria after 1945 because he personified the liberalism that had come into effect within the Colonial Office and the changed attitude of British officials towards emergent nationalism in Nigeria after the Second World War. Unlike his predecessor Sir Arthur Richards, who was ‘Lugardian’ in his attempt to browbeat the nationalists into conformity with Britain’s war-time expectations, Sir John Macpherson developed a close working relationship with the nationalists. He wasted no time in courting the friendship of the nationalist leaders who had been isolated by Arthur Richards’ hostility. This shows that John Macpherson was conscious of the mood in the Colonial Office, the readiness for change, and symbolized them as far as the future of the colonies was concerned.

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7 See David KILLINGRAY & Richard RATHBONE, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
8 Details of the Colonial Office’s perception of the aftermath of the Accra Riots of 1948 and its implications for nationalism in Nigeria can be found in the National Archives (Ibadan) (NAI), CSO 583/4/48, Macpherson to Cohen, 19 July 1948.
11 See Olakunle LAWAL, *op. cit.*, chapter two.
By the beginning of 1950, a clearly discernible pattern in British colonial policy had appeared: constitution-mongering, which then became the major instrument of containing anti-colonial nationalism in Nigeria. This was a strategy adopted by Britain to contain the forces of Nigerian nationalism and control the pace of the devolution of power. This was because at the heart of the constitution-making strategy was the concept of preparation, which was meant to tutor the colonial peoples in the niceties of western liberal democratic government. The strategy of constitution-making was expected to keep the British ahead of the nationalists. However, rather than assuage the forces of Nigerian nationalism, the stratagem merely unleashed the inherent ‘Oliver Twist’ nature of Nigerian nationalist politicians, who were never satisfied with the tokenism offered by the British. Once a modicum of reform was introduced by the British in the early 1950s, Nigerian nationalists demanded more. Merely giving them an opportunity to have a say in their own affairs was not satisfactory, they wanted to control their own destiny. Indeed, on the eve of the commencement of colonial reforms that became decolonisation in the 1950s, the centrifugal forces within Nigeria, as exemplified by mutual suspicion and antagonism between the political parties which appealed to sub-nationalisms (ethnicity), had become so pronounced that even the date of self-government had to be different from one region to the other.12

Independence in 1960: the debate within the Colonial Office

The concept of preparing the colonies for self-government had taken roots in 1951, when the first set of elections were held, ostensibly, to incorporate the educated elites into local colonial administration at both the regional and central levels. This election was to provide the British officialdom with the first opportunity to impart to the new leaders of the country the whole ethos of western parliamentary government. For the Nigerian nationalist politicians, it was an opportunity to learn the basic niceties of ‘modern’ government. However, decolonisation or the transfer of power was not being contemplated at this stage. In fact, it was not until almost a decade after the famous local government dispatch was released that the whole discussion about British disengagement from Nigeria started. Between 1952 and 1956, British officials were content with playing the role of supervisors, overseeing the management of the colony by the new elites that had just been incorporated into local colonial administration.

Up until 1957, British colonial officials believed that outright political independence for Nigeria was still about a decade away. However, with independence for the Gold Coast in 1957, it dawned on the Colonial Office that it was just a matter of time before Nigerian nationalists demanded self-government from Britain. In March 1957, Sir James Robertson wrote to the Colonial Office about the possibility of Nigerian politicians asking for independence in 1959,13 an

13 TNA, CO 554/1583, Robertson to Lord Perth, 16 March 1957.
opinion which was considered disturbing by another senior official of the Colonial Office who actually proposed delaying independence until some time in 1960, arguing that Nigeria could then be better prepared for independence.\textsuperscript{14} Although the Colonial Office had expected all along that the independence of the Gold Coast would have an impact on Nigeria,\textsuperscript{15} the Colonial Secretary himself suggested at the April 1957 constitutional conference that the conference should not be allowed to agree on 1959 as a date for independence for the federation.\textsuperscript{16} It was thought that Britain needed a generation to prepare a united Nigeria for democracy while in 1959, an official noted that two more stages were necessary before the final transfer of power:\textsuperscript{17} one step after the 1957 conference, and with some three or four years of preparation, the next after 1960 or 1961.

