What Did African Employees of European Enterprises Expect from Independence? UAC Workers in Ghana and Nigeria

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ABSTRACTS

This article explores what insights company records of the United Africa Company (UAC) can provide in the expectations that West African employees of European-owned enterprises had of independence. In the years before the achievement of flag independence, tens of thousands of African workers were employed by European enterprises on all levels from manual labour to mid-level management. What would independence mean for their jobs? Would it lead to rapid promotions as Africanisation policies were expected to result in more African managers? Or would the potential for nationalisation or a forced retreat from former colonies endanger their job security? Studies of the responses of European business to decolonisation have looked at political and business strategies, business planning and investment decisions, but much less is known about the expectations of ordinary employees. This article suggests that their expectations were linked to promotion and material improvements, more than abstract ideas about freedom. It also finds that already before the coming of flag independence, fears for unemployment and discrimination on grounds of regional belonging clouded expectations of independence.

In diesem Artikel wird untersucht, welche Einblicke Unternehmensunterlagen der United Africa Company (UAC) geben können in die Erwartungen, die westafrikanische Mitarbeiter europäischer Unternehmen an die Unabhängigkeit hatten. In den Jahren vor der Erlangung der Flaggenunabhängigkeit waren Zehntausende afrikanischer Arbeitnehmer auf allen Ebenen, von der Handarbeit bis zur mittleren Führungsebene, in europäischen Unternehmen beschäftigt. Was würde Unabhängigkeit für ihre Arbeit bedeuten? Würde es zu schnellen Beförderungen führen, da von der Afrikanisierungspolitik erwartet wurde, dass sie mehr afrikanische Manager

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hervorbringen würde? Oder würde die Möglichkeit einer Verstaatlichung oder eines erzwungenen Rückzugs aus ehemaligen Kolonien ihre Arbeitsplatzsicherheit gefährden? Studien zu den Reaktionen europäischer Unternehmen auf die Dekolonisierung haben sich mit politischen und geschäftlichen Strategien, Geschäftsplanung und Investitionsentscheidungen befasst. Über die Erwartungen normaler Arbeitnehmer ist jedoch viel weniger bekannt. Dieser Artikel legt nahe, dass ihre Erwartungen eher mit Beförderung und materiellen Verbesserungen als mit abstrakten Vorstellungen von Freiheit verbunden waren. Es wird außerdem festgestellt, dass bereits vor der Flaggenunabhängigkeit die Angst vor Arbeitslosigkeit und Diskriminierung aufgrund der regionalen Zugehörigkeit die Erwartungen an die Unabhängigkeit trübte.

This paper asks the question of what ordinary people in colonial Ghana and Nigeria were expecting from independence. It narrows its scope to one section of ordinary people, the African employees of European-owned enterprises, and explores what business records may reveal about their expectations. This is not a question that is often raised, as it seems obvious that the ending of colonial regimes of oppression must have been welcomed and celebrated by ordinary people in colonised territories. The latter assumption finds support in the descriptions of popular participation in government-organised independence celebrations and in expressions of mass popular culture, such as the well-known calypso song "Birth of Ghana" by the Trinidadian musician Lord Kitchener. Although this song had been commissioned by the Ghanaian government, and was thus not a spontaneous expression of the mood of the masses, it was very popular.[1] Meanwhile, the mass protests and strikes from the 1930s to the early 1950s, that had been directed against European enterprises and appropriated by nationalist politicians, suggest that the urban masses expected independence from colonial rule to bring an improvement of their lot.[2] Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, promised them as much in a speech during the country's independence celebrations in which he shared his intention to "within the shortest possible time bring the good life to the people."[3]

Indeed, scholarly characterisations of the decolonisation period have noted the considerable optimism about the possibilities that the end of colonial rule offered.[4] Yet Nate Plageman has pointed out that already before the attainment of formal independence, urban youth in Accra, Ghana had become frustrated with the policy priorities of the nationalists (until independence from Britain, Ghana was known as the Gold Coast colony; in this article to aid comprehension of developments spanning the decades of

1 J. Cowley, London is the Place: Caribbean Music in the Context of Empire 1900–60, in: P. Oliver (ed.), Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro Asian Contribution to Popular Music, Milton Keynes 1990, pp. 57–76, there p. 66.

2 F. Cooper, Decolonization and African Society. The Labor Question in French and British Africa, Cambridge 1996, pp. 389–450.

3 Quoted in J. T. Reynolds, Sovereignty and Struggle: Africa and Africans in the Era of the Cold War 1945–1994, Oxford 2015, p. 30.

