

AFRICAN RESISTANCE TO THE IMPOSITION OF COLONIALISM: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW



As in all aspects of life, the practice of history has its fashions. For reasons, in the language of the history of science, both internal and external to the logical development of the intellectual discipline, certain topics attract the interest of scholars and a vigorous debate ensues. After a while, the ardour cools. Other subjects come to the forefront of academic discussion, until, years or decades later, it may be that the unresolved points of the initial discussion are once again investigated, the arguments are taken up again and what had seemed to be a dead, almost irrelevant problem comes to life again.

Even in the short period - scarcely more than twenty years - in which African history has been a recognizably academic field of inquiry, such cycles can be seen, if not perhaps in such an extreme form. In this short survey, I intend to analyse one such process, namely the investigation of the forms of primary resistance by Africans to the imposition of colonial rule in the classic period of European imperialism, say from 1880 to 1914. I will be dealing almost exclusively with the areas of East and Central Africa - Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Malawi, Zimbabwe - where a more or less coherent debate can be seen. A similar set of problems also arose in the study of West Africa but, apart from the book edited by Crowder (1971), does not seem to have come into such sharp focus. Although there has been much more important work done on resistance to colonial rule south of the Limpopo, there are still remarkable lacunae in that literature. The most obvious of these is the absence of an even half-way adequate account of the Hundred Years' War between the Xhosa and the Whites on the Eastern frontier of the Cape Colony, with the partial exceptions of recent work by Saunders (1976A, 1976B) and Peires (1979).

As so much else in the historiography of this era of African history, historians were able to define their positions, and clarify their views, by taking exception to the work of Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher. In this case, it was not one of their major theses that was challenged, but rather what amounted to little more than a few throw-away remarks in a chapter devoted to a rather different subject. In it they claimed that whether or not a society resisted the coming of the Europeans was a function of its social structure. Resistance, we are told, was the 'romantic, reactionary struggle against the facts, the passionate protest of societies which were shocked by a new age of change and would not be comforted.... The more [a society's] unity hung together on the luxuries of slave-raiding, plunder and migration, the less its aristocracy had to lose by struggle against the Europeans.' As against this, 'the more urbanized, commercial and bureaucratic the polity, the more its rulers would be tempted to come to terms', leading to the 'defter nationalisms' which 'planned to reform their personalities and regain their powers by operating in the idiom of Westernisers' (Robinson and Gallagher, 1962, 618, 640).

Within these grandiloquent phrases, there is an exceedingly attractive hypothesis, the more so as it is phrased in terms of probabilities rather than as an absolute law. The only trouble with it is that it happens not to be true. In one of the most important articles on the subject of African resistance to European colonialism, T.O. Ranger pointed out that 'resisting societies were [not] necessarily different in structure, motive or atmosphere from cooperating ones'. Indeed, so he claimed 'A historian has... a difficult task in deciding whether a specific society should be described as 'resistant' or collaborative' over any given period of time. Many societies began in one camp and ended in the other. Virtually all African states made some attempt to find a basis on which to collaborate with the Europeans; virtually all of them had some interests or values which they were prepared to defend, if necessary by hopeless resistance or revolt' (Ranger, 1969, 304). Ranger was prepared to make one generalisation about these societies that were able either to collaborate or to resist. They had to be of a sufficient scale and political organisation for decisions to be made. Not even this generalisation lasted long, however. The bloody guerilla war fought over nearly two centuries in South Africa by the 'Bushmen', Khoisan with highly attenuated political structure, was quickly brought forward as a counter example (Marks, 1972).

There were, so it seemed, no great generalisations that could be made as to why some African societies resisted and others accommodated to the coming of the colonialists. In each individual case, the

pressure exerted by the intruding Europeans, the balance of internal African politics and enmities, the chance of who made the first alliances with the whites, even the prejudices of the colonialists, all played a roll in determining the actions of the Africans. In each individual or regional example, there is much that is instructive for the history of the continent. In terms of broad theory, however, there was, so it seemed to Ranger and to many of his fellows, more interest in the question how the resistance was organised. Looking particularly at the Maji Maji revolt in southern Tanzania and the risings of 1896-7 in Zimbabwe (Ranger, 1967) it was noted that they entailed the mobilisation of large masses of people from numerous political units. In the case of Maji Maji, they spoke a number of different languages, while in Zimbabwe numerous traditionally hostile groups had fought together against the whites. This was possible, so it was argued, because of the ability of the religious leaders of the area to act as coordinators, indeed as motivators, of the resistance. Moreover, it was not only in these great revolts that religious leaders were of importance. Ranger claimed that 'a list of risings allegedly led by 'witch-doctors' in East and Central Africa amounts to some thirty-five to forty instances' (1969, 315). This was the way in which the masses were mobilised to fight colonialism.

