

Post-war Societies (Africa)

By [Walter Gam Nkwi](#)

Summary

This article focuses on the Africans who fought in the First World War and the role they played in bringing about social transformation in postwar African societies. It sheds light on the ex-soldiers as entrepreneurs and missionaries. The essay concludes that the First World War soldiers were responsible both individually and collectively for the introduction of “modernity” and thus were “progressive” influences in their various societies. They were also responsible for disrupting certain socio-cultural traditions and thus introduced some elements of social instability in postwar Sub Saharan Africa.

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Introduction

When the First World War erupted in 1914, Africa was largely a [colonial backwater](#) and Europeans considered most Africans to be “hewers of wood” and “drawers of water.”¹ European powers soon realised that the recruitment of Africans as soldiers and carriers in the war was inevitable. Historians David Killingray and James Matthews note that many carriers and soldiers in the First World War came from Africa.² [Joe Harris Lunn](#) contends that approximately 140,000 West Africans served as combatants, and out of this number 31,000 were [killed](#).³

[Much has been written](#) on the First World War in Africa. For instance, D.K. Fieldhouse discusses the political ramifications of the war on both European powers and colonial dependencies in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, while W.E.F. Ward provides a summary of

developments in Africa between the war and the advent of the worldwide economic depression of the 1930s. Like D.K. Fieldhouse, Robin Hallet discusses the political consequences of the war for the development of Sudanese and Egyptian [nationalism](#), especially as relates to the Wafd party. He shows that the wartime saga was a solvent that broke down the isolation of many African communities and the experience of seeing whites killing whites de-mystified European superiority for Africans. Byron Farwell, Edward Paice, and [Hew Strachan](#) focused their works on how the war was executed in Africa. A few scholars have focused on [East Africa](#). J.D. Overton examines the impact of the war on the economic development among the settler community in Kenya, while the East African scholar, G.W.T. Hodges provides statistics for the British forces in East Africa.⁴ [West Africa](#) has also attracted the attention of many scholars.⁵ However, much of the literature has focused on the political and economic consequences of the war, thus underemphasising the social change that ex-soldiers introduced into African societies as a whole and West Africa in particular. Nevertheless, the return of soldiers from the war front also disrupted social cohesion in their societies, although it has been suggested elsewhere that “post-war trouble from ex-soldiers was slight.”⁶

This article examines the role of First World War African ex-soldiers as agents of social change in Africa, primarily drawing upon West African examples as a case study. Scant attention has been paid to the effects of World War One on post-war societies in Africa. The war had important social effects which have not been taken seriously by scholars so far, and so further research on other areas of the continent is needed. Several areas in Africa were active theaters of the war. The East African campaign was the longest anywhere in the world and involved large numbers of Africans as soldiers and porters. Many of the peoples of West Africa, from the Guinea Coast to Lake Chad, and south from the Sahara desert to the Atlantic Ocean, were also caught up in the war, particularly those recruited from the lower rungs of society, even in the remotest parts of the region. Many who seemed marginal members of society rose in influence after the war. They were responsible for the social transformations in the domains of entrepreneurship, evangelism, throughout West Africa, as were similarly situated ex-soldiers in other parts of the continent. These men commanded respect from their peers and enjoyed enhanced prestige as people who had travelled far and wide and performed heroic acts. They brought new attitudes and their newly found prestige. Such roles played by African ex-soldiers as agents of social change have hitherto received insufficient attention from researchers.

