Common Motives of Africa's Anti-colonial Resistance in 1890–1960

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ABSTRACT

The encounters between the Africans and Europeans have reconfigured the history of the African continent in many ways. The history of the African resistance against foreign encroachment and domination has deep roots. The Africans generally welcomed the European explorers, traders, missionaries and colonizers in the spirit of the African generosity. However, whenever the Africans felt that their generosity was not reciprocated, they resisted in various ways but with a single goal in mind – freedom. In reality the struggle between the Africans and the Europeans was not an equal one. Most Africans hated colonialism because of what it did to them. The Africans resorted to force which provides a means of unilateral decision making. It would be wrong to argue that the majority of the Africans at anytime accepted the Europeans colonialism. In the present article the author analyzed six case studies of the anti-colonial resistance movements on the African continent. He also argues that the land alienation, particular mode of tax collection or similar other causes, to which the rise of resistance across Africa is commonly attributed, at best are the factors that precipitated those movements. At the core of the African resistance there was, in fact, the aspiration for political liberation, the concern to terminate the foreign domination.

INTRODUCTION

The colonization of Africa by the European powers provoked resistance in different place. The history of the African resistance against foreign encroachment and domination has deep roots since

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arrived not as colonialists but as missionaries, traders and even explorers. The natives resisted in various ways. Some fought by using arms and this was called an active resistance; some assumed non-compliance while the others reluctantly complied without protest, for example, the Masai of Kenya, the Sangu of Mbeya and the Bena of Iringa, both tribe of Tanzania. Still some peoples refused to cooperate and refused to have any affairs with the colonialists – one may call this a passive resistance (*e.g.,* the Gogo of Central Tanzania. There were those who regarded the arrival of the colonialists as an opportunity for lucrative trade. Some groups which suffered from long-time warfare or from slave raiding gave an uncertain welcome to the European presence in their region hoping that there would be peace (*e.g.,* the Asantehene, the supreme chief of the Asante Empire called Osei Tutu I of Ghana and Muwanga of Baganda Kingdom in Uganda).[1] There were many reasons for siding with the Europeans (sometimes, *e.g.,* to settle scores with other tribes; so some Africans collaborated with the Europeans hoping to eliminate their long-time enemies). The Europeans considered those who resisted as foolish, fanatical or simply uncivilized people. For example, 'the British propaganda had long portrayed the Mau-Mau resistance of people of Kenya as a small uprising of savages who were experiencing some form of mass psychosis, the result of the Kikuyu tribe's inability to cope with the modern world' (Sadowsky 1999). The main function of the colonial governments was reduced to maintaining the law and order, raising taxation and providing the infrastructure of roads and railways. Thus, there were no progresses, only some kind of development to facilitate exploitation. There seemed to be no need for a more rapid development and they expect to rule Africa for hundred years to come. Most of the African primary resistances[2] were defeated, 'except for the Ethiopians resisting the Italian invaders that ended with resounding success, where Emperor Menelik II defeated the Italians in 1896 at the battle of Adowa'.[3]

Conflict and frustration were sparked off as the African rulers tried to retain or even increase some of their powers. In reality, the struggle between the indigenous Africans and the colonialists was not an equal one. At first in primary resistance many people had no reaction to colonialism because during the early years it had little impact on their lives. However, after colonialism had gained pace

they all started to feel the pinch. In all resistances people considered religion as the only resort to turn to:

> Religion has always been central to people's lives in Africa. Although the majority of Africans are now Muslim or Christian, traditional religions have endured and still play a big role. Religion runs like a thread through daily life, marked by prayers of gratitude in times of plenty and prayers of supplication in times of need. Religion confers identity on the individual and the group. In the history of the continent, religion has had a powerful effect on political change: spirit mediums have led revolts against European and African rulers, ancestral spirits have commanded acts of destruction and called for the overthrow of rulers and chiefs.[4]

In purely scientific terms a war is described as 'an organized violence carried on by political units against each other'. The aim of the war is to kill members of another group, and not merely to harm them. Despite the fact that a war in reality is a conflict, it is clear that not all conflicts end in war. Many of the African leaders who resisted colonial rule died in battle or were executed or sent into exile after defeat. For example, Samori of the Mandingo was captured and died in exile. Two years later, Kinjikitile Ngwale, a Maji Maji hero, was captured and hanged for treason, Lobengula died in a battle and so many others.

