

Research Article

From Conquest to Control: Adaptive Colonial Strategies and the Fragility of British Rule in West Africa, c. 1874-1945

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Abstract

This article examines how British colonial power in West Africa moved from military conquest to routinized administration between the late nineteenth century and the end of the Second World War. It argues that conquest did not, by itself, create durable rule. In the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, British authority endured through a changing repertoire of administrative practices: indirect rule, legal pluralism, fiscal extraction, coercive policing, intelligence gathering, urban concentration, and selective incorporation of African intermediaries and elites. These practices were not evidence of an omnipotent imperial design. They were responses to administrative thinness, African resistance, fiscal insecurity, and the political diversity of West African societies. By reading colonial reports, parliamentary papers, district correspondence, and administrative records alongside major secondary scholarship, the article shifts attention from the motives of imperial expansion to the daily techniques through which power was converted into governance. It also places British West Africa within a wider comparative history of empire. Sources in this work are used not as a direct equivalence but as a controlled comparison showing that imperial durability often depends less on conquest itself than on the capacity to modify institutions after conquest. The article, therefore, presents British colonial rule as simultaneously forceful and unstable: forceful in its ability to reorganize law, labour, taxation, space, and authority; unstable because it depended on negotiated legitimacy, local collaborators, and continuous institutional adjustment. The analysis has been sharpened by placing these practices within debates on the colonial state, collaboration, invented tradition, and the production of administrative knowledge, while also grounding the argument in concrete episodes such as the Hut Tax War, the Women's War, Gold Coast chieftaincy disputes, and Northern Nigerian emirate administration.

Keywords

British West Africa, Colonial State, Indirect Rule, Taxation, Legal Pluralism, African Resistance, Imperial Governance, Colonial Archives

1. Introduction

British colonial rule in West Africa is often narrated through conquest, commerce, humanitarian rhetoric, and imperial rivalry. These remain necessary themes. The expansion of British power in the Gold Coast, Nigeria, the Gambia and Sierra Leone cannot be separated from the political economy

of trade, the strategic anxieties of European competition, the language of abolition and “civilisation,” or the military campaigns through which Britain asserted sovereignty. Yet conquest alone cannot explain colonial permanence. Military victory could defeat an army, impose a treaty, annex a territory,

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or proclaim a protectorate. It did not automatically produce a governable colonial order.

The central question of this article is therefore not simply why Britain expanded in West Africa, but how British rule was made to endure after expansion. Between c. 1874 and 1945, colonial administrators governed through a flexible, uneven, and often improvised set of strategies. They worked through chiefs, emirs, warrant chiefs, clerks, court messengers, interpreters, police, soldiers, missionaries, merchants, and educated African elites. They reorganized customary authority, fragmented jurisdiction, monetized subjection through taxation, built coercive infrastructure, concentrated administration in colonial towns, and offered selective political accommodation to some African actors while excluding others. Colonial rule was therefore neither a finished system nor a simple extension of battlefield victory. It was a process of administrative conversion: the conversion of conquest into institutions, of sovereignty into revenue, of violence into routine, and of local authority into colonial mediation.

The analysis therefore places strong emphasis on the empirical machinery of rule: annual reports, parliamentary papers, district records, Native Authority files, administrative correspondence, and the official language through which colonial officials represented African societies as governable objects. [1-5, 9] These sources must be read critically. They were produced by the colonial state and therefore often converted African political life into categories useful to administration: “tribe,” “custom,” “chief,” “taxpayer,” “labourer,” “native authority,” and “disturbance.” Precisely for that reason, they are indispensable for studying how colonial government saw, simplified, and managed the societies it claimed to rule.

This theoretical framing matters because colonial power was not simply a matter of formal sovereignty or military superiority. It was produced through what Ronald Robinson described as the “non-European foundations” of empire: the collaboration, brokerage, and constrained cooperation of local actors whose authority made imperial rule workable but never fully secure. [31] It also speaks to Mahmood Mamdani’s argument that colonial rule divided political belonging between civic and customary authority, while Terence Ranger’s work on invented tradition helps explain how colonial governments converted selected, reshaped, or recently formalized practices into the language of timeless custom. [30] Read together, these debates clarify the article’s central claim: British West Africa was governed not through a single colonial design, but through an adaptive and unstable machinery that translated local institutions into instruments of imperial administration.