4 P. Nugent, Africa Since Independence, Basingstoke 2004; H. G. West and J. E. Fair, Development Communication and Popular Resistance in Africa: An Examination of the Struggle over Tradition and Modernity through Media, in: African Studies Review 36 (1993) 1, pp. 91–114.

decolonisation, the name Ghana is also used for the colonial period). While Ghanaian nationalist politicians invested money in development projects to enhance the city's economic growth, improve its appearance, and protect the interests of the political elite, young people had difficulties finding work as well as housing. As youths were feeling increasingly marginalised, they compared their own hardship with the wider climate of prosperity and political promise, and became more and more worried about their own prospects under independence.[5]

This scepticism was not limited to urban youths. Several months after Ghanaian independence, managers of the United Africa Company (UAC) reported an "uneasiness amongst the ordinary people in regard to the political situation" and a resultant decline in consumptive spending.[6] Nor was the scepticism limited to Ghana. UAC personnel reporting on the independence celebrations in Cameroon observed "an air of artificiality with little popular rejoicing", which was probably linked to the political tensions in the country and the high levels of unemployment. In Douala alone an estimated 20,000 people out of a total population of 130,000 were unemployed at the time.[7]

What do we know about what people were expecting from independence, by the time it came in 1957 (Ghana) or 1960 (Cameroon, Nigeria)? Not all that much, it seems, aside from what can be gleaned about expectations from the subsequent disappointments, described for instance by Lynn Schler for Nigerian seamen.[8] It is well known, for instance, that in 1950s Nigeria, support for independence was stronger in the south of the country than in the north, but there appears to be not much documentation about what ordinary people hoped or perhaps feared would happen.[9] One documented expectation for independence in northern Nigeria, as set out in a policy declaration dated 29 September 1955, was that it would provide the opportunity to get rid of southerners from the northern regional administration, a process that became known as "northernisation".[10] We do not know for sure how ordinary people in the north responded to this particular promise, though research suggests that northern political elites' manipulation of sentiments against southern Nigerians was effective during this period.[11] This notion of northernisation was a particular take on "Africanisation", the much debated promise of decolonisation as an instrument to replace with qualified local Africans the Europeans

5 N. Plageman, Highlife Saturday Night: Popular Music and Social Change in Urban Ghana, Bloomington IN 2012, pp. 138–139.

6 Unilever Archives and Records Management (UARM) UAC/1/1/1/2/15 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 12 – Minutes of Board Meeting 14 October 1957.

7 UAC/1/1/1/2/18 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 15 – Minutes of Board Meeting 11 January 1960.

8 L. Schler, Nation on Board: Becoming Nigerian at Sea, Athens OH 2016.

9 T. Falola and M. M. Heaton, A History of Nigeria, Cambridge 2008, pp. 150–152.

10 UK National Archive, Kew CO 554/1732, no. 15 7 Nov 1957: Minute by M G Smith expressing concerns about a possible collapse of the public service in the Northern Region, 7 November 1957.

11 See, for instance, D. Anthony, Poison and Medicine. Ethnicity, Power, and Violence in a Nigerian City, 1966 to 1986, Oxford 2002, pp. 55–68.

who occupied management and leadership positions in the colonial administration, the railway, the army and the police, as well as in European-owned businesses and banks.[12] The opening up to Africans of posts that had been the preserve of Europeans turned decolonisation from an abstract idea into an achievable goal from which people could benefit. However, it was also a change from which only those Africans could benefit who had the required level of western-style education and experience working in the colonial economy or bureaucracy. Although a minority, this included the tens of thousands of African workers who were employed by European enterprises on all levels, from labourers to mid-level management. What would independence mean for their jobs? Would the announced Africanisation policies lead to rapid promotion, perhaps to a managerial position? Or would the potential for nationalisation of foreign assets, or a forced retreat of their employers from former colonies, endanger their job security? Would decolonisation put a stop to unfair discrimination of African staff and what was felt as racist behaviour by supervisors and managers?[13]

To answer these questions, I present in this article a perspective contained in company records from the United Africa Company (UAC) – one of West Africa's biggest private employers from the 1930s to the 1980s.[14] This perspective can serve not only as a lens on popular expectations of independence: it also offers a new perspective on European business and decolonisation. Existing studies of the responses of European businesses to decolonisation have looked at political and business strategies, business planning and investment decisions – including business links to nationalist politicians – but much less is known about the expectations of their employees.[15] Were their expectations similar to those of other colonial subjects, or did they perceive their interests and opportunities to be different?

I have found glimpses of UAC employees' expectations of independence around three broad themes: strikes and trade union membership; the withdrawal from agricultural produce buying and general retailing; and, finally, staff appraisals and promotions, as well as resignations (here, the expectations caused by Africanisation played a role). I will discuss these three aspects in the main body of the article, but before I do this, I will provide a brief introduction to the UAC, its history and its business model.

UAC was a British-headquartered multinational enterprise in its own right, however it was itself a subsidiary of the multinational corporation Unilever. UAC had been created in 1929 by joining together trading companies already active in Africa and the Middle

12 F. Cooper, Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present, Cambridge 2002, pp. 38–53; S. Decker, Africanization in British Multinationals in Ghana and Nigeria, 1945–1970, in: Business History Review 92 (2018), pp. 691–718.

13 J. Appiah, Joe Appiah: The Autobiography of an African Patriot, Accra 1996, p. 113.

14 D. van den Bersselaar, Business Records as Sources for African History, in: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History 2018, DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.237.

15 S. Decker, Postcolonial Transitions and Global Business History: British Multinational Companies in Ghana and Nigeria, New York 2022; G. Verhoef, The History of Business in Africa: Complex Discontinuity to Emerging Markets, Cham 2017; S. Stockwell, The Business of Decolonization: British Business Strategies in the Gold Coast, Oxford 2000; D. K. Fieldhouse, Merchant Capital and Economic Decolonization: The United Africa Company 1929–1987, Oxford 1994.