Rather than assuming that social change necessarily involves only the imposition of Western-style structures from above, this article considers change as more of a continuing series of adjustments and reactions within African indigenous social structures, for which outside

forces acted as catalysts rather than instigators. The significance of such a study is hardly in doubt. Michael Crowder has noted that “the social consequences of the war for Africa varied considerably from territory to territory and depended on the extent of their involvement.” Yet he also concluded that the social consequences of the war cannot be neglected:

Compared with the research conducted on the political consequences of the war for Africa, comparatively little has been undertaken on its social consequences. Yet its impact on soldiers, carriers and labourers who were uprooted from the limited worlds of their villages and sent thousands of miles away and their impact on their societies on their return forms a major theme in colonial history.⁷

Recruitment of Soldiers

The [recruitment of Africans](#) to fight the war alongside their colonial masters was crucial. Although Africans had demonstrated an aptitude for [warfare](#) during resistance to colonial incursions, even fighting in European armies in small numbers, it was not until the outbreak of the First World War that Africans were enlisted in great numbers to fight on the side of their colonial masters. More than 2 million Africans served in the war as soldiers or carriers. In the East African campaign, between 750,000 and 1 million Africans were recruited into service as porters, hauling the equipment of the opposing armies “through forest and swamp.”⁸ Conscription in French Africa followed the Decree of 1912 in which a permanent black army was conscripted to perform military service for four years.⁹ However, recruitment did not occur without resistance in West Africa, with notable resistance to conscription in French Dahomey. Elsewhere on the continent, similar resistance from the Barwe people of Mozambique who rose against the [Portuguese in that area](#) was recorded.¹⁰

A closer examination of the situation in West Africa suggests that many [tirailleurs sénégalais](#), a name generally given to troops recruited from French West Africa to fight on the side of [France](#), numbered 170,891 men. Approximately 30,000 of them were killed. In French Senegal more than one-third of all males of military age were mobilised.¹¹ The idea of France raising such a colossal number of troops had been suggested as early as 1910 by [Charles Mangin \(1866-1925\)](#), who predicted that in case of war French West Africa alone could raise as many as 40,000 men. In the context of the time, it appeared impossible to raise such a number.¹² David Killingray notes that 14,785 troops came from British West Africa at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, and another 50,000 during the 1915-16 enlistment campaign.¹³

Recruitment in the British Gold Coast was guided by particular policies. Conscious efforts were made by the British Crown and local administrators to ensure that only members of designated ethnic groups and people with specialised skills were recruited into the colonial forces. Four categories of people were recruited for the military: slaves, traders, porters, and ordinary people who were lower in rung than the indigenous elites. Ethnically, the preference was for Hausa, Yoruba, Wangara, or from any of the “tribes” in Northern Ghana such as Grushi, Kanjarga (Bulsa), Dagomba, Gonja, Frafra, and Mossi.¹⁴ It was these soldiers who were partly responsible for social change in their respective territories after the war, through the foundation of new settlements, entrepreneurship, the introduction of new ideas and [technologies](#), and the spread of Christianity. On assuming the allied command in East Africa, General [Jan Christiaan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#) similarly authorised a massive recruitment effort for the [King's African Rifles](#) throughout east and central Africa, with similar results.¹⁵

Soldiers as Traders and Foundation of new Settlements

Removed from remote villages, soldiers fought far away from their homes and returned with new views and new things. In Central and [Southern Africa](#), they started small businesses where they sold basic goods needed for homes. Songs, which they had chanted while at war, like “take the happy tidings where trade can be done” were taken seriously by the ex-soldiers.¹⁶ In West Africa, many demobilised soldiers also became traders. Through their trading activities new and modern products reached African homes. In the Gold Coast, for instance, ex-soldiers, most of whom were northerners, returned to their homes in the north of the country, while others returned to their homes beyond the frontiers of Ghana, in Togo and Burkina Faso. The colonial authorities’ policy was to prevent soldiers from remaining in towns, since they feared that in towns they might form an alienated group of potentially unemployable troublemakers. Nonetheless, the British colonial authorities encouraged some soldiers upon discharge to settle in certain coastal towns. Those who were encouraged to settle on the coast, preferred staying in the *Zongos*, migrant communities in the towns of southern Ghana.¹⁷

