

The Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme: A Site of Change and Conservatism

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“These strangers have organized a dance in our village, and it is a good dance, but they ought first to have asked the permission of the village elders, according to our custom,” commented one Tanganyikan villager on the invasive Groundnut Scheme.¹ This was a much more flattering statement than the Scheme perhaps deserved. Nevertheless, the quote captures key elements of British colonial development policy in Tanganyika following the Second World War. The so-called “strangers” were, in fact, just that. The Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme was both conceptualized and actualized by British actors. Managing Director of the United Africa Company, Frank Samuel, and Director for Agricultural Production in Tanganyika, R.W. Miller, initially proposed the notion of planting groundnuts in 1946. John Wakefield, a British Director of Agriculture in Tanganyika, conducted a study to determine the location, funding, and extent of the Scheme, which was to begin in Kongwa, Urambo, and Nachingwea in 1947. In 1951, the Groundnut Scheme, after clearing a mere seven percent of Wakefield’s projected area, was pronounced unceremoniously over. In the four years of the project’s brief lifespan, the Scheme frittered away over £36 million of the British taxpayers’ money—£12 million more than initial estimates.² This development scheme was unprecedented in its failure, which often eclipses an even more remarkable component of the project; namely, how the scheme embodied Britain’s evolving approach to colonial policy in Tanganyika. While the large-scale, socialist nature of the Groundnut Scheme marked a dramatic departure from conservative colonial development efforts in the interwar period, the continual dismissal of African wisdom and intention to impose a British vision on an African colony bears a striking resemblance to pre-WWII colonial development policy.

¹ Nathan Jumba Anyonge, *British Groundnut Scheme in East Africa: Labour Government’s Dilemma* (Kansas State University, 1966), 136.

² Alan Wood, *The Groundnut Affair* (London: Bodley Head, 1950), 36.

A Historiographical Tradition

The Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme, being one of the most notorious failed development projects in Africa, has drawn much intellectual curiosity and discourse over the decades. Alan Wood's intimate telling of the developmental fiasco in his book, *The Groundnut Affair*, criticizes the Scheme's many flaws but, in an apologist fashion, insists on the admirable intentions of the Groundnutters to industrialize—read: modernize—East Africa.³ Modernization theory, popularized in the 1960s with the publishing of Walt Rostow's *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, promoted Westernization as tantamount to civilization, grossly dismissing African agency.⁴ In a pendulum-like reversal, Michael Havinden and David Meredith's 1991 book, *Colonialism and Development: Britain and Its Tropical Colonies, 1850-1960*, depicts the Scheme as an exploitative endeavor designed to enrich the British empire.⁵ Havinden and Meredith exemplify the postmodernist approach to development that dominated academia during the 1980s and 90s and entailed a heightened awareness of the persistence of hierarchical structures. The work, in pursuing a postmodernist narrative, however, characterizes the indigenous people as passive recipients of a villainous British plot. Writing on African development in the 2000s has focused more on the agency of native actors and the specific local context. Juhani Koponen's piece on the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme, "From Dead End to New Lease of Life: Development in South-Eastern Tanganyika," attempts to understand the lasting legacies of British colonialism in East Africa while being mindful of the Tanganyikan response to development policy, but at times neglects the broader global context.⁶ This paper, instead, aims to understand structuralist forces that informed colonial development policy following World War Two while remaining mindful of individual actors; to examine the collaborative efforts of English and African workers while recognizing the persistence of racialized hierarchical structures; and to consider the Groundnut Scheme as an embodiment of Britain's evolving post-war development policy without overlooking the conservatism inherent in periods of change.

The Idealization of Groundnuts: A 'New Era' in Colonial Development?

British colonial policy towards Tanganyika in the interwar years entailed a system of indirect rule and minimal investment. Tanganyika was, in a sense, foisted upon the British after the defeat of the colony's former subjugator, Germany, in World War One. Much to the chagrin of the Colonial Office, which subscribed to the belief that colonies should offset their own costs,

³ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*.

⁴ Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1960).

