

5.2.3 Petitions as Anticolonial Resistance

Sebald was one of the first to document how, at the beginning of the 20th century, a protest movement was formed that did not want to wait for reforms from above, but rather, by relying on its own efforts, strove for change.⁵⁰ Since, under the conditions at the beginning of the 20th century, the success of violent anti-colonial resistance was just as impossible as the open refusal of a colonial order, in the last decade of German colonial rule in Togo petitions were the means of choice.

Starting in August 1902, by employing the services of Octaviano Olympio, who was by far the most influential Afro-Brazilian in Togo, the chief of Atakpamé, Kukowina, complained in a petition to Governor of German Togoland, Woldemar Horn, about the District Officer of Atakpamé, Geo A. Schmidt, who arrested the minor, Adjaro Nyakua, for unlawful rubber harvesting and, in the exuberance of his power, abused her.⁵¹ Kukowina, whose complaint was not against colonial rule *per se* but merely against an excess of repressive measures, was referred back by Horn to the District Officer Geo A Schmidt. Yet, since Kukowina did not withdraw his complaint, Schmidt ordered to put Kukowina in prison, where he was subjected to such ill-treatment that he died upon his release in January 1903.

When Schmidt also took action against students of the Catholic Steyl Mission in Atakpamé, the mission made itself the advocate of complaints for Africans. The administration and missionaries turned to the higher authorities in Germany, by sending petitions and letters, including to the Reichstag, to (de)securitise the state of affairs in the German protectorate. However, in the sense of the *illoctionary disablements*, Habermas characterizes the treatment these petitions received as “eloquent silence,” because stereotypical rather than realistic images of Africa and Europe were mobilized, thereby concealing more than bringing to the fore.⁵² Habermas notes that the “very act of writing a petition must have seemed *threatening*, since the choice of the petition as a medium for expressing dissatisfaction presupposed a considerable political will and initiative on the part of the local population (or at least its elite).”⁵³ Habermas argues that petitioning meant using a medium of the colonial power (including writing and a European language) to gain access to a political space and to initiate a process of negotiation on one’s own behalf, including a sense of entitlement to be heard as a political and social subject with legitimate concerns, which might not have had the same rights as a European, but was by no means without rights.⁵⁴ The potency of a presentation of grievances classified as a petition lies in its official nature. So, even if petitions were not granted, they may have been successful through sheer visibility. In short: petitioning

50 Thea Buttner, ed., “Leadership and National Liberation Movement in Africa,” special issue, *Asia, Africa, Latin America*, no. 7 (1980)

51 Habermas, *Skandal in Togo*.

52 Habermas, *Skandal in Togo*, p. 130.

53 Author’s translation, emphasis added, Habermas, *Skandal in Togo*, p. 131.

54 Habermas, *Skandal in Togo*, pp. 132–35; Bright C. Alozie, “Female Voices on Ink,” *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 10, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2019.1684719>.

expressed potential for anticolonial agency, though, petitions were part of a process by which colonial subjects sought to reform rather than to overthrow the state.⁵⁵

The consequences were disillusioning. Schmidt was transferred to German Cameroon, and the chief representative of the Steyl Mission and two critical priests as well had to German Togoland and were replaced by missionaries who subordinated themselves willingly. Octaviano Olympio concluded that no excessive hopes should be placed in the missionary societies and that the Africans should therefore formulate anti-colonial goals themselves. Starting in 1907, Octaviano Olympio, lead the indigenous leadership of Lomé, sent regularly petitions to the German governor Count Julius von Zech, demanding, among other things, equal treatment of natives under the law, the abolition of unwarranted arrests, chains and flogging, a better prison regime, the inclusion of indigenous representatives in government council meetings, tax reductions and permission to trade freely.⁵⁶ The colonial administration reacted with suspicion to every criticism and proposal for change, simply because it came 'from below,' because it was put forward by the African side. Generally, the administration considered these petitions as a fundamental attack on its claim to rule and reacted accordingly. Governor von Zech and subsequent governors reacted repressively to such petitions, with corporal punishment or fines. Occasionally authors of such petitions, including Octaviano Olympio, were arrested. In addition to petitions, newspapers were also put to the service of written protest. Although Africans were not allowed to publish their own newspaper in Togo, in the British Gold Coast colony, where the colonial administration relied on the much more liberal indirect rule, the African newspaper *The Gold Coast Leader* appeared weekly from 1902. There were no separate articles on Togo until 1911, but from 1913 on, in each issue one or two articles, mostly from anonymous contributors, dealt exclusively with German Togoland.⁵⁷

