

The Colonial Public Sphere in Nigeria, 1920-1943

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Abstract

The article turns to colonial and local imaginations of public criticism, public communication and public opinion in colonial Nigeria. Thereby, it focusses on the Lagosian English-language press and colonial archival documents. The aim is to provide insight into the political terrain, to map power structures and contestations of colonial power directly related to colonial hegemony, the media, and the public sphere. The paper argues that both, the colonial state and local politicians engaged in debates about the form, substance and purpose of the public sphere. At stake was who was entitled to voice public criticism and how to alter and contest colonial rule.

A colonial public sphere?

Recent events, such as the so-called “Arab Spring” in 2011 in North African countries and protests in Iran that followed the disputed re-election of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad in 2009, have drawn attention to the public sphere. Located between the private realm and the sphere of public power, it is seemingly open to individuals and groups’ utterances and criticisms. Moreover, public criticism voiced in the public sphere has the potential to transform authority (Habermas 1990: 98; Koller 2010: 263). With regards to the above mentioned protests, scholars argue that increasing accessibility of communication technologies such as the internet and mobile phones facilitates participation in public communication, but that these media do not constitute a “new” public sphere with the power to oust presidents (Gladwell/Shirky 2011; Lynch 2012; Papacharissi 2002; Shirky 2011). In addition to studies focussing on the impact of “new media”, scholars recently attempted to render an analysis of the public sphere fruitful for historical analysis (Koller 2010; Mah 2000; Requate 1999). At the

same time, other studies turned to newspapers in Africa and sought not to use them as sources for historical analyses of nationalism, but rather to explore print or literary culture as such (Barber 2006, 2007). Moreover, scholars argue against “situating *all* local cultural phenomena in relation to a colonial source” (Newell 2002: 43, emphasis in original) and emphasise print activity beside and beyond the British presence.

The concept of the public sphere may constitute a useful analytical framework when investigating a specific aspect of print culture, namely its importance for the terrain of the political struggle (Scott 1999: 31; Shami 2009: 29). It acknowledges the newspaper’s importance for the awakening of political consciousness (Anderson 1998: 36ff; Coleman 1965: 186; Omu 1978: vii, 42), and puts their criticisms in broader perspective. An investigation into the public sphere addresses the role of the sphere in which public criticism is voiced in a given society ;it turns to the purpose of a sphere of which newspapers were an important part. This sphere may become a site of discursive will formation, it may exert pressure on policymakers and thus influence policy processes. It may constitute a principle of control mediating the needs of society to the state. But, by rendering the state accountable to some of the citizenry, it may also serve the rationalization of political domination (Benhabib 1992: 92; Fraser 1992: 112; Habermas 1990: 87, 268; Neidhardt 1994: 8ff).

An investigation into the public sphere moreover turns to publics. It recognizes that within the public sphere various locations may become “sites of power, of common action coordinated through speech and persuasion”, and, correspondingly, that “there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms” (Benhabib 1992: 78). An analysis of the public sphere turns to institutions and locations of various publics and addresses processes of their formation. It investigates relations between publics such as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and, in doing so, addresses debates on what forms of expressing knowledge were to prevail (Benhabib 1992; Calhoun 2010; Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; Shami 2009; Stoler / Cooper 1997: 13). An investigation of the public sphere in colonial Nigeria can be regarded as a means to engage in writing ‘new’ colonial history, as it examines engagements with ‘publicness’ (Cooper 1994).

The article at hand addresses colonial and local debates on the form, substance and purpose of the public sphere in colonial southern Nigeria by investigating English-language newspapers published in Lagos and colonial archival documents. The analysis starts in the 1920s, against the background of post-World War I politics which saw the growth of nationalist organisations such as the National Congress of British West Africa. This is also the time when Hugh Clifford was inaugurated as Governor of Nigeria and introduced a very limited franchise for wealthy Lagosians. The analysis ends with the West African Press Delegation's visit to London in 1943, and, therefore, by and large covers the interwar period. It looks into newspapermen's and politician's views on their activities as well as individuals' and groups' engagements with publicness at "diagnostic events" that give insight into political contests and conflicts in Lagos (Moore 1987: 730). The text considers discussions on the role of the public sphere in the colonial state against the background of its "*capacity* for reasoned public choice" (Koller 2010: 263, emphasis in original), assesses its potential to mediate decisions and needs to the state and influence policy processes (Neidhardt 1994; Habermas 1990). Furthermore, rather than matching a specific conception of a public sphere – by way of example a bourgeois public sphere – to the colonial situation in Nigeria, it addresses conflicting relations between publics – such as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in existence in the public sphere (Calhoun 2010; Eley 1992; Fraser 1992).

Potentials of 'public opinion'

Looking into the editorials of maiden issues or anniversary issues of newspapers reveals the political commitment of Nigerian newspapermen. With their papers, as well as with political parties, an educated elite sought to influence the trend of events. They explicitly referred to the conduct of the colonial state when formulating their goal: a strong public opinion which could not be ignored by the Governor (Omu 1978: 8ff., 26ff.; Tamuno 1966: 41). Moreover, they debated about and reflected on the role of newspapers in and for colonial society.

