

INTEGRATION AND DISINTEGRATION IN BRITISH COLONIAL WEST AFRICA: THE CASE OF THE GOLD COAST AND LAGOS 1874-1886

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ABSTRACT

In 1874 the British West African colonies of Lagos and the Gold Coast, which were separated by considerable territory, were amalgamated to form one administration with the headquarters at Accra in the latter territory. However, as a result of increasing activity by other colonial powers in the adjoining territories and agitation by the Lagos communities and trading concerns in Britain for a separate and distinct government, the union was dissolved in 1886 to enable the administrator of each territory to tackle the urgent problems of territorial expansion and commercial control then emerging.

Introduction

The constitutional evolution of the British West African colonies was usually attributed largely to the mood of the British public and parliament rather than to the pressure of local merchants, governors and Africans. Thus accounts of the territorial and governmental changes tended to emphasize the necessity for economical administration, a reduction of the burden of the colonies on the British taxpayers, the prevention of unnecessary colonial wars and the control of irresponsible governors by the Colonial Office.⁵ A closer study of some of the colonial records shows that local interests were also important factors.

This article examines the interplay of essentially local and imperial factors in the integration and disintegration of the Gold Coast and Lagos colonies in 1874 and 1886 respectively. In view of the renewed urgency for deeper West African integration and the lead role expected of Ghana and Nigeria,

the not too distant past may hold some lessons for the current and future political leaders in the sub-region.

Administrative Organisation of British West Africa

The former British colonies in West Africa, comprising Sierra Leone, The Gambia, the Gold Coast and Lagos (the cradle of Nigeria), underwent several territorial and administrative formations. Such political arrangements as were evolved since the era of company rule involved crown take-over of the properties of British merchants, the return of such possessions to the companies, subsequent annexation, various amalgamations of the four colonies and dissolutions of the united governments.¹ There is no need to enter into a discussion of the political evolution of the West African Settlements from the inception of company control and crown interventions. Suffice it to say that the Charter of 24 January 1850 separated the settlements in the Gold Coast from the colony of Sierra Leone. A governor and legislative council were appointed to administer the existing or future forts and settlements of the Gold Coast comprised within longitudes 10⁰ East and 10⁰ West.²

Lagos was occupied by the British in 1851 but it was not until 1862 that it was annexed and a governor was appointed to the settlement and its dependencies.³ The colony maintained its identity until 19 February 1866 when it was united with Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and the Gambia under the general title of the West African Settlements. The governor-in-chief had his headquarters in Freetown, and the administrators of the other three dependencies were subordinate to him. The Gold Coast then comprised British Settlements and territories in West Africa between the 5⁰ west longitude and the 2⁰ east longitude. Lagos was delimited by longitudes 2⁰ and 5⁰ east.⁴ In 1874, however, the two colonies were separated from Sierra Leone and the Gambia and formed into one government under the name of the Gold Coast Colony. The unified administration was disbanded in 1886 and the two colonies evolved separately until the end of alien rule.

Union of the Gold Coast and Lagos Colonies 1870 – 1874

By the early 1870s, effective British presence in the Gold Coast was confined to a narrow coastal belt where a few dispersed administrative stations were in the charge of colonial officials. During the Anglo-Asante war of 1873 - 74 it was generally accepted by the authorities in London

that the scattered West African colonies could no longer be effectively administered by one governor resident in Sierra Leone.⁶ After the defeat of the Asante, it was decided that the machinery of government in the Gold Coast should be re-organised to enhance efficiency.

Energetic schemes of development and administration were also required to consolidate British authority, augment local revenues and make the colony self-supporting and self-protecting. The outcome was the creation of the unified administration of the Gold Coast and Lagos on 24 July 1874.⁷ The united Gold Coast Colony was divided into three judicial provinces. The Western and Central Provinces were in the Gold Coast Settlement and Lagos was the Eastern Province.⁸ The Governor was a resident in Accra and his deputy, the Lieutenant-Governor lived in Lagos.