⁵ Michael Havinden and David Meredith, *Colonialism and Development Britain and Its Tropical Colonies, 1850-1960* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁶ Juhani Koponen, "From Dead End to New Lease of Life: Development in South-Eastern Tanganyika From the Late 1930s to the 1950s," *Developing Africa: Concepts and Practices in Twentieth-Century Colonialism* (Manchester University Press, 2014).

Britain received a territory in financial ruin. The British provided funding after the proposal was vetted and greenlighted by a special meeting of Parliament to the Tanganyika territorial government.⁷ Once stabilized, however, the colonial overseers defaulted to their policy of minimizing colonial government expenditures while maintaining their hold on power. British expatriate officials governed the colony via an executive council, including the governor, chief secretary, and treasurer. When a legislative council was formed in 1926, the thirteen official members opted to nominate a European from the committee to represent the interests of Tanganyikans.⁸ The British Administrative Office, providing an illusion of agency, established the Institution of Native Commissioners and relied on local chiefs to collect taxes. In reality, a system of paternalism and conservatism dominated.⁹ The benefits of utilizing local authorities as resources were threefold. Firstly, shifting the duty of tax collection to local authorities allowed Britain to avoid the downfall of many a vast empire: overextension. In fact, in 1930 fewer than 1,000 British civil servants worked in Tanganyika's Colonial Administration.¹⁰ Secondly, indirect rule fomented tribalism and ethnic tensions, further mitigating the threat of local rebellion in what the historian Fred Burke has dubbed a "divide-and-rule" tactic.¹¹ And lastly, a close relationship with local chiefs allowed the British colonial government to, in the words of former colonial governor Donald Charles Cameron, "keep them modern."¹² In summary, before World War Two British colonial rule in Tanganyika was characterized by negligible investment, nonexistent native autonomy, and almost exclusively served British interests.

The shortage of fats and oils following World War Two, however, upended Britain's conservative investment policy towards Tanganyika. The destruction from World War Two was extensive and far-reaching. Many East Asian oil-producing plantations had been decimated, whaling limited, and Britain's colonial relationship to India severed as a result of the country's burgeoning independence movement.¹³ Furthermore, postwar production of groundnuts by the world's leading growers, India, China, and Indonesia, was sixteen percent of prewar production. This posed an especial problem for Britain, which depended on imports for over ninety percent of its oils and fats supply.¹⁴ This was the context in which Frank Samuel presented his, now notorious, Groundnut Scheme for East Africa. The ambitious proposal, which the Wakefield report estimated to cover 2,555,000 acres within five years through the miracle of mechanized agriculture, found the right audience in the newly elected British socialist Labour government headed by Prime Minister Clement Attlee.¹⁵ Frank Samuel successfully argued his case in the House of Commons, gaining parliamentary approval to commence the Scheme in January of

⁷ Fred Burke, *Tanganyika; Preplanning* (Syracuse University Press, 1965), 17.

⁸ Burke, *Tanganyika; Preplanning*, 48.

⁹ Bernard Chidzero, *Tanganyika and International Trusteeship* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 131.

¹⁰ Burke, *Tanganyika; Preplanning*, 9, 14.

¹¹ Burke, *Tanganyika; Preplanning*, 24.

¹² Chidzero, *Tanganyika and International Trusteeship*, 130.

¹³ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 30.

¹⁴ J.S. Hogendorn and K.M. Scott, "The East African Groundnut Scheme: Lessons of a Large-Scale Agricultural Failure," *African Economic History* 10, (1981): 83.

¹⁵ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 32.