The fact that missions had trained printers stimulated the growth of the "Indigenous Newspaper Movement" in the 1880s, as did political printing activity in Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast. The newspaper-business was an

option for financially distressed traders to generate a small amount of revenue, but it was a thorny undertaking. Economic ambitions blended with philanthropy, and the desire to influence public opinion may have outdone economic motivations (Ajayi 1965: 158f.; Omu 1967, 1978). Starting from the 1920s, the newspaper-business underwent changes. Even though newspapers were popular after World War I, the long-established weekly papers demised, only to give way to the daily press. Moreover, the Yoruba-language press was rekindled, and newspapers started to appear outside of Lagos. Most importantly, the organisational character of newspapers changed. The weekly papers were small-scale businesses, in which the editor was usually the owner of the paper and his own reporter. The dailies were in need of more “hands” and therefore had a higher demand for capital. In 1925, two prominent Lagosians established the Nigerian Printing and Publishing Company, and started the publication of *The Nigerian Daily Times* in 1926. Nnamdi Azikiwe’s *West African Pilot*, which came out in 1937, was the first daily paper of his Zik Press Limited (Barber 2005; Coker 1968: 14ff., 82f.; Omu 1978: 26ff., 50ff.).

Newspapers moreover underwent changes with regards to the contents they carried – their pages increasingly complemented long dissertations with other coverage. Drawing on Reuters’ cable service, the papers featured international “news” if they could afford them. Correspondents supplied the papers with “News from the Provinces”, but the gathering of news remained a difficult task. With features like *The Nigerian Daily Times*’ “Women’s Corner”, entertaining sections such as “Week-End Humour”, “Grains of Knowledge”, puzzles or a “Children’s Corner” and by publishing short stories over the course of multiple issues, the papers ensured reader retention, and convened new publics (Azikiwe 1945a, 1945b; Barber 2005, 2007; Forbes 1931: 4).

Around 1920 the newspaper business experienced a “generational change” – pioneer Nigerian newspapermen such as George Alfred Williams (*The Lagos Standard*), James Bright Davies (*Nigerian Times/Times of Nigeria*) and John Payne Jackson (*The Lagos Weekly Record*) as well as Joseph Peter Herbert Brown (*The Gold Coast Leader*) of the Gold Coast died. Those continuing their ventures brought in new ideas, but also pledged to continue political journalism. They were reaffirming an assumed duty the

educated elite had embraced at the end of the 19th century, namely acting as custodians of the people's liberties, to defend them against unjust government measures (African Brotherhood 1920: 4; Cole 1975: 73ff., Danmole 2005, Omu 1978: 39ff., Our London Counterpart 1920: 5, Our New Series 1919: 3, The Passing of James Bright Davies 1920: 4, Zachernuk 2000: 19-46, 62).

Newspapers were no longer expressing solely the views of their proprietor/editor/journalist, but they were nevertheless attached to one of the political camps dominating Lagos politics. Overall, the political landscape may be divided into conservatives and radicals even though ruptures and alliances were intertwined and complex (Barber 2005, Cole 1975). In short, the water-rate protest – mobilisation against the imposition of a tax financing a potable water supply between 1908 and 1916 – may be regarded as causing the breaking up of an alliance between the 'traditional' and 'modern' elite. It ruptured a partnership in opposition to colonial legislation which came into existence in face of colonial policies with regards to land ownership. This disintegration fostered the so-called Muslim split. This power struggle over control of the Central Mosque was in turn intertwined with the so called Eleko question, which centred around the recognition of and support for the Oba (or "king") of Lagos. This question, which dominated Lagos politics in the 1920s and the early 1930s, therefore expressed and was an expression of various conflicts in Lagos politics. Superficially, the radicals – and their papers such as *The Lagos Weekly Record*, *The Lagos Standard*, *The Nigerian Times* and *the Lagos Daily News* – supported the Eleko, and the conservatives – and *The Nigerian Pioneer* and *The Nigerian Daily Times* respectively – wished to see him deposed (Cole 1975: 100ff., 168, Coleman 1965: 179ff., Okonkwo 1995: 11ff.).

Since 1861, when Lagos was ceded to Britain, the Oba of Lagos had officially had no political importance for the government. For giving up his control over trade and developments in Lagos, he received a government pension (July 1968: 383ff., Tamuno 1975: 29). Nevertheless, the government occasionally requested him to perform political duties (Coleman 1965: 195). Moreover, he was the head of and mediator between other Lagos chiefs. A large share of the people was loyal to the Eleko, some even declared their allegiance only to him, and not to Britain. For others, the office of the Oba

was outdated, and still others wanted to see another person filling the post (July 1968: 419, Cole 1975: 12ff., 102, 133). The Eleko was suspended for a short period in 1919, and again in 1920. He was deposed in 1925, and ordered to leave Lagos. Shortly after his arrival in Nigeria in 1931, Governor Donald Cameron reinstated the Eleko (Cole 1975: 123, 145ff.). The people publicly declared their support for the Eleko in mass meetings, petitions, and delegations and counter delegations to the government; the issue hit the headlines in Britain and was the subject matter of local press campaigns (Cole 1975: 101ff.). By way of example, *The Lagos Daily News* published more than 100 pieces on just one commission of inquiry associated with the matter (Cf. *The Lagos Daily News* 1931: 1).