THE CASE OF SHONA AND NDEBELE REBELLION

This case relates to the present day Zimbabwe. Shona and Ndebele rebellion derives its name from the two tribes known respectively as 'the Shona' and 'the Ndebele' that were at the core of the resistance. This war is also known as 'Chimurenga War I' (1896–1897).[5]

The whites at the Ndebele war boasted of having the Maxim guns. As it was put by Hilaire Belloc, in his poem 'The Modern Traveler': 'Whatever happens, we have got the Maximum gun, and they have not'. Needham further observes 'While the Africans (the Ndebele) did have a few guns, they were unskilled at using them, they preferred traditional weapons such as spears, because they were so successful for too long with those traditional methods and they were not prepared to change them' (Needham 1974: 96). So, they were easily defeated. This war was fought at the end of 19th century between 1896 and 1897.

The two tribes were resisting the British occupation: The first reason was the land questions. The Ndebele had been deprived of the ownership of land; while the white settlers had appropriated the best plots of land. The second reason was the way the British policed the Ndebele territory. The British had placed the Shona officers in the Ndebele areas and since there was a rivalry or even animosity between the two tribes, the leaders of the Ndebele tribe did not welcome such policy of the British. This caused resentment against the British in the Ndebele minds. Nevertheless, it appears that the basic cause of the Ndebele uprising was the loss of cattle. And this (*i.e.,* the loss of cattle) constituted the third important reason which fueled the Ndebele uprising against the British. The thefts of the Ndebele cattle were, in fact, sent by the British who hoped that would bring the hostile Ndebele to their knees. And that would in turn make the British hold over the Ndebele territory even stronger.

The colonial administration could also confiscate the local population's most valuable assets – land and livestock, especially from those who refuse to cooperate with them, thus destroying both the basis of the local economies and the African's right of ownership, their honor and honesty. Without any opportunities of redress or restitution, communities' existing system of justice and sense of fairness, including the traditional respect for private, were rendered irrelevant: the power of the gun was a new form of administering 'justice'. In such a way, the dictatorial regime was cultivated, imposed and in time, increasingly tolerated.

Some Shona kings tended to solicit the help of the whites against their traditional rivals – the Ndebele. In 1896, the Shona were able to act with a certain amount of unity. In alliance with the Ndebele caused a revolt against the colonial rule. They would credit Mlimo (the Matabele spiritual/religious leader) with fomenting much of the anger that led to this confrontation. He convinced the Ndebele and Shona that the white settlers (by that time numbering about 4,000 people) were responsible for the drought, locust plagues and the cattle diseases (*e.g.,* rinderpest) ravaging the country at the time. In the Shona uprising the religion played a major part. Like most mediums Mlimo was able to convince the warriors that they were immune to the white men's bullets. Nehenda Niakasikana, the Ndebele/Shona leader, caught in December 1897, was

charged with murdering a white man and she was hanged. Her last words were 'My bones shall rise again' (Needham 1974: 102) and many Zimbabweans believed that her spirit led to the successful Chimurenga War II that created modern Zimbabwe.[6]

THE CASE OF MAJI MAJI WAR IN TANGANYIKA

'Maji Maji' War was fought against the Germans in Tanganyika from 1905 to 1907. This war was essentially an uprising of several indigenous tribes in response to the German policy designed to force African people to grow cotton for export. The war was called 'Maji Maji' because 'Maji' in Swahili means 'water' and the locals believed that they could not be harmed by the German bullets, because the bullets would turn into water. So it was called 'Maji Maji' because when the Germany bullets were fired the indigenous soldiers were shouting or crying 'maji maji'. That is how the name 'Maji Maji' came from. The indigenous local soldiers tended to mobilize the society's all resources and means to wage war with few restrains or with none at all. The 'Maji-Maji' uprising was mostly influenced by traditional beliefs and by the promise of a new world. They believed that the dead ancestors were to be resurrected at Ngalambe and 'Prophet' Kinjekitile Ngwale was sent by God to save the people from the German oppression. People saw that the only solution was to get rid of the cotton production which exploited their labor and threatened their economy. 'Prophet' Kinjikitile made use of religion or beliefs which were known to people of the Tanganyika at the time which was most affected by the cotton scheme. In this cotton production scheme every chief was forced to mobilize his male subjects to the cotton cultivation. The cotton was produced for export to Germany. The members of the farm received what was left after deducting all other costs. But it was so little that some members of the block farms refused to accept the payment.

