

Boston University

OpenBU

<http://open.bu.edu>

Seidman Research Papers

Book reviews

Book review: British business and Ghanaian independence

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/20732>

Boston University

to American Historical Review
Indiana U.
Baltimore Hall
Bloomington, Ind 47901

A book review:

British Business and Ghanaian Independence, by Josephine F. Milburn

(Nanover: University Press of New England, 1977), 156 pp.

Ghana's development perspectives were widely acclaimed when it became the first subSaharan nation to attain political independence after World War II. Yet today its economy is characterized by stagnation: high unemployment, a swollen international debt, skyrocketing inflation, and the continuing enrichment of a narrow class of business managers and top government personnel in the midst of mass impoverishment of the peasantry and working people. One might, therefore, look forward with anticipation to reading Josephine Milburn's book, British Business and Ghanaian Independence, in hopes of discovering at least some elements of an explanation of this sad outcome.

Milburn declares at the outset that she seeks to assess the relations between business firms and the colonial and post-colonial governments to evaluate the "generally popular views about business" ranging from those of the British administrators to those, which she attributes to Lenin and Nkrumah, of the 'conspiratorial nature of business.' Her evidence, much of it from government and company documents, relates primarily to the market activities of the three big cocoa firms, the United Africa Company, John and Cadbury, during the 1937-1957 period. She gives only a superficial sketch of the post-independence relations of business and government. She concludes

The firms' efforts were primarily directed toward realization of profits from the sale of cocoa on the world market and from the selling of goods on the Coast....

But foreign investment in cocoa has contributed to development of a central monetary market in West Africa and has brought about the conditions and motivation necessary for economic and national development. (p. 116)

The scope of her analysis, as well as her conclusion, is, however, severely limited by her narrow analytical perspective. She describes in great detail the sometimes cooperating, sometimes conflicting efforts of the colonial

and administrators to establish viable, on-going cocoa marketing structures especially during the turbulent times of the cocoa holdup and the post-war independence struggles. But she obscures the reality that, whatever the disagreement over details, the colonial firms and administrators did work together over the years to forge an institutional framework which shackled the Ghanaian peasantry and economy to production of ever-increasing amounts of cocoa beans for the firms' profitable manufacture and sale in the context of their global operations.

Milburn's book does not really explore the wealth of evidence as to why this initiated the process of 'development of underdevelopment' which is at the root of Ghana's current predicament. The issue is not, as she suggests, whether the companies 'conspired' with the government. Rather it is the inherited institutional structure, shaped under the protection of the colonial umbrella, which enabled a handful of oligopolistic firms to accumulate and reinvest capital in the extraction of raw materials and sale of manufactured goods under the particular conditions of the then-Gold Coast. The mass of the African peasantry was alternatively enticed and coerced by the imposition of the money economy to provide the essential cheap labor. Tens of thousands worked as sharecroppers, investing their time and muscle in planting and harvesting cocoa from which the companies, through their control of the marketing process, reaped the profits. Only a limited class -- those who accumulated capital by hiring labor and investing in speculative trade and real estate or who became managers and supervisors in the companies or government posts -- participated in the benefits of the resulting distorted 'development'. These, too, were the main beneficiaries of the Africanization programs which Milburn praises as company contributions. In short, the detailed government and company documents which Milburn cites at length may interest those concerned with minutiae of company-colonial relations. They do not appear to support her unduly optimistic conclusions. Her analysis tends to obscure the underlying institutionalization process which lies at the root of the problems that plague Ghana to this day.

by Ann Sudman