When reflecting on their conduct and their role in society, newspapermen took pride in their ventures, but also saw room for improvement. In this regard, the press in “the more advanced countries of the world” served as a standard against which to judge local expressions of criticism and protest (*Newspapers in West Africa To-Day* 1933: 6). Nigerian newspapermen seemingly looked up to the efficiency of the press elsewhere, the recognition it enjoyed and the confidence readers accorded to it. They saw themselves in their infancy, and felt that they had “a long way yet to go” (*Newspapers in West Africa To-Day* 1933: 6, *The Press* 1931: 3). Nevertheless, the existence of several newspapers in Nigeria was seen as an indication of progress (*Our Twenty-sixth Year* 1919: 4). Moreover, the fact that people were making use of the newspapers and, therefore, were stating their concerns in a “sane and sober manner”, was to “compel attention from the proper quarters”. The use of newspapers enabled “amicable and peaceful adjustment” of controversial issues – a decade or two ago, people may have resorted to rioting and bloodshed instead, as one of the papers had assumed (*Newspapers in West Africa To-Day* 1933: 6). Nevertheless, other modes of registering presence in a community, such as processions and drumming, remained important modes of political expression as well as for spreading information (Cole 1975: 138, Olukoju 1997: 294, Schmidt 2005). Mainly conservative newspapermen additionally reinforced the importance of their papers by looking down on drumming and singing in the streets (Cf. *Rambling Notes & News* 1921: 8).

With regards to their potential to influence the conduct of the colonial state, newspapermen clearly identified a need for action. When launching his *Nigerian Times* in April 1910, James Bright Davies' paper laments "the confused jumble of tongues, notions and ideas which passes current[ly]" (A Reason for Our Faith 1910: 4). According to the article, this was not public opinion. Comparing this "confusion of tongues" to the biblical story of the tower of Babel, the paper states that it was no wonder that the nation was facing decay and ruin under a ruthless government. Moreover, the editorial dissociates itself from "sensationalism and (...) scurrilous and scandalous attacks on the personal and private character of individuals" as they are a "cankerworm (...) sapping the vitals of (...) national life" (A Reason for Our Faith 1910: 4). Similar concerns with utterances were also voiced in the 1930s. *The Comet*, a weekly paper edited by the renowned publicist Duse Mohammed Ali bewails the "absence of public opinion" which not only arrests economic progress but "causes the Administration to assume a dictatorship" – which could be disadvantageous to the interests of the people (Men and Matters 1933: 4, Omu 1968: 66ff.). Two letters to the editor published in the paper in 1933 voice concern with personal attacks staged in newspapers. They call for unity, brotherhood and solidarity as necessities in order to achieve progress, and to render it possible for Africans to rise (Okanrende 1933: 15, An Observer 1933: 15).

After the visit of the West African Press Delegation to London in 1943, the press once again appeared as essential means for achieving political aspirations – if there was an agreement on topics and opinions. The press could guide and direct the great changes – Azikiwe dubbed the members of the Press Delegation as "Ambassadors of Goodwill". As it was time for a common West African point of view, the press could render a unique service (Cf. A Common Viewpoint 1943: 2, Ambassadors of Goodwill 1943: 2). The press was not only described as *the* medium to express public opinion, moreover it was up to the press, more precisely the educated elite, to "crystallize" public opinion (Azikiwe 1945a: 2). It was up to those engaging in the newspaper business to "educate" the people, and this task was assigned to the "intelligent and educated members of this community" (A Reason for Our Faith 1910: 4). Public opinion needed to be brought under "proper training and be educated under intelligent direction" – otherwise it was brute force. Only education was to ensure the

comprehension and appraisal of the government's measures at their true value – to enable an assessment of whether government policy was beneficial or harmful (A Reason for Our Faith 1910: 4). This “duty” of the educated elite was not only associated with newspapers. Missionary Henry Townsend referred to history and politics when seeking to educate with his *Iwe Irohin*, the first Yoruba paper (Ajayi 1965: 158-159). The Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) sought “to educate and organise public opinion upon the principles of Democracy or Elective Representation” (The Intelligenzia of Lagos 1931: 1). But often the goal behind this “instruction” was rather general, pointing to efforts at persuasion. The Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) sought “[t]o educate and organise public opinion to a higher moral and intellectual lev[e], so that national consciousness may be developed and the achievement of the common ideal made possible”.⁶

Public criticism and the colonial state

For Nigerian newspapermen, their activities appeared to be an imperative in face of the colonial situation. And, despite restrictive media legislation and attempts to oppress criticism, the colonial state also had an interest in the availability of newspapers, and was concerned with the institutions and locations of public criticism. David Scott (1999: 45f.) shows that already in the 19th century colonial administrators were concerned with the instrumentalities and technologies of public opinion. According to him, colonial administrators in Ceylon sought to ensure that wants were of a certain kind. This – a public voicing “rational” wants – was, in turn, regarded to promote “good government” and at the same time break down support for local forms of knowledge. Therefore, the colonial state encouraged a certain form of public communication and public criticism, one that was regarded to strengthen the colonial state.