1947. The urgency of the postwar context certainly helped win Samuel government clearance, but a socialist element also accounted for such a drastic change in development policy. In the words of Samuel, “[W]e have moved, by inevitable development, into an era when the capitalist is losing the nineteenth-century glamour of dash and daring: risk-taking is no longer the job of the entrepreneur, but of the taxpayer.”¹⁶ The socialist government was not alone in celebrating a new direction in colonial development. One member of the Conservative Party indicated his support for a “battle of mechanised science against the forces of nature.”¹⁷ Edith Penrose, a renowned British economist, praised the Scheme in a 1948 edition of *Scientific American*, positing, “[l]arge-scale modern farming is the only way in many areas to produce enough to maintain or improve the living conditions of increasing populations.”¹⁸ Even scientists who expressed reservations about the feasibility of the project applauded its goal of bringing modern and efficient mechanized farming to East Africa. The fervor for the Groundnut Scheme and willingness to invest significant sums of money starkly contrasted with the Empire’s former policy of costless rule, and a sense of urgency in the post-War period helped shape this new approach.

The experience of World War Two also imbued the Groundnut Scheme with a military-style *modus operandi*. From the terminology used, the personnel and machinery involved, and source of inspiration, the War figured prominently in the execution of the Groundnut Scheme. One newsreel from the British Pathé corporation, released in 1948, panned across a flat landscape of scraggly, unforgiving brush as the narrator described the pioneers’ efforts, “Men and machines had to fight to conquer— but conquer they did.”¹⁹ This newsreel, and its use of categorically militaristic language, represents the prevailing consideration of the Scheme as an extension of Britain’s Wartime exploits. Alan Wood, a member of the groundnut team, was also unable to resist military analogies in his account of the project. Wood referred to the various officials as a “groundnut army,” and described the “fleets of bulldozers... bashing down brush.”²⁰ The term ‘groundnut army’, while intended to be somewhat humorous, did accurately portray the makeup of the Scheme’s men in charge. John Strachey, Minister of Food and spearhead of the project, served in the Royal Air Force (RAF) as an Air-Raid Warden and rooted his inspiration for a large-scale project in the War years. During one session in the House of Commons Strachey read an excerpt from a journal he kept at the RAF, revealing the effect of the War on his developmental planning strategy:

Thus far it has been possible to produce these major collective efforts for the purposes of war alone. What could not be done if an expedition of this scope could be fitted out, not in

¹⁶ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 31.

¹⁷ Stefan Esselborn, “Environment, Memory, and the Groundnut Scheme: Britain’s Largest Colonial Agricultural Development Project and Its Global Legacy,” *Global Environment* 6, no.11 (2013): 66.

¹⁸ Hogendorn and Scott, “The East African Groundnut Scheme,” 84.

¹⁹ Pathé Newsreels, *Groundnuts—The Facts* (London: British Pathé, 1949).

²⁰ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 169, 41.

order... to decide who should have the right to develop Africa, but in order actually to develop Africa?²¹

Other military figures included a head contractor of the Paulings & Company at Kongwa, Sir John Gibson, who was celebrated for his contributions to the building of Mulberry Harbor in 1944. The Agent at Kongwa from Paulings & Co—another veteran, Major Peter Rush—only hired men with whom he had wartime experience.²² The position of Unit Manager was generally reserved for people from the United Africa Company, but Army veterans filled other high-ranking positions. In fact, a former employee at the War Office, Major-General Desmond Harrison, took over control of the Scheme in 1948. This pronounced bias towards hiring military men, as opposed to those actually knowledgeable in large-scale agriculture, soon became a point of tension. One official at Kongwa, after resigning, expressed this frustration, “The whole trouble is that the heads of departments are all ex-Army, with no idea of business.”²³ The Scheme contained more literal relics of the War as well. Much of the machinery provided for the Scheme came secondhand from various army reserves; hence the high rate of breakdowns—in Nachingwea over eighty percent of tractors failed.²⁴ When the groundnutters found themselves low on tractors, John Wakefield suggested revamping old Sherman tanks. These tank-tractor hybrids, commonly called Shervicks, however, were ill-suited for the terrain of Tanganyika and quickly broke down.²⁵ This blind faith in a military-style agricultural campaign, regardless of the financial cost or feasibility, further reflected the lasting impression the War cast; the preference for all things military was so endemic that it guided the philosophy of colonial development in Tanganyika. However, the sheer brutality of the War also raised global expectations of universal human rights and welfare, including in Tanganyika.

