

# Introduction: Uncovering Non-Official Expectations of Independence in Africa

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The decades leading up to African colonies gaining flag independence show determined resistance and demands for freedom, prosperity and equality from anti-colonial activists within as well as outside African territories. Demands for independence were supported through political negotiations, activists' international networks, the mobilisation of urban masses through newspapers, general strikes, and armed freedom struggles.<sup>1</sup> When flag independence finally came this was marked with extensive formal festivities and popular celebrations.<sup>2</sup> But what did the popular masses think that had been achieved? What were their expectations of independence?

The new governments appear not to have enjoyed the trust of their populations for very long. Ghana, for instance, gained flag independence in 1957. Economic decline set in from 1961, and when in 1966 a coup by military and police ended the government of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, people took to the streets, dancing, singing and jubilating over Nkrumah's overthrow.<sup>3</sup> In Nigeria, flag independent since 1960, political crises surrounding the 1962/63 census and the 1964 elections led to political violence, two military coup d'états in 1966, and the 1967–70 Biafra war. The war

- 1 M. Collins, *Nation, State and Agency: Evolving Historiographies of African Decolonization*, in: A. W. M. Smith and C. Jeppesen (eds.), *Britain, France and the Decolonization of Africa*, London 2017, pp. 17–42; I. Milford, *African Activists in a Decolonising World: The Making of an Anticolonial Culture, 1952–1966*, Cambridge 2023; M. Shipway, *Decolonization and its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires*, Malden MA 2008; L. James and E. Leake (eds.), *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence*, London 2015.
- 2 R. Holland, S. Williams and T. Barringer (eds.), *The Iconography of Independence: 'Freedoms at Midnight'*, London 2010.
- 3 J. H. Frimpong-Ansah, *The Vampire State in Africa. The Political Economy of Decline in Ghana*, London 1991, pp. 94–99.

resulted from the secession attempt of the southeastern part of Nigeria. Indications are that Southeast Nigerians, who had previously supported anti-colonial activism and the creation of Nigeria, now broadly supported the break-up of the country.<sup>4</sup> For the case of Congo it is hard to say how long the Patrice Lumumba-led government enjoyed the trust of the Congolese people, or even if it ever did. Lumumba enjoyed personal popularity, but his quarrelling government made up of fellow members of an educated elite who had long been close to the Belgian colonisers was estranged from the general population. Within weeks of achieving flag independence in 1960, a mutiny broke out in the army, the former coloniser sent troops, and the provinces of South Kasai and Katanga seceded. Later that same year, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu took power through a coup d'état. Lumumba was taken prisoner and murdered in 1961. The resulting upheaval would last until the end of 1965, when Mobutu took control through another coup d'état and established a dictatorship.<sup>5</sup> Mozambique gained flag independence in 1975, following ten years of armed struggle. Opposition against the FRELIMO government led to a civil war breaking out as early as 1977.<sup>6</sup>

It is safe to assume that these outcomes were not what anti-colonial activists, nationalist politicians and freedom fighters had been hoping for. Nevertheless, later analyses (and also some contemporary ones) have shown that these results should not have been unexpected. Nationalist politicians had constructed an image of the coming of independence as constituting a watershed moment, and this is exactly how it was performed and explained by new flag independent governments.<sup>7</sup> However, in certain respects the continuities beyond the independence moment seem to have been more significant. In countries such as Ghana and Nigeria, and initially also in Congo, those who came to power with flag independence were those members of the European-style educated elite who most resembled the colonisers in thought and deed.<sup>8</sup> In Nigeria, the leading nationalist politician Obafemi Awolowo had observed that '[t]he illiterate masses have little or no confidence in the educated few, for the simple reason that the latter, in their political activities, are completely out of touch with the former.'<sup>9</sup>

More structural forms of continuity were provided by the bureaucracies that had been built up by the colonial states (and from which many of the new African administrators arrived) and the colonial legislatures.<sup>10</sup> In most cases and in most countries the colonial laws relating to many fields – including labour relations, the ownership of natural resources, marriage and inheritance, and sections of criminal law – were not immediately repealed and replaced by new legislation. They continued to apply, in many cases for

4 E. E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence*, Bloomington 1998, pp. 31–50.

5 D. Tödt, *Elitenbildung und Dekolonisierung: Die Évolués in Belgisch-Kongo 1944–1960*, Göttingen 2018, pp. 321–326; G. Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo From Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*, London 2002, pp. 77–111.