The settled conditions in the Gold Coast following the defeat of Asante and the more effectual administration of the consolidated colony stimulated the steady development of trade and a great increase in revenue receipts. The increasing prosperity of the Gold Coast and the favourable financial state of the colony arising partly from strict control of expenditure once more raised the question of the organisation of the four British territories. While the finances of the Gold Coast and Lagos were in as sound a condition as possible and there were favourable prospects of this continuing, Sierra Leone and The Gambia were in great financial difficulties which could not be solved by the extension and intensification of the collection of customs revenue. It was, therefore, proposed that the approaching retirement of Governor S. Freeling offered an opportunity to reconsider the existing political arrangement of British West Africa. The united administration had worked thoroughly well and without it there would probably have been another war, bad government, poor finances and troubles of all kinds in the Gold Coast and Lagos.⁹

R. W. Herbert in the Colonial Office felt that the four colonies should once more be amalgamated to form a political and financial union under a governor - in - chief with the headquarters in the Gold Coast. It was proposed that the governor should earn not less than £5,000 per annum with an administrator at Sierra Leone. The latter officer would correspond directly with London except where correspondence with Accra would be necessary and delay would not cause any harm. Herbert pointed out that: "With the headquarters of government at the Gold Coast there would be much better means of developing the sanatorium at Aburi and of meeting

many other requirements of what is now the most important settlement".¹⁰ A good and powerful steamer would enable the governor to move freely and quickly from one place to the other and his health should be adequately protected. Under such a scheme the colonies might be financially independent of the imperial treasury, and a relief to the Colonial Office.

Sir M. Hicks-Beach, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, however expressed doubt as to whether a governor could efficiently superintend British West Africa. He was not certain that it was wise to alter a system that had apparently been so successful in the Gold Coast, as there was no man of ability to succeed Governor Samuel Rowe. Besides, the scheme of extending colonial jurisdiction in Sierra Leone required the immediate supervision of an able administrator on the spot.¹¹ However, Herbert maintained that the significant questions that arose should be in the hands of "a more important and experienced man than we are likely to be able to secure for either of the present poor appointments".¹² The opinions of such an administrator would be of much value to the British government on policy proposals and his control would be useful when personal administrative difficulties arose. A financial union would also avoid the constant recurrence of unsuccessful applications to the treasury. However, many difficult points of detail would have to be settled and more information provided before the proposal could be implemented.

Separation of the Gold Coast and Lagos 1882 – 1886

In 1882 Sir Samuel Rowe observed that officers at Accra did not often take notice of what transpired in Lagos, apparently because they tended to see themselves as belonging to the Settlement of the Gold Coast rather than to the larger colony.¹³ This attitude was deprecated and the headquarters staff were urged to take greater cognisance of events in Lagos. Administrative work on the Gold Coast had also increased considerably and the practice had been "to treat Lagos as a separate command so far as the interior administration of its affairs went,"¹⁴ and full particulars of all events beyond the most trivial and ordinary details were conveyed from time to time to Accra. The inhabitants of Lagos demurred at the administrative establishment because they considered that Lagos was far ahead of the Gold Coast in material development.¹⁵

As the Lieutenant Governor did not owe a general allegiance to the Governor at Accra but was one of his principal subordinates, the two officers were informed that the question of a more complete amalgamation of the two settlements for administrative and fiscal purposes had, from time to time, engaged the attention of successive Secretaries of State. The officers in Accra and Lagos were to be ordered to confer and arrange a scheme for carrying the union into more complete effect.¹⁶ Captain Moloney, the administrator of Lagos, was not too happy about the plan¹⁷ proposed.

He pointed out that the Governor was probably unaware of the considerable jealousy on the part of the Lagos community for being subordinated to the Gold Coast since the settlement's trade and commercial importance was greater. The attitude of the people therefore, had to be weighed carefully, and that a decision should not be taken hastily without a full consideration of the whole matter. It was, however, claimed that the amalgamation of the Gold Coast and Lagos Colonies had proved of a great value in working the short service leave system, effected some economy and generally enhanced financial efficiency and administration.¹⁸ Accra, the seat of the united government, became the most important centre of trade and the commercial focus of a large territory.