The Groundnut Scheme, in fact, prioritized African welfare and eventual independence to a much greater degree. An indicator of Britain’s new direction in colonial policy was the Colonial Development and Welfare Act created in 1940. The act, promulgated during the war years, was initially only a marker of intent. While the Colonial Office bristled at the emphasis on welfare and social services, a Statement of Economic Policy for Tanganyika released in 1946, which “[aimed] at increasing the wealth of the territory by the maximum development of its natural resources, with the objective of progressively raising the general standard of living... of the indigenous inhabitants,” suggested that the winds of colonialism were changing.²⁶ The report stressed protection for economically vulnerable indigenous groups, expanding education services, and preparing Tanganyikans for self-governance. Articles Eight and Ten of the Tanganyika Trusteeship Agreement, also released in 1946, underlined Britain’s obligation to develop Tanganyika economically through land alienation without infringing on native rights.²⁷

²¹ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 44.

²² Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 51.

²³ Derek Marks, “Official Resigns—Says” ‘No Plans’,” *The Sunday Times* (December 5, 1948).

²⁴ Hogendorn and Scott, “The East African Groundnut Scheme,” 90.

²⁵ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 179.

²⁶ Burke, *Tanganyika; Preplanning*, 41.

²⁷ Chidzero, *Tanganyika and International Trusteeship*, 233.

The Groundnut Scheme was a logical solution to this want for a more holistic approach to development. The Scheme would quite literally sow the seeds for a lucrative agricultural industry in Tanganyika that local Africans were to take over within a generation or so. Writing in 1961, Bernard Chidzero, a renowned Zimbabwean economist, even praised the Groundnut Scheme for selecting tsetse-infested or drought-ridden land for the development project because it avoided uprooting native settlers. However, Africans were still not allowed to hold top administrative positions in the Scheme and were instead relegated to the role of spectators. A White Paper from 1947 insisted on the benefits of an “ocular demonstration of... modern agricultural methods” for Tanganyika.²⁸ This was a policy of planned disengagement that would allow Britain to gradually break away from colonial rule while simultaneously preparing Africans for self-governance and economic prosperity.

The attempt to build camaraderie between African and European workers on the Scheme marked another evolution in British colonial policy in Tanganyika. The United Africa Company instructed European laborers on the Scheme to befriend their Wagogo coworkers: “DON’T be stand-offish. DO crack a joke with them. If slightly salacious so much the better.”²⁹ British officers also attempted to be more mindful of local customs. Adam Noble, Manager of the Kongwa growing region, enlisted Chief Simango’s help to inspire workers, “He kept on the job all day, encouraging the workers and making jokes with them when necessary.”³⁰ Urambo held dances and sports games and even set up local schools; by 1949 Kongwa had five schools.³¹ Education was also provided to a far greater degree than in the interwar period. Adolph Myers, a language instructor, established an Educational Development Unit at Ifunda to teach Africans English, and the Englishmen a working understanding of Swahili in an attempt to facilitate communication between laborers. The education of African workers also covered less traditional arenas— in Dar-es-Salam British trade unionists instructed their African counterparts on how to effectively strike.³² This kind of interaction between local and English workers, which focused more on accommodating African customs, starkly contrasted with earlier British practice.

The most significant break with previous colonial policy, however, came in the form of massive external funding for the Scheme. John Wakefield’s initial estimate called for an investment of £24,000,000, which the British government unflinchingly approved—the same government that several years earlier touted a doctrine of non-spending. The staggering amount of money invested matched the scale and ambition of the project—the government bankrolled the transportation of goods, imports of expensive machinery, farming supplies such as seeds and fertilizers, and more. These expenditures, however, did not translate into massive returns for the British government but a mortifying deficit; the British government even exported more seeds than it ultimately imported groundnuts.³³ Despite the Scheme’s failings, money was still

²⁸ Esselborn, “Environment, Memory, and the Groundnut Scheme,” 80.

²⁹ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 73.

³⁰ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 77.

³¹ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 172.

³² Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 127, 79.