Colonial officials sounded rather altruistic about putting in place an enduring structural legacy for the emergent nation. Sir James Robertson had noted in June 1956, when nationalists were calling for another round of meetings to review the Lyttelton constitution\textsuperscript{18} as agreed in Lagos in 1954, that the Colonial Secretary should emphasize the danger to ‘the whole machinery of government which are posed by too frequent changes’.\textsuperscript{19} He then advised the Colonial Secretary not to allow himself to be drawn into agreeing, even tentatively, to any date for Nigerian independence.\textsuperscript{20} Robertson believed that sudden independence for Nigeria may lead to the collapse of the country and compared independence for Nigeria to a machine which must be in running order before it was granted to the country.\textsuperscript{21}

But although Sir James noted that once a semblance of independence was granted it would be difficult to stop it altogether, he pointed out the danger of delaying self-government unduly. If Britain wished to retain the goodwill of the Nigerians, it would be better for the initiative to come from her than for her to be forced to concede it.\textsuperscript{22} Although the Colonial Office appears to have been convinced that it owed Nigeria a duty to lay a solid foundation for its political independence, its officials shared Robertson’s observation that it would be too risky to delay

\textsuperscript{14} TNA, CO 554/1583, Minute by T. B. Williamson to Secretary of State, 16 March 1957. The proposal was to grant minimal autonomy to the Federal Government at the resumed constitutional conference forecast for 1957.

\textsuperscript{15} TNA, CO 554/1583, Minute by T. B. Williamson to Secretary of State, 5 April, 1957.


\textsuperscript{17} TNA, CO 554/1583, Minute by T.B. Williamson to Secretary of State, 5 April 1957.

\textsuperscript{18} The Lyttelton Constitution was the outcome of the deliberate tinkering undertaken by the Colonial Office in consultation with Nigerian nationalists and essentially based on its perception and understanding of the trends at work in Nigeria. A useful study of the Constitution can be found in Kalu EZERA, \textit{Constitutional Developments in Nigeria}, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964.

\textsuperscript{19} TNA, CO 554/905, Robertson to Eastwood, 11 June 1956.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Ibid.}
independence further. One official noted that it would not be worthwhile to ‘risk the forfeit of Nigeria’s goodwill towards us by refusing the present demand for the sake of hanging on for a further three or four years’.

It was also realised that the prestige and reputation of the United Kingdom were high in Nigeria at that time and that it would not be in Britain’s interest to jeopardise some fundamental interests.

The protection of British interests was one major factor in the capitulation of the Colonial Office on the issue of independence for Nigeria in 1959. Bureaucrats in Church House later agreed that if Britain was to retain her privileges in Nigeria as well as the capacity to influence Nigeria’s thinking on international affairs in directions that would favour her, then independence must be conceded to the nationalists.

One official did note that nobody who had been acquainted at Colonial Office level with Nigerian affairs could possibly recommend (with equanimity) that Nigeria should be given independence in 1959 or 1960. But the dominant view remained that of Tom B. Williamson, the leading official in charge of Nigerian affairs at the Colonial Office at this time. He argued that if the demand for independence in 1959 was confirmed by the government of Northern Nigeria, it would be extremely difficult and dangerous to resist such demand.

It is, however, important to note that Nigerian politicians themselves had different reasons for demanding self-government in 1959. For instance, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the leader of the Action Group Party, told Sir James Robertson at the end of April 1957 that 1959 was just a target date to be used as a propaganda tool. On their part, the northern emirs encouraged politicians, and particularly Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who had been leading the Federal Government since 1957 under the general direction of the British, to support self-government in 1959. The emirs feared that if independence was delayed, they would lose much of their power to the emerging educated class and would not be able to recover their old authority.

At the same time, there was no unanimity within the colonial administration in Nigeria about the desirability of independence for the country in 1959 or early 1960. While Sir James Robertson alerted the Colonial Office to the danger of further delay to self-government for the federation, the governor of the North, Sir Brian Sharwood-Smith, advised delay. To him, while Britain ought to retain the goodwill

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23 TNA, CO 554/1583, Williamson to Gorell-Barnes, 9 April 1957.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 TNA, CO 554/1583, Minute by Gorell-Barnes to Secretary of State, 9 April 1957.
27 Ibid.
28 TNA, CO 554/1583, ‘Note on a Conversation with Awolowo’, in Robertson to Williamson, 23 April 1957.
29 TNA, CO 554/1583, ‘Note on a Conversation with Balewa’, in ibid.
30 Sir James Robertson recalled in a post tenure interview that he told the Colonial Secretary ‘in 1958 or 1959 […] that if we did not give independence in 1960, we were going to have a lot of trouble’, in A. H. M. Kirk-Greene (ed.), The Transfer of Power: The Colonial Administrator in the Age of Decolonisation (vol. 3), Inter-Faculty Committee, Oxford University, 1979, p. 128.
31 TNA, CO 554/1596, Sharwood-Smith to Williamson, 14 April 1957.
of Nigerians, what was needed at that time was a delaying action with Her Majesty’s Government as umpire, and the means to be provided by the nationalists. In other words, British officials needed no special tactics to pre-empt Nigerian nationalist politicians, considering the inherent and seemingly perpetual conflicts within the nationalists’ camp. 32 By mid-1957, the Colonial Office had accepted in principle that federal self-government for Nigeria was a matter that could not be delayed without the acquiescence of Nigerian politicians. Meanwhile, Tafawa Balewa had been found to be the most acceptable ‘rallying point for divergent opinions in Nigeria and had thus been pencilled down for the Prime Ministership of Nigeria, if and when independence was eventually granted33.