Sebald noted that Octaviano Olympio seemed to accept the legend of the model colony in his petition and never mentioned German colonialists by name.⁵⁸ From a securitisation-strategic perspective, it is quite possible that Octaviano did not accept the legend of the model colony, because, after all, the Germans discriminated against the Olympio family to the utmost, but Octaviano knew how to use the legend of the model colony skilfully in his securitisation, because in Germany there would have been nothing more to fear if the legend of the 'model colony' burst like a soap bubble. Sebald himself noted that only the beginning of the World War I in August 1914 prevented the petitions from being discussed in the Reichstag. If the war had broken out only a few months later, the 'model colony' of Togo might have served as a very different role model for the other German colonies in the Reichstag, namely as a model for anti-colonial protest.⁵⁹ Not naming certain colonialists could also have been a strategic means of

55 Streets-Salter and Getz, *Empires and colonies in the modern world*, p. 413.

56 Amos, "Afro-Brazilians in Togo"; Habermas, *Skandal in Togo*.

57 Sebald, *Togo 1884–1914. Eine Geschichte der deutschen „Musterkolonie“ auf der Grundlage amtlicher Quellen*, p. 171.

58 Sebald, *Togo 1884–1914. Eine Geschichte der deutschen „Musterkolonie“ auf der Grundlage amtlicher Quellen*, p. 184.

59 Sebald, *Togo 1884–1914. Eine Geschichte der deutschen „Musterkolonie“ auf der Grundlage amtlicher Quellen*, pp. 171–72.

securitisation, so as not to incur the wrath of a few specific people, but nevertheless to securitise the colonial situation with sufficient vagueness. Regarding Togolese identity, Sebald postulates with reference to Olympio's petition that "It was not until 25 years after the German takeover that African sources prove that, for example, the spokesmen of the anti-colonial protest used the term Togo. People began to think and act in terms of the new entity 'Togo' and to transform the term originally imposed by force by the colonial power into 'our Togo,' to 'Africanise' or 'nationalise' it."⁶⁰ Confronted with this constant and everyday threat, this inevitably led to communalisation among the local population.

The brute methods of the German administrators led to many inhabitants emigrating westwards to the British Gold Coast, where economic opportunities, especially in cocoa and mining, were more promising. At the Gold Coast, such a poll tax existed only from 1852 to 1861, but due to misappropriation of funds, the tax was repealed, and the imposition of poll taxes was completely abandoned because the colonial government relied on import and export duties on cocoa, which were cheaper to collect and much more profitable. The notion that British administration meant leniency and better opportunities for African advancement took root in the period of German rule.⁶¹ Besides, Pidgeon-English, also spoken by the German colonial officials, was already the lingua franca on the West African coast. Africans who spoke English could simply make more of their lives if they went to the Gold Coast, where they could acquire citizenship rights.⁶²

To regulate this migration and the flow of goods, strict restrictions were imposed between the two colonies and trade across the Anglo-German border on the Volta River was virtually halted between 1904 and 1914, until the outbreak of World War I.⁶³ Since it was expected that the looming World War I will be fought on the battlefields of Europe, no military had been stationed in Togoland. There was only the *Polizei*- or *Schutztruppe* consisting of a dozen German officers and about 500 local policemen. Indeed, the French and British allies achieved one of their very first victories in the Great on Togolese soil, only after three weeks (6–26 August 1915) with the surrender of German troops to British and French forces. While the British occupied the western parts of the protectorate, including Lomé, the French occupied large parts of the north and east (see Map 5).

5.3 Togoland under Mandate

5.3.1 Creation of the Mandates System

Bain notes that during the Paris Peace Conference, "[s]o long as the war remained primarily a European affair, colonial questions attracted little attention." Unsurprisingly for most of the press, the war took place primarily in Europe and the negotiations were thus seen as a European affair. Yet from the beginning, the mandate question was one of the most important and controversial items on the agenda of the Paris Peace Conference.

60 Sebald, *Die deutsche Kolonie Togo 1884–1914*, p. 165.

61 Welch, *Dream of Unity*, p. 53.

62 Sebald, *Die deutsche Kolonie Togo 1884–1914*, p. 158.

63 Brown, "Borderline Politics in Ghana," p. 578.