6 J. Cabrita, *Mozambique: A Tortuous Road to Democracy*, London 2001.

7 C. Lentz and D. Lowe, *Remembering Independence*, Abingdon 2018.

8 P. Nugent, *Africa Since Independence*, Basingstoke 2004; E. A. Ayandele, *The Educated Elite in the Nigerian Society*, Ibadan 1974, p. 99; Tödt, *Elitenbildung und Dekolonisierung*, p. 322.

9 O. Awolowo, *Path to Nigerian Freedom*, London 1947, pp. 31–32.

10 F. Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present*, Cambridge 2002, p. 156.

decades.<sup>11</sup> Looking at another area of continuity, already in 1965 the Ghanaian president Nkrumah, who was at the time presiding over a declining economy, analysed the continuation of economic dependency relations beyond the coming of flag independence in terms of neocolonialism.<sup>12</sup> Whether explained out of the intentional restructuring of African economies during formal colonial rule (as the theory of neocolonialism argued), or out of the challenges of industrialisation when capital is lacking (as orthodox development economics proposed), African economies remained highly dependent on the export of raw materials, as well as on capital investment from foreign businesses, both of which benefited the foreign businesses more than the local African producers and consumers.<sup>13</sup>

Foreign intervention is another unsurprising factor in the quick demise of African governments that came to power with flag independence. In some cases, involving the former coloniser (usually France) this meant an informal continuation of colonial relations.<sup>14</sup> In other cases the Cold War drew in other players. Socialist Ghana and capitalist Nigeria, having clearly positioned themselves in the big ideological divide of the era, largely escaped actual foreign intervention (although the USA and the UK at the very least knew about the 1966 coup d'état in Ghana ahead of it taking place). In Congo and Mozambique, both the USA and the USSR got deeply involved in supporting different local political groups. This contributed to the political upheaval in Congo, where both the CIA and British MI6 reportedly planned to remove Lumumba whom they feared had turned towards the USSR. The civil war in Mozambique was fuelled by USA support of the anti-communist RENAMO insurgents against the socialist FRELIMO government that received assistance from the USSR and Cuba.<sup>15</sup>

Historians have thus identified a number of factors that explain why flag independence did not bring the freedom and prosperity that its proponents had predicted. With hindsight it is hard to imagine that anticolonial activists really believed they could build up independent nation states where people would live in freedom and prosper economically, educate their children and care for the sick, overnight. Sources from the time nevertheless reveal a genuine excitement and optimism about the possibilities of independence.

11 H. F. Morris, *The Development of Statutory Marriage Law in Twentieth Century British Colonial Africa*, in: *Journal of African Law* 23 (1979) 1, pp. 37–64, there pp. 62–64; G. Woodman, *British Legislation as a Source of Ghanaian Law: From Colonialism to Technical Aid*, in: *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee / Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 7 (1974) 1, pp. 19–32; T. O. Elias, *Ghana and Sierra Leone: Development of their Laws and Constitutions*, London 1962; T. O. Elias, *The Nigerian Legal System*, London 1965; T. Okonkwo, *Ownership and Control of Natural Resources under the Nigerian Constitution 1999 and Its Implications for Environmental Law and Practice*, in: *International Law Research* 6 (2017) 1, pp. 162–184, there pp. 169–170; A. O. Bello, *Criminal Law in Nigeria in the Last 53 Years: Trends and Prospects for the Future*, in: *Acta Universitatis Danubius Juridica* 9 (2013) 1, pp. 5–37; G. Karekwaivanane, *The Struggle over State Power in Zimbabwe: Law and Politics since 1950*, Cambridge 2017.

12 K. Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, London 1965.

13 G. Austin, *African Economic Development and Colonial Legacies*, in: *International Development Policy* 1 (2010), pp. 11–32.

14 P. Airault and J.-P. Bat, *Françafrique: Opérations Secrètes et Affaires d'État*, Paris 2016.

15 Nugent, *Africa since Independence*, pp. 204–238; J. Reynolds, *Sovereignty and Struggle: Africa and Africans in the Era of the Cold War, 1945–1994*, Oxford 2015, pp. 54–61.