The next round of the controversy, then, centred upon what date would be mutually acceptable to the colonial power and the nationalists. By 1958, pressures were mounting among nationalists for self-government in April 1960. In May 1958, Sir Ralph Grey reported to the Colonial Office that Balewa and some Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) Ministers had become convinced of the need to have independence in April 1960.34 The new interest in self-government found support and agreement in the position of the Movement for Colonial Freedom in London, which included over 100 MPs. This Movement passed a resolution opposing Britain’s rejection of 1959 as date of Nigeria’s independence.35 By the end of May 1958, Balewa was asking the Governor-General to help him look for a ‘celebration officer’ (i.e. someone to take charge of the planning and arrangement of suitable celebrations) for independence.36

Colonial Office bureaucrats, however, remained reluctant to assign a specific date for the attainment of independence by Nigeria. For instance, Maurice Smith, a senior official at the Colonial Office, strongly advised against April 1960 as the date for Nigeria’s independence. He gave two major reasons for his objection. The first was that any acceptance of April 1960 would be an embarrassment to Britain’s relations with the Central African Federation, apparently, because the Colonial Office was not even contemplating outright independence for the area as of this

32 The phenomenon of intra-nationalist conflicts has been discussed fully in Olakunle LAWAL, Britain and the Transfer, op. cit., pp. 176-201.
33 Sir James Robertson said that Balewa was ‘greatly respected by other parties’ and that when the choice of a Prime Minister had to be made, ‘the choice was not difficult’, in KIRK-GREENE (ed.), op. cit., p. 130. See also details of the relationship between Robertson and Balewa in Sir James ROBERTSON, Transition in Africa From Direct Rule to Independence A Memoir, London: Hurst, 1974; and Olakunle A. LAWAL, “Britain’s Attitude Towards Alhaji (Sir) Abubakar Tafawa Balewa During the Era of Decolonisation”, Nigerian Forum (A Publication of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs), 223, 1993. A most illuminating biography of Alhaji (Sir) Abubakar Tafawa Balewa can be found in Trevor CLARK, A Right Honourable Gentleman: The Life and Times of Alhaji, Sir, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Zaria: Huda Huda Publishing House, 1991.
34 TNA, CO 554/1596, Grey to Eastwood, 8 May 1958.
35 TNA, CO 554/1596, Helen Bastable (Secretary of the Movement for Colonial Freedom) to Commissioner for the Northern Region, 7 May 1958.
36 TNA, CO 554/1596, Robertson to Macpherson, 27 May 1958.
time. His second reason was the ‘situation in Nigeria itself’: although some progress had been made since 1957, there was little doubt that a federal government at that time was likely to be an uneasy coalition. He compared the situation to that in France where successive coalition governments stayed in office only as long as they were able to avoid any decisive action that might offend the interest of at least one of their diverse components. Smith also cited disorder in the East and the West and the permanent threat of troubles in the North as evidence of Nigeria’s unpreparedness for self-rule. To him, the Eastern regional government of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was perhaps the most ‘inept display of regional government yet seen in Nigeria, while the Northern government still hangs almost entirely on the vain and unreliable Premier. Only in the West does government appear to be competent and stable’. Furthermore, Britain’s Cabinet was reluctant to grant independence because it feared that the expansion of the Commonwealth might lead to the creation of an Afro-Asian bloc within the organisation itself. Nigeria, if it became independent, would tip the numerical balance in favour of the Afro-Asian group. Consideration was also given to the need to address the feeling of the old Commonwealth, particularly South Africa, about such enlargement.

In spite of the reservations outlined above, Britain was left with little or no choice but to agree that Nigeria would become independent in 1960. In fact, Sir Ralph Grey informed Sir John Macpherson in June 1958 that political facts in Nigeria indicated that ‘the real power to determine the pace of events has in fact passed from us to the local people and […] that attempts made to persuade them to a slower pace would be misunderstood and merely result in a loss of goodwill.’ By mid-1958, there were indications that the Colonial Office had given up the struggle against independence in 1960 and the Cabinet agreed, provided that essential constitutional and military safeguards were guaranteed. In March 1959, the Colonial Secretary wrote to the Lord Chancellor, Viscount Kilmuir, who was also the Chairman of the Legislative Committee of the British parliament, asking for agreement to authorize the Parliamentary Council to draft the necessary Bill on Nigerian Independence. In July 1959, the Colonial Office commenced the drafting of the Nigerian Independence Bill. Once a decision was taken in the Colonial Office, some attempts were made to prepare for physical imperial disengagement.

