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POSTCOLONIAL TRANSITION AND GLOBAL BUSINESS HISTORY

BRITISH MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES IN GHANA AND NIGERIA

Stephanie Decker

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Postcolonial Transition and Global Business History

British multinationals faced unprecedented challenges to their organizational legitimacy in the middle of the twentieth century as the European colonial empires were dismantled and institutional transformations changed colonial relationships in Africa and other parts of the world. This book investigates the political networking and internal organizational changes in five British multinationals (United Africa Company, John Holt & Co., Ashanti Goldfields Corporation, Bank of West Africa and Barclays Bank DCO). These firms were forced to adapt their strategies and operations to changing institutional environments in two English-speaking West African countries, Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) and Nigeria, from the late 1940s to the late 1970s. Decolonization meant that formerly imperial businesses needed to develop new political networks and change their internal organization and staffing to promote more Africans to managerial roles. This postcolonial transition culminated in indigenization programmes (and targeted nationalizations) which forced foreign companies to sell equity and assets to domestic investors in the 1970s. *Postcolonial Transition and Global Business History* is the first in-depth historical study on how British firms sought to adapt over several decades to rapid political and economic transformation in West Africa.

Exploring both postcolonial transitions and development discourse, this book addresses the topics with regard to business and economic history and will be of interest to researchers, academics and students in the fields of organizational change, political economy, African studies and globalization.

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Data statement

The data that support the findings in this book are available from public and private archives, and not digitally available. Restrictions apply to the use of this data, which were used with the kind permission of the data owners. A list of archives, and sources consulted in those archives, can be found at the end of the book.

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1 Introduction

British business decided at an early stage to stay in West Africa after independence. Indeed, that they would outlast the empire was not a matter that anyone doubted, according to John Holt & Co's (Holt) chairman:

> Merchant houses in West Africa by years of good service and honest dealing have built up a fund of goodwill. Our company has been trading in West Africa for 90 years and I am confident that we shall still be there 90 years hence.[1]

Such firms and their managers 'have long managed not just variation and shifts in technology, but also shifts in the political and social environment'.[2] While contemporary management studies are interested in corporate political activities, business diplomacy and legitimization strategies, only rarely do they acknowledge the long history of firms developing such capabilities to 'harness the trajectory of political and social change'.[3]

1.1 Periodization

The 1950s and 1960s marked a critical time period for global business, as formerly imperial companies were faced with the emergence of many newly independent states. Mistrust of firms as agents of a neo-colonial presence, nationalism and simmering internal tensions about ethnicity, social division and redistribution in new states presented a diverse yet increasingly familiar and repeating mix of challenges for multinational companies (MNCs). They constituted a postcolonial transition for international business (IB), and across the developing world, MNCs began to explore how to respond to these challenges strategically.[4]

This coincided with the creation of IB as an academic field of study. Early IB scholars were concerned with the 'liability of foreignness', economic nationalism and later expropriation.[5] Yet, many changes that stemmed from MNC responses to postcolonial transitions were often normalized as a sign of the times and forgotten after the resurgence of neoliberal orthodoxy in the 1980s.[6] However, economic and political nationalism and the enduring

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legacy of global empires have gained increased relevance in recent years, thus highlighting the importance of understanding the legitimization strategies of MNCs faced with postcolonial transitions.[7]

Such legitimization strategies were often based on MNCs' role in promoting economic development. The 1950s and 1960s were characterized by a post-war consensus on orthodox development theory. Ghana (formerly the Gold Coast) and Nigeria were good examples of these dynamics. Most West African nationalist politicians accepted the tenets of development theory, as did the Colonial Office and practically all British firms in Ghana and Nigeria.[8] While the state was envisaged as taking a leading role in this process; foreign investment was seen as beneficial because it was a source of capital, for example, for industrialization, or aided the transfer of skills to Africans. This study focuses on formerly imperial British firms that sought to fit in with this new approach to the economy and adapted their strategies to gain the goodwill of colonial officials and nationalist politicians.[9]