At the same time, historical research has also uncovered cases of apprehension, and even tension, among the population regarding the gains that independence would bring. This leads to the key problem that this special issue explores: what were ordinary people who supported independence actually expecting would happen once independence was gained? This is not such an easy question to answer. It has become clear that what at first glance looked like popular participation in independence celebrations was actually carefully scripted by the new governments.<sup>16</sup>

Across Africa, before coming to power, nationalists had used newspapers, mass meetings, protests and strikes to challenge the claims that colonial governments had been disseminating through radio, film and print media. Colonial administrations had responded with various forms of repression, including arrests of protestors, censorship, temporary publication bans of newspapers, the withholding of government advertising, and legal action against strike organisers and newspaper editors, but these measures proved unsuccessful. Once in power, nationalists used the same technologies to assert an official narrative of independence, mobilising newspapers in support of their governments, and suppress other voices.<sup>17</sup> Having used popular mobilisation to overthrow colonial power, they were very aware that the same instruments could also be used against them. They thus attempted to control the popular media and to subdue and co-opt the trade unions.<sup>18</sup> Governments from Ghana to Mozambique introduced strict acts against terrorism and sedition, and they were not afraid to make use of them. In Ghana in 1960, for example, four members of a popular highlife dance band were arrested and sentenced to three months of hard labour for allegedly singing a song mocking president Nkrumah.<sup>19</sup> For historians interested in finding out about expectations of independence this means that, while there exist many sources that reflect educated elite nationalists' viewpoints, as well as what they argued the popular masses expected, should want, and hope for, it is not so easy to find out what the general population actually expected from independence in the years running up to, and following, the moment of flag independence. In 1982, partly in an attempt to answer this question, the Nigerian historian J. F. Ade Ajayi published a brief article on "Expectations of Independence". In it, he revisited the period just before the coming of flag independence by looking at the proceedings of a conference on the coming of independence in Africa, held in 1959 at what was then University

16 Lentz and Lowe, *Remembering Independence*.

17 F. B. Nyamnjoh, *Africa's Media: Democracy and the Politics of Belonging*, London 2005, pp. 161–167; E. Hunter and L. James, Introduction: Colonial Public Spheres and the Worlds of Print, in: *Itinerario* 44 (2020) 2, pp. 227–242; S. Newell, *The Power to Name: A History of Anonymity in Colonial West Africa*, Athens OH 2013, pp. 68–74; F. Barton, *The Press of Africa: Persecution and Perseverance*, New York 1979; E. A. Ogunade, *Freedom of the Press: Government-Press Relationships in Nigeria, 1900–1966*, PhD Southern Illinois University 1981.

18 B. Beckman, S. Buhlungu and L. Sachikonye (eds.), *Trade Unions and Party Politics: Labour Movements in Africa*, Cape Town 2010; C. Phelan (ed.), *Trade Unions in West Africa*, Oxford 2011; C. Phelan, Trade unions and 'Responsible participation': Dahomey, 1958–1975, in: *Labour History* 55 (2014) 3, pp. 346–364; J. Kraus, Strikes and Labour Power in Ghana, in: *Development and Change* 10 (1979), pp. 259–286.

19 Reynolds, *Sovereignty and Struggle*, p. 57.

College, Ibadan.<sup>20</sup> According to Ajayi, the proceedings provide ‘a useful record of the intellectuals’ aspirations and their perception of the expectations of the masses on the eve of independence.’<sup>21</sup> He found that the aspirations for independence were expressed “in very abstract terms” by the intellectuals that contributed to the conference, and that the popular masses (whose “most characteristic attitude” was “suspicion of government”) “remained largely mute”.<sup>22</sup> Ajayi wrote that ordinary people’s basic expectation of independence was “to see an end to the unpredictability and irrationality of the white man’s world” and that, with time, these expectations became more concrete:

*Soon, expectations came to include improved standards of living in housing and clothing, greater returns for their labour, better transportation for exporting and marketing their surpluses, education as a means to the social mobility that would ensure a better life for their children, and an adequate water supply, electricity, health-care facilities, and other such amenities of life.*<sup>23</sup>

It is unclear what Ajayi used as sources for his section on “the masses”. The book that was published out of the conference includes practically nothing about the popular masses’ views in 284 pages that mainly deal with political institutions.<sup>24</sup> The section has only one reference, to Colin Leys’ *Underdevelopment in Kenya*, an important book but it contains little about popular expectations of independence.<sup>25</sup>

Since Ajayi’s article, the expectations that ordinary Africans had of independence have remained under-researched. The further flag independence recedes into the past, the harder it is to get at ordinary Africans’ expectations through interviews or through the reading of private correspondence (as less and less correspondence survives). Unlike in Britain, for instance, there was no Mass-Observation project in African colonies to systematically collect insights into what ordinary people were actually thinking.<sup>26</sup> Studies on other aspects of decolonisation or on the first post-flag independence years (such as Leys’ book that Ajayi referenced) contain statements about the expectations of African workers and peasants, but these were not the focus of these texts and they usually do not provide detailed sources for such statements.<sup>27</sup> Studies of African popular culture similarly have little to say about what people expected from independence.<sup>28</sup> Not even

20 J. F. A. Ajayi, *Expectations of Independence*, in: *Daedalus* 111 (1982) 2, pp. 1–9.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 2, p. 4.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

24 H. Passin and J. A. B. Jones-Quartey (eds.), *Africa: The Dynamics of Change*, Ibadan 1963.

25 C. Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya: The Political Economy of Neo-Colonialism 1964–1971*, Nairobi 1975.