Nigeria saw restrictive newspaper legislation in 1902 and 1917, in 1909 the colonial state ratified the Seditious Offences Bill which limited freedom of expression. When Hugh Clifford held his first speech as Governor of Nigeria in the Nigerian Council in December 1919, the press welcomed this

⁶ The National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter TNA): Public Records Office (hereafter PRO): CO 583/234/15/30386: *Bernard Bourdillon*, Nigerian Youth Movement, 07. November 1938, Nigerian Youth Movement, n.d.: 20.

first insight into his approach to colonial policy. Even before his installation as Governor of Nigeria, the press had compared Clifford favourably to his predecessor in Nigeria, Frederick Lugard (White 1981: 60). According to *The Lagos Weekly Record*, Clifford represented a “great change” (The Old Order Changeth 1920: 5). One contributor was struck by the importance Clifford planned to attach to public criticism when formulating official policy – he detects “a readiness to face intelligent criticism of Governmental policies” (Adetayo 1920: 5). The importance attached to public criticism seems to be linked to the overall policy guiding colonial governance. Its significance appears to relate to two schools of colonial administration which scholars and contemporaries see personified by Clifford and Lugard. Lugard – and his systematization of Indirect Rule –, is seen as pursuing the isolation of governing bodies from various interests, aiming to silence protest, criticism and opposition, longing for silent and unquestioning obedience. In contrast to this, Clifford’s approach is perceived as open towards economic and other interests, as sensitive to public opinion, as keeping close relations to the general community (Nicolson 1977: 226, 233, Olusanya 2001: 523).

Clifford, who prided himself with his administrative experience, aimed to set himself apart from Lugard.⁷ In particular, he criticised the amalgamation of Nigeria implemented by Lugard in 1914⁸ and repeatedly emphasised that his goal was not only an amalgamated, but a *united* Nigeria (Clifford 1921: 1–14, Proceedings at the Official Banquet 1920: 4). As early as October 1919 – two months after his arrival in Nigeria – Clifford started to send lengthy dispatches to the Colonial Office in which he delineated the necessity for changes in the system in operation. Thereby, the encouragement of public criticism formed part of his line of argumentation. The “opposite views” held by Clifford and Lugard were known in the Colonial Office, and regretted rather than welcomed.⁹ For Clifford, Lugard’s approach sought the isolation of government bodies, and, moreover, hampered the economic

⁷ TNA: PRO: CO 583/80/73600: *Hugh Clifford*: Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria, 03. December 1919: 232. See also Stockwell 2004.

⁸ “Nigeria” consisted of three separately administered entities up to 1906, and it was mainly economic motives that lead to the merger of the southern provinces in 1906, and the amalgamation with the Northern Province, which was implemented by Frederick Lugard in 1914 (see Kalu 1964: 15ff).

⁹ TNA: PRO: CO 583/80/73600: Clifford, Amalgamation, 03. December 1919, Minute, John Alfred Harding, 27. January 1920: 210.

development of Nigeria. To him, the amalgamation was the attempt to expand the northern system of Indirect Rule to the South. Clifford sought to reverse this and argued for interaction with the people. According to him, only, "as close a touch as possible with the public, European and native [sic!], whose affairs it is their [the government's, author's note] business to administer" could secure moderately good government.¹⁰ In order to cross the threshold of great commercial expansion at which Nigeria was standing, the operations of government should "be carried out in the midst of the most active life and thought of the country, whence it is able to maintain the closest touch with every section of the community, and where its actions are exposed to the close[s]t scrutiny and criticism".¹¹ If a capital was chosen in other "British Tropical Possessions" it was recognised that much depended upon the government's "close and active cooperation with those sections of the public which are engaged in the promotion of trade and of business enterprise".¹²

In the Colonial Office Clifford's eagerness for the development of economic resources was well received, but not to be placed over Lugard's model of Indirect Rule. The Colonial Office was dominated by enthusiastic Lugardian Indirect Rulers, and, therefore, Clifford could not succeed with his proposed reversal of the overall policy guiding the administration of Nigeria.¹³ Clifford apparently had to confine his aspirations with regards to public criticism to the South. In the course of proposals for a "reform" of the legislative machinery of Nigeria, more precisely the Legislative Council, which provided for a very limited elective representation, Clifford again stressed the importance of public criticism and close scrutiny of government policy.¹⁴

But besides attaching importance to public criticism, Clifford became known for denouncing a local form of criticism: the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA). Meeting for its first conference in Accra in

¹⁰ TNA: PRO: CO 583/80/73600: Clifford, Amalgamation, 03. December 1919: 246.