It is here that the impetus for studying the early period of resistance against the colonialists can be seen. In those heady years following independence in East Africa, historians, whether they worked in Africa or abroad, whether they were themselves Africans or not, were caught up in the fervour of building the new nations and so came to study what might be taken as the first mass movements within the countries of the new Africa. Ranger indeed, on the basis of somewhat scanty evidence, came to argue for the continuity between the movements of primary resistance and the growth of modern mass nationalism (1968). In doing so he was concerned to stress the popular nature of nationalism more than to make any definite statements about the resistance of the early colonial period. Nationalism was not only a question of the elites in the towns and bargaining in legislative councils. Rather it was a matter of mobilisation, of mass enthusiasm, as had been the wars against imperialist penetration. TANU spread through the countryside with the all-embracing speed of the Hongo possession during Maji Maji. No wonder Maji Maji was 'the national epic of Tanzania' (Gwassa and Iliffe, 1968, 1).

No wonder, also, that after a few years scholars' interests changed. As the optimism of the years after independence gave way to realities of the 1970s, it was seen that mobilisation was not enough. Getting people to work together against the enemies - poverty, illiteracy and so forth - could not compensate for the legacy of colonialism, for the mis-

formed economic structures, for the growing differentials between classes, for the rampant underdevelopment. For all the failure of the movements, the works on Zimbabwe, on Maji Maji, had been hopeful. The world could be changed by such actions. Now this was seen not to be possible, or at least likely. The intellectual energy of the 1970s went into such subjects as the agricultural history of colonial Africa (e.g. Palmer and Parsons, eds, 1977). The economic had taken over from the political as the main motif of its historiography. It is thus not surprising that in 1976, John Lonsdale noted that 'so far as resistance and rebellion is concerned, I'm not sure that discussion has proceeded very far since the contributions of some years back...' (cited in Ranger, 1977, 133).

It is somewhat ironic that his statement should be made by Lonsdale for in the next year, 1977, he published an article 'The Politics of Conquest: The British in Western Kenya, 1894-1908', (1977), which is a most significant contribution to the discussion which he considers not to have progressed far in the previous years. He deals with an area in which the political relations were exceedingly complex, as the African polities were of small scale and the British had to establish their authority piecemeal. Lonsdale argues that 'explanatory variables ... most commonly deployed in analysis' of resistance and accommodation - 'the degree of cohesion in a ruling class or social structure, their political fortunes, whether on the upswing or downturn, the availability of a religious tradition for which and by which to fight, the nature of the local economy, especially its responsiveness to market expansion or technical innovation, military capacity, the nature and intensity of European demands' - are of little predictive value in explaining African reactions in Nyanza. Rather Lonsdale would seem to be making two main points. First, nowhere in Eastern Africa - nor indeed elsewhere in the continent - is there such a being as 'primary resistance'. In all cases there had been greater or lesser contact with the coast. The world capitalist economy had begun to malform African society well before the formal establishment of colonial control. The colonialists came in along the roads used by the traders and entered into the net of relations already established by them, a fact of great importance for the detailed process of conquest. Secondly, Lonsdale stresses the fact that he is dealing with a process, not with an event. Indeed, he distinguishes four main stages - and one intermezzo when, due to a mutiny among their Sudanese mercenaries the British presence in eastern Kenya virtually vanished. These stages were, first, a period of coexistence, when the British had to work in close partnership with their African allies, followed by one of ascendancy when 'the British came to gain a hold over, but not to monopolise, external relations within Nyanza, to use this superiority to choose and sup-

port their African allies at the parochial levels, but to make very few demands in return'. After the intermezzo, the British were able to enforce domination, as they were for the first time pressing their demands, especially for labour in the localities. The strain on many of their erstwhile collaborators became too great and armed clashes became more common, while the British, forced to multiply the number of their collaborators in order to implement their wishes, had to make a large number of detailed local settlements. Thereafter, in the final phase of control came 'the multiplication of African roles under direct British command', with the consequence that whereas earlier 'African leaders had raided others as allies of the British, now they coerced their own people, as British subordinates'. In this shift from the oppositions of collaboration and resistance lies, surely, the essence of colonialism.

Further south, there has been much important work done on the Zimbabwe risings of 1896-7. In a sense this was predictable. Ranger's work in the 1960s had stemmed from his study of this rebellion and his *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia* was the most influential book on the subject of African resistance. Thus, more than any other work it has been subjected to close scrutiny. Articles by Cobbing (1977) and Beach (1979) - and indeed a *mea culpa* from Ranger himself (1978, though c.f. Ranger 1977) - have demonstrated that what was once seen as the cement holding the risings together, maybe even the motivator of the risings, namely the religious Mwari cult had in no sense the political role that Ranger ascribed to it. The Mwari mediums did not pass the messages around. The risings can no longer be seen as *analogous* to the mass enthusiasm, which, so it was fondly hoped and felt, drove on African nationalism.

