

**CLASS:** SS2  
**SUBJECT:** GOVIC  
**TOPIC:** INDIRECT RULE IN NIGERIA  
**WEEK:** 3  
**TERM:** THIRD TERM

### Meaning of Indirect Rule

Indirect rule was introduced in Nigeria by Sir Lord Frederick Lugard. It is a process by which the British ruled through **chiefs** and their **councils** which were intermediaries. It can as well be seen as the system whereby the traditional rulers (native authorities) in British colonies were used to rule their own people under the supervision of the British officials. In other words, the local traditional political institutions were employed by the colonial masters to rule the natives.

The practice was very successful in northern Nigeria but in the south, it was not so successful.

### The Reasons for the Adoption of Indirect Rule

The principle of indirect rule was adopted for the following reasons:

1. **The experience of Lord Lugard:** Indirect rule was first introduced in India and later in East and Central Africa. In these places, the system was successful. The success prompted Lord Lugard to introduce the system in Nigeria.
2. **Personnel reason:** Indirect rule was introduced because there were not enough Englishmen ready to work in Africa. For example, by 1914 there were only 9 British officers to administer the whole of northern Nigeria.
3. **Language barrier:** The problem of communication was another reason for the introduction of indirect rule. The people of Nigeria could not speak or understand English language and the British officials could not speak local languages. Therefore, indirect rule was used.
4. **The absence of good roads:** Most of the British colonies were large. To further compound this problem, most of the villages were linked by footpaths and people had to trek long distances before getting to their destinations.
5. **British policy of preservation:** Another reason that accounted for the adoption of this system was the British state intention to preserve all that were good in Africa.
6. **Problem of finance:** The British government used the indirect rule system because it was cheaper for them to use African traditional chiefs.
7. **The existence of good administrative systems:** Before the advent of colonialism, they were already good administrative systems in Nigeria. For instance, the Fulani/Hausa

Empire, the Yoruba and Benin kingdoms had good systems of keeping law and order. Therefore, the colonial masters decided to use the systems that were already in place.

8. **The experience of the American War of Independence in 1776:** One of the reasons for the adoption of indirect rule was the experience of the America War of Independence. The United States of America was a former British colony. The British invested a lot of money in that country, but unfortunately for them, the original inhabitants of the land took up arms and waged a revolt against them. Other powerful nations supported America and they won the war. Since then, the British decided never to invest in their colonies.

### **Indirect Rule in Northern Nigeria**

One of the reasons for the indirect rule policy was for the purpose of local government along traditional lines. The system rested upon native courts and native authority ordinances.

The protectorate of northern Nigeria was divided into six provinces and each under a British official known as **Province Resident**. Each province was further divided into districts and placed under **District Commissioners**.

The system of indirect rule was successful in the northern Nigeria, and the following factors can account for this success:

1. The **Sokoto Caliphate** already possessed a highly developed and efficient system of administration needed by the colonial masters
2. The North had a centralized system of taxation and treasury officials. There were also Muslim cults and an outstanding army for both internal and external aggression.
3. There was also in existence a **tradition of submission** by the northerners to authority, as the Emirs were regarded as God's representative on earth.
4. The level of education of the people in the North was very low, that nobody could question the British system.
5. As a result of the nature of the northern traditional system, British officials were able to control the emirs and the emirs controlled the people. It was the successful application of the system in the north that prompted Lord Lugard to adopt the system in southern Nigeria.

### **Indirect Rule in Western Nigeria**

The indirect rule recorded a partial success in western Nigeria contrary to Lugard's expectation. The Yoruba Oba did not possess absolute power. For instance, the Oba in

Yoruba traditional society was responsible to his council of chiefs (Oyomasi). They could dethrone him and force him to commit suicide, if he decides to rule autocratically.

Secondly, contrary to Lugard's expectations, power in Yoruba society was shared among a number of chiefs representing their linages over which the Oba had limited power.

Thirdly, by reason of the Oba's position as the spiritual head he could not appear in public except on special occasion. This made it difficult for the Oba to function as the head of the native administration that was created by the colonial masters.

On the whole, the checks and balances that existed in the Yoruba traditional system prevented the Oba from becoming autocratic. When the colonial masters attempted to increase the powers of the Oba, the people rose in opposition and this led to the Sayen riot of 1916 and the Ijeora massacre of 1918.

### **Why Indirect Rule Failed Partially in the West**

1. The traditional political system in existence did not give the monarch or Oba absolute powers, even though the system was centralized.
2. The traditional political system was hierarchical in structure.
3. The Yoruba had a sizeable number of educated elite.
4. The tax collection system in the West was weak.
5. The principle of checks and balances was in practice.
6. The educated elite were excluded from the indirect rule system hence they opposed it.

### **Indirect Rule in Eastern Nigeria**

The system of indirect rule failed in Eastern Nigeria because the Igbo lacked the traditional system of administration that was necessary for its success. For instance, the Igbo chiefs did not have much power like the northern Emirs. Thus, the people were not used to being controlled by the traditional rulers of any central authority. The people respected age, and leadership came from the entire council of elders.

In order to make the system of indirect rule work, the colonial masters introduced the position of **warrant chiefs**. This was however new to the people. The people saw the warrant chiefs as tyrants. This coupled with the introduction of taxation led to the Aba women riot of 1929 and the Calabar and Opobo riot the same year.

### **Why Indirect Rule Failed Significantly in the East**

1. There were no traditional rulers in Igbo political system that could be seen as a central leader.
2. The imposition of warrant chiefs was a major flaw.
3. The system was fragmented and democratic, and did not allow for oppression.

4. The level of literacy was already high in the Eastern region when the system was introduced.
5. The system of taxation in existence in Igbo land was not authoritarian.
6. The traditional system was highly decentralized

### **Merits of the Indirect Rule System**

1. The system was economical. It helped to solve the problem of limited financial resources and personnel.
2. The system preserved the good aspects of the indigenous political institutions. For instance, the people were allowed to administer their territories. In places like northern Nigeria it appeared as if the people were ruling themselves.
3. The system encouraged local community development. The colonial masters used part of the tax collected for the construction of roads, schools and hospitals.
4. The system also solved the problem of communication. If the colonial masters had ruled directly they would have had the problem of passing information across to the people.
5. The system helped to change some traditional beliefs and practices like human sacrifices and killing of twins.
6. Infrastructural facilities such as roads, railways and electricity were developed for effective administration.

### **Demerits of the Indirect Rule System**

1. The system reduced the traditional chief to mere puppets and agents of the colonial masters.
2. The system directly caused the death of some traditional rulers.
3. In some places, the creation of the position of warrant chiefs led to widespread rioting.
4. Power was centralized in the hands of a few individuals at the expense of the masses. Therefore the masses could not participate in government.

### **ASSIGNMENT**

Explain the following terms:

- a. Warrant Chiefs.
- b. Province Resident.
- c. District Commissioners.
- d. Sanyin riot of 1916.