¹¹ TNA: PRO: CO 583/84/7580: *Harry Claude Moorhouse*: Nigerian Council, 25. January 1920: 3. See also: *The Capital of Nigeria*. In: *The Lagos Weekly Record*, 14. February 1920: 5.

¹² TNA: PRO: CO 583/80/73600: Clifford, Amalgamation, 03. December 1919: 246.

¹³ TNA: PRO: CO 583/80/73600: Clifford, Amalgamation, 03. December 1919, Milner to Clifford, 5. July 1920: 299-304. See also: White 1981: 38.

¹⁴ TNA: PRO: CO 583/100/19595: *Hugh Clifford*: Legislative Council: Reconstitution, 26. March 1921.

March 1920, delegates from Gambia, Gold Coast, Nigeria and Sierra Leone constituted what Imanuel Geiss (1968) dubs the dominant nationalist organisation of the 1920. Aspirations by an educated elite to form such an organisation date as far back as 1912/1913, and were stimulated amongst others by developments in India and Ceylon and the unsettling force of World War I (Coleman 1965: 178, 191f., Eluwa 1971: 205ff., Geiss 1968: 180, 221f., Langley 1978: 118ff.; Olusanya 2001: 522; Omu 1978: 231). Late in 1920 the NCBWA sent a delegation to London in order to present their agenda – the demand for economic and educational reforms and constitutional reforms granting the people a voice on their affairs in the Legislative and Municipal Governments – to the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Langley 1978: 131, 243, National Congress of British West Africa 1920: 6). Clifford denounced the NCBWA in his speech to the Nigerian Council in December 1920 – in which he, at the same time, delineates his imagination of public criticism and public opinion. Clifford's critique of the NCBWA appears to be in defence of *his* plans for a representative assembly and against a potentially competing model for control and criticism of government policies by the people. Correspondingly, in his speech to the Nigerian Council in December 1920, Clifford at first announces his plan to send proposals with regards to a reform of the legislative machinery to the Colonial Office for consideration. Subsequently, he introduces the denunciation of the NCBWA as "one matter with which I wish to deal before I quit the subject of the control and criticism, in the public interest, of the actions of the Government through the agency of a Representative Assembly" (Clifford 1920: 18). Clifford delineates the alleged "unrepresentativeness" of the Congress and evokes the representativeness of the government and its institutions. In addition to corresponding to his imagination of representativeness, public criticism should not set the agenda of political discussion; rather, it should follow and potentially amend government policy. The "general public" should be afforded with all the information on which to base an opinion – especially with regards to public revenues. Then, the public should scrutinise the government's plans, "detect weaknesses or defects that may have escaped official calculations, (...) utter warnings that may be needed, and (...) bring the force of outside criticism to bear upon questions which the Governor and his advisers may not have considered with sufficient closeness from the point of view of

special interests or from that of the unofficial community as a whole" (Clifford 1920: 225).

Even though Clifford rejected the aspirations of the educated elite when denouncing the NCBWA, he did not seek for the elite's simple subordination to Indirect Rule – unlike Lugard.¹⁵ Rather, Clifford evoked a "civilising mission" with regard to public criticism. He obligated the educated elite to spread and foster a "public opinion" corresponding to his imagination of colonial conduct. In this regard European ideas or concepts amounted to the only standard and it was up to the African to select, translate and adapt "from among the lavish crop, borne by the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which the elaborate civilisation of modern Europe to-day offers to mankind" (Clifford 1920: 55). In reference to the NCBWA and their critique this meant to not imitate political theories evolved for a different set of circumstances for the government of people who were at a different "stage of civilisation" (Clifford 1920: 21ff.). The careful selection of appropriate concepts and ideas could only be ensured by an education which not only encompassed reading, writing and arithmetics, but also "basic principles that mould and regulate character and conduct" (Clifford 1920: 52). Correspondingly, to him, the "better instructed" and "wiser and more cultivated representatives of African opinion in Lagos" (Clifford 1920: 20) had repudiated the claims and demands of the NCBWA. Clifford therefore calls for the cultivation of a "robust PUBLIC OPINION that will not tolerate mere *imitation*, but insist upon selection and *adaptation* of the gifts of Europe" (Clifford 1920: 55, all emphasis in original). The particularities of this demarcation of colonial conduct were to lie with the colonial government and its fulfilment was only achievable in the distant future: according to Clifford the "inculcation of right instincts and the formation of sane and sound public opinion must inevitably be slow and gradual process" (Clifford 1923: 3).