East, with the intention to reduce competition, achieve efficiencies of scale, capture a dominant market share and lower the prices paid to African middlemen and farmers for agricultural produce. During the world economic slump of the 1930s, which saw a sharp decline of world market prices for produce, UAC came to dominate the trading economy as planned. In the process, many Nigerian middlemen entrepreneurs were put out of business and farmers discovered that they received much less for their produce than they had during the 1920s.[16] During the second half of the 1930s, protests against the produce buying arrangements drew the attention of African nationalists and colonial administrators to the business practices of UAC and other foreign firms, challenging the legitimacy of their businesses.[17]

As countries gained flag independence during the 1950s and 1960s, UAC in a pragmatic attempt to repair its legitimacy in the eyes of independent governments, reorganised its activities into local subsidiaries, with names such as UAC of Nigeria and UAC of Ghana.[18] These subsidiaries initially remained fully owned by Unilever, but over the decades, Unilever made increasing percentages of ownership in local UAC subsidiaries available to local African investors. In the decades that followed and in response to African governments' economic indigenisation programmes, UAC withdrew from certain lines of business (in particular agricultural produce buying and general retail) while investing in others (mainly manufacturing and technical trading). However, in the run-up to flag independence, although UAC had already agreed an industrialisation strategy in 1943, most of the changes that the company would implement as a response to decolonisation were neither visible nor anticipated: UAC was still dominant both in the produce trade, where farmers complained that they received low prices, and in the trade in imported goods, where buyers complained that they were made to pay high prices.[19]

This dominance made UAC politically vulnerable, in particular through its role in importing consumer goods, which directly affected the politicised urban masses. These urban Africans had embraced the attempts by Christian missions, colonial administration and multinational businesses to establish a consumer culture along a European model in African colonies (whereby the missions did not intend to go quite as far as the business companies).[20] For this group the frustration with colonial rule was not due to the fact that colonial modernity was threatening older, traditional structures and ways of life, but

16 A.I. Nwabughuogu, From Wealthy Entrepreneurs to Petty Traders: The Decline of African Middlemen in Eastern Nigeria, 1900–1950, in: Journal of African History 23 (1982) 3, pp. 365–379; J.-G. Deutsch, Educating the Middlemen: A Political and Economic History of Statutory Cocoa Marketing in Nigeria, 1936–1947, Berlin 1995, p. 108; G. Austin, Capitalists and chiefs in the cocoa hold-ups in South Asante, 1927–1938, in: International Journal of African Historical Studies 21 (1988) 1, pp. 78–84.

17 Fieldhouse, Merchant Capital and Economic Decolonization, pp. 173–175.

18 Decker, Africanization in British Multinationals, p. 705.

19 D. van den Bersselaar, UAC between developmentalists and antirevolutionaries: a multinational enterprise makes sense of post-independence Africa, in: S. Fiebrig, F. Reichherzer and J. Dinkel (eds.), Nord/Süd: Perspektiven auf eine globale Konstellation, München 2020, pp. 209–240.

20 B. Meyer, Commodities and the Power or Prayer: Pentecostalist Attitudes Towards Consumption in Contemporary Ghana, in: Development and Change 29 (1998) 4, pp. 751–776.

rather that the colonial promise of modern consumption patterns was so slow to arrive.[21] In the years following the rationing of consumer goods during the Second World War, a consumer society seemed more remote than ever, as imported goods remained scarce and expensive. The 1948 anti-colonial protests in Accra that led to the speeding up of the process of political change which would eventually bring Ghanaian independence had started out of anger over shortages and high prices. European commercial premises, in particular those belonging to UAC, were attacked and looted. The protests point towards the unpopularity of UAC, which was represented in the local press as an instrument of British economic exploitation.[22] What the protests also suggest is that one expectation of independence was that the independent government would deliver on the colonial promise of a modern consumer society.

1. Strikes

How did UAC employees feel about the role that their employer played under colonial rule, and what did they expect from UAC following independence? Their attitude towards the labour disputes and general strikes of the period offers some clues as to their opinions and expectations. Most strikes concerned issues of direct relevance to the employment relation, such as wages and conditions of service. Indeed, an earlier wave of strikes that had occurred between 1930 and 1945 reflected a serious fall in the living conditions of UAC employees during this period.[23] The strike wave that followed the Second World War was more intense and reflected the frustrations caused by the continuation of wartime rationing of certain goods and the increase of consumer prices. The strikes were also increasingly well organised, due to an improving trade union infrastructure that was supported by the colonial administration, and also because of the interest that nationalist politicians were taking in recruiting organised labour for the anti-colonial cause.[24]
Most strikes were about demands for pay increases to compensate for the rising cost of living, but in the background, frustrations about colonial rule played a role. One moment where this became visible was at the end of 1950, during union mass meetings discussing the outcome of arbitration following a strike of African UAC employees in Nigeria. UAC management regarded the outcome as "very satisfactory" and agreed to pay out the 12½ percent cost of living allowance awarded in full.[25] The Nigerian trade unionists, on the other hand, showed themselves to be very unhappy, even though they had no objections to the award itself. They pointed out that the average annual salary