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37 TNA, CO 554/1596, Minute by Maurice Smith to A. Emmanuel and C. G. Eastwood, 15 May 1958.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid. Some of these countries included India, Australia, Canada, Pakistan, Ceylon, the Federation of West Indies, Bangladesh.
42 Ibid.
44 In 1958 for instance, Alan Lennox-Boyd informed the British Cabinet that outside the Western Region, there was no evidence of Nigerians being capable of running their own affairs well enough. See TNA, CO 554/1958, Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the British Cabinet, July 1958.
45 TNA, PREM 11/2436, Minute, Cabinet Meeting, 11 September 1958.
46 TNA, CO 554/1610, Macleod to Viscount Kilmuir, 3 March 1960.
47 TNA, CO 554/1610, Minute by Barder to Smith, 23 July 1959.
Preparation for outright independence meant the formalization of Nigeria’s membership of international organizations and the establishment of diplomatic offices in major political and economic capitals of the world.

**Britain’s foreign policy legacies for Nigeria on the eve of independence**

As part of the general preparation of Nigeria for independence, Britain took steps to train some Nigerians in the art of practical diplomacy by attaching such individuals to the Foreign Office in London and sending some of them to the University of Oxford for training. Some were also posted to important political and economic capitals for affiliation to British Missions. From 1958, some forty Nigerian public officers commenced training in anticipation of the first diplomatic posts to be established after independence. One such training centre outside the United Kingdom was Washington D.C., where one Reginald Barrett, a British official heading the Nigerian liaison Office, an autonomous arm of the British Embassy in the United States, supervised the exercise.⁴⁸ The Nigerian officers were trained in the vagaries of diplomatic procedures, protocol, international relations and their social usage. The British government also arranged with United States officials from the State Department to give lectures and discuss practical problems with the trainees. Some also took regular courses in ‘African Issues in International Relations’ at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies.⁴⁹ They spent some time in New York to observe the United Nations, serving as members of the British delegation.⁵⁰ These men were to form the core of Nigeria’s first set of career diplomats, trained along the lines of western, and especially British, diplomatic traditions. It is, however, important to note that these were part of the general preparations for self-government for Nigeria (not independence), at least a decade or so from 1956-57. The nationalists simply seized the initiatives and accelerated the process beyond the imagination of British officials.

Nigeria’s post-independence foreign policy became a campaign issue in the elections that were organized in 1959, before independence. The character of Nigeria’s post-independence foreign policy could no longer be ignored by the Nigerian political parties. In January 1959, therefore, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa asked his secretary, Peter Stallard, to request the schedule officer in the Foreign Office, S. J. Fingland, to produce for him, on a personal basis, a note on the foreign policy of an independent Nigeria. This seemingly simple invitation provided an opportunity for colonial officials to influence the thinking of the federal Prime Minister on foreign affairs on the eve of independence.⁵¹ Significantly, another official, A. E. Emmanuel, noted that Balewa’s request

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⁴⁹ V. MCKAY, *op. cit.*, p. 156.
⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹ TNA, CO 554/2059, Snelling to Fingland, 19 January 1959.
seems to offer to us a most unique opportunity to exert a favourable influence on the minds of Nigerian Ministers in foreign policy matters in the first few years of independence. We have been thinking of how to use this opportunity to the best advantage and we think that if our advice is to make the strongest impact it should come from the Governor-General rather than in the form of an informed note by Fingland.\textsuperscript{52}

Thus, the Colonial Office, with due consultation with the Foreign Office, embarked upon a rigorous attempt to shape Nigeria’s post-independence foreign policy from early 1959 until the final disengagement in 1960.

S. J. Fingland suggested the following broad policy outlines which Britain should encourage Nigeria to pursue after 1960.\textsuperscript{53} First, Nigeria should not be encouraged to pursue a policy of ‘neutralism’ in the Cold War politics of the post-1945 era. The ostensible reason for this suggestion was that ‘neutrals were not always able to control their degree of neutrality and may find themselves supporting a far from neutral interest’, and that in any case, neutrals ‘could not escape involvement in the event of a thermonuclear war because many of them would be as dead as combatants’. Above all, neutralism was found to be morally unjustifiable while ‘practical politics’ would not permit any such policy.\textsuperscript{54}