26 J. Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History, 1937–1949*, Oxford 2013.

27 A. S. Mohammed, *The Working Class*, in: Y. B. Usman (ed.), *Nigeria Since Independence: The First 25 Years. Volume 1: The Society*, Ibadan 1989, pp. 180–201; L. Lindsay, *Working With Gender: Wage Labor and Social Change in Southwestern Nigeria*, Portsmouth NH 2003, pp. 105–32; E. Jacob, *Militant Mothers: Gender and the Politics of Anticolonial Action in Côte d’Ivoire*, in: *Journal of African History* 63 (2022) 3, pp. 348–367.

28 A. J. C. Pongweni, *The Chimurenga Songs of the Zimbabwean War of Liberation*, in: K. Barber (ed.), *Readings in African Popular Culture*, Bloomington IN 1997, pp. 63–72; S. Newell, *Ghanaian Popular Fiction: “Thrilling Discoveries of Conjugal Life” & Other Tales*, Oxford 2000.

the studies reflecting on history and public memory, and the genre of books reflecting on 50 or 60 years of independence of individual countries, have placed the expectations of independence of ordinary Africans at the centre.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, snippets of information are found scattered all over the primary sources. Thus scholars working on the period do pick up insights or at least hunches about what people had been expecting of independence, not in the least because of their explicitly articulated disappointment in what flag independence had brought them. Thus in government archives we find reports on angry women demonstrating against the re-introduction of school fees, and in company archives we encounter workers complaining about “being talked down to”, about being negatively characterised in racial terms, and “made to feel dependent on the whiteman”.<sup>30</sup>

This observation has led us to organise this special issue. The essays collected in it explicitly ask about the expectations that ordinary Africans had of independence. They bring out insights that we “know” or at least have come across in the sources, but for which we do not yet have an historiography. Therefore, a key focus for the collection is the question of where and in what type of sources historians can find this information, and how we can separate people’s actual expectations from that what others claim are their expectations? – a particular challenge at times when both anti-colonial political activists and supporters of the status quo are very vocal in the articulation of their views and goals.<sup>31</sup> The articles emerged from a panel we organised on “Non-official expectations of Independence (1950–1975)” at the 2023 ECAS conference. Geographically, they cover Ghana, Nigeria, Congo/Zaire and Zambia. The non-official actors they look at include urban newspaper readers and cinema goers, members of youth organisations, female protesters, workers for international business, as well as comic artists and their readers, whose perspectives have been reconstructed from popular newspapers and magazines, company archives, oral history interviews, and even some official reports and archival sources. The papers were commented on by Christi van der Westhuizen, who offered a comparative analytical perspective on the papers from the perspective of her work on South Africa, where the end of Apartheid has led to similar questions as to the expectations that ordinary people had of the outcomes of the political process.

Edeagu’s article on Nigerian non-elite women’s protests in 1958, a time when the regions had already gained self-government but the country was not yet flag independent, comes with a provocative title: “We Beg to be Under the White Men”. The phrase is taken from the slogans that the demonstrating women were reportedly chanting. The article does

29 Some examples: C. A. Furtado and L. Sansone (eds.), *Lutas Pela Memória em África*, Salvador BA 2019; O. Akinwumi, M. M. Adamu and P. Ukase (eds.), *Nigeria at 50: The Challenges of Nation Building*, Zaria 2012; E. Akyeampong and A. de-Graft Aikins, *Ghana at Fifty: Reflections on Independence and After*, in: *Transition* 98 (2008), pp. 24–34.

30 UK National Archive CO/554/1955 Telegrams to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1958. This conflict is explored in detail in Edeagu’s contribution in this volume; Unilever Archive and Record Management UAC/1/11/18/2/18 Report from EAS Ltd, 26 January 1955.

