CHAPTER 10

THE INDIGENOUS INSTITUTIONS UNDER COLONIALISM

When the missionaries arrived, the Africans had the land and the missionaries had the Bible. They taught us to pray with our eyes closed. When we opened them, they had the land and we had the Bible.

—Jomo Kenyatta, the late president of Kenya (cited in Lamb, 1983, 59).

It has been said that the despotism of the chiefs was thus overthrown. But it appears that that despotism was immediately replaced with a new despotism—the despotism of the Governor-General who, overnight, stepped into the shoes of all the chiefs and became the ‘Supreme Chief of Natives.’ The power to allot land became vested in him via the various officers of the government, the most active of which was the Native Commissioner of the district, called the Bantu Affairs Commissioner after 1962.

—Digby Sqhelo Koyana of South Africa.

A. COLONIALISM

1. Early Contacts and Scramble for Africa

After the 1840s, when the slave trade was finally abolished, commerce began to flourish in the ensuing calm and peace. Rivalries, however, continued between various African peoples. Cattle raids continued and hostilities intensified when one ethnic group fought another for control of lucrative markets and trade routes. Those who found themselves under siege from warring neighbors found it convenient to seek protection from the Europeans.1 For example, in the eighteenth

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1 This led many African radicals to accuse the chiefs of collaborating with the colonialists. This charge, however, failed to recognize that the chief’s prerogative was always the survival of his ethnic group. If an alliance with an European power assured their survival, the chiefs exercised this option, albeit reluctantly. It was, for many, the most prudent choice out of a set of options at that time.
and nineteenth centuries, the Fanti and the Asante on the Gold Coast were frequently at war. When the Dutch allied themselves with Asante, the Fanti thought it wise to seek British protection. In March 1867, the Dutch and the British signed an agreement under which all Dutch forts and settlements east of the mouth of the Sweet River, near Elmina, were to be exchanged for those of the British to the west. “The news of the agreement infuriated the Fante because they were not consulted. It also alarmed the rulers of the western districts because, since they knew the Dutch were the traditional friends of the Asante, they expected their states would soon be overrun by the Asante” (Boahen and Webster 1970, 210).

On January 16, 1873, rioting broke out in Sekondi to protest the transfer of British protectorship. Until the 1860s, the Europeans were generally unwilling to extend protectorates over African natives as that required additional expenditures. In 1843, for example, the African Committee of the British House of Commons passed a resolution that disavowed any deep involvement in Africa.

“Their third resolution lays it down plainly that the policy of the British Government henceforth in Africa, ‘should be to encourage in the natives the exercise of those qualities which may render it possible for us more and more to transfer to the natives the administration of all Governments, with a view to our ultimate withdrawal from all, except probably Sierra Leone’” (cited in Nicol 1969). But in the face of growing commercial competition, the British nevertheless were forced to act or face being squeezed out of Africa. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and other Europeans brutishly jostled with one another for influence over trade and control of certain valued commodities. Numerous forts and castles were built, especially along the West African coast to defend commercial interests against foreign interlopers and to expand trade as well.

To secure commercial beachheads and advantages, pretentious friendship treaties were signed with African chiefs and kings. But not all of Africa’s rulers were that naive. As Dappa Peppe in Bonny on the Niger Delta said in the 1840s: “One white man come and make book (treaty) and another white man come tomorrow and break it; white man be fool, but treaty is in my head” (quoted in Wickins 1981, 274).

So intense was the competition for commercial hegemony that, in 1884, Chancellor Bismarck of Germany found it necessary to convene a conference of European nations with the avowed purpose of reducing tensions among them. The effect of the conference was to establish rules for the recognition of spheres of commercial suzerainty. In the aftermath of this Conference began a frenzied scramble for Africa to establish such spheres of dominance where none existed before. Suddenly, the rules of the game had changed dramatically.

Tendentious treaties were this time yanked out of African rulers, in some cases by sheer military force. De facto protectorates became colonies. Various rationales were proffered to justify this transformation to colonialism. The “savages” of Africa had to be civilized in order to free them from the oppressive regimes of their traditional rulers. The missionaries’ “duty” was to convert the