The article also refines its comparative dimension. Andoh’s study of Roman imperial strategies in North Africa is useful to this paper because it identifies a broader imperial problem: conquest may establish dominance, but empires survive only when they develop methods for sustaining authority across diverse local settings. [12] The comparison here is deliberately limited. Roman North Africa and British West Africa differed

profoundly in chronology, economy, political culture, and institutional form. Yet the comparison clarifies a common logic of imperial durability: military power had to be translated into clientage, infrastructure, urban space, legal ordering, and selective incorporation. Used in this limited way, the Roman case deepens rather than interrupts the West African analysis.

The article proceeds through five linked arguments. First, conquest created claims to sovereignty but left unresolved the practical problem of governing thinly staffed, fiscally constrained colonies. Second, crises such as tax revolts, disputes over chieftaincy, labour unrest, and the Women’s War in southeastern Nigeria forced administrative recalibration. Third, indirect rule and legal pluralism were not simply expressions of respect for African custom; they were techniques for governing cheaply and unevenly. Fourth, taxation, labour control, policing, surveillance, and urban administration made colonial power material in everyday life. Finally, African resistance and negotiation shaped colonial rule from within. British colonialism endured not because it eliminated fragility, but because it repeatedly reorganized itself around it.

2. Conquest and the Problem of Colonial Consolidation

British sovereignty in West Africa was often announced through military victory and legal proclamation, but the difficult work began afterward. The Gold Coast offers a clear example. British authority expanded through repeated conflicts with Asante power and culminated in the formal annexation of the coastal colony in 1874, followed later by the incorporation of Asante and the Northern Territories into the imperial system. [14, 15, 21] Such victories established a claim to rule, but they did not supply the personnel, information, infrastructure, or legitimacy required to administer complex political societies. Officials still had to collect taxes, settle disputes, police roads, discipline labour, regulate trade, recognize chiefs, and suppress opposition.

A sharper Gold Coast example is the movement from the defeat of Asante power to the administrative reordering of Asante political authority after the Yaa Asantewaa War of 1900. The exile of Prempeh I, the British occupation of Kumasi, and the later incorporation of Asante into the colonial order show that military victory did not end the problem of rule. British officials still had to decide how to recognize stool authority, regulate succession, secure roads and trade routes, and make Asante governable through district administration. The case therefore illustrates the article’s larger argument: conquest opened the door to empire, but administrative consolidation required the continual remaking of African authority into colonial authority.

The same problem appeared in Sierra Leone. The proclamation of the Protectorate in 1896 extended British authority over the hinterland, but the attempt to make that authority fiscally productive provoked the Hut Tax War of 1898. The war

revealed the distance between imperial assertion and local acceptance. Many communities understood a tax that colonial officials presented as a rational source of administrative revenue as an intrusion into household autonomy, chiefly authority, and local sovereignty. [10] Parliamentary papers and protectorate correspondence on the disturbances are important because they show colonial officials struggling to transform an abstract claim of protection into a practical system of taxation, policing, and chiefly mediation. [2].

Nigeria intensified this problem because British authority was assembled across a vast and politically varied territory through chartered company rule, treaties, military expeditions, and protectorate declarations. The administrative challenge was not uniform. Northern emirates, Yoruba polities, Delta communities, and Igbo societies presented different forms of authority and different obstacles to colonial governance. [20, 22] British officials therefore did not create one coherent colonial state. They assembled a patchwork of arrangements: emirate-based indirect rule in the north, modified chiefly administration in parts of the southwest, and more artificial warrant-chief structures in southeastern Nigeria.