³³ Esselborn, “Environment, Memory, and the Groundnut Scheme,” 61.

successfully injected into the local economy. One local newspaper in Nachingwea remarked on “these days of great prosperity” regarding the Groundnut Scheme in 1952.³⁴ A colonial official observed the proliferation of local vendors, who supplied high-priced fruit, meat, and vegetables to the scheme’s employees.³⁵ Ultimately, through its focus on social welfare, native rights, bettering the local economy, and training Africans for eventual self-governance, the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme reflected a significant shift from the British government’s former colonial development policy in Tanganyika. Even so, in the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme some features of pre-WWII era colonial development practice prevailed.

The Actualization of the Scheme: *Plus ça change...*

Similar to the pre-War era, most executive decision-making for the Scheme was conducted in London, not Tanganyika. Top officials spent the majority of their time in England. In what Alan Wood termed a “grasshopper administration,” general Managers and chief officials, including Major-General Harrison, frequently flew between London and the various growing locations in Tanganyika.³⁶ Moreover, from the outset, the Scheme was more aimed at Britain, and British politics, than Tanganyika itself. John Strachey even asserted that the success of the scheme “depends, more than on any other single factor, whether the harassed housewives of Britain get more margarine, cooking fats and soap, in the reasonably near future.”³⁷ More significantly, in appealing to the British voter, officials and politicians who supported the Scheme failed to report the myriad delays and issues with growing—at times even obstinately funneling more machinery and money into what they were informed was a lost cause. In 1948 a South African Professor of Ecology, John Phillips, visited the growing sites and, after estimating that between the three regions only 55,000 acres could realistically be cleared, attempted to advise the Board in London against sending more seeds. The Board, in response, shipped as many supplies as their imaginations saw fit—including “political sunflower” seeds to artificially inflate the number of acres under cultivation.³⁸ The decision-makers in London, far removed from the realities of soil and rainfall patterns of Tanganyika, failed to comprehend the agricultural logistics of growing groundnuts in East Africa. In 1947, one South African scientist, Hugh Bunting, conducted experiments on the soil to determine the ideal growing locations for the project. After measuring the levels of calcium, potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, and nitrogen in the soil at sample plots, Bunting determined that Kongwa would be an ideal location—even though Kongwa’s rainfall statistics were well below the amount necessary to cultivate groundnuts. However, Bunting’s measurements, regardless of their accuracy, were perfunctory—the board had chosen Kongwa as a growing site before Bunting had

³⁴ Emma Hunter, “A History of Maendeleo: The Concept of ‘Development’ in Tanganyika’s Late Colonial Public Sphere,” *Developing Africa: Concepts and Practices in Twentieth-Century Colonialism*, (2014): 89.

³⁵ Esselborn, “Environment, Memory, and the Groundnut Scheme,” 82.

³⁶ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 127.

³⁷ Havinden and Meredith, *Colonialism and Development in Britain*, 278.

³⁸ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 157, 200.

even conducted his tests.³⁹ The selection of equipment posed a similar problem. The tractors and Shervicks, when not out of commission, were suited for neither the rock-hard clay dirt and blinding clouds of dust during the dry months nor the muddy cascades during rainy spells; they were designed for British agricultural plots. One camp in the Nachingwea region also suffered from the groundnutters' incomprehension of local history, and after building the Ruponda camp on an old millet shamba the place was overrun by vermin.⁴⁰ The Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme may as well have been called the London Groundnut Scheme considering where the decision-making primarily took place. Disheartened officials and workers in Tanganyika put on a play in 1950 mocking the external decision-making nature of the scheme in their adaptation of *Cinderella*. In the play, one group of secretaries jested with each other, "Altogether we're quite redundant, though we're grossly overpaid. Hush! Don't tell the Board in London, Where else should we make the grade?"⁴¹ The Board did not generally seek out or heed the advice of the Heads of Departments located in Tanganyika either. An exasperated executive on the Scheme fumed, "The Board sits aloft in a solitary state making decisions without knowing the facts to go on: but fortunately its decisions don't have any effect, because the Board treats them as so sacred and secret that nobody is ever told what they are."⁴² London was the epicenter of colonial planning for Tanganyika in the interwar period, and the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme proved no different.