21 R. Finsterhölzl, Kommerzielle Werbung im kolonialen Afrika. Die Werbebranche und der politische Wandel in Ghana 1930–1970, Köln 2015, pp. 194–197.
22 Stockwell, The Business of Decolonization, pp. 69–74.
23 A. G. Hopkins, An Economic History of West Africa, London 1973, pp. 257–258.
24 R. L. Sklar, Nigerian Political Parties. Power in an Emergent African Nation, Princeton 1963, pp. 84–85; T. Hodgkin, Nationalism in Colonial Africa, London 1956, p. 117.
25 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/9 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 6 – Minutes of Board Meeting 14 November 1950.

of a European UAC employee was £1000 per year, whereas the average annual salary of an African employee was a mere £48. This difference had of course more to do with the kind of work done by European versus African employees, with most Europeans being paid managerial salaries and most Africans being employed as manual labour, but this was not discussed at the mass meetings. At any rate, the pay award did little to bridge the gap. Furthermore, the union leadership considered that the arbitrator, Judge Vahe Bairamian, was partial and had lost his reputation by "acting to please the imperialists who had appointed him".[26] Meanwhile, UAC directors were not just concerned about strikes in their own business. They kept track of labour conflicts more generally, on the one hand because they were concerned about the general climate of labour relations and on the other because of the effect that strikes by other companies and services had on their own business. During 1947, several strikes in British and French West African colonies demanded that African employees be paid the same wages as Europeans. The demand for "equal pay for equal posts" thus revealed the expectation that independence would result in a fairer wage structure.[27]

In contrast to most strikes, in Ghana the Gold Coast general strike of January 1950 was not about pay or conditions, but explicitly about independence. The strike had been called by the Gold Coast Trades Union Congress (TUC) ostensibly in support of a trade dispute of one of the unions, but in reality in support of Kwame Nkrumah's "Positive Action": a campaign of civil disobedience intended to force the colonial government to concede to nationalists' demands.[28] The strike was directed against the government but also involved workers of commercial businesses such as UAC. Most UAC workers did not join the strike, and the UAC Workers Union did not encourage its members to take part in it, given that there existed no trade dispute with their employer.[29] What surprised the UAC management, however, was how many of its employees nevertheless joined the strike, and that a number of them were leaders in the larger movement for independence. The strikers told the management that "[t]hey had no quarrel with the UAC but when Nkrumah called they must obey", and also that they did not mind if they did not get paid while striking.[30] In some towns, including Sekondi, Takoradi and Tarkwa, UAC employees were among the first to go on strike. UAC managers considered the strikers disloyal to the company, having placed their work duties second and "thrown loyalty to the winds" due to being "impregnated with the poison" of the independence movement.[31] While wanting to believe that many of their employees had been intimidated to join the strike, they took a hard line against employees whom they regarded as "agitators"

26 National Archive Enugu (NAE) RIVPROF 2/1/105 Political Intelligence Report UAC Workers, Port Harcourt 17 December 1950.

27 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/8 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 5 – Minutes of Board Meeting 29 April 1947.

28 R. S. Gocking, The History of Ghana, Westport CT 2005, p. 93.

29 R. Jeffries, Class, Power and Ideology in Ghana: The Railwaymen of Sekondi, Cambridge 1978, p. 58.

30 Unilever Archives & Records Management (UARM), United Africa Company Collection (UAC) UAC/2/20/3/7/1 Report on the Gold Coast General Strike (10 February 1950).

31 Ibid.

and tried to stop them from being re-employed in the company. The UAC General Manager, P. H. Fitz-Gerald, concluded that the strike had been “an obvious failure”, yet he clearly felt threatened by the popular sentiments.[32] However, although the general strike in the Gold Coast shows that many ordinary workers wanted independence and were prepared to make personal sacrifices for it, it is not clear what they expected independence would bring.

Strikes that occurred within the first few years of flag independence again tended to be mainly concerned with pay and conditions, usually indicating a labour dispute with the company, and in some cases directed against the government. Examples of this include the strikes in Ghana in 1961 against the deduction of pension fund contributions from wages (as required by the Ghana Government) and against the Ghana budget.[33] In this instance, the UAC management showed itself much more understanding of the strikers’ motivations than during the general strike for independence, noting that there were “real fears amongst many of our loyal staff, including managers, of Government taking over their pension fund money and misusing it.”[34] Similarly, in 1964 the Nigerian UAC Workers Union threatened to strike over the inappropriate behaviour of the manager of the Lagos Kingsway Store, who was accused of having slapped a female employee. The Union demanded the manager’s dismissal by the company and his expulsion from Nigeria by the Federal Government. Eventually, the strike was called off, and the manager, whose action was said to have been “grossly exaggerated”, kept his position.[35]

All in all, the strikes and trade union membership do not reveal a great deal about workers’ expectations of independence. In those cases, when independence was a clearly articulated goal of a strike, very little is revealed about what was expected from independence, aside from the ending of colonial rule and the removal of Europeans from management positions. The strikes for equal pay for equal work, and for pay increases in general, revealed a bit more in this regard. In these cases, imperialism played a role in the background, and it seems clear that workers expected to receive better pay and be treated better when colonial rule came to an end.