The contrast between Northern Nigeria and southeastern Nigeria makes this point especially concrete. In the north, British officers could work through emirate hierarchies in places such as Kano, Sokoto, and Zaria, using emirs and district heads to collect taxes, administer Native Courts, and transmit orders. In many Igbo-speaking areas, however, the absence of comparable centralized offices pushed officials toward the invention of warrant chiefs. The same doctrine of indirect rule therefore produced different administrative realities: in one setting it adapted existing hierarchies; in another it created new intermediaries whose legitimacy remained deeply contested.

The British colonial state was thus a thin state: powerful in coercive capacity but limited in personnel, revenue, knowledge, and legitimacy. Its weakness explains its reliance on intermediaries. Chiefs, emirs, headmen, interpreters, police, court clerks, missionaries, merchants, and educated elites became the channels through which colonial power operated. This mediated character of rule should not be mistaken for softness. Mediation was itself a form of domination because it made African institutions serve colonial ends. But it also meant that colonial authority could never be entirely self-sufficient. It depended on local actors whose loyalty, legitimacy, and usefulness were never guaranteed.

This is where Andoh's Roman comparison helps clarify the broader imperial problem. Roman rule in North Africa, as he argues, did not rest on conquest alone; it relied on client kings, colonies, roads, garrisons, and selective incorporation. [12] British West Africa reproduced a modern version of this dilemma. The key historical problem was not how conquest was achieved, but how victory was converted into a durable administrative order.

3. Crisis, Resistance, and Administrative Recalibration

Colonial institutions in West Africa often developed through crisis. Administrative change was not simply imposed from a settled imperial blueprint; tax resistance, labour conflict, chieftaincy disputes, legal uncertainty, and anxieties about public order frequently produced it. Crisis did not merely disrupt colonial government. It revealed the limits of colonial knowledge and forced officials to revise the machinery of rule.

The Hut Tax War in Sierra Leone is a crucial example. The hut tax was not simply a financial measure. It made households legible to the colonial state and turned domestic space into a unit of fiscal assessment. [24] Colonial reports and parliamentary correspondence on the war are therefore more than records of a disturbance. They reveal how the state interpreted resistance: not as a legitimate political challenge, but as a problem of order, misinformation, chiefly influence, and administrative enforcement. [2] The longer-term lesson for British officials was that revenue collection required local mediation. Taxes could not be extracted by proclamation alone. They required chiefs, police, district officers, registers, patrols, and punitive capacity.

The Bai Bureh-led resistance in the northern Protectorate demonstrates how fiscal policy became a struggle over sovereignty. What officials represented as a modest tax for roads, administration, and order was read by many communities as a direct attack on household autonomy and political independence. The violence that followed exposed the weakness of proclamation as a governing tool: the state could announce a tax, but it needed chiefs, interpreters, patrols, courts, and punitive expeditions to make payment enforceable. This episode gives the article a concrete example of how colonial fiscal policy turned abstract sovereignty into daily coercion.

In southeastern Nigeria, the Women's War of 1929 exposed another danger: the creation of intermediaries without adequate legitimacy. The warrant-chief system attempted to make decentralized societies governable by appointing men who could act as colonial agents. In many Igbo communities, however, such centralized male authority lacked deep institutional roots. Women's collective action against warrant chiefs, tax rumours, and colonial intrusion revealed that indirect rule could produce instability when it invented or distorted local authority. [32] Administrative files and Native Court records are especially important for this episode because they show how local grievances entered colonial language through petitions, inquiries, reports, and disciplinary proceedings. [8].

The Women's War also strengthens the gendered dimension of the argument. Women's mobilization against tax rumours, intrusive census practices, and unpopular warrant chiefs shows that colonial governance entered not only formal political institutions but also market networks, household economies, and gendered systems of authority. By forcing commissions of inquiry and reforms to Native Administration,

women demonstrated that African protest did not merely resist colonial policy; it reshaped the administrative machinery through which colonial officials tried to govern.