But it was not merely the size of the target - or the striking position of the risings in the history of Zimbabwe - that brought this concentration of work. Rather, it would seem that in Zimbabwe the risings have remained relevant to the concerns of the country in a way that has not been the case further north. In a country where a guerilla war has been fought over the course of the last decade, historians naturally tend to reassess continually that guerilla war of scarcely more than two generations ago. The same applies with equal if not more force to Mozambique. The most important work in this respect has been done by Allen and Barbara Isaacman, lately in collaboration with a Research Brigade of the Universidade de Eduardo Mondlane, Maputo. This shows that what had begun as active sympathy for the Frelimo freedom has been translated into active collaboration once they gained power. Both the commitment and the changing nature of the Isaacmans' relationship with Mozambique can be sensed in their works. They were, of course, always 'enga-

gés' In the preface to *The Tradition of Resistance in Mozambique* Allen Isaacman writes:

From the outset we visualized this study as having a political as well as a scholarly purpose. When we began researching this book in 1967 the Portuguese seemed firmly entrenched in Mozambique where they continued to crank out the myth of lusotropic-alism. We felt it was important to challenge the Euro-centric and culturally arrogant distortions and, in some small way, to try and liberate the Mozambican past. This concern is not in contradiction with our commitment to the highest levels of scholarship. On the contrary, they are one and the same!' (xxiv).

Nevertheless, it is perhaps significant that this book, published in 1976, was dedicated to 'The Freedom fighters of Mozambique and Zimbabwe', while *Mozambique* (1972), Isaacman's first book, an analysis of the *prazo* system of the Zambesi valley, published some four years earlier, was offered 'to the People of Mozambique'. But even *The Tradition of Resistance* has not been spared self-criticism. In it Allen Isaacman analyses the various defensive wars, revolts, rebellions and risings by which the people of the Zambesi valley attempted to retain or regain their freedom in the face of aggressive Portuguese colonialism. In the course of this book he makes numerous theoretical advances, most notably in the application of the concept of 'day-to-day resistance' - a term borrowed from American slave studies - to such phenomena as non-payment of taxes, avoidance of labour duties and so forth. This allows him to stress the dialectical relationship between the nature of the colonial rule and the forms and strength of the resistance to it. Nevertheless, the core of their work relates to the various wars fought notably by the Barue and related Shona people, but also by the Sena, the Tonga and the Massingire against the Portuguese. In his analyses much of Isaacman's attention is focussed on the problem of leadership. The importance of the Muena-mutapa is also stressed when he deals with the various Shona revolts. In both the Barue struggles for independence, which ended in the war of 1902 and in the Barue revolt of 1917 the role of the monarchy and of the spirit mediums is stressed. The major problem he deals with relates to the ability of the leadership to mobilise the masses, the elitist perspective that this entailed notwithstanding.

Apparently in realisation of the shortcomings of such an approach, in the light of the experience of the FRELIMO freedom fighters, a year later the Isaacmans published an article in which they argued that:

Given the existence of social differentiation and inter-ethnic rivalries, the indiscriminate use of the term African resistance throughout the literature tends to obscure more than it illumi-

nates. In order to sharpen our analysis, we must study seriously the economic and social configuration of Central and southern African societies on the eve of the scramble. For the colonial period we must focus on the atomized resistance of peasants and workers as well as on the protests of the urban poor (1977A). Thus they stress the *divided* nature of pre-colonial society, in which conflict was not only between factions of the elite, but also between those strata that were in the process of becoming classes. Earlier they dealt with the relationships between leadership and followers in terms reminiscent of Lenin's views of the nature of a revolutionary elite party. Now they are more concerned to stress the possibility of the initiative for resistance coming from below, sometimes railroading their erstwhile rulers along with them, sometimes having to struggle against them as well as the colonialists. For this reason, such phenomena as 'social banditry' have attracted their attention (1977B).

As a corollary to this, they stress that what they are dealing with is not so much resistance to colonialism as to *capitalism*. There is a continuity between armed resistance and such matters as tax evasion, desertion, contract breaking and so forth. Indeed, if one accepts the dictum of Wallerstein that 'the expansion of Europe was really.... the expansion of the capitalist mode of production' (1976,31), then the whole history of resistance, from the killing of d'Almeida in 1505 to the Soweto riots - to take only South African examples - are part of a single process, albeit one in which the *conjuncture* has been as marked as that of the capitalist world-economy itself. The continuity may not be as direct as Ranger thought, but it is there, and is seen to be there by the actors in the historical drama. In his famous speech at the Rivonia trial, Nelson Mandela described how 'In my youth in the Transkei I listened to the elders of my tribe [the Thembu] telling stories of the old days. Among the tales they related to me were those of wars fought by our ancestors in defence of the fatherland....' (cited in Saunders, 1976A). These memories were one of the main streams into his own decision to work as a revolutionary to build a new South Africa.