2. Withdrawal

In the decades running up to flag independence, in addition to strikes by its employees, UAC was also confronted with boycotts by its African customers. The most well-known example of this is the Gold Coast Boycott, from the end of January till the beginning of March 1948, when European, Syrian and African traders throughout Ghana were

32 Ibid.
33 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/19 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 16 – Minutes of Board Meetings 13 March and 5 September 1961.
34 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/19 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 16 – Minutes of Board Meeting 28 March 1961.
35 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/22 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 19 – Minutes of Board Meeting 15 September 1964; UAC/1/1/1/2/23 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 20 – Minutes of Board Meeting 5 January 1965.

boycotted in protest against the high prices of goods imported from Europe. This boycott, especially due to its violent ending in the so-called "Accra Riots", is regarded as a key event that speeded up the process of decolonisation in West Africa.[36] For the British Government, the event was not only worrying: it also revealed a range of issues that extended far beyond high consumer prices, including the treatment of war veterans, public relations and the press, constitutional and political reform, Africanisation, industrial development, the spread of the Swollen Shoot disease of cocoa, education, and housing.[37] UAC management was not blind to the broader, political context, but focused on the two issues that affected them most: accusations of high consumer prices and of unfair allocation and distribution of goods in short supply to African traders.[38] The official Commission of Enquiry's *Watson Report* observed that the high prices reflected a limited supply and high demand and were therefore largely beyond the control of the importers. Indeed, as compared to before the war, the cost prices to importing firms such as UAC had tripled (and for certain goods they were up to eight times higher).[39]

The Commission's assessment did of course not change the fact that for many people in Ghana, prices had risen far more rapidly than their income. For this they held firms such as UAC responsible, which they said hiked prices through their monopolistic position and through restricting African enterprise. This viewpoint was linked to campaigning by the press and by nationalist politicians against foreign businesses and their association, the Association of West African Merchants (AWAM). The resulting public sentiment was that, if goods were to be sold through Africans instead of through the foreign companies, prices would be lower. This sentiment received support from the Government's promise to allow a larger place for Africans in the economy, including through consumers' cooperatives, as a way to lower prices.[40] However, the *Watson Report* had found that firms like UAC actually kept the prices down of the goods that they sold through their own retail network. The report further pointed towards the high mark-ups that African retailers and petty traders realised on the goods they purchased from UAC and cash wholesalers. When goods in short supply were sold on to African traders for resale to African consumers, the prices went particularly high.[41]

In the short and medium term, the boycott led UAC to lower some of its prices. It sought, of course, extensive publicity for such price reductions.[42] There were, however, further boycotts, and another usual UAC response to these was to promise to allocate more merchandise to African traders. In Nigeria, the organisers of a boycott in Ibadan in 1947, when importation was still restricted and operated through government-allocated

36 Cooper, Decolonization and African Society, p. 8.

37 Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Disturbances in the Gold Coast 1948 [Watson Report], London 1948; Statement by His Majesty's Government on the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Disturbances in the Gold Coast 1948, London 1948.

38 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/8 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 5 – Minutes of Board Meeting 10 February 1948.

39 Watson Report, p. 39.

40 Statement by His Majesty's Government, p. 13.

41 Watson Report, pp. 40–42.

42 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/8 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 5 – Minutes of Board Meeting 24 February 1948.

licences, demanded that UAC sell 85 per cent of its total allocation of textiles through Africans. UAC managers understood the Ibadan boycott to be directed against non-Nigerian firms, and in particular against the textile sales they made to Syrian traders. In response to the boycott, UAC professed its desire to deal with African firms, and offered to allocate £60,000 worth of textiles to "established African firms" which were able to purchase on a cash basis and were prepared to serve the public.[43] In 1957 in Northern Nigeria, UAC also encountered demands that Syrians should be prohibited from retail selling of textiles. The General Manager in Nigeria reported "a decided anti-Syrian and anti-Lebanese bias in the proceedings."[44] UAC managers played up the anti-Syrian sentiment, as it distracted from the criticism of their own participation in the retail trade. However, it was becoming clear that in the longer term UAC would have to withdraw from general retailing and leave the field to African entrepreneurs.

Meanwhile, the earlier supplier boycotts or "hold-ups" by farmers in Ghana and Nigeria of the second half of the 1930s, that had enjoyed widespread popular support and had led to accusations that UAC and other European businesses were monopsonistic colonial exploiters, had not reoccurred since 1938. This can be explained partly by specific local political circumstances involving local chiefs, and partly by the formation of produce marketing boards that apparently guaranteed farmers' incomes.[45] However, during the 1950s, memories of the earlier hold-ups were still present among the population, and there was a widespread feeling that African farmers and traders would be better off if European firms would exit the produce buying business. Local traders' organisations, such as the Nigerian Northern Traders Union, demanded that the transport of goods and produce should be left to Nigerian traders and that the buying of groundnuts by foreign businesses be prohibited.[46] This thus became an expectation of independence, and already during the 1950s UAC and other European businesses began preparations to leave this sector to African traders. UAC finally withdrew from the cocoa trade in Ghana in 1959 and in Nigeria in 1962, from the palm oil trade (in both countries) in 1961, and from the groundnuts trade in 1963.[47] Thus the transfer of the produce trade to African traders was one of the expectations of independence, and one that was achieved. However, although African businessmen were quick to take advantage of the openings, the associated expectation that this would aid prosperity did not materialise.[48]