Residence in the *Zongos* benefited both the colonial administrators and the ex-soldiers. For the colonial administration, the group could be called up in times of crises and shortage of personnel. Additionally, even though there was the fear of unemployment, the soldiers could nonetheless work in the expanding city as drivers, porters, teamsters, photographers, mechanics, launderers, and newspapermen, among other prominent occupations. For the ex-soldiers, staying in the *Zongos* provided them with a psychological link to the rural hinterland, where they had been recruited. *Zongos*, even though in the south, maintained a northern flavor both in their physical environment and way of life. Money from savings and

payment of discharge bonuses enabled them to easily enter into trade and transportation.

In Bamenda, Cameroon, which was administered as part of the Eastern Provinces of Nigeria, many ex-soldiers settled in "Old Town," an area similar to the *Zongos*. Ex-soldiers in Bamenda were kept quite near to the British colonial administration. The soldiers' experiences in the war provided them with skills that proved valuable and allowed veterans to enter the colonial administration in large numbers and by the 1930s the veterans had become a "vibrant visible symbol of colonial administration."¹⁸ Ex-soldiers who finally settled at Old Town were also involved in trading and transportation.¹⁹

The question remains, however, why many veterans felt that they should not return to their home villages after demobilisation. The African historian, Gregory Mann, has captured why this occurred using Mali in West Africa as a case study:

Demobilisation was chaotic, in part because the French administration had inadequately planned for it, naively assuming that soldiers would simply return "home", never mind that "home" was often nowhere near the location of their discharge, that some of their villages no longer existed, or that veterans wanted to avoid returning to places where they would have to be subordinate to elders or in some cases former masters."²⁰

In post-war West Africa the introduction of motor vehicles, was largely fueled by former soldiers who had travelled far and wide, learned to drive and had become mechanics. More than 1,000 soldiers from the Gold Coast fought in far-away Cameroon in the 1914-16 campaign and came back with new skills of drivers and mechanics. Many ex-soldiers also worked as engineers in the ports of Port Harcourt in Nigeria and Dakar aiding their rise as prominent urban commercial centers after the First World War.²¹

Ex-soldiers become Evangelists

In West Africa, although the introduction of Christianity in this area pre-dates 1918, the German missionaries who were responsible for introducing and maintaining it had left the territory after Germany lost the war. The German missionaries had been primarily active in Togo and the Cameroons. In the Cameroons, the ex-soldiers who were scattered throughout the Bamenda took on the responsibility of spreading the "glad tidings" among their own people, against the wishes of their semi-divine traditional rulers. Strife between veterans of German military service and traditional rulers was recorded in northern territories of the Gold Coast such as Yendi, which was formerly part of Togo. Traditional rulers often found ex-soldiers obstinate, and sometimes the veterans were not submissive even to their own priests. This was largely because of their German military training and the very stringent

religious instruction they had received from the German military chaplains. Consequently, they constituted a new elite, and at the same time wielded influence out of proportion to their small numbers in their particular communities.²² Similar patterns of ex-soldiers' influences occurred in other parts of Africa as well, such as the emergence of a new socio-economic dynamics within ruling class Ngonde society in northern Nyasaland.²³

Returning soldiers also opened new religious structures, which represented nodal zones of conversion. [Churches](#) were set up in villages even if this was against the wishes of the traditional rulers, and the veterans also sometimes introduced entertainment such as dancing. For instance, in Nkwen, a neighbouring village to the Bamenda station in Cameroon, the returnees opened a church at Futru, against the wishes of their traditional ruler, Fon Azefer (1917-1954). They were eventually successful by taking the "*jujus*" (a West African charm believed to have magic power), who persecuted them, to the administration for redress. In this context it is really the masquerade which was a formal dance at which masks and other disguises are worn. The overall complaint of traditional and colonial authorities was that these men, whose knowledge of the Christian faith was rather limited, were recalcitrant to their social and political superiors. It was precisely this challenge to authority, mixed with the introduction of new religious and quasi-religious impulses such as those associated with the introduction of some dance societies, that brought enormous change to post-war West African society.²⁴