Development policies in West Africa came into their own only at the end of World War II, and the late 1940s and early 1950s saw a surge of economic nationalism and criticism of foreign merchant companies. This became less common through the rest of the 1950s and early 1960s when attention focused on decolonization. By the late 1960s and 1970s, however, economic nationalism returned in the form of promoting indigenous business, expropriations, the expulsion of foreigners and stricter immigration controls. Frederick Cooper, for example, has argued that 'the shifting tendencies of the world economy […] do not fit a breaking point coinciding with political independence. Rather, they suggest a break a decade later, in the mid-1970s, when modest progress turned into a prolonged crisis. The period 1940–1973 can be dubbed the development era'.[10] This account finishes in the late 1970s, coinciding with the second indigenization programme in Nigeria, which marked the breakdown of the development framework that was so formative for Africa's independence. In the late 1970s, the wave of expropriations worldwide also slowed down noticeably after reaching its peak in 1975, and by 1981 global incidences became increasingly rare.

1.2 Terminology, company selection and country context

The terminology of economic nationalism in West Africa was complex. Localization, Indigenization and Africanization were frequently used interchangeably. Here, I use the term Africanization to denote the replacement of expatriate staff with Africans. This can also be referred to in terms of nationality, for example, Ghanaianization or Nigerianization. For Nigeria, regional rivalries also found an expression in terms such as Northernization. The UAC and Unilever coined their own parlance on the issue, referring to Africanization as Ization more generally (and hence encompassing their global operations).

In contrast to this, I use indigenization to refer to changes in ownership or shareholding that led to part or total ownership of an enterprise by local interests, whether private, public or corporate. Local incorporation refers to the local registration of a formerly extraterritorial firm, whereas localization is used as a general umbrella term for all these processes. There is also a terminological issue regarding Ghana, whose colonial name was the Gold Coast. Throughout this study, the last name is used exclusively for the colonial period; otherwise, the name Ghana is used if a reference is made to the country during the colonial and postcolonial periods.

The selection of companies was driven by the question of how existing businesses coped with the postcolonial transition from a colonial presence to operating in a newly independent country. Hence the oil industry is not included because these companies entered Nigeria towards the end of the colonial period. Moreover, due to their economic importance, they were not subject to the general indigenization legislation, as negotiations with oil and petroleum firms were dealt with separately.[11] The firms featured in this book dominated the West African colonies in the post-war years and continued to be significant at least until the 1970s. In Nigeria, for example, eight business representatives, among them four of the five companies chosen for this study – Bank of British West Africa (BBWA) (later Standard Bank of West Africa), Barclays Bank DCO (later Barclays Bank International), the Unilever subsidiary United Africa Company (UAC) and John Holt & Co. (Holt) (Liverpool) – were consulted by the governor on business representation in parliament, an indication of who the key economic players were at the beginning of the period.[12]

Barclays and BBWA remained predominantly branch bankers, but they increased their local business substantially. They also began to compete – often unsuccessfully – with African banks for government accounts, and advertised themselves to African customers instead of serving almost exclusively expatriates. UAC and Holt changed their primary fields of operation in these years. At the end of the war, they were still mainly produce and general merchants, but commercial and official pressure led to their withdrawal from many small retail activities and to some extent from produce buying as well. They went increasingly into wholesale and distribution, and the UAC opened a chain of department stores (Kingsways). Holt invested in construction and building supplies, often with technical partners, as did UAC. The Unilever subsidiary expanded significantly into textile printing, packaging and highly profitable beer brewing. The fifth firm in the sample is Ashanti Goldfields Corporation (AGC), which operated a major gold mine in Ghana in one location (Obuasi).

Nigeria and Ghana are, despite some similarities, two very different countries, especially in terms of their economic and political development. But they also differ in their geographical and human endowments regarding size, natural resources, ethnic diversity, levels of wealth and education. During decolonization, however, political events in the Gold Coast affected

Nigeria and vice versa, for example, the speed of constitutional devolution or the introduction of a central bank. The Gold Coast was considered the better-developed country, capable of quicker advances. Nigerian politics became dominated by regionalism and ethnic rivalries to a greater extent than Ghana. In the 1960s, their economic fortunes diverged as Nigeria began to exploit the oil resources in the East, while prices for Ghana's main export and the source of its wealth, cocoa, declined. But there were also political differences. While Nigeria was a federation with a fragile alliance at its centre, which pursued essentially liberal economic policies, Ghana's more centralized political system was initially dominated by its first independent head of state, Kwame Nkrumah, who experimented with African socialism, 'big push' industrialization schemes and protectionist policies. This difference remained significant until the 1970s when military dictatorships controlled both countries. Ghana blocked remittances from foreign investors during this time period and went into a prolonged economic crisis, whereas Nigeria remained open to foreign investment and experienced an economic boom because of its oil revenues.