Towards the end of 1884 a deputation of 36 people, including three Europeans from Lagos, demanded the creation of a distinct and subordinate government for Lagos. The benefits expected from the change were stated at great length and with much emphasis and perfect sincerity, but unfortunately the proceedings were entirely verbal and only one Mr. Hood, a member of the Lagos delegation, took some notes, which were not made available to the Governor.¹⁹ William Young, the governor, requested the deputation to reflect seriously on the issue and ask themselves whether "it did not appear that the benefits contemplated by separation, and by a separate Government were not more fanciful than real".²⁰ He felt that such agitation was likely to ruin the two colonies and the Colonial Office observed that the people were a little vague in their ideas regarding the dissolution and that their views respecting municipal institutions were primitive.²¹

By March 1885, William Young had drastically revised his views about the administration of the united colony. He declared that it had been patent

for some time that the system of administering Lagos through a deputy governor was cumbersome and embarrassing. The Governor advised that Lagos should either be separated altogether from the Gold Coast and be placed under a governor or its position should conform to that of other administrative districts of the Gold Coast.

Young favoured the establishment of two separate and distinct administrations: "There is a gap between Lagos and the seat of Government of the Gold Coast of some 230 miles, and upwards of 150 miles of this gap is foreign Territory. What may affect the trade and commerce of the one country has no concern whatever with the other."²² Besides, the tariff of Lagos was distinct and its revenue was large enough to support a subordinate government on a modest scale for the circumscribed area of the colony (Table 1).

It was further suggested that the town of Lagos should be divided into districts for the levy of rates for local developments and improvements. As annual revenue of at least £50,000 could be relied upon, there should be no difficulty in providing for a separate government in Lagos since the staff was already there.

Table 1: Revenue and expenditure of Lagos settlement (1880 – 1884 in pounds sterling)

YEAR	REVENUE	EXPENDITURE
1880	47,987	55,475
1881	42,421	45,461
1882	44,636	44,039
1883	50,558	37,879
1884	66,875	43,271

Source: GC Conf. of 14 March 1885, CO 96/164,PRO.

The political conditions and administrative problems of Lagos and the Gold Coast were different. The Governor asserted that Lagos: "Possibly owing to the configuration of the surrounding Territory and its position amongst Tribes hostile to each other, is a hot bed of intrigue, and from the ready means of communication which inland waters afford to this extensive interior Territory, there is no saying when the independent and immediate exercise of judgment of an experienced head, or the prompt

action of a firm hand, might not be called for".²³ If France remained in possession of the Protectorate of Port Novo and enforced the extension of its influence over the neighbouring peoples who were at the time strenuously resisting alien interference, many troubles would certainly arise which would seriously affect the interests of Lagos. In such an eventuality the presence of somebody who was qualified to act promptly and deal directly with urgent issues would be an asset.

The mail steamers could not be depended upon and communication between Lagos and Accra was irregular and embarrassingly slow and it took a fortnight or more to receive replies. Furthermore, telegraphic communication did not then exist between Accra and Lagos and there was no certainty that it would be established in the near future. Even if this facility was provided, "the native political troubles, as well as those arising from the neighbouring French Protectorate, could not be satisfactorily disposed of through its means. Each of these outlying districts has a history of its own, and an accurate judgment could not be formed without a study of that history."²⁴

The implication was the Governor, resident at Accra, could not adequately assess the significance of events in Lagos and take the right decisions. Yet it was imperative that action should be taken at once in relation to many of the matters that arose at Lagos. In some cases, however, the measures adopted were exceedingly embarrassing: "Possibly the very fact that the officer taking that action recognises and feels that his own responsibility in the matter is not final, but only views it as intermediary, may lead him to act without careful thought and discrimination which he might otherwise feel compelled to exercise."²⁵

Additionally, the affairs of Lagos generated a very large correspondence both in London and Accra, and most of the time of the Governor was taken up by matters relating to that settlement, with much detriment to the Gold Coast. After a year's experience in the administration of the government, William Young was convinced that the dissolution of the union was in the interest of Lagos and particularly of the Gold Coast. The only objection on the part of Lagos was the loss of an Appeal Court, as one judge was considered to be enough for all purposes there.