'Maji Maji' war took time to plan and did not come with the fall of Tanganyika into colonialism immediately to the German but came when colonial rule had been in place for a while. The consequences of the loss of sovereignty was now clear to people. Forced labor, taxation, harassment and harsh conditions caused the 'Maji Maji' War. People forgot about their differences. They united in the struggle against a common enemy. People would go on a pil-

grimage visit to Ngarambe openly in crowds, like a wedding procession, but their secret object was to obtain war medicine against the Germans (Illife 1979: 170). The Germans observed and misinterpreted its significance. It was necessary and possible for the locals to unite into a (Placeholder1)big force to ensure victory over the Germans. The Germans did not fully comprehend the initial preparations for the 'Maji Maji' war. Few soldiers (*askaris*) were scattered in the area and they could not therefore check that such a movement was under way.

'Maji Maji' war was the first and largest interethnic expression of anti-colonialism for its scale and extent and it was the largest and actually, single threat to the German authority in East Africa. The natives turned to magic to drive out the German colonizers and used it as the unifying force. 'War seemed the only way to end extortions of the Arabs and Germans' (Pakenham 1991: 621). People knew about the superiority of the colonial military machine but they believed that effective war with the whites could not be waged in a traditional way but with the war medicine which they could give a trial. Nevertheless, the gun proved far superior to magic or the spear, shield and bow and arrow. Dozens thousands of the native Africans were killed mercilessly so the newcomers could access their wealth or settle down in their lands. Eventually, the military powers of the intruders overwhelmed the Africans and thus, the Europeans maintained a hold upon the territory.

THE CASE OF SOUTH WEST AFRICA

The Germans also engaged themselves in South West Africa (Presently Namibia). Originally, a tribe of cattle herders, the Herero, were living in that region of South West Africa.

> During the scramble for Africa the British made it clear that they were not interested in the territory; so in August 1884 it was declared a German protectorate. From the outset there was resistance of the Khoikhoi (South African Tribe. – *S.M.*), but tenuous peace was worked out in 1894. In that year Theodor Leutwein became colonial governor of the territory owned by Herero and it underwent a period of rapid development while Germany sent the 'Schutztruppe' (German Colonial Forces) of imperial colonial troops to pacify the region (BBC 2001).

White settlers were encouraged to settle on land taken from the natives, which caused a great deal of discontent. The land was frequently seized and given to colonialists, and resources, especially the diamond mines were exploited by the Germans. In 1903, some of the Nama tribes rose in an uprising under the leadership of Hendrik Witbooi,[7] and about 60 German settlers were killed. In January 1904, the chief Samwel Maherero led the Herero uprising and killed about 120 Germans including women and children and destroyed farms. The magnitude of involvement shows that people were determined to get rid of the German exploitation. The troops defeated the Herero combatants at the Battle of Waterberg on August 11–12, 1904 but were unable to encircle and eliminate the military threat. The survivors retreated with their families toward Bechuanaland (presently Botswana). The British offered the Herero refuge under the condition that they would not continue their uprising on the British territory.

The German general Lothar von Trotha ordered the Herero males to be executed, while women and children were to be driven into the desert, Trotha issued an appeal to the Herero.

> I, the great general of the German troops, send this letter to the Herero people… All Herero must leave this land… Any Herero found within the German borders with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall no longer receive any women or children; I will drive them back to their people or have them fired upon. This is my decision for the Herero people.[8]

This actually gave the Africans no alternative and the only solution was to fight. The Africans waged war not only through traditional beliefs but also through new religions to combat colonialism. They share some common features; a belief in one GOD above a host of lesser gods or semi divine figures, a belief in ancestral spirits; the idea of sacrifice, often involved the death of a living thing to ensure divine protection and generosity.

THE WAR OF RESISTANCE IN WEST AFRICA

The story of the West African resistance centers around Samori Toure of Guinea against the French colonizers. Samori Toure headed the Wasulu empire which at its height included parts of present day Guinea, Mali, Sierra Leone and Northern Cote d'Ivore.