British business reflected on these differences, and most companies shifted their attention in the late 1960s towards the more profitable Nigeria. Previously, decision-making on dealing with African economic nationalism after the war was more determined by experiences in Ghana, especially to consumer protests and political campaigns by new nationalist parties. But they were also aware that they were faced with similar policies of local participation in foreign investment across Africa, and they interpreted events in Ghana and Nigeria in this light.[13] The indigenization programmes that occurred in both countries were also remarkably similar, more so than the nationalizations in Tanzania or Uganda.[14]

1.3 Decolonization and development

MNC strategies for dealing with postcolonial transitions reflected their potential role in the process of economic and social development. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard discussed the importance of the idea of development for the social sciences.[15] They emphasized how the notion of development reverberated in local contexts, giving peripheral groups a sense of entitlement and a place in the global economy from which they could make demands based on the moral and political right of development: 'Development in the 1940s was a framing device through which colonial regimes tried to respond to challenges and reassert control and legitimacy, but it was a device that could itself be challenged and seized, used for different ends'.[16]

Their conception of development as an ideological framework that frames redistributional struggles, political alliances of different groupings and the participation of several conflicting interests in the same discourse, none of whom were entirely in control of the contents and the boundaries of the debate. Corporate responses reflected this concern with 'development', especially in their corporate political activities and commercial decisions. For British companies in West Africa, the nationalist mobilization after the war created the prospect that firms would not be allowed to continue unless they adapted to the demands of future independent nations. The nature of this development discourse, and its interpretation by companies, is the subject of chapter 2.

However, did decolonization truly end the imperial presence of more powerful countries in the newly independent states? Gallagher and Robinson argued that the nature of British imperial expansion shifted between formal and informal control.[17] Whereas on the African continent, the lack of effective large-scale states and imperial rivalries led to the imposition of formal rule. The notion of local collaborators and informal modes of control returned in the form of neo-colonialism, which cast British companies in the role of new imperial agents.[18]

1.4 MNCs and the postcolonial transition during decolonization

Research focusing on MNCs in developing countries tended to consider the activities of firms separately during decolonization, and the political risk they faced from expropriations in formerly colonial countries. This book views both as connected – decolonization marked a transition from a colonial institutional framework to an independent one. Still, colonial legacies meant that the new institutional arrangements were not stable. Postcolonial transition refers to this process of change that was not complete with independence and that culminated in a period of economic nationalism and expropriation of foreign property.[19] The experience of MNCs in Ghana and Nigeria was repeated, with variations, in other formerly colonial states. The legitimization strategies firms employed were deployed in different regions at different times.[20] These continuities become visible when considering how consistent corporate strategies remained before and after independence.

Nevertheless, several historiographical debates have focused only on business-government relations during decolonization. Here the focus has been on whether colonial governments collaborated with companies during decolonization. Imperial historians such as Sarah Stockwell, Roger Tignor, Larry Butler and Nicholas White have addressed whether colonial governments continued to support the interest of imperial firms during decolonization. Stockwell, for example, seeks to counter an earlier study by Milburn, in which the author maintains that British businesses had not prepared for independence.[21] Nwankwo, in his history of British banks in Nigeria, came to a similar conclusion to Milburn.[22] Stockwell demonstrated that companies did indeed prepare, but that their attempts to influence official policies were not universally successful. She concluded that distance bordering on mistrust developed between the colonial government and imperial business during decolonization. As British companies became increasingly sidelined in the process of decolonization, they began to develop new corporate strategies that maintained some influence and failing that, at least some sympathy in official circles. The merit of Stockwell's study is that she demonstrates that businesses aimed to be involved in wider political, social and economic concerns and projects. To be accepted as partners meant that they were potentially able to influence the course of political decision-making. Butler similarly researched the political activities of mining companies in Northern Rhodesia/Zambia.[23]

