

Book Review

Philip Atsu Afeadie (2016). *Workplace Anguish and Pleasure in Northern Nigeria: Exactions of Colonial Governing*. ISBN 978-9988-2-4607-5. Accra, Ghana: Woeli Publishing Services (142 pages)

Ebenezer Ayesu

Senior Research Fellow, Institute of African Studies,
University of Ghana, Legon
eayesu@ug.edu.gh

Philip Atsu Afeadie's book, *Workplace Anguish and Pleasure in Northern Nigeria: Exactions of Colonial Governing*, seeks to examine the emotional experiences of political officers (imperial European functionaries) and political agents (junior African colonial workers serving mostly as interpreters and messengers) in British colonial administration in Northern Nigeria. Essentially, the work explores complexities of feelings relating to joy, sadness, confusion, stress and their control among political officers, political agents and traditional rulers. The author sheds light on the intricacies of patron/client relationship between the three groups. Primarily using archival material, including government documents, private papers, diaries, memoirs, reports and oral traditions, the author reveals in six chapters the oft-neglected issues involving the power of emotions and sentiments on the consolidation or weakening of imperial authority at the workplace or what the British colonial administration in Northern Nigeria termed personnel 'attitudes and feelings'.

Chapter One discusses 'inadequate African Assistants', which inadequacy often meant relatively huge workload for European political officers. With a population of about 43 million then, 1,223 administrators and 938 police officers were grossly inadequate for the management of colonised Nigeria. The author reports that the gloom of loneliness encircled the overwhelmed political officers as there was often no cordiality with the African people, and political officers sometimes refused to take advice from the few African political agents. Battling with loneliness, political officers developed a sense of individuality and self-reliance as they resorted to sport and relished the freshness of the African evening. The inadequacy of political agents made some political officers induce the capable ones with gifts and presents to prevent them from abandoning the work.

Chapter Two deals with 'attitudes of political agents', perceived to be engaged in extortion and misrepresentation, comportment which both baffled and annoyed the political officers. This was of transcendent importance to High Commissioner Lugard who is noted to have remarked that 'the absence of honest native interpreters and agents is the curse of the country and renders administration difficult'. This, according to the author, brings to the fore the scarcity of agents and their practice of extortion and attitude of reticence which were variously described as complex and perplexing. However, the author fails to interrogate what could have accounted for this complex behaviour and reported cowardice on the part of some agents. For instance, was their remuneration commensurate with their workload, especially in relation to their European counterparts? Or were the practice of extortion and the attitude of reticence of the political agents meant to subvert the very colonial order they had been employed to serve? Sometimes, political officers resigned themselves to the mischief of political agents. Yet, there were many agents whose forthrightness elicited joy and admiration from political officers.

Chapter Three examines the 'survival of political agents' whose status the author describes as one fraught with 'curse and opportunity'. There is not much emphasis on the sweet rewarding moments of those political agents who were joyous at belonging in colonial governance. The danger associated with the work of the political agents rather comes into focus as they were sometimes attacked by ordinary African subjects or intimidated and imprisoned by traditional rulers. These occupational hazards became all the more frequent as

political agents were forbidden from carrying arms despite the dangerous terrain and hostile environment in which they operated. Their grief and anguish were thus understandably enormous amidst vexations of underpayment and the lack of insurance and workplace protection for their services. They survived largely by cultivating patience at work.

Chapter Four dwells on ‘engaging traditional rulers’ and rightly so, because the indigenous ruling hierarchy was of utmost importance to the functioning of the Indirect Rule system. Political officers, as the author notes, were imbued with a sense of mission, a ‘fascinating job to do’ which required the use of their power, intelligence and charisma to ensure easy administration. Owing to the sensitive nature of issues relating to taxation, which was equally indispensable for the running of Northern Nigeria, the political officers recognised the vital contribution of some of the chiefs to colonial administration even as they described other traditional rulers as conservative, ineffective and disgusting. Except for instances of mob attacks referred to in the previous chapter, the author did not stress the hostile attitude of the ordinary people towards their own chiefs for cooperating with colonial administration in the collection of taxes.

Chapter Five deals with ‘differences in ideology of political officers’. Here, the author reveals that the real story, as far as ‘ideology’ and Indirect Rule were concerned, could be found in the private memoirs and letters of resident and district officers but not in official memoranda and imperial records. The disagreements among political officers and those between political officers and high authority were highlighted as some led to the reversal of decisions and reprimands, and created much anguish. Subordinate political officers coped by resigning themselves to their conditions or deferring to high authority until moments of reprieve.

Chapter Six is the last chapter and is mainly devoted to ‘emotions and work efficiency’. This notwithstanding, the chapter appears to be more of a summary of emotions discussed in the previous chapters than an actual exploration of the impact of the emotions on work efficiency. The author, however, examines, to some extent, how the management of the emotions impacted work efficiency, for better or worse.

In all, the author, considering the sources at his disposal, does creditably well by drawing attention to workplace anguish and pleasure in colonial Northern Nigeria. The book is not only well-written, thoughtful and informative, but also well-documented, and therefore instructive to modern-day work engagements. The book’s originality resides in the exploration of the impact of the affect on power relations and imperial construction in African contexts.