Ex-soldiers and Colonial Administration

Ex-soldiers were not only responsible for challenging the traditional status quo, but caused serious challenges even to the colonial administration. One of those areas where that happened was in labour militancy. Far from assuming that trade unionism took roots in the post Second World War period, the African experience as far as the ex-soldiers were concerned had started with the formation of labour unions after the First World War. In fact it was an important and disruptive force which the war veterans brought back with them. For instance, in Guinea ex-soldiers were at the forefront of strikes and riots that targeted the chiefs and the colonial administration.²⁵ Like most causes of strikes, in Guinea as much as other parts of Africa, there was an increase in the prices of basic commodities and misery and unemployment to most ex-soldiers.

In Mali, the first sign of strain between French colonial administration and the ex-soldiers of the First World War came as a surprise to the colonial administration. The ex-soldiers had returned from the war expecting some compensation for their sacrifices. On the contrary, they encountered a colonial administration that was more concerned with quashing signs of

potential unrest than with compensating them for their loyalty. The colonial administration had thought that these soldiers would just return to their homes but failed to understand that some homes had been annihilated in the course of the war. In the face of these frustrations, many ex-soldiers wandered the roads, becoming what Mann calls “unruly clients,” exhibiting behaviour that questioned the state’s authority, which at one time was their unquestionable master. Ex-soldiers resisted in subtle ways. Mann has recounted how one demobilised soldier explained his theft of a bull that belonged to the commandant as follows: “everything that belonged to the Commandant was his, [and] that having risked his life for France, he was certainly owed a bull.” Furthermore, ex-soldiers in Mali continued to wear their uniforms, despite rules to the contrary, until they were torn and faded.²⁶

Although perhaps not as “unruly,” veterans in central Africa also raised concerns with colonial authorities. Many were upset that they were subject to taxation after their wartime service, and others who had served in the Kings African Rifles and the Rhodesia Native Regiment were vocal with complaints they had not received the full post-war gratuities they were promised. A number of Nyasaland veterans were generally discontented with their post-war situation, believing, as one expressed it, that like a hunting dog after a successful pursuit of the game, “all ... t[hey got] are bones.”²⁷ Some joined native associations to work through colonial administrative channels to effect changes in their lot, while others participated in dance societies (called “bands” by Nyasaland officials) in which they frequently mocked the British administration and voiced a variety of discontents in their song lyrics.²⁸

In Malawi, [Melvin Page](#) narrates the experiences of Malawian *askaris* (soldiers) and the *tenga-tenga* (porters/noncombatants) alongside their families and even the wider community during and after the First World War. The war created a general atmosphere of disenchantment. Not only did 1,741 soldiers and 4,400 porters perish, it also consequently provided a platform for the rise of Chilembwe Rebellion.²⁹ Some traditional rulers such as Chimtunga Jere resisted the colonial demands for labour and this further won for him some support from the local population.

Conclusion

The First World War had far-reaching repercussions in Africa and the world at large. Returning ex-soldiers introduced enormous social changes. They caused tension with traditional authorities by introducing new forces into their communities and they encouraged adoption of new practices and attitudes, because the people saw the veterans bringing positive change. As a result, throughout the post-war years, African societies kept adjusting to new changes that were introduced by the ex-soldiers from the First World War. Their impact

brought a trend toward modernity that was hitherto largely unknown, and they themselves constituted a new social stratum altering the social landscape of their societies.

However, the modernity that was introduced was Janus-faced. What appeared to some to be progressive modernity appeared to others as social disruption, and introduced to the area a different “civilisation” that would have profound effects for many years. As such, the First World War was an important catalyst for social change far beyond the Western Front and Europe, reaching into remote rural areas and villages of Africa as well.³⁰

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