They document a change from the rather closer relationship between imperial business and colonial governments before and during World War II. Deutsch argued that the collaboration between business and the Nigerian government peaked in 1940 and subsequently declined; the same year that Cooper and Randall suggest for the adoption of 'development' as the new colonial rationale by Britain.[24] Tignor's comparative study of British companies during decolonization in Egypt, Nigeria and Kenya comes to a similar conclusion. He offers a sustained comparison between the official economic policies of three former colonies that developed very differently after decolonization. He deplores that nationalism and politics take over economic questions during decolonization in all three countries and argues that nationalism remained a powerful force throughout this period.[25] One of his central arguments, that Nigeria became a mixed economy, mainly through the introduction of marketing boards, which were crucial instruments of state control of the economy in the name of development. Deutsch analyzes the rationale and interests behind their inception in *Educating the Middlemen*, which makes it clear that the experience of World War II was central in creating a more active role for the colonial state in the economy.[26] The key insights were summarized by White, who drew on his research on colonial Malaya and a range of international studies.[27]

These conclusions have been challenged by Uche, who has highlighted the close relationship between British business and the British government.[28] However, his evidence reflects the post-independence period, specifically the late 1960s and 1970s, in which the position of the British government vis-à-vis its companies operating abroad changed back to a more supportive position due to the international competition between investors.[29] This study is more concerned with the strategies employed by MNCs to manage both the challenges and opportunities that emerge from the actions of host and home governments. At all times, MNCs sought out political contacts and aimed to gain the acceptance and goodwill of politicians. In Ghana and Nigeria, their attention shifted from colonial governments towards the emerging African elites in politics and business (see chapter 3).

1.5 Economic nationalism and expropriations

Economic nationalism became an issue of greater relevance in the 1970s, as a wave of expropriations unsettled the post-war development discourse.

This coincided with critical scholarship at the time such as the rise of Latin American dependency theory. These ideas reached Africa via Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. He argued that the political and economic inequality in the world was due to imperial exploitation and, more recently, MNCs.[30] Other authors defended the role of MNCs in the world economy.[31] UNCTAD took a keen interest in these issues and began to publish research and overviews of its own, supporting demands for a New International Economic Order and generally favouring a moderate internationalist view, which nevertheless favoured closer host economy control of foreign investment, and applauded the indigenization programmes.[32]

Indigenization programmes were, however, controversial, and viewed as mistakes by defenders of MNCs, or failures by their critics. UNCTAD criticized many programmes for their focus on ownership, which undermined attempts to extend host country control over foreign investors.[33] Some, however, took a more differentiated position towards economic nationalism: Collins pointed out that Nigerian indigenization often masked internal redistributional struggles over definitions of citizenship.[34] In the most extensive and detailed study of the Nigerian Enterprise Promotion Decrees, Biersteker emphasized the role Nigerian businessmen played in the formulation of the first NEPD and in the subversion of the second. Despite being cautiously positive about the impact of indigenization on local manufacturing, he concurs that real control over investment only rarely changed hands (he cites banking and insurance as exceptions).[35] Chapter 4 specifically addresses the indigenization programmes in Ghana and Nigeria from the perspective of the MNCs.

IB history often covers time periods of economic nationalism in long-run corporate histories, for example, the extensive work of Geoffrey Jones.[36] The history of British imperial business has benefited especially from Mira Wilkins' concept of the free-standing company (FSC).[37] This type of business was normally conducted from a metropolitan head office, often in the City, which specialized in one country or one region of the world. By the 1960s and 1970s, this organizational form became less common due to a wave of mergers. Most of the companies in this sample followed this pattern at least at one stage of their development: UAC and John Holt were predominantly active in West Africa and Africa (and the UAC was managed at arm's length, operating very independently within the Unilever group), Ashanti Goldfields (only Ghana) and the BBWA (only West Africa), were FSCs.[38] Barclays Bank DCO's three predecessors had been focused on specific areas: Egypt, South Africa and, in the case of the Colonial Bank, West Africa and the Caribbean. The UAC acquired interests in the Congo and Eastern Africa and was not an FSC, because it was a wholly-owned subsidiary of Unilever, which operated worldwide. Holt (which opened French and US American subsidiaries in the 1930s) and AGC were bought during the 1960s and 1970s by Lonrho and BBWA by Standard Bank.