There was no deep feeling about separation among the European population actually resident in Lagos, no matter what Lagos merchants in England felt. Nonetheless, it was obvious that "there is a strong and

unanimous feeling in its favour – which it is certain will not be allowed to sleep – amongst the colored population; and when this class of people once get a settled idea into their heads, it is almost impossible to remove it.”²⁶ In fact, some members of the delegation were insistent on this point and one of them “viewed separation as essential to the advancement of Christianity.”²⁷

Governor Young reiterated the fact that even if the dissolution was not effected immediately it would still be necessary to do so in the not very distant future. Besides separation, no other alternative arrangement would work more satisfactorily than the existing system, which had proved inadequate to meet the exigencies of the situation. Any other scheme would create a great dissatisfaction among the vocal elements of the Lagos population, and the local press was controlled by those advocating dissolution. It was undoubtedly important that the officer who had to deal with international questions should be a man of experience and good judgment. He should also act under the sense of direct responsibility and with promptitude and firmness. Only a governor who was in direct correspondence with London could fulfill these conditions.

The united colony was also regarded as too large to be administered affectively by one man, in view of the difficulties of climate, transport and communication. Although the lack of method and administrative talent in Sir S. Rowe created problems, these had not abated under his successor, who was obviously an excellent administrator. A.W.L. Hemming was therefore convinced that the supervision of the Gold Coast Colony proper was enough of a task for one governor and that it was better to effect the separation demanded by the people of Lagos.²⁸

Lord Derby had indicated in 1883 that the amalgamation “had nothing of finality or perpetuity about it”.²⁹ Hemming believed that the current salary of £1,700 with a table allowance of £250 should be sufficient to entice a good man who would look upon Lagos as a stepping stone to something else. It was proposed that the salary of the governor at Accra could be reduced from £3,000 to £2,000 with a duty allowance of £500, but Sir Herbert considered this inadvisable. These suggestions and other details were to be worked out if separation was acceptable in principle.

The strongest objection to the dissolution of the union was economic: an increase in the establishments, especially at Lagos. It was, however, anticipated that when colonial jurisdiction was extended to the Benin

River the revenue would increase appreciably. On the whole, Hemming and Lord Derby were inclined to administer Lagos and the Gold Coast as separate entities.³⁰

In May 1885, a petition on behalf of British merchants interested in the development of trade with West Africa drew attention to "the unsatisfactory manner in which the administration of the Government is now provided for at Lagos – one of the most important, from a business point of view, of all the Settlements on the West Coast of Africa."³¹ Before the merger Lagos "was making rapid progress, and bidding fair to become the central port towards which the produce of a very large and important tract of country, extending back to the banks of the Niger, was finding its way in increasing quantities. A check was given to this, by the withdrawal of all discretionary power from the administrator, reducing him to a mere subordinate, without any power or fixed position; any official who could be spared from Accra being appointed to act".³²

The commercial activities and development in Lagos had declined and almost ceased while the complications which had more than once led to trade embargo between Lagos and the interior had increased. The past experience had shown that minor complaints which appeared to be insignificant often ended up in general trade blockades and losses to merchants if they were not judiciously handled by a governor experienced in native palavers, local politics and African customs. Yet it was these merchants who contributed most to the colonial revenue, a large part of which was appropriated to pay officials stationed a week's journey to, and who rarely visited, Lagos. As Lagos was an outstation of the Gold Coast there were frequent changes of administrators and this did not facilitate continuity of government and the development of the settlement.³³

By June 1885, the Earl of Derby was more inclined to favour a separation. Hemming indicated that it was not possible to map out a definite scheme, in London, of the staff required for the two colonies. A reduction of the staff of the Gold Coast was almost impossible without impairing the efficiency and proper conduct of public business, owing to the nature of the climate and leave requirements. The establishment of Lagos also necessarily had to be augmented, but the revenues were promising and the amount of £2,905 which Lagos contributed towards the salaries of principal officers of the united government would be available. If the salary of the governor in the Gold Coast was maintained, then his

counterpart at Lagos should not earn less than £2,000 since there was more society and, therefore, much more entertaining to be done there than at Accra.³⁴