Second, Nigeria’s most important relationship should be her close and fundamental tie with the United Kingdom and her position as an independent constitutional monarchy within the Commonwealth of Nations. This was to encourage Nigeria to search for and support those countries whose policies were animated by the same belief as her own.\textsuperscript{55} On her part, Britain appointed a man of Cabinet rank, Lord Head, who was previously Secretary of State for War (1951-56) and also Minister for Defence (1956-57), as the first High Commissioner to Nigeria. This, in the words of a top official of the Colonial Office, ‘showed the importance attached by the UK to the post’.\textsuperscript{56} It is also important to note that S.J.G. Fingland found it desirable to ‘formally cast off his “adviser”’s hat and don, publicly, [his] U.K. one in preparation for the opening of the High Commission Office on the 1\textsuperscript{st} of October.\textsuperscript{57}

Third, Nigeria should seek countries whose attitudes to basic human values and free institutions she could respect because they were in large measure identical to her own. It was specifically stated that Nigeria should particularly aim to retain and expand her existing ties of friendship with the United States.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{52} TNA, CO 554/2059, Minute by Emmanuel to Allen, n. d.
\textsuperscript{53} TNA, CO 554/2059, Suggested Outlines of Foreign Policy of an independent Nigeria, January 1959.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} TNA, CO 554/2554, C. G. Eastwood to D. Williams, 7 July 1960.
\textsuperscript{57} TNA, CO 554/2554, Gardner-Brown to C. G. Eastwood, 4 August 1960.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
Fourth, although it was suggested that Nigeria should condemn racism, she was also enjoined to refuse to ‘pillory’ her friends publicly or to join forces with other countries in denigrating them in, for instance, the United Nations. This suggestion might explain why Nigeria later spurned the call by the Council of Ministers of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to sever diplomatic relations with Britain over the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by Rhodesia in November 1965.

Fifth, it was suggested that in her African policies, Nigeria should avoid friendship with radical countries and be ‘careful of Nasser’s design to dominate Africa’. Nigeria should be suspicious of any form of Pan-Africanism which could lead its followers to accept, consciously or unconsciously, the domination of outside influence and thus to fall into a worse form of ‘colonialism’ than they had ever known. In the same vein, no West African Federation should be allowed to break Nigeria’s friendship with other countries such as the United Kingdom or with the Commonwealth. Significantly, the outline also suggested that Nigeria’s foreign policy after independence would be better with the ‘free world’ in order to harness and develop—through foreign capital—her vast potentialities. It is interesting to note that a number of actions taken by the Balewa government really followed this suggestion. For instance, African liberation, which was expected to be a major focus of Nigeria’s African policy, received a rather lukewarm attitude from the Balewa administration—although in the short term, Nigeria championed the expulsion of South Africa from the Commonwealth in 1961. In 1962, the Nigerian government refused military training facilities to the liberation movements from Angola, just as at the 1961 Monrovia Conference of African states, Balewa had warned against ‘indiscriminate aid’ to the liberation movements. In the same manner, against the 1963 date fixed by the All-African Peoples Organization for the independence of all colonial territories, Nigeria moved a motion in the United Nations that set 1970 as the target date for their independence. In fact, The Economist rightly opined in 1961 that Abubakar had a more hesitant approach to African unity than Dr. Kwame Nkrumah and this explained their divergent positions on the subject in the run-up to the formation of the OAU in 1963. In 1960, the Prime Minister had taken a tour of West Africa and met the leaders of Ghana, Togo, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast. After talking to Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa about his trip, Sir James Robertson, the outgoing Governor-General, reported that

[Balewa] had enjoyed meeting M. Houphouet Boigny and found him not only pleasant but held similar views to his own. He does not disguise his dislike of Dr. Nkrumah, and his suspicion of M. Sekou Toure, though he was pleased to discover, in conversation with M. Sekou Toure, that the latter shared his dislike of Dr. Nkrumah. The Prime Minister seems bent on forming a group of states in West Africa with similar ideas, who can

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
63 The Economist, 7 October 1961.
counter Dr. Nkrumah’s influence, and work together for economic, social and cultural rapprochement, rather than for the formation of a closer union.64

It can then be seen that although Balewa was tutored by the British on a preferred direction of an African policy, it was clear from the outset that he had his own preferences and idiosyncrasies as to what road Nigeria should tread on Pan-African matters. In fact, in spite of the admonition of the British that Nigeria should play down on the idea of African unity, Balewa declared: “We belong to Africa and Africa must claim first mention in our external affairs”.65 The British were conscious of this tendency. J. O. Moreton, a senior official at the British High Commission in Nigeria, wrote to the Colonial Office confirming the sentiments already identified with Balewa at independence: ‘I have always said that Nigerians are Africans first and foremost and that their foreign policy would be dictated primarily by their relations with other African countries. The Commonwealth and Britain come some way behind’.66 The implication of this was that once the Nigerian nationalist politicians assumed power, they were more inclined to toe an independent line.