For various reasons that are beyond the scope of this article, agriculture and the produce trade did not make the contribution to the independent states' economies that had been expected, as agricultural production flatlined or declined.[49] In 1966, representatives of

43 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/8 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 5 – Minutes of Board Meeting 1 July 1947.
44 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/15 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 12 – Minutes of Board Meeting 13 May 1957.
45 Austin, Capitalists and Chiefs, p. 95; Deutsch, Educating the Middlemen, p. 177; Stockwell, The Business of Decolonization, p. 39, pp. 58–59, p. 75.
46 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/15 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 12 – Minutes of Board Meeting 13 May 1957.
47 Fieldhouse, Merchant Capital and Economic Decolonization, pp. 436–445.
48 Hopkins, Economic History of West Africa, p. 273; O. N. Njoku, Economic History of Nigeria, 19th–21st Centuries, Nsukka 2014, p. 297.
49 Njoku, Economic History of Nigeria, p. 299; E. E. Osaghe, Crippled Giant. Nigeria since Independence, Blooming-

UAC workers expressed their disappointment in a memo to the Nigerian Government. They observed how foreign firms had been persuaded to withdraw from sectors such as produce buying. They alleged that "the intention which seemed patriotic was introduced in order to encourage indigenous buying agents of a particular region to seize control of the business," and that, subsequently, "this once buoyant trade declined disastrously because of poor management. As a result of the decline our economy was adversely affected."[50] It is unclear to what extent the majority of UAC employees agreed with the memo, which was four pages long and went through a long list of similar grievances and demands. The authors, at any rate, had clearly expected more from independence, and their accusations may reflect some of their expectations, for instance when they note that Nigeria "willingly inherited the Colonial labour legacy and have attempted to foist a transparently slavish system onto free citizens." This undesired state had continued because "no effort was made to interpret the Colonial era labour Code to conform with our independent status."[51]

This has brought this article back to the question of what UAC employees expected from independence. For many ordinary West Africans, UAC's eventual withdrawal from produce buying and general retail had been something expected to accompany the coming of independence. For UAC workers in these sectors, this would of course mean that they might lose their jobs in the process. This may have particularly been the case for UAC employees from southern Nigeria who were working in groundnuts and cotton buying in northern Nigeria, as one of the main complaints against foreign merchants was that they used southerners to transport produce.[52] UAC workers elsewhere, however, may not have worried too much about their jobs: the previous occasion when UAC had closed a large number of branches, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, in many cases rather than to just firing the employees and closing the station, it had sold the branches to the African staff who ran them. UAC had provided the new owners with mortgages, on condition that they continued to buy merchandise from UAC and sold produce to the company.[53] Although as independent entrepreneurs they were no longer on the UAC payroll, these African traders continued to be regarded as part of the UAC organisation. They received the in-house magazines, were invited to company parties for employees, and significant moments in their lives were reported and celebrated in the same way as the company did for its salaried staff.[54] Additionally, since the beginning of the twentieth century a large part of the buying and selling throughout West Africa had been done through "credit customers" – usually female traders who received imported

ton IN 1998, p. 50; J. H. Frimpong-Ansah, The Vampire State in Africa. The Political Economy of Decline in Ghana, London 1991, p. 140.

50 UARM UAC 1/10/2/5/4 F.N. Kanu, Memorandum Submitted to the Supreme Head of the Military Government Major-General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi by Workers in the U.A.C. Group of Companies on Behalf of all Other Workers in Identical Trade & Industries, Ebute Metta, n.d. [1966].

51 Ibid.

52 Fieldhouse, Merchant Capital and Economic Decolonization, pp. 444–445.

53 Ibid., p. 97.

54 Farewell Party for Mr Tsikata, in: The Unicorn 11 (1965) 9.

goods on credit for resale and settled their account with the European importing firm on a monthly basis. They had outstanding market knowledge, therefore UAC tended to keep them close, informally integrating them in the UAC organisation. Credit customers were invited to UAC social events, such as the Kente Dance in the Akuse Club House, where credit customer Mary Amanor won the prize for the "best dressed woman", and significant events in their lives or careers are reported in the company newsletter, such as Mary "Tobacco Queen" Baiden's 30-year jubilee as a credit customer.[55] The role of credit customers did not change through decolonisation, and it was only in 1970 that this form of trading was outlawed in Ghana as outdated, inefficient and leading to market abuses.[56] It is unclear when it ended in Nigeria.

UAC's retreat from general and produce trading in the 1950s and 1960s was at least in part effectuated through the re-designation of people from employee status to that of independent entrepreneur, but this clearly did not apply to all employees.[57] General trading saw a shift in focus towards wholesale and the supply of credit customers. While UAC's general trading stores closed down, specialised stores for building materials, agricultural technology and cars, as well as the upmarket "Kingsway" department stores continued. Although the emphasis shifted, employment in merchant trading largely remained. The same was not the case for produce buying. Although UAC was careful to "expunge" the word "redundancy" from its vocabulary in order "not to risk upsetting government or to give any impression that we were reducing or sacking people," it managed to reduce expenditure (largely on staff) by £100,000 per month after it exited this trade.[58] Produce buying had always required a lot of resources, as UAC operated 350 buying points and employed 2700 buyers. When UAC withdrew from this trade, even though it was clear that positions would be lost, it reassured its workers in an internal memo that every effort would be made to absorb displaced staff.[59] This message was particularly aimed at African managers, whom the company, in line with its Africanisation strategy, did not want to lose. UAC reduced its expatriate staff, while African produce managers were offered alternative posts, including those of Textiles Sales Manager, Hardware Sales Manager, Administrative Manager and District Manager.[60] Chief W. E. Erhabor, for instance, was working as a senior Produce Manager at Lokoja (Nigeria) when UAC withdrew from produce buying, and as a result he was transferred to G. B. Ollivant – another business