It was considered best to maintain the Constabulary of the two colonies as one regiment. The officers were to serve either at the Gold Coast or Lagos and their salaries were to be paid by the colony in which they were stationed. The governor was, however, able to convince the Colonial Office that it was better to have two separate forces of constabulary, although the central prison could be maintained at Accra. As the Anglican Bishop of Accra was paid from local revenue, the ecclesiastical organisation created no problems. Lagos was to have its own Executive and Legislative Councils and the new scheme of separate governments was to come into operation on 1 January 1886.³⁵

Governor Young died in April 1885 and W.B. Griffith, the administrator of Lagos, moved to Accra as acting governor. Minutes on a dispatch by Griffith pleading for his continued retention in the colonial service indicated that Col. Stanley, the Secretary of State, had firmly decided that Lagos should be made a subordinate administration. Griffith was informed that he would be appointed governor of the Gold Coast and Hemming observed that "he is not a man of first rate ability, but he is business-like, trustworthy, prudent and, what is of much value, now pretty thoroughly acclimatised".³⁶ He believed that Griffith would serve satisfactorily as governor for a few more years.

The people of Lagos petitioned that the colony should be severed from the Gold Coast or be placed on the same footing with The Gambia. The over 200 signatories included representatives of every respectable European firm in Lagos, high standing African merchants, editors of newspapers and ministers of religion of all denominations.³⁷ They referred to an earlier petition in 1884 which detailed their grievances and the inconveniences Lagos suffered by being made a mere district of the united Gold Coast Colony.

The petitioners reiterated that the amalgamation was detrimental to their progress generally as members of the community and settlement of Lagos. An example cited was the inability of the administrator to authorise expenditure of £10 as a reward without approval from Accra. The amalgamation was considered to be a false economy since it perpetrated inefficient rule, improper management and retrogression in several

important spheres of human endeavour. The argument that Lagos could not be governed economically without it being made an appendage of the Gold Coast and its officials subordinated to those residing at Accra was totally rejected.³⁸

Lagos had maintained its full complement of staff approved before the union when the colony was much younger and its revenue was not as large as it was in 1885. It was claimed that the contribution of Lagos to the salaries of high officials of the united administration, who were of no immediate material benefit locally, would suffice to pay for the cost of governing the colony independently. Lagos was compared to The Gambia, which was not more advanced and which had only about half of the revenue of Lagos, but which had a Governor and council board. The laws governing tariffs in Lagos and in the Gold Coast were not identical. For example, the duty on spirits in the former was six pence per gallon and two shillings and six pence in the latter while the licence to retail spirits was £25 and £2 respectively.

It was pointed out that "the Gold Coast where the Headquarters of the colony are fixed, with its 13 principal ports and substations, does not rival Lagos in a fair comparison of exports and imports; and also it cannot be said that the inhabitants of the Gold Coast are superior to those of Lagos in civilization and in educational, religious and social advancement."³⁹ The late Governor remarked that his visit to Lagos was his first contact with civilization after he had left England. A large body of influential, wealthy and respectable people who were deeply interested in the growing trading community of Lagos was also seeking dissolution of the united administration. The business community and the elite had even fixed the scale of the salaries of the official establishment they were pleading for so that they could literally provide for them. Besides, the African population had expressed the desire that "the services of natives should be utilized in some of the more important offices especially the medical and law branches which would cause a great saving in general expenses, natives not being under the necessity of desiring a frequent leave of absence."⁴⁰ A subordinate government at Lagos would materially facilitate Africans being employed in these capacities.