Sixth, British concerns centred on Nigeria’s attitude towards the Soviet Union in a post-colonial era. Nigeria was advised against any close dealings with the Soviet Union, ‘which had a sinister record of promoting subversion in other countries, especially through the formation of local communist parties’.67 She was to be discouraged from any immediate exchange of diplomatic representation with the Soviet Union or with other Iron Curtain countries.68 By August 1959, the Nigerian Federal Prime Minister was ready to implement this particular recommendation as he asked Fingland how he could counter Russian advances or diplomatic relations without yielding any ground.69 This suggestion appeared to have been well taken. In the words of Oye Ogunbadejo, Balewa ‘held tenaciously to the western values he had inherited from the British’.70 According to him, Balewa’s perception of and attitude towards the Soviet Union was a result of his devoutly religious disposition to many issues. In ‘a normative approach to foreign relations’, his foreign policy was clear cut: ‘either support the West and be in good and respectable company, or support the communist and be in the company of evil’.71 Obviously the Prime Minister took the admonition of the British to heart in his dealings with the Soviet Union during the early years of Nigeria’s independence. Although the Soviets were invited to Nigeria’s independence celebrations, Balewa told the delegation that

64 This view by Tafawa Balewa can be found in TNA, DO 177/12, Robertson to Permanent Under-Secretary of State, September 1960. Also see Olajide ALUKO, Ghana and Nigeria: A Study in Inter-African Discord, London: Barnes and Noble, 1978, p. 64.
65 In ibid., p. 88.
66 TNA, DO 177/12, Moreton to V. C. Martin, 17 October 1961.
67 TNA, DO 177/12, ‘Draft Confidential Annex on Nigerian Foreign Policy After Independence’, n. d.
68 Ibid.
69 TNA, DO 177/12, cited by Allen in his letter to Gallagher, 5 August 1959.
71 Ibid.
Nigeria was interested only in economic, not political, relations.72 This disguised hostility was only abandoned by the Nigerian government in the late 1960s when the realities of the civil war brought it home to the Nigerian authorities that there could only be permanent interests but not permanent friends in international relations.73

However, much as Balewa appeared rather patronizing and ever-willing to do the wish of the British government, local opinion and domestic politics also influenced his attitude towards some of the emergent issues of a diplomatic nature in the early years of independence. Balewa was particularly aware of domestic public opinion: he complained to the British High Commissioner in 1961 about criticism in the press and political parties that the country, even after independence, was being run by the British. For Balewa, ‘all these accusations in the press and by word of mouth are rubbish and the people who believe them are either trouble-makers or ignorant.’74 It would appear that in spite of the strenuous effort on the part of Britain to implant her interest in the official and sub-conscious minds of Nigerian decision-makers on the eve of independence, officials and the political class missed no opportunity to repudiate this pro-British attitude immediately after political independence was granted.

The Anglo-Nigerian Defence Agreement

The responsibility for Nigerian defence policy, as was the case of foreign affairs, was exercised by Britain until 1960. As was the case with the broad outlines of Nigeria’s foreign policy after independence, Britain’s officials took considerable interest in the prospects of an Anglo-Nigerian defence agreement on the eve of independence. Indeed, the idea of a defence agreement was first mooted during the 1958 constitutional conference in London by the British Defence Minister.75 He emphasized the importance of avoiding any uncertainty about the defence facilities which Britain would need to retain in Nigeria to reinforce the Middle Eastern and Far Eastern theatres. Moreover, the strategic importance of Nigeria was sufficiently great to Britain to justify her making every effort to retain an enclave of territory in Nigeria which could be under her own sovereignty.76 However, the Cabinet agreed at a later meeting to leave out the demand for a reserve military base because of the ‘absence of a suitable coastal site’.77

Although it is possible to argue that the nationalist politicians were coerced into signing the defence agreement since the idea became a sine qua non to the grant