On the Gold Coast, disputes over stool succession, destoolment, land rights, and chiefly recognition exposed the politics of “custom.” British officials often presented themselves as neutral arbiters of tradition. In practice, their decisions helped define which customs counted as authoritative and which chiefs counted as legitimate. District Commissioner reports and Ashanti administration files are therefore essential for understanding how colonial authority entered local disputes not merely as an outside power, but as an institution that reorganized the terms on which African authority could be recognized. [7, 29].

These examples sharpen the argument. British colonial rule endured by turning crises into administrative knowledge. Tax revolts produced new fiscal procedures. Resistance to warrant chiefs led to inquiries and revisions of the Native Administration. Chieftaincy disputes produced new forms of surveillance over succession and custom. The colonial state did not eliminate opposition; it learned from it, classified it, and reorganized itself around it.

4. Indirect Rule and the Colonial Manufacture of Authority

Indirect rule was the most visible strategy through which Britain tried to govern large populations with limited staff and limited funds. Yet it was not a uniform doctrine mechanically applied across West Africa. It was a pragmatic method shaped by local political structures, colonial finance, and the need to convert African authority into administrative service.

This section therefore treats indirect rule less as a benevolent recognition of African custom than as a colonial technology of rule. Its purpose was to solve three administrative problems at once: how to govern cheaply, how to make authority appear locally legitimate, and how to convert African political institutions into channels for taxation, law, labour control, and surveillance. This framing sharpens the article’s intervention by moving beyond a descriptive account of indirect rule toward an analysis of indirect rule as an adaptive strategy produced by imperial weakness as much as imperial confidence.

In Northern Nigeria, Frederick Lugard’s model of indirect rule drew on the hierarchical structures of the Sokoto Caliphate. Emirs, district heads, alkalis, and Native Authorities were retained, but their authority was subordinated to British supervision. [6] This system reduced administrative cost and allowed taxation, policing, judicial work, and labour obligations to move through existing political channels. Yet it also changed the meaning of indigenous authority. Emirs retained prestige, but their power increasingly depended on colonial recognition. Authority that had once rested on Islamic, dynastic, military, and local political traditions was made conditional on administrative usefulness.

The Gold Coast presented a different situation. Chieftaincy was central, but chiefly authority was often contested through stool disputes, destoolment cases, conflicts with educated elites, and disagreements over land and jurisdiction. [25] British officials claimed to govern through traditional authority, but they also redefined that authority by delimiting jurisdictions, codifying custom, and deciding which chiefs were legitimate. Indirect rule therefore did not merely preserve African institutions. It manufactured administratively convenient versions of tradition.

Southeastern Nigeria revealed the most severe contradiction of this strategy. Where British officials did not find centralized authority, they attempted to create it through warrant chiefs and Native Courts. [11] These chiefs often lacked local legitimacy, and their authority rested heavily on colonial appointment and coercive backing. The Women’s War showed that indirect rule could provoke resistance precisely because people recognized it as colonial power disguised as local authority.

The Roman comparison is useful here only if carefully controlled. Andoh’s discussion of client kingship in Roman North Africa shows how empires often govern indirectly by using local rulers whose authority both extends and masks imperial power. [12] The British case followed a similar logic, but under modern bureaucratic and fiscal conditions. Indirect rule reduced costs, extended reach, and gave domination the appearance of continuity. Yet it also created a persistent danger: intermediaries could be rejected as colonial agents, become too powerful, or fail to translate local authority into imperial obedience. Indirect rule was therefore not a stable solution. It was a political bargain continually vulnerable to breakdown.

5. Legal Pluralism and Administrative Fragmentation

British West Africa was governed through multiple and unequal legal orders: colony and protectorate, direct and indirect rule, customary and colonial law, urban and rural jurisdiction, Native Courts and colonial courts. This fragmentation was not accidental. It allowed Britain to govern different populations under different rules while avoiding the cost and political risk of uniform administration.

In Sierra Leone, the division between the colony and the protectorate created two political regimes within one territorial formation. Freetown and the older colony were shaped by Creole political life, missionary education, and British legal institutions. The Protectorate, by contrast, was governed more directly through chiefs, commissioners, and customary authority. [23] This arrangement allowed the colonial state to maintain different standards of legal status, citizenship, representation, and administrative intervention.