The view of Europeans and European knowledge as inherently superior also harkened back to Britain's colonial presence in Tanganyika during the interwar years. Instead of consulting locals to understand typical growing practices, British officials barreled ahead with their purportedly superior calculations. Rainfall patterns in Kongwa, Urambo, and Nachingwea—areas considered as "country of perpetual drought" by East Africans—were deemed choice spots by British officials.⁴³ The historian Fred Burke remarked on this dismissal of African knowledge: "Had the eager planners learned the language of the Wagogo and listened closely to their minstrels tell of years of famine, they might have been less optimistic than they were."⁴⁴ Similarly, when the groundnutters believed high-tech machinery could overcome any obstacle of nature, the locals respected the limits of modern agriculture in the face of dense forests of baobab trees. The British officials, however, plowed ahead, destroying many tractors on the bulbous roots of the baobabs.⁴⁵ This preference for external European technology and information as opposed to internal African wisdom was intrinsically linked to the belief that Europeans were inherently superior to Africans. Even the language with which the groundnutter Alan Wood described bees and beekeeping implied an ingrained consideration of Africa as an inferior land. To Wood, African bees were "savage" and the African technique of beekeeping was a

³⁹ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 58-61.

⁴⁰ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 138.

⁴¹ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 193.

⁴² Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 185.

⁴³ Esselborn, "Environment, Memory, and the Groundnut Scheme," 74.

⁴⁴ Burke, *Tanganyika; Preplanning*, 36.

⁴⁵ Esselborn, "Environment, Memory, and the Groundnut Scheme," 73.

“primitive” relic of an ancient past.⁴⁶ Africans themselves were also dismissed as lazy and primitive for preferring hoes to tractors.⁴⁷ In a condescending statement, John Strachey justified the British government’s primary focus on developing agriculture, as opposed to education, in Tanganyika: “What is the use of providing schools for people whose primitive methods of production condemn them to ever-growing malnutrition?”⁴⁸ The debate over what common language to use—Swahili or English—also reflected the staid conservatism of some British officials. The more traditional officials opposed Africans learning English because they did not want “servants understanding the conversation when they wait a table,” and posited that “Africans who have learned English tend to get uppish, and feel superior to the white man.”⁴⁹ This desire for a hierarchical division between English and local Africans extended to shops as well; one luxury European store built for the groundnutters in Tanganyika prohibited Africans from entering.⁵⁰ Evidently, racial hierarchies and a colonial understanding of European superiority persisted in the Scheme.

Conclusion

World War Two had a profound impact on the British Empire. The War produced greater demands for human rights and independence as well as an environment no longer tolerant of subordinate colonial statuses. The War also resulted in a food shortage for Britain, and thus a desperate urge to increase fat and oil rations. The newly elected socialist prime minister Clement Attlee suggested Britain’s peacetime direction, which focused on bettering the lot of British citizens through significant social investment. These factors culminated to provide an ideal background for Britain to launch an ambitious new agricultural development project in East Africa. The Groundnut would alleviate Britain’s fats and oil shortages and boost the country’s prestige by including a more welfare-oriented program for Africa to demonstrate Britain’s forward-thinking. To achieve this goal Britain spent exorbitant amounts of money—a drastic divergence from former colonial practice, but vestiges of prewar British colonialism prevailed. Insistence on planning from England, rejections of African knowledge, and refusals to abandon racialized hierarchies beneficial to Europeans plagued the Scheme, ultimately undermining the same qualities that separated the project from previous colonial development practices. Despite the Scheme’s admirable intentions, these British “strangers” had imposed an unsolicited “dance” on an optionless colony, and in the new epoch, the old remained.

⁴⁶ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 162.

⁴⁷ Esselborn, “Environment, Memory, and the Groundnut Scheme,” 81.

⁴⁸ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 42.

⁴⁹ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 126.

⁵⁰ Wood, *The Groundnut Affair*, 171.

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