The Governor, W.B. Griffith, strongly recommended the petition for serious consideration since the signatories represented "the whole wealth and intelligence of the community."⁴¹ It had become clear that separation

was much desired by the inhabitants of Lagos and representations had been received to that effect from people in England who were interested in that colony. The nature of the climate, the difficulties of communication and the many important matters requiring the governor's presence and attention at Accra did not make it easy for him to give the affairs of Lagos the necessary personal supervision.⁴² The united administration was dissolved with effect from 1 January 1886 and Griffith was appointed governor of the Gold Coast on the prevailing rates of salary and allowances.

Comments on the estimates of the Gold Coast for 1886 indicated that nothing was saved by the union of the two colonies and that the separation would achieve little profit financially. On 1 January 1883, when the settlements were united financially, the assets of the Gold Coast and Lagos were £69,355 and £26,313 respectively and the revenue received from each was in the proportion of 10 to 6. However, most of the expenditure on public works during the period was on the Gold Coast. A balance of about £160,000 at the beginning of 1886 was to be divided between the two territories on a basis to be determined. It was further suggested that the best way of dividing the assets would be to deduct the balance in favour of each territory at the date of the financial union and then divide the remainder between them in the proportion of the total revenue received from each colony.⁴³

Conclusion

By the 1870's the four British colonies of the Gambia, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast and Lagos were still very small in size. Essentially, they consisted of the individual forts and settlements scattered along the coast. For economic reasons they were formed into one administration with the capital at Freetown, in Sierra Leone. By the acquisition of the Danish and Dutch forts in 1850 and 1872 respectively, Britain gained complete control over an extensive littoral in the Gold Coast which included the outlet for Asante at Elmina. The prospect of the loss of access to the sea for foreign trade led to an Asante invasion of the Gold Coast Colony and their defeat by the British in 1874.

After the Ashanti had been routed, the coastal states with which Britain had treaties of protection were formally annexed to the forts and their immediate hinterlands. In order to forestall the recurrence of the

difficulties with Asante and military confrontation, it was decided that a governor should reside in the Gold Coast and devote his time and energy to reforming and strengthening the administration of the colony. He was also to organize its defences and consolidate British influence while overseeing developments in the territorially small and commercially insignificant colony of Lagos. Thus the Gold Coast and Lagos were separated from The Gambia and Sierra Leone in 1874 and constituted into one colony.

Similarly, it was the desire to consolidate British influence and power against the intervention and encroachment of rival colonial powers in the affairs and commercial development of Lagos which partly necessitated the dissolution of the united Gold Coast Colony in 1886. The establishment of a protectorate at Porto Novo by the French, the German annexation of the Cameroun and the ensuing campaigns against the adjacent territories, generated delicate and complex international questions which required the presence of an experienced and independent administrator at Lagos to take firm and prompt decisions on the spot.

The increasing conflict of national interests, the diminishing influence of local British authorities, and the adverse effects on commerce of the introduction of differing principles of trading by various colonial powers, were all factors which influenced the re-establishment of Lagos as a separate colony. As A.W. L. Hemming pointed out in 1884, "the loss of the Cameroun was bad enough, but we ought not to allow Germany also to appropriate the coast between the Gold Coast and Lagos."⁴¹ When the colonial powers began increasingly to penetrate into the interior and to extend their spheres of influence, it became obvious that the interests of Lagos could not be adequately protected by a governor resident at Accra.

For effective local administration it was also necessary to create two subordinate governments. The political problems which beset Lagos on all its frontiers called for prompt and decisive action, but the distance from the seat of government and the delays enjoined by correspondence with Accra rendered it difficult for the Governor to act quickly. There was also a tendency to deny Lagos of officers and development. The Colonial Office had to intervene occasionally to send a good district commissioner to Lagos which was much more in need of one than any other place in the Gold Coast.⁴⁵ Besides, the affairs of, and the large correspondence

generated by Lagos, precluded the Gold Coast from receiving the attention it deserved.

There was, increasingly, little community of interest between the two colonies. Significantly, the people and most of the colonial officials of the Gold Coast who probably benefited more from the united government were passive observers in the process of disintegration, as no record of their sentiments has been located by the author. Constant agitation by the Lagos community contributed much to the dissolution of the united administration. The separation of the Gold Coast and Lagos colonies re-established the basic territorial units where local interests predominated.

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