For Clifford, the reconstituted Legislative Council amounted to a hotbed for and a means to instruct the elite along the lines of "public opinion" envisioned by him. Granting a limited franchise in the refashioned council –

¹⁵ According to Lugard, the interests of the majority should not be subjected to the will of "educated" Africans. Therefore, educated Africans should participate in the state as councillors to the "Native Ruler". To Lugard, Indirect Rule made Chiefs independent from educated African lawyers or advisers. See Lugard 1922: 116, 196, 223.

four members were to be elected by wealthy inhabitants of Lagos and Calabar – may therefore be regarded as a move to incorporate opposition, to subjugate critics to his outline of public criticism. This way, it appeared to Clifford, they were imbued with a sense of responsibility as they were no longer able to spread their “mischievous rumours” without being publicly brought to account for them.¹⁶ The Council Clifford envisioned was effected by means of a new constitution in 1922. Henceforth the nominated and elected members of the Council should form, educate and lead public opinion “along sound and rational lines”, they should engage in “fearlessly condemning all that is lawless and dishonest; and of championing the thing that is right, no matter whether it chance to be popular or unpopular” (Clifford 1923: 4). Clifford envisioned the local press as part of the effort of cultivating a “robust public opinion”. He measured them with regards to their capacity for attaining publicity for the work of the government – to spread “sound public opinion” – and denied it any right to set the topics of the political agenda.¹⁷ Clifford sought to employ the educated elite in the transmission of his imaginations of colonial conduct which also meant to exercise a specific form of public criticism. This form of “criticism” made no provisions for the educated elite to mediate needs they identified to the government. The limited provisions for public criticism were portrayed as enabling “good government”, and should, therefore, legitimize the colonial state. Starting from the late 1920s, the Colonial Office reconsidered its approach to public communication and commenced to foster the distribution of its opinions via mass media (Smyth 1979, 2001). The aim was to gain the audience’s approval – the public sphere was considered as an arena for the distribution of imaginations of colonial conduct – by way of example in the course of programmes such as Education for Citizenship. Moreover, during World War II, the governance of public communication appeared to be crucial for ensuring loyalty to the empire.

Quite contrary, newspapermen assumed to speak for the people and sought to implement “government by journalism” (Baylen 2004). In 1919, a contributor refers to a conceptualisation of journalism delineated by Joseph Ephraim Casely Hayford in 1903, and claims that it contains a lesson which

¹⁶ TNA: PRO: CO 583/100/19595: Clifford, Legislative Council, 26. March 1921: 114f.

¹⁷ TNA: PRO: CO 583/100/19595: Clifford, Legislative Council, 26. March 1921: 107f. See also Clifford 1920: 224f.

“will do West Africa a great good” (A Togolander 1919: 7). Casely Hayford explains that he had turned to newspapers had he not gone to the bar. He considered the duty of journalists to speak for the silent ones, to interpret the mourning and tumults of crowds – to be the word of the people.¹⁸ Newspapers should be the mouth-piece of the people, and their editors ready friends – the newspaper was the only medium for expressing public opinion, the only medium to make the popular voice heard (Casely Hayford 1903: 181, Weekly Notes 1902: 3, The Newspaper Ordinance 1902: 2). More than giving a voice to the people, newspapers amounted to an institution which was indispensable in face of the colonial situation and its power imbalances. The press was seen as a necessity, because there were no appropriate institutions for restraining and checking abuses of the local colonial government. The newspapermen particularised that if people appealed to the authorities in Downing Street the latter only consulted facts and findings provided by the local authority appealed against (The Thoughtless Tirade 1910: 4, Our New Series 1919: 3).

Besides a self-portrayal as a counterweight to the colonial state, the press claimed to know the people’s needs and aspirations, and, therefore, demonstrated that they had knowledge valuable for “good government”. Thereby, “good government” stood for a true implementation of ideals associated with Britain, such as justice and righteousness, fair-play and equity. To the newspapermen, the local government was fallible in this regard (The Anti-slavery and Aborigines Protection Society 1910: 2, The Thoughtless Tirade 1910: 4). The journalists positioned themselves as the ones to safeguard “good government”: according to the press, the people knew the meaning of being under colonial rule, and, consequently, they also knew what was beneficial to them, and what was not. The press – as the representatives of the interests of the people – was articulating the aspirations and needs of the people in contrast to colonial authorities (The Thoughtless Tirade 1910: 4). This contestation of colonial power intended not to be seditious – probably also in the light of respective legislation, such

¹⁸ Casely Hayford refers to a conceptualisation of journalism as delineated by William Thomas Stead, a British newspaperman. Stead sought to implement “government by journalism”, and adapted a passage of Victor Hugo’s “L’homme qui rit” when explaining what caused him to never cease rejoicing to be a journalist and what he sees as his mission as a journalist. See Stead 1897: 25ff., Casely Hayford 1903: 181; A Togolander 1919: 6f.

as the Seditious Offences Bill (Adetayo 1920: 5, Coleman 1965: 179ff., Omu 1978: 182ff.). The press contended the government's self-appointed expertise on the people's needs by evoking "education" not only when seeking to mobilise the people to engage in politics. The press portrayed administrators as being in need of education too. Being foreigners, they could not be expected to have a deep understanding of local social and political problems (Adetayo 1920: 5). It was only "correct knowledge of each other's point of view that will make friendship between nations possible" (Our London Counterpart 1920: 5). This task of interpreting was assigned to the educated elite.