Nigeria displayed an even more complex legal geography. Northern Nigeria operated through emirate structures and Native Authorities; the Yoruba southwest through modified

chiefly systems; and the Igbo southeast through warrant chiefs and Native Courts. [22] The result was not a coherent state but a layered administrative formation. Difference became a tool of rule. By treating communities as legally and administratively distinct, British officials could govern unevenly while presenting inequality as respect for local custom.

Legal pluralism also gave administrators discretion. Colonial courts, Native Courts, ordinances, administrative orders, and customary law coexisted in an unstable relationship. Mahmood Mamdani's formulation of the colonial state as a divided structure of civic and customary authority remains useful, although West African cases require attention to local variation. [28] Legal plurality allowed Britain to invoke custom when it served colonial interests and override it when it did not. It also allowed officials to classify African claims as customary, political, criminal, or administrative depending on what kind of intervention the state wished to make.

Concrete disputes over land, stool succession, Native Court jurisdiction, and criminal procedure reveal the practical force of this pluralism. In the Gold Coast, chiefly recognition and destoolment disputes allowed British officers to decide which claimants represented "custom." In Nigeria, Native Courts could turn local conflicts into colonial cases, while appeals and administrative reviews gave district officers final authority over supposedly customary justice. Legal pluralism therefore worked as both ideology and practice: it claimed to respect difference while giving the colonial state the power to organize, classify, and overrule difference.

This legal fragmentation was both a form of control and a sign of limitation. Britain ruled unevenly because it lacked the capacity and legitimacy to impose a uniform order. Administrative difference, therefore, became a technology of empire. It disciplined subjects by sorting them into categories: chief and subject, native and non-native, colony and protectorate, taxpayer and labourer, customary litigant and colonial defendant. The colonial state governed by dividing the legal field.

6. Taxation, Labour, and the Fiscal Logic of Rule

Taxation was one of the most material ways in which conquest became colonial rule. It transformed African communities into revenue-producing populations and made them visible to the colonial state through registers, assessments, fines, fees, licences, and court payments. [16] Taxation was therefore not only economic; it was political. It asserted the state's right to count, classify, demand, and punish.

In Sierra Leone, the hut tax became a flashpoint because it attached colonial sovereignty to the household. It required people not merely to acknowledge British authority in abstract terms, but to pay for the administrative system that governed them. [10] In Nigeria, direct taxation became central to Native Administration, especially in the north, where emirate structures were reorganized to support revenue collection. In the

Gold Coast, customs duties, export taxes, court fees, licences, and municipal rates formed part of the fiscal architecture of colonial rule. [24].

In Northern Nigeria, direct taxation tied emirate authority more closely to the colonial state. Emirs and district heads did not merely preserve precolonial authority; they became fiscal agents whose legitimacy was increasingly measured by their ability to assess, collect, and deliver revenue. In the Gold Coast, customs duties and court fees linked coastal commerce and legal administration to the financial survival of government. These examples make clear that taxation was not an isolated economic policy but a central mechanism through which colonial states measured obedience and funded their own expansion.

Colonial reports on finance are crucial because they reveal a central assumption of British African administration: colonies were expected, as much as possible, to pay for themselves. [24] This fiscal expectation helps explain the attraction of indirect rule. Chiefs and Native Authorities were cheaper than large bureaucracies. Native Courts generated revenue. Local taxes funded local administration. The governed were made to finance the institutions that subordinated them.

Taxation also tied colonial rule to labour. Roads, railways, ports, mines, administrative stations, and public works required workers. Where wage labour was scarce, costly, or resistant, colonial officials relied on chiefs, compulsory labour, community obligations, and coercive pressure. [19] Infrastructure, therefore, cannot be treated simply as development. It was also a mechanism of extraction, movement control, and administrative penetration. Roads allowed troops, police, goods, and tax collectors to move. Railways connected export zones to ports. Administrative stations made state presence visible beyond the coast.