The Islam-inspired military jihads of West Africa caused a substantial transformation of that region into belts of the West African states, and Samori Toure's policies demonstrated how the African states were expanding internally in the course of struggle with foreign invasion. Samori Toure's main forces were infantry and pursued 'scorched earth'[9] approach. Samori first rose to prominence in 1867 when he began carving out his state in the Guinea Highlands bordering the Niger River.

He understood the power of firearms early on and trained and commanded a growing and disciplined army of musketeers.[10] By 1878 he proclaimed himself 'faama' (military leader) of his own united Mandika-Wasulu Empire. Though the Samorian army lacked good firearms and ammunition, major battles were fought by means of carefully arranged fixed lines to maximize available firepower. Samori Toure's armies had to remain mobile, moving to new territory on one front, harassing the French on another and doubling back to reoccupy old areas. The common feature of the military forces the African society is that their offensive tactics were considerably decentralized. Cruelty played a significant role in colonial government; colonial propaganda especially influenced the African population. The colonial government widely used terror and intimidation, and did not stop with physical destruction of intractable and potential leaders and 'dangerous' chiefs. Whenever time allowed, the colonial authorities organized military parades to demonstrate modern weapons. This and other propaganda action was meant to instill into the Africans the idea of the invincibility and omnipotence of the white man.

THE RESISTANCE IN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

At the centre of this story of resistance was the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The Kitawala movement originally developed in South Africa and then moved northward into the copper belt of Katanga province. 'Kitawala' was a movement which originated in Katanga Province (present-day Shaba region, in Democratic Republic of Congo) during the 1920s. It was initiated by black American missionary activist in South Africa of the Watch Tower Bible and Track Society.[11] Is a much more radical product of African resistance with a Christian elements? The move-

ment converted miners who then spread the movement northward from their South African base into the copper belt of Katanga.

Watch Tower missionaries preached social equality, equal pay for equal work, the imminent arrival of God's Kingdom, and the impending struggle for the restitution of Africa to the Africans. Although anti-colonial in its ideology, the movement had no concrete strategies of revolution, which, however, did not prevent the state from cracking down on it as with Kimbanguism.[12] The colonial government attempted to repress Kitawala by relegation of its members to isolated regions. Ironically, this strategy simply contributed to the spread of the movement as the exiled adherents converted their rural neighbors.

Over time, the movement became more Africanized and more radical, thus slowly transforming from a branch of the worldwide Watch Tower Church into what has been termed as peasant political consciousness. The theological messages varied from place to place. However, a common core of beliefs included the struggle against sorcery (witchcraft), the pacification of society, and the existence of a black God. Kitawala denounced all forms of authority as the work of Satan, including taxes, forced labor and other coercive elements of the colonial rule.

THE CASE OF MAU MAU IN KENYA

The Mau-Mau movement was centered in Kenya and it was led by the Kikuyu tribe to fight against the British colonialists who had taken their land. Mau-Mau is a term of uncertain origin. Probably, Mau Mau is an acronym for *'Mzungu Aende Ulaya Mwafrika Apate Uhuru'*. This Swahili phrase translated in English reads: *'Let the white man go back to Europe so the Africans can get Independence'*. The Kikuyu did not call the movement Mau-Mau but they called it *'Muingi'* (The movement), *'Muingithania'* ('The Unifier'), *'Muma wa Uigano'* ('The Oath of Unity').

Different Africans from different regions resisted colonialism by means available to them. The white settlers alienated a lot of land. Many white farmers became wealthy through the growing and exporting coffee abroad. They banned the natives to grow coffee and introduced a hut tax. They also made it extremely difficulty for the landless to purchase and hold a plot. As a result, many Kikuyu people left rural areas and flooded the cities. So the Mau-Mau

starting point was in Olenguruone region. In the project the white men settlers shrewdly promoted of the soil conservation in the African reserves emphasizing the need to take action before it was too late. This fitted neatly with the concern for security of the White Highlands. In sustaining conflict the Olenguruone residents organized a mass defiance of the regulation and sough allies from equally disgruntled squatters in the White Highlands and from Kikuyu central province. The Olenguruone provided a valley far all disgruntled Kikuyu, whether squatter or not, as many people were seeking ways and means of dealing with various aspects of the colonial oppression and ultimately, the colonial rule.