31 J. Chick, Cecil King, the Press, and Politics in West Africa, in: *Journal of Modern African Studies* 34 (1996) 3, pp. 375–393.

not suggests that the women really preferred colonialism to independence. It rather suggest, based on reporting and letters to the editors in local Nigerian newspapers, as well as memoirs and (auto)biographies, that women supported independence and made an effort to bring it about, and that they had expected it to bring freedom from direct and indirect taxation. When the regional government reintroduced school fees in 1958, following a brief attempt at free education, many women felt cheated by the indigenous educated elite and nouveau political class. The “education riots” thus reveal the expectations these women had of independence. Ambler’s contribution on popular ideas of freedom engages with the meanings that Nigerian urban dwellers and in particular the literate and politicised younger men and women attached to “freedom” in the decade before the coming of flag independence. It looks at debates on freedom mainly in local Nigerian newspapers in the context of a range of issues and events, including Nigerianisation, regional elections and the behaviour of politicians, the 1956 visit to Nigeria by Queen Elizabeth (and particularly the film produced about the event), the Moral Rearmament play “Freedom”, and up-to-date leisure including foreign movies. The expressed concerns about the slow pace of Nigerianisation, politicians fanning the “embers of disunity”, outsiders’ portrayals of Nigerians as “uncivilised” or “primitive people”, but also the desire to see Lagos become as “up-to-date” as London or New York, reveal some expectations of independence that were shared widely enough to make it into the popular media. The expectation of Nigerianisation or Africanisation (that with independence Africans will start occupying management and leadership positions that during colonialism had become the preserve of Europeans) is also a theme in Van den Bersselaar’s paper, which explores expectations of independence of African employees of the British multinational United Africa Company (UAC) in Ghana and Nigeria. A reading of personnel records and other materials in the company archive revealed that UAC workers, instead of being concerned with abstract notions of freedom, were expecting promotions, pay increases and better treatment from their employers, as well as access to more, and cheaper, imported goods.

Several contributions re-visit “official” sources or contexts to look for clues to non-official or even subversive views on independence. For instance, Wetzel’s contribution on the *Organização da Juventude Moçambicana* (OJM) shows that there was negotiating space for ordinary Mozambicans in what, at first glance, seems an example of the process whereby the flag independent government organised the masses and told them what they should feel and think about, and expect from, independence. Indeed, Wetzel shows that during the early years of independent, FRELIMO-led Mozambique, the lines between enthusiasm-driven, voluntary organisation and coercion into specific modes of organising were extremely blurred. As it is often difficult to find genuine voices of ordinary Africans in the sources dating back to the days of the coming of flag independence, one strategy used in some of the papers is to reflect on expectations of independence on the basis of later expressions of disappointment with what flag independence had brought. This can be seen, for instance, in Guéné’s article on comics in Congo / Zaire and Zambia, which explores three popular magazines with comics, which were all owned by organisations (a large mining company in Congo, the Zambian government, and the Catholic

Church) that would seem in various ways close to “official” positions. While the paper indeed shows ways in which the comics engage with and represent changing official positions and priorities, often through rather “didactic” story lines, it also shows that the comics contained veiled criticism of the institutions that published them. Furthermore, during the 1970s and 1980s, when these institutions could no longer make confident promises about the future, they selected stories for publication that urged their readers to maintain a strong moral compass, cultivate self-discipline, and be resourceful to overcome the deteriorating conditions of living. The comics are thus illustrative of how the dream of independence had soured, thereby also bringing out more clearly what expectations of independence had been in the first place.

The articles that follow thus use different lenses onto popular expectations of independence, including disappointment (both Guéné and Edeagu), women’s protests (Edeagu), (organised) youth (Wetzel), debates in the popular press (Ambler), and African workers of European-owned businesses (Van den Bersselaar). To get at these perspectives, most of the contributions have included a critical reading of popular local newspapers, thus connecting with current interest in the role of newspapers in shaping and providing colonial (and postcolonial) public spheres.<sup>32</sup> Comics are a genre in their own right, but their critical analysis (as done by Guéné) uses similar reading strategies as are used for newspapers to identify and analyse (veiled) criticism or even subversive popular views – for instance relating to disappointments with flag independence. Van den Bersselaar’s use of business records (as is also the case with Guéné’s use of comics published by organisations that were close to “official” positions), while bringing to the front a group of people, and a sectoral perspective, that is not commonly brought out in discussions about (expectations of) independence, is still having to critically engage with the problem that those who produced these business records in the course of their daily employment, were still in relatively privileged positions compared to other members of the non-elites in decolonising Africa.

32 Hunter and James, Introduction: Colonial Public Spheres and the Worlds of Print, pp. 227–242.