African resistance to taxation and labour demands was therefore a struggle over sovereignty. Anti-tax protests were not merely refusals to pay. They challenged the state's claim to define households, assess property, command labour, and subordinate local authority. Fiscal extraction made colonial power concrete, and for that reason, it repeatedly became a site of political confrontation.

7. Coercive Infrastructure, Policing, and Surveillance

Violence did not disappear after conquest; it became institutionalized. Military campaigns gave way to constabularies, police forces, prisons, patrols, district commissioners, court messengers, intelligence reports, and administrative files. Coercion became routine, bureaucratic, and dispersed.

The West African Frontier Force, local constabularies, and colonial police units helped suppress rebellion, defend trade routes, collect taxes, discipline labour, and support chiefs aligned with the colonial state. [27] Policing was not only a response to crime. It was a means of securing revenue, labour, mobility, and political obedience. Prisons and courts similarly

made colonial power visible as a daily institution rather than an occasional military expedition.

The daily instruments of coercion were often modest but politically decisive: a patrol sent to enforce a tax order, a court messenger carrying a summons, a police escort attached to a district officer, or a prison sentence imposed after a Native Court judgment. Such examples matter because they show that colonial coercion did not only appear in spectacular campaigns. It was embedded in the ordinary routines through which the state collected revenue, disciplined bodies, and made administrative decisions enforceable at the village, market, and district levels.

Surveillance was equally important because British administrations were thin. District officers depended on reports, rumours, informants, petitions, court records, tax registers, maps, and censuses to compensate for limited knowledge. Administrative correspondence transformed local conflicts, migrations, market activities, religious movements, labour unrest, and chieftaincy disputes into information that could be acted upon by the state. [17, 13] These records did not neutrally describe African society. They translated it into colonial categories and priorities. Andoh emphasizes that Roman control in North Africa depended on roads, garrisons, colonies, and military infrastructure. [12] British West Africa depended on different instruments: police, Native Authorities, railways, ports, administrative reports, and district intelligence. The institutional forms differed, but the imperial problem was similar. Conquest had to be routinized through infrastructure that made power mobile, visible, and repeatable.

8. Colonial Urbanism and Administrative Space

Colonial towns were central to the transformation of conquest into rule. Accra, Lagos, and Freetown were not merely settlements within colonial territory. They were administrative hubs through which imperial power was concentrated, staged, and made visible. Government offices, courts, prisons, barracks, customs houses, ports, railway stations, European quarters, schools, and mission institutions turned urban space into an architecture of authority.

Freetown occupied a distinctive position as a colony of emancipated Africans and a centre of Creole politics, missionary education, and British legal culture. Lagos became a major commercial and administrative centre linking coastal trade, railway development, and the government of colonial Nigeria. Accra became the Gold Coast capital and a centre of administration, elite politics, newspapers, and later nationalist mobilization. [26].

Each city also offers a concrete window into the relationship between space and governance. Freetown's Creole press, schools, and legal culture created a public sphere that could both serve and criticize empire. Lagos connected colonial administration to commerce, railway expansion, elite politics,

and later labour unrest. Accra's growth as an administrative capital brought together chiefs, educated elites, newspapers, cocoa interests, and nationalist associations. These urban examples show that colonial towns were not passive containers of imperial rule; they were contested arenas where governance, extraction, and opposition met.

Urban space served three administrative functions. First, it centralized bureaucracy: archives, councils, courts, treasuries, and departments were concentrated in towns. Second, it organized extraction: ports and customs houses connected West African commodities to imperial markets. Third, it displayed authority: official buildings, ceremonies, police presence, segregated quarters, and controlled streets made colonial order visible.

Yet cities also produced opposition. Educated elites, lawyers, teachers, clerks, journalists, trade unionists, market women, and workers used urban space to organize criticism, petitions, strikes, newspapers, and associations. The same towns that made colonial power visible also made its contradictions visible. By the 1930s and 1940s, urban centres had become crucial sites of labour agitation and nationalist politics. [18].