55 Valuable Prizes Given Away at Akuse, in: Gold Coast U.A.C. News 1 (1950) 3, p. 3; Kumasi Tobacco Queen Mary Baiden – Thirty Years a Credit Customer, in: Gold Coast U.A.C. News 3 (1952) 10, p. 3.

56 B. Murillo, Female Credit Customers, the United Africa Company and Consumer Markets in Postwar Ghana, in: E. Rappaport, S. Trudgen and M. J. Crowley (eds.), Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Britain, London 2015, pp. 159–177, there p. 172.

57 P.C. Garlick, African Traders and Economic Development in Ghana, Oxford 1971, pp. 76–77.

58 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/21 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 18 – Minutes of Board Meeting 20 March 1963.

59 Fieldhouse, Merchant Capital and Economic Decolonization, p. 437.

60 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/18 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 15 – Minutes of Board Meeting 4 January 1960 (on policy and European managers); UAC 1/10/2/2/2/2 UAC Personnel Department Staff Files – second series 1922–1981 (concrete examples).

within the company – and posted to Benin.[61] UAC employees would later remember the upheaval of the withdrawal from produce trading and the resulting streamlining of the trading business and the redeployment of staff as a particularly stressful period.[62]

3. Promotions and Resignations

During colonial rule, in government agencies as well as in European-owned private sector businesses, a distinction was made between "European" and "African" positions. While all manual labourers and clerks were Africans, positions of managerial or technical responsibility were almost exclusively staffed by Europeans, resulting in frustrated career progression and resentment among African staff.[63] This was a factor in the development of nationalist sentiment among this group, and accelerated career progression once European superiors had left was clearly one expectation of independence. For some employees this is exactly what happened with Africanisation, whereas for others nothing much changed. This again led to disappointment and frustration among UAC workers, partly caused by the extensive publicity UAC had sought for its Africanisation programme. Newspaper advertisements with titles such as "A Man of Importance" and "Doorway to Success" promised "the prospect of promotion to more highly paid and responsible jobs" and claimed that UAC "sets no limit on the promotion to which any of its employees may attain."[64] The popular mood meant that UAC had to engage with Africanisation, although on the one hand, the increase in the number of African managers was relatively slow, while on the other hand, UAC had been employing Africans as managers since its establishment in 1929. During the 1930s in Nigeria as well as in Ghana, UAC employed a number of Africans in management positions carrying out the same duties as a European manager, being paid the same basic salary and receiving a percentage of the net profits of the company as a commission.[65]

At the end of the Second World War, in Ghana and Nigeria combined, UAC employed 112 Africans as managers, and the share of Africans in the management force was 20.47 percent. By 1957, the number of Africans in management had increased to 276, but as the number of Europeans had also increased, the share of Africans in the management force had remained roughly the same, having slightly declined to 20.20 percent.[66] UAC's withdrawal from produce buying and the shift to manufacturing and technology, further complicated Africanisation. As mentioned above, many of the African managers had been employed in produce buying, and to keep them after the closing down of this side

61 Chief Erhabor talks to Pennews, in: UAC Pensioners' Newsletter 1 (1982) 1, pp. 8–9.

62 Know our pensioners – Mr S.S. Newlands, in: The Unicorn 26 (1980) 2, pp. 7–9.

63 D. van den Bersselaar, White Collar Workers, in: S. Belluci and A. Eckert (eds.), General Labour History of Africa. Workers, Employers and Governments, 20th–21st Centuries, Oxford 2019, pp. 379–404, there p. 388.

64 UARM UAC 1/11/20/1 Guardbook UAC Ltd. Goodwill (c.1949–1954).

65 UARM UAC /2/20/3/2/1 UAC of Ghana Ltd, General Manager's Private Files (1933–1940).

66 Statistics, in: Statistical and Economic Review 5 (1950), pp. 37–44, there p. 42; The United Africa Group's Staff and Labour Force, in: Statistical and Economic Review 20 (1957), pp. 39–45, there p. 41.

of the business, they had to be redeployed to other areas for which they may not have had the qualifications or aptitude.[67] Aware of the fact that the slow increase in the percentage of African managers was not helping the company's reputation among nationalist politicians and the general population, UAC decided to re-designate the "Senior Staff" job category as "Assistant Management", with terms of service more in line with those of managers. At one stroke this change increased by 12 per cent the percentage of management posts held by Africans.[68] At the same time, however, to establish businesses alternative to the produce trade it was leaving, UAC management brought in new European managers, who brought their experience of working in those lines of business in Europe, or knowledge of the new technologies that UAC was introducing. For instance, when, in 1962, UAC's Handifoods business introduced the Gala Sausage Roll in Nigeria as part of establishing a business producing European-style foodstuffs, it brought in managers as well as food technology from Walls, then the leading British producer of meat products and ice cream.[69]