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73 Even after the civil war, the first country visited by the Nigerian Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, was Britain. In a way, this was meant to show that ‘despite Biafra there had not been any fundamental change in Anglo-Nigerian relations’, see J. B. OJO, op. cit., p. 59.
74 See TNA, DO 177/12, Lord Head to Sir Alexander Clutterbuck, 17 January 1961.
75 Cited in TNA, CO 554/2059.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., CO 554/2059, Extract from the conclusion of a Cabinet Meeting, 12 October 1958.
of self-government, it should be noted that all the sections of Nigeria’s ruling elite were aware of Britain’s interest in securing a defence agreement with Nigeria. In fact, Balewa recalled that when the British ministers first mooted the idea of having a military base for the Royal Air Force in Kano, he suggested that the base should be established elsewhere because Kano was a big commercial town with an international airport. He also recalled that Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo agreed that the British could have the base anywhere in the East or West. In fact, they all initialled the heads of the agreement and also agreed that if the United Kingdom was in any trouble, Nigeria would regard herself as being obliged to help the British. To avoid any doubt, Balewa assured the Colonial Secretary, Alan Lennox-Boyd, that even if any of the other party leaders had second thoughts, permission for the United Kingdom would be available. Thus, in September 1958, the British Cabinet agreed to grant independence to Nigeria provided that the essential constitutional and military safeguards were guaranteed. Although the Defence Minister favoured an agreement that would be part of the total package of self-government, the Cabinet finally considered that the agreement might prove more reliable and command greater international respect if, on the Malayan precedent, it was signed, or at least ratified, by Nigeria after she attained independence. The major reason for this was the desire to allow Nigerians to sign the document freely after independence. In fact, Sir James Robertson warned the Colonial Secretary in mid-September 1959, based on evidence from Cyprus, that too many claims without the goodwill of the locals would not be enforceable.

There were two major provisions in the defence agreement: (1) ‘Staging and over flying rights for British aircrafts, together with the right to use the harbours at Lagos and Port Harcourt in case of war; and (2) reserving sovereignty in perpetuity over a small enclave of Nigerian territory which would provide a secure and permanent base for British forces’. The agreement also enabled Nigerian military

78 Both Chief Awolowo (the leader of the Action Group Party) and Dr. Azikiwe (then President of the Nigerian Senate and leader of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons) denied ever signing the agreement but only a draft which they expected the Government of the Federation to renegotiate anyway. Indeed, Chief Awolowo declared a few months later that Nigerian leaders ‘were bundled to 10 Downing Street and were asked to initial this document on the understanding that unless this document was initialed, it would not be possible for Her Majesty’s Government to make a declaration fixing a date for our independence’. See The Hansards, Nigerian House of Representatives Debates, November 1960, p. 61. For the controversy over the background and the secret nature of the negotiation that led to the signing of the Defence Pact, see the seminal essay by Gordon J. IDANG, ‘The Politics of Nigerian Foreign Policy: The Ratification and Renunciation of the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Agreement’, African Studies Review, vol. 13, no. 2, 1970. Details of the individual reactions and denials by the different political personalities connected with the agreement can be found in The Daily Times (Lagos), 4 May 1960; The West African Pilot, 21 February 1960; and Nigerian Tribune, 4 May 1960.
79 TNA, CO 554/2059, Grey to Eastwood, 16 September 1958.
80 Ibid.
82 TNA, PREM 11/2436, Minute of Meeting, 11 September 1958.
83 TNA, CO 554/1548, Extract from the conclusions of a Cabinet Meeting, 22 October 1958.
84 TNA, CO 554/1548, Extract from the conclusions of a Cabinet Meeting, 11 September 1958.
personnel to be trained in Britain and to secure modern military equipment from Britain. In return, Nigeria was to provide the British with a base in Kano, port facilities in Lagos and Port Harcourt, while British military personnel were to enjoy special privileges. In the end, an amended version of the Defence Agreement was ratified by the Nigerian Parliament after a brief debate in 1961. But the vehemence of the opposition to the Defence Pact finally robbed it of a long existence. It was eventually abrogated by mutual consent in January 1962 on the eve of the Conference of African Heads of States and Governments in Lagos. In its place, a new agreement in principle, which enjoined the two governments to ‘endeavour to afford to each other at all times such assistance and facilities in defence matters as are appropriate between partners in the Commonwealth’, was instituted.\(^85\) While the British were able to secure a bilateral military agreement with Nigeria immediately after independence,\(^86\) the Pact suffered from fits and falls in its implementation before it was eventually abrogated in 1962.\(^87\).

Two examples of this suffice here. First, the Minister of Defence, Mohammadu Ribadu, vehemently refused to allow senior British military officers to visit and participate in some military exercise, in spite of the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Agreements. Second, an unidentified Nigerian official in Ethiopia told the British High Commissioner to Nigeria in no uncertain terms that the Ethiopian Government was getting aid from all directions without being tied to the apron strings of any of the donors. In essence, whilst Nigerian officials were ready and willing to accept aid from as many quarters as were willing to donate, they were not ready to be tied to the apron strings of such donors.\(^88\) This anti-British feeling and attitude, which were hardly hidden in the immediate post-independence years, would appear to have permeated almost all the sectors of the Nigerian government. Even Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, who was an anglophile and was always willing to pander to the interests of the British, had occasions to disagree with them. Within three months of independence, Balewa was exhibiting some reluctance in allowing the full implementation of the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Agreements—prompting the British High Commissioner to Nigeria, Lord Head, to pour out his frustration and embarrassment to Sir Alexander Clutterbuck, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Commonwealth Relations Office, in January 1961:

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\(^{85}\) The London Times, 22 January 1962.