The newspapermen's conceptualisation of public criticism entailed a contestation of the government at its own game. When voicing their critique, Nigerian newspapermen referred to a set of liberal ideals associated with Britain, and related their criticism to the institutions of government. In this way, and against this backdrop, they proved to be a prerequisite for "good government", and sought to alter the conduct of the government's institutions.

Mechanisms in the public sphere

Although newspapermen, contributors and politicians agreed that an accordance of opinions was a prerequisite for a successful contestation of colonial power, they disagreed with regards to who was to voice such a public opinion. Suchlike disputes found expression in so-called press controversies. By way of example, when Governor Donald Cameron arrived in Nigeria in June 1931, the newspapers published speeches held by various representatives of the Lagos community at this occasion. This sparked a controversy between the conservative *Nigerian Daily Times* and the radical *Lagos Daily News* when the latter questioned whether Henry Carr, the former Resident, was entitled to welcome Donald Cameron on behalf of the community of Lagos. Via the newspapers, the different factions of Lagos politics were contesting to speak in the name of the people (At it again 1931: 6, *The Intelligenza of Lagos* 1931: 1)¹⁹.

¹⁹ Between 22. and 24. June 1931 three issues of *The Lagos Daily News* are missing in the British Library Newspaper Library. The paper's attacks are therefore reconstructed with the help of *The Nigerian Daily Times*.

According to the newspapermen, questions affecting the public were of concern to everybody (The Public Man 1919: 4). Moreover, a citizen “should go the length of interesting himself in what, for instance, would contribute to the welfare of his fellow-citizens” (Citizenship 1931: 3). It was a civic “right” of everybody to be in communication with any government department with regard to “the removal of anything which such people may consider derogatory to the health of all in their vicinity” (Citizenship 1931: 3). A man’s worth was not only determined by money, rather it was dependent on the quality of the services he rendered for the welfare of the people, on “usefulness and public service” (What are you worth ? 1931: 3). But only some were qualified to be opinion leaders, to represent public opinion, to “lead their compatriots in the path of the best interests without self-seeking” (Men of Vision 1931: 3). According to *The Lagos Daily News* a person’s unstinted service to the cause of humanity would make certain persons “veritable ‘idols’ of the people” (Personality 1931: 3). In the 1920s and the early 1930s, the public sphere resembles a place for competition of individuals over prominence which in turn seemingly guaranteed influence in politics (Benhabib 1992: 78f.).

The activities of Herbert Macaulay demonstrate this coalescence of popularity and politics. His addressing of colonial injustices earned him far-reaching popularity and reaffirmed his right to speak in public. When referring to his political doings, I.B. Thomas – himself a newspaperman and author of Macaulay’s biography – claims that Macaulay dominated the “race for eminence as a public benefactor” (Thomas 1946: 39). Scholars refer to Macaulay’s charisma when assessing his ability to mobilise large sections of the community for public demonstrations, mass meetings or the signing of petitions. He managed to unite different sections of the community in the radical faction (Baker 1974: 88ff., 136, Cole 1975: 110ff., 132).

In May 1931, the *Lagos Daily News* – Macaulay’s paper – held a popularity contest – the paper asked its readers to post letters with the names of persons they thought to be the most popular in Lagos. Readers of the paper should nominate persons “very many people are prepared to conjure with”, persons, whose names were on all lips in consequence of the fact that their owners were ever ready to identify themselves with the aspirations of their fellowmen and had proved their unstinted services for the common weal

(Four Popular Names 1931: 3). The contest saw Herbert Macaulay and Eshugbayi Eleko win. To the editorial staff of the *Lagos Daily News*, this result affirmed the conception that those most popular were entitled to lead. It showed that people “take in what is actually going on around them” (The Four Popular Names Competition 1931: 1).

About a month after this contest, the *Nigerian Daily Times* published an alternative conceptualisation of the relationship between “popularity” and leadership ability. In “What’s in a Name?” John Moray Stuart-Young laments that work was no longer performed for work’s own sake, that famous men or women were no longer unassuming members of the community. The glamour of fame – of the famous person’s hidden powers – was replaced by publicity as “every thought and attitude, every gesture and personal idiosyncrasy” of famous persons was known (Stuart-Young 1931: 8). Even though Stuart-Young refers to novelists, scientists and craftsmen, this notion of popularity corresponds to the views held by those behind and associated with the *Nigerian Daily Times*, the conservatives. According to this faction, the acts of those politicians shouting loudest – a reference to the Herbert Macaulay faction – were to be assessed at the “proper quarters” (At it Again 1931: 6, Cole 1975: 161). Only the quality of their utterances was to determine their leadership ability, not their popularity.