The Roman comparison again helps at the level of imperial form. Roman towns in North Africa functioned as centres of administration, settlement, military organization, and cultural integration. [12] British colonial towns were not Roman colonies, but they performed a comparable imperial function under capitalist and bureaucratic conditions. Urbanism was not politically neutral; it was a spatial strategy of governance.

9. Selective Incorporation, African Agency, and Adaptive Limits

British colonial rule also survived by incorporating selected African actors into limited structures of power. This incorporation took many forms: advisory councils, municipal boards, clerical work, mission education, legal practice, Native Authorities, chiefly recognition, and constrained forms of public debate. [20] It was not democratic inclusion. It was a strategy of controlled participation.

In the Gold Coast, educated elites challenged colonial land policy and defended African rights through newspapers, petitions, legal arguments, and organizations such as the Aborigines' Rights Protection Society. [25] British officials responded with a combination of concession and containment. They recognized the usefulness of educated intermediaries but feared their capacity to mobilize criticism. The result was selective accommodation: enough inclusion to stabilize authority, but not enough to surrender control.

The Aborigines' Rights Protection Society offers a particularly strong example of selective incorporation and its limits. By opposing measures that threatened African land rights and by using petitions, legal argument, newspapers, and imperial

constitutional language, Gold Coast elites turned British political idioms against colonial policy. Their activism shows that accommodation did not simply absorb African elites into empire; it also equipped them with institutional tools for criticism. This concrete case strengthens the article's claim that collaboration and contestation often operated within the same political field.

In Nigeria, chiefs, emirs, clerks, translators, court officials, and educated elites were drawn into administrative systems while broader political participation remained restricted. In Sierra Leone, Creole elites had long engaged British legal and political institutions, but the Protectorate population was governed through different structures. [23] Across the region, incorporation was unequal, hierarchical, and politically calculated.

Selective accommodation created collaborators, brokers, loyal critics, and future nationalists. This was its contradiction. By creating limited spaces for African participation, the colonial state also created arenas in which Africans learned to contest it. Educated elites used the language of British law, rights, representation, and constitutionalism to expose the exclusions of colonial rule. Chiefs used recognition to strengthen local power. Workers used urban institutions to organize claims. Incorporation, therefore, stabilized the empire in the short term while generating new forms of political expectation.

9.1. African Agency and the Limits of Colonial Control

A revised account of colonial governance must avoid presenting British power as seamless. Africans did not merely experience colonial rule; they shaped it. They resisted, negotiated, evaded, appropriated, and redirected colonial institutions. Chiefs used colonial recognition to strengthen local claims. Communities used courts to pursue local disputes. Women mobilized market networks and moral authority. Workers struck, slowed production, and organized unions. Educated elites wrote petitions, newspapers, and legal challenges. Farmers evaded taxes, migrated, or resisted labour demands.

For this reason, African agency should not be treated as an afterthought added to a story of British administration. It was part of the structure of colonial rule itself. Chiefs, women, farmers, workers, clerks, lawyers, and urban intellectuals did not all oppose empire in the same way, but their actions determined which policies could be enforced, which intermediaries could survive, and which administrative reforms became necessary. The colonial state was therefore co-produced through domination and negotiation, coercion and brokerage, resistance and adaptation.

The Hut Tax War, the Women's War, anti-tax protests, labour unrest, chieftaincy conflicts, and nationalist mobilization all reveal that colonial control was repeatedly contested. [32, 10] These actions did not always destroy colonial institutions, but they often forced recalibration. Officials revised tax pro-

cedures, reorganized Native Authorities, expanded surveillance, disciplined chiefs, modified courts, and made limited concessions. African agency, therefore, shaped colonial rule from within.

This point strengthens the article's use of "fragility." Fragility does not mean that colonial rule was weak in a simple sense. British colonialism possessed coercive force, administrative ambition, and extractive capacity. It was fragile because its authority depended on unstable mediations: chiefs who could be rejected, courts whose legitimacy could be challenged, taxes that could provoke revolt, labour demands that could generate unrest, and educated elites who could become nationalist critics. Colonial rule endured by containing these contradictions, not by resolving them.