The uprising occurred as a result of increasing economic tension accompanied with lack of peaceful political conditions in the highlands. 'The Kikuyu introduced a new oath taking in 1942–43 which was administered to young men, women and children not simply to the leaders as with traditional Kikuyu oath to ensure communal solidarity' (Throup 1988: 8). The Mau-Mau survived first as a secret society, secondly as a fighting force because the combatants were able to get supplies from different sources. Mau-Mau had popular support and adopted tight security which prevented the presence of traitors.

> …among the Kikuyu, the women who had taken oath did not have sexual relation with 'enemies' i.e. unoathed Kikuyu men. Men were warned against marrying daughters of unoathed Kikuyu men… Mau-Mau women were barred from prostitution and men from dealing with prostitutes, although women were allowed to flirt with 'enemies' for purposes of gaining information (Kanogo 1987: 145).

Ritual oathing was a crucial component of Mau-Mau as they called on God – Ngai to witness the oath. Their people swore to be united in their fight against the colonial enemy to take back the land that the white man had stolen from them. The people of Olenguruone are credited with having introduced what subsequently became the first Mau-Mau oath. Jacob Njiangi, a farmer fighter explained, 'We used to drink the oath. We swore we would not let the white man rule us forever. We would fight even down to our last man, so that we could live in freedom'. Those who took the Mau-Mau oath were taught that its violation would be instantly punished.

CONCLUSION

War of resistance against colonial rule in Africa cannot be viewed as an isolated and unique experience. Even though they were literally unarmed and the reprisal were often cruel and disproportionate.

> …The people fought because they did not believe in the white man's right to govern and civilize the black. They rose in a great rebellion not through fear of terrorist movement or superstitions oath, but in a response to a natural call, a call of the spirit, ringing in the heart of all men, educated or uneducated, and in all times to rebel against foreign domination… (Nyerere 1966: 40–41)

'It would be wrong to say that the majority of Africans at any one time accepted European colonialism' (Kimambo and Temu 1997: 122). Colonialism in any case was doomed to die a natural death, but not without resistance. It would be wrong to say that war in itself is an answer to all human problems. But sometimes it is a necessary evil. Regardless of gender, race, religion and even time, the resistance should last as people feel that they are oppressed. The main aim was to fight for their rights. The resistances should remind us that sometimes it is not material possession that keep us going forward – important is the will and determination inside our hearts. Without this willpower we can achieve nothing. It is better to fail trying than to fail to try. Deprivations of rights were camouflaged in taking of the land, taking of cattle, and forced labor. But people fought to get what they wanted most and that was their freedom.

NOTES

[1] See at http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice /special/1264_story_of_africa.

[2] Primary resistance is the early resistance.

[3] See at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle of Adowa.

[4] See at http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/index_section6.shtml

[5] Chimurenga is a Shona word for 'revolutionary struggle'. The word's modern interpretation has been extended to describe a struggle for human rights, political dignity and social justice, specifically used for the African insurrections against the British colonial rule in 1896–1897 (First Chimurenga) and the guerrilla war against the white minority regime of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1966–1980 (Second Chimurenga).

[6] Chimurenga War II (Second Chimurenga) was the guerrilla war against the white minority regime of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1966–1980 for liberation of Zimbabwe.

[7] King Hendrick Witbooi was a Namaqua (Nama) chief of Namibia. The Nama are the largest group of the Khoikhoi people. The Nama led by the Witbooi's were called so because of their unique white head-scarves.

[8] German Regrets Namibia 'Genocide'. URL: http:// news.bbc.co.uk.hi/africa 3388901.stm

[9] A scorched earth policy is a military strategy or operational method which involves destroying anything that might be useful to the enemy while advancing through or withdrawing from an area. Although initially referring to the practice of burning crops to deny the enemy food sources, in its modern usage the term includes the destruction of infrastructure such as shelter, transportation, communications and industrial resources.

[10] A musketeer (from French: mousquetaire) was an early modern type of infantry soldier equipped with a musket.

[11] The Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania is a nonprofitable organization headquartered in New York City borough of Brooklyn, United States. It is the main legal entity used worldwide by Jehovah's Witnesses to direct, administer and develop doctrines for the religion and is often referred to by members of the religion simply as 'the Society'.

[12] Kimbanguism is a branch of Christianity founded by Simon Kimbangu in what was then the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). The church's name is the Kimbanguist Church and it is a large, independent African Initiated Church.

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