The complications caused by the rather slow pace of Africanisation, which included anxiety about job security among European managers, were studied by the Lindsay Committee in 1963.[70] Although the company was no longer limiting the appointment of Africans to management positions to those who had started in the company many years earlier and had worked their way up through the ranks, to include recent graduates whom it hired directly as "Management Probationers", it still faced a lack of Africans that it could promote to middle and senior management. The UAC board identified "wastage" as a major hurdle to the Africanisation of management: too many of the Africans being trained for management, or hired as managers, soon left the company. A look at an incomplete set of personnel staff cards for the period suggests that between 10 and 20 percent of newly hired African staff either resigned or simply stopped coming after six months or one or two years. The terse comments on the cards in some cases note "Resignation", in others, "Termination" or "Dismissed – Unsatisfactory Conduct", or less frequently "Termination – Dishonest". The relatively large number of staff who handed in their "Resignation" very soon after joining the company or "Resigned dissatisfied", were "Presumed to have left", "Did not Complete Training" or were "Not on Staff Return" suggests that at least among relatively recent new recruits, there was disappointment with the company and its opportunities for promotion.[71]

Similar experiences have been recorded in Lynn Schler's study of the Nigerian National Shipping Line. This company had been newly established on the eve of independence,

67 Redeployment: An Aspect of Development in Tropical Africa, in: Statistical and Economic Review 28 (1963), pp. 1–38, there p. 31.

68 UARM UAC/1/1/1/2/27 The UAC Ltd Minute Book 24 – Minutes of Board Meeting 20 May 1969.

69 Fieldhouse, Merchant Capital and Economic Decolonization, p. 542.

70 UARM UAC/1/4/1/16/9 Confidential circular from The Chairman, Management Terms Committee, 26 August 1963.

71 UARM UAC/1/10/2/1/16 UAC Staff Cards: Overseas Staff; UAC/1/10/2/1/28 UAC Staff Cards: Overseas Staff: Void Cards.

but with shareholdings by the European-owned shipping companies Palm Line (another UAC subsidiary) and Elder Dempster Lines, from which companies it recruited many of its seamen. Seamen who joined the National Shipping Line were promised higher wages and an end to discriminatory practices toward African seamen that had been a feature of the colonial era-based shipping lines. However, the seamen who joined the National Shipping Line found that the ships' officers long remained European, and that once these positions had been Nigerianised the incumbents did not receive better treatment from their fellow countrymen, but rather deteriorating pay and rewards and poor working conditions.[72] The deterioration of pay and rewards was a quite general problem in the Ghanaian and Nigerian economies, from which UAC employees also suffered. At times, UAC managers were of the opinion that pay increases were justified and desirable, but they could not do so, as governments tried to keep wages down as part of generally unsuccessful attempts to control inflation.

In contrast to Schler's findings for the shipping line, however, there is no indication that UAC employees felt that their working conditions deteriorated following flag independence. But African UAC employees were expecting to be promoted quicker than they were, and this was a major cause for dissatisfaction. From the perspective of UAC management, many of their newly recruited employees were "impatient" and "arrogant", expecting to get promoted before they had gathered enough experience with the company, or before even having completed the training. One of the company magazines presents the case of "Kofi" (not his real name) as a warning to those who "fail to keep their promise". "Kofi" is hired as a clerk but gets frustrated with the amount of work and lack of promotion and after three years starts to show signs of dissatisfaction: "The manager detects a completely negative attitude in Kofi's application to duty and crowns his verbal warnings with a written warning to him. Kofi thinking he is too big to be terminated rushes in the following day with his letter of resignation."[73] The company magazine goes on to note that two years later, Kofi has still not found new employment, clearly exposing the mistake that Kofi has made, but also referencing the growing unemployment following flag independence, which certainly had not been expected.

4. Conclusion

The current article is one of few studies that attempt to reach beyond African nationalist elites' official perspectives on decolonisation and explicitly search for the viewpoints of ordinary West African women and men. In the preceding pages I have analysed documents found in the UAC company archive that shed light on the expectations that employees of European enterprise in West Africa had of independence. While the tens of thousands of UAC workers were relatively privileged compared to many inhabitants

72 Schler, Nation on Board, p. 197.
73 N. Owusu, The Promise some of us Fail to Keep, in: The Unicorn 10 (1964) 10, p. 10.

of rural areas and unemployed urban dwellers, they did not (with very few exceptions) belong to the political elite. While employees supported demands for independence with claims of loyalty to nationalist leaders such a Nkrumah, what they expected from independence were promotion, pay increases and better treatment from their employers, as well as access to more, and cheaper, imported goods. In fact, they expected that independent African governments would deliver on the promises of employment and consumption that their colonial predecessors had made and failed to keep.

Some of these conclusions as to expectations of independence have been inferred from later disappointment, as was also the case in Schler's study of Nigerian seamen. Looking for African employees' perspectives on decolonisation in UAC company records also showed some areas of concern, such as the likely implications of northernisation in Nigeria for UAC employees from southern Nigeria or Ghana. Another was how early, already before the coming of flag independence, the spectre of unemployment affected expectations in Nigeria as well as in Ghana.