9.2. Comparative Discussion: Adaptation, Not Mastery

The Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone show a shared pattern: colonial durability depended on flexibility rather than uniform design. British officials lacked sufficient personnel, money, legitimacy, and local knowledge. They therefore governed through intermediaries, legal fragmentation, fiscal extraction, coercive surveillance, urban concentration, and selective incorporation. Yet these strategies differed across local contexts. Indirect rule in Northern Nigeria drew on emirate institutions; warrant-chief rule in southeastern Nigeria provoked major resistance; chieftaincy in the Gold Coast became a field of colonial arbitration; Sierra Leone's hut tax exposed the fragility of protectorate authority.

The comparison with Roman North Africa should be understood as an analytical aid, not as an equivalence. Andoh identifies a repertoire of Roman imperial strategies: divide and rule, client kingship, urbanization, military infrastructure, and selective incorporation. [12] British West Africa reveals a modern colonial repertoire shaped by bureaucracy, capitalism, racial hierarchy, and fiscal self-sufficiency. The comparison clarifies that empires often endure through institutional adaptation after conquest. It also warns against interpreting adaptation as imperial genius. Adaptation often signals weakness. Empires adjust because they encounter resistance, uncertainty, and constraint.

The broader theoretical point is that adaptation should not be confused with mastery. Empires adapt because they face political limits: insufficient manpower, fragile legitimacy, fiscal constraint, ecological and regional diversity, and the unpredictable agency of subject populations. British West Africa therefore contributes to imperial historiography by showing that administrative flexibility was not merely a sign of institutional intelligence; it was also evidence of dependence. The colonial state survived by borrowing authority from African institutions, but that borrowing exposed it to the very conflicts, rivalries, and expectations it sought to control.

British rule in West Africa, therefore, lasted not because it was omnipotent, but because it was flexible enough to survive

its own limitations. Its durability rested on improvisation. Its power lay in its ability to reorganize law, labour, space, revenue, and authority. Its weakness lay in the fact that it had to keep reorganizing them.

10. Conclusion

British colonial rule in West Africa was not secured by conquest alone. Military expeditions, annexations, treaties, and protectorate declarations established imperial claims, but durable governance required more complex machinery. Between 1874 and 1945, Britain converted conquest into control through indirect rule, legal pluralism, taxation, labour regulation, policing, surveillance, urban administration, and selective incorporation.

These strategies made colonial authority resilient but never secure. The colonial state remained dependent on intermediaries, vulnerable to resistance, constrained by finance, and forced to adapt to local political realities. Its strength was its capacity for institutional adjustment; its weakness was the repeated necessity of adjustment.

This article contributes to scholarship on colonial state formation by shifting the analytical focus from why Britain expanded to how Britain governed after expansion. It shows that colonial power was not a completed structure imposed after conquest, but an unstable process of institutional improvisation. British colonialism in West Africa was produced through crisis, negotiation, coercion, accommodation, and African agency. It survived not because conquest solved the problem of rule, but because colonial administrators continually remade the machinery of domination in response to the limits of their authority.

By deepening the theoretical engagement and grounding the argument in specific cases, the article shows that the history of British West Africa is best understood as a history of administrative adaptation under pressure. The Hut Tax War, the Women's War, Gold Coast chieftaincy politics, Northern Nigerian emirate administration, and urban elite activism all demonstrate that colonial governance was made through concrete encounters between imperial ambition and African political life. The article's contribution, therefore, lies in showing that the durability of British rule rested on a fragile and constantly revised bargain between coercion, collaboration, legal fragmentation, fiscal extraction, and African agency.

Abbreviations

AD	Anno Domini
BC	Before Christ
c.	Circa
CO	Colonial Office

Author Contributions

Patricius Nana Mensah: Conceptualization, Methodology,

Investigation, Resources, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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