The above mentioned press controversy between the *Nigerian Daily Times* and the *Lagos Daily News* about who was to welcome Governor Cameron in the name of the community of Lagos moreover discloses mechanisms of exclusion evoked by those becoming articulate via the press. Macaulay’s popularity seemingly enabled mobilising the masses, and, therefore, legitimized his speaking out. His opponents were united by the shared hostility towards him and their rejection of the positions he stood for (Baker 1974: 108). Seemingly in vain, they tried to reach out to the people, to bring “different sections of the population (...) into new collective relationships” by way of example by means of publishing articles in the Yoruba language (Barber 2005: 190). With regards to the controversy, *The Lagos Daily News* claimed to have a right to speak in the name of the Nigerian National Democratic Party which held all elected seats in the Legislative Council. They alone were to speak for the community of Lagos (The Intelligenza of Lagos 1931: 1). *The Nigerian Daily Times* countered this entitlement by

invoking an exclusive right to speak. Henry Carr, who had addressed Cameron on behalf of the community, was an honourable man, and therefore had a right to speak. This justification resembles the paper's notion of popularity, which suggests that shouting loudest (publicity) is shallow, and that publicity should not be mistaken for the true value of acts (the hidden powers). Correspondingly, *The Nigerian Daily Times* argues that "the other side" – Herbert Macaulay, the *Lagos Daily News*, and the Nigerian National Democratic Party – was fooling the masses. The "masses" were portrayed as an assembly of cooks, stewards, mechanics, and market women vulnerable to their empty and passing show (At it again 1931: 6f.). In this instance, the press appears to be less an arena for negotiations with regards to contents, than a platform for reinforcing claims about being rightfully entitled to speak out. In addition to this allusions to class, some tied justifications for speaking out to 'education'. In letters to the editor or columns, contributors questioned the "intellectuality" of certain editors, advised other contributors to obtain "more enlightenment" in night schools, or generally held "semi-educated" elements responsible for political controversy (Obasa of Ikija 1919: 6a, The Resident of the Colony 1921: 6, Alakija 1937: 7). This kind of reference sought to delegitimize opposing views.

Overall, the notion of who was entitled to represent public opinion and who could potentially assemble a momentum strong enough to contest the colonial state changed in the 1930s. Youthful organisations took over the role of opinion leaders, of those entitled to represent public opinion, from "public men" (Zachernuk 2000: 87). The Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) made its mark in 1938, when organising protests against a buying agreement by leading European exporting firms that saw a decrease in the prices paid for Nigerian cocoa – the so called "Cocoa Pool" (Falola/Heaton 2008: 142). Consequently, the movement could rally votes for the upcoming elections to the Legislative Council by contrasting their activities to their opponent's inactivity. According to the movement, those currently holding seats in the Legislative Council did not provide the people with first-hand information on local affairs, instead, the people had to get their information through the press. What then were the councillors there for? This line of argumentation paved the way for the party's claim that the time for the "youth" to be articulate had come – it was now up to the movement to

address the government on the people's grievances (Youth Movement Holds First Election Campaign Meeting 1938: 1, 7f.).

In 1944, the National Council of Nigerian and the Cameroons (NCNC) seized the youthful momentum. Combining Macaulay's power base and new allies, such as trade unions, Nnamdi Azikiwe, embraced the role as Macaulay's "political son" (Baker 1974: 92). He could convincingly claim that it was now up to the NCNC to "crystallize the natural aspirations of our people, to express in concrete form the trend of public opinion, and to emancipate our nation from the manacles of political bondage" (Azikiwe 1961: 153).

Summary

The form, substance and purpose of the public sphere in colonial Nigeria undoubtedly concerned politicians, newspapermen and colonial administrators. Thereby, the government and the governed imagined the public sphere, and, thus, the political terrain, in opposing ways. The former sought to convince the educated elite to engage in public criticism and "sound public opinion" which strengthened the colonial state, for instance in the Legislative Council and by distributing such opinions via the press. Respective utterances should – for the time being – not set the agenda of political discussions, they should rather follow and potentially amend government policy. Quite contrarily, newspapermen and Nigerian politicians saw themselves and their newspapers as advocates of the needs and aspirations of the people, and sought for the government to acknowledge their utterances as such. According to them, they were a prerequisite for "good government" – as only they knew what the people wanted and needed.

Overall aspiring a consonance of opinions within the public sphere, which was seen as a necessity to alter and contest the colonial state successfully, different groups contested whose utterances were to constitute such a public opinion. Lagos politics in the 1920s and 1930s was dominated by popular public men; their popularity legitimized their claim to speak on behalf of the people. Alternative conceptions of opinion leaders and public opinion stressed class and education of those becoming articulate in the

public sphere. In the 1930s, organisations replaced the claims of public men and argued convincingly that they not only expressed, but also formed public opinion.

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