\(^{86}\) In this regard, Chief Awolowo was to note rightly ‘that the military pact was not genuinely abrogated’ and that ‘there was a secret understanding of an equally sinister nature as the original Pact itself’; see The (Nigerian) Morning Post, 3 February 1962 and House of Representatives Debate, March-April, 1962, pp. 397-399.

\(^{87}\) Two examples of the official problems which the Defence Pact faced in its implementation can be given here: (1) The unhelpful attitude of Mohammadu Ribadu, the Defence Minister, according to Moreton at the British High Commission in Lagos (TNA, DO 177/12, J. O. Moreton to V. C. Martin, 17 October 1961); and (2) the reluctance of Balewa himself to allow the full implementation of the Defence Pact in 1961, which prompted the British High Commissioner to Nigeria, Lord Head, to retort that ‘I told him that an agreement was an agreement and […] we were rather upset that so early in the day a facility which was included in the agreement should be denied to us’ (TNA, DO 177/12, Lord Head to the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, 18 January 1961).

\(^{88}\) Cited in TNA DO 177/12, Lord Head to Sir Alexander Clutterbuck, 18 January 1961.
I went and saw the Prime Minister this morning and discussed [...] the arrangements for tropical testing [off] Naval fighter under the Defence Agreement. I said that we fully appreciated the embarrassment and difficulties which had been caused to the Government by the misrepresentation of the Defence Pact and the agitation which had taken place in the press and elsewhere. Nevertheless an agreement was an agreement and we were rather upset that so early in the day a facility which was included in the agreement should be denied to us.89

**Conclusion**

In analysing Britain’s effort at constructing a foreign policy for Nigeria on the eve of independence, it is important to note that contrary to the conventional view that Nigeria swallowed all the advice and admonitions which Britain offered, Nigeria, as a country, tried to chart her own independence course. Some evidence does suggest that the legacies which Britain sought to leave for Nigeria showed in some of the foreign policy initiatives and acts which the Balewa government carried out—and some of the positions taken presented Nigeria as a stooge of Britain and the West. But some diplomatic decisions also ran contrary to the preferences of the British. Interpretations based on extreme anglophilism essentially prevailed before files were declassified after 1990 and a reconsideration of Nigerian foreign policy in the incipient years of independence has become all too necessary.

As some of the information above would seem to suggest, the realities of Nigeria’s domestic opinion and the vagaries of international politics in the period under consideration did in fact influence the extent to which Nigerian leaders could be susceptible to manipulation by the British in the early years of independence. Indeed, the voice of British diplomat J. O. Moreton graphically captures the mood and temperament of the ‘new Nigeria’ in 1961 within both official and unofficial circles, as well as the evolution of Nigerian foreign policy vis-à-vis the expectations of her erstwhile colonial masters:

(...) the fairly universal theme running through Nigerian political thinking, that they should become less dependent on Britain is I think a permanent and not necessarily in the long run, an unhealthy one. It does not mean any falling away in personal friendliness. But it does mean we must never take for granted Nigerian support or sympathy on any issue and it may mean that we should be somewhat less obtrusive in our relations with them and above all avoid any impression that we have some proprietary rights here. [...] I suggest it is all part of the current mood of disengagement and the desire to demonstrate that Nigerians no longer need to dance to the tune of a British department, albeit a different one from the colonial days.90


90 TNA, DO 177/12, J. O. Moreton to V. C. Martin, 17 October 1961.
This, in a nutshell, can be described as the fortune that befell Britain’s aspiration in an independent Nigeria, where the politicians seemed to have played along until independence, before allowing the force of public opinion and the general anti-British feeling to take over their pre-independence pro-British attitude.

In the final analysis, while the British undertook decolonisation in a conscious manner and with the belief and interest in maintaining a reasonable amount of continuity in the direction of socio-economic and political developments in Nigeria, the reality in the immediate post-independence years was the contrary. Dennis Austin has rightly noted that part of Britain’s success in transferring political power was her belief in continuity.91 This was true as far as the implantation of the structures of governance was concerned. Certainly, it seems that the British did succeed in nurturing Nigeria in the niceties of British diplomatic preferences and tradition… only to the extent that the training and attitude of Nigerian politicians reflected this mentoring in the first few months of independence. Available evidence points out that the force of public opinion as well as the desire of Nigerian politicians to prove that they were not stooges of Britain decided their attitude.

Bibliography