Unilever and the UAC have seen the greatest scholarly interest of all the companies in this study. Jones published a commissioned corporate history of Unilever, which assesses the importance for Unilever of UAC and the African business, particularly in Ghana and Nigeria.[39] Previously, Fieldhouse's corporate history of the UAC attributed the decline of the company to the increased politicization of the economy.[40] Economic nationalism and poor financial performance led to greater protectionism, something Fieldhouse refers to as a 'shadow'. He defines economic decolonization in an earlier book as something that was happening almost simultaneously with political decolonization.[41] However, in his history of the UAC, he extends this to a much wider and less clearly defined timeframe: 'the economic evolution of many of the African countries from the mid-century threatened UAC's life-blood. I have loosely described this process as "economic decolonization", by which I mean the process by which the African countries, once politically independent, used their sovereignty to cast off, or at least limit, the power of foreign merchant capital'.[42]

While not a well-defined concept, economic decolonization is significant because it connects decolonization and economic nationalism. This fusion of anti-colonial and nationalist sentiment with demands for economic asset redistribution defines the postcolonial transition. Hodgkin described African nationalism in 1956 partly as a 'revolt against an inferior economic status'. Still, such economic nationalism became submerged in the transfer of power, only to emerge in the early 1960s and more forcibly in the late 1960s and 1970s, when the development agenda had failed to deliver economic prosperity.[43]

The economic nationalism of the postcolonial transition shared many similarities with other countries such as Canada. Breton describes economic nationalism as focused on the redistribution of wealth, not on economic growth, by shifting sources of income away from the lower-income groups and agricultural producers towards the (educated) middle classes.[44] This aspiring new middle class, which often suffered from a lack of career opportunities, benefited from nationalist policies that increased the state's control of employment in key sectors such as administration and manufacturing. Bates described similar dynamics in African countries as development coalitions, which were made up of producers and commercial interests that benefited from political patronage.[45] Johnson defined economic nationalism as a community deciding to exchange actual private consumption for the collective consumption of a 'public good', i.e., the national ownership and control of the economic system. This involved actors not taking decisions on purely economic grounds, but also considering factors such as social prestige and national pride in their 'imagined community'.[46]

Economic nationalism and firms' responses to local content requirements and expropriations are often considered in isolation from MNCs' staffing decisions. However, the workforce of MNCs became more diverse during this period, a process described by Perlmutter at the time in almost natural terms.[47] Yet historical research into corporate files shows that political considerations influenced human resource policies. The second part of the book connects the internal changes within the firms to the corporate responses to the broader institutional changes.

1.6 The postcolonial transition and Africanization

Curiously, the subject of Africanization has not attracted a great deal of historical attention. The Africanization of the civil service was a hotly debated topic during decolonization in West Africa, but few works devote more than a couple of pages to the subject.[48] It was more explicitly the focus of Nicolson's work on *The Administration of Nigeria* that offered the perspective of a former expatriate civil servant and Olusanya, a Nigerian historian, who addressed the racism within the service.[49] Even less attention was paid to corporate Africanization, with Milburn the first to analyze the Ghanaian case.[50] Stockwell only briefly mentions the advance of African managers in her study and mostly refers to their role in corporate representation.[51] A more in-depth, sociological analysis of relevance is Burawoy's enquiry into the Zambian copper mining industry.[52] His research is unique as he worked for one of the mining companies and conducted interviews during and after his formal employment contract when Africanization was still ongoing. The importance of Africanization as a legitimization strategy has not been fully recognized in business historical research.[53]

Research into Africans as workers and employees of foreign firms rather than managers saw greater interest, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. The political aspects of Africa's labour movements, or the lack thereof, remained a particularly controversial area. Initially, interest in the history of organized workers in Africa began with Hodgkin's book *Nationalism in Africa*, whose central premise, that all protest movements in colonial countries were essentially national or proto-national, was disputed in an influential work by Coleman.[54] Coleman's critique changed the interpretation of nationalist politics in Africa, emphasizing that they were not as all-encompassing as they were portrayed in the early years. The importance of the global discourse on economic development in the 1940s and 1950s was also evident in the decolonization of the French and British Empires in Africa. Cooper's *Decolonization and African Society* argues that governments wanted to create a bounded working class with whom they could negotiate through an essentially metropolitan system of industrial relations.[55]

This was essential, especially after World War II, to ensure the steady output of tropical commodities and rising productivity needed for Britain's post-war reconstruction. Labour, however, turned these development theories into a basis for entitlements, and the increase in strikes, consumer