THE COLONIAL ECONOMY IN THE LOWER NIGER REGION

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Introduction

In this study the Lower Niger refers to the portion of the River Niger which stretches from Lokoja where the River Benue joins the Niger to form a confluence and flows southward to the Atlantic Ocean via a many mouth delta. The study focuses on the major channel of the Lower Niger which passes through Lokoja, Onitsha, Warri, Sapele, and Burutu where it empties itself into the open sea. In the colonial period the British the Lower Niger via Burutu and Warri ports was important because transportation on the Lower Niger River served as a mode for conveying commodities for internal trade and for export.

The Lower Niger was the busiest waterway in the West African sub region. The major towns along the Lower Niger River (Lokoja, Idah, Onitsha, Asaba, Warri, Sapele, Burutu and Forcados) variously served as ferry terminals and as inland river ports or trading stations during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods. The river ports attracted a good deal of canoe and shipping traffic. Water transportation had contributed tremendously to the growth and development of these major river towns. Trade in Nigerian merchandise such as palm oil, palm kernel, cotton, groundnut, beniseed, shea butter nut and other commodities gave rise to the ‘cash crop’ economy and was the purpose for British Empire building in Nigeria. However, from 1900 to 1918, the most important export from the Nigerian colony were palm oil and palm kernels which accounted for over 63% of the total produce exported. The paper also discusses the major entrepreneurs that emerged among the people of the Lower Niger.

The ports of Benin (Burutu, Sapele and Warri) form the link with inland navigation on the River Niger. Burutu port was established on an island in the Western Niger Delta in the opening years of the twentieth century. Earlier, the Forcados estuary was the best entrance to the Benin port as ships drawing twenty feet could cross the bar. Later the Escravos estuary was opened for sea-going ships in 1938 when the situation of the Forcados estuary gradually deteriorated to as low as twelve feet. The Lower Niger River is navigable by ocean-going vessels from the conference at Lokoja to the open sea at Burutu during the rainy months of May to October when there is high water. This is because there are usually no constraints on the movement of ships during this season. The Lower Niger passes through some major towns in Nigeria. Table 1 below shows these major towns from the confluence town of Lokoja to the open sea.

Table 1: Major Towns along the Lower Niger River and Mileage to the Sea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Towns</th>
<th>Miles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Escravos</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burutu</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warri</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patani</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboh</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onitsha</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of these towns are located in the forest belt of Nigeria, a belt which is rich in valuable forms of sylvan produce, such as palm oil and palm kernel (one of the most important staples of West African trade) from which the southern territory derived its name “Oil Rivers” protectorate.

The Colonial Economy

Ogunremi’s account on the antiquity of river trade in the Lower Niger and the use of the dug-out canoe frequently referred to the Nupe, Kupa, and Kede groups. The immediate environment dictated the type of profession that people specialized in. For instance, the Kede, Ijaw, Nupe, and Igbira Koto specialized in fishing and paddling of goods in canoes and boats. In the Warri province pottery and palm oil manufacture was the traditional activity of the Okere and Ugbori people. The Urhobo exchanged their palm oil, plantain, cocoyam, starch, and kpokpo-gari with other communities in the LNR. The Urhobo villages which mostly produced these trade items include Ukpalla, Kiabodo and Eruhu. Market day was fixed at nine days intervals where commodities were exchanged. Aboh in the Delta had trading relations with Asaba, Onitsha, Igala Kingdom, Ukwani, Isoko and the neighbouring communities now in Delta state. Articles of trade included slaves and palm oil, arms and ammunition from Brass. Aboh sold food crops and exported commodities to all her neighbours including the Igala people.

In the early years of contact with the Europeans in the LNR, the major articles of trade from Europe were gun, gun powder, cloth, tobacco, smoking pipe, knives, looking glass (mirror), and carpets. On the domestic market the following items were offered for sale; yams palm oil, bullock, foils, animal skin bag, ivory, pepper, cotton, Arabian mare, cloth and mat.

The abolition of the transatlantic slave trade from the early decades of the nineteenth century gave birth to the trade in commodity or agricultural produce crops otherwise known as the legitimate trade and tagged the ‘cash crop’ economy in this study. The trade in palm oil and palm kernel attracted European merchants most of whom were agents of European trading firms mostly from Liverpool, Glasgow, London, Manchester, Birmingham, Lisbon, Spain and Paris. Flint explained that the merchants of Liverpool had much capital invested in the trade with West Africa and so: Were able to adjust and quickly too to the transition from slave trade economy to ‘cash crop’ economy by the first half of the nineteenth century. It was in order to ensure the success of peaceful trade that the British Consul Simpson appointed King Masaba of Nupe (son of Mallam Dendo) in 1871 as patron of peace and security in the trade of the LNR. This appointment gave opportunity to many Nupe men to serve as middlemen to the supply of British goods and export of farm produce from the middle belt and Northern Nigeria. According to Flint: “Thus, British trade with Nupe rose steadily. It was first experimented with shea-butter in the 1830’s. Between 1871 and 1878 the value of trade in this commodity rose from four pounds eight shillings to fifty eight pounds five shillings exported annually. The value of ivory taken out of Nupe territory rose from thirteen pounds five shillings in 1871 to fifty two pounds in 1879. While explaining the aspect of cash which accrued to the inhabitants of the Lower Niger, Macmillan noted that:
In the early years of trade (before 1870’s), traders on the inland waters were at the mercy of local chiefs who controlled the trade and collected a form of tax known as “comey”. This was the situation when Mr. Mcgregor Laird a Liverpool Merchant arrived the Lower Niger at Lokoja. But when George Dashwood Taubman Goldie arrived at the Lower Niger in 1870, he formed the United African Company (UAC) by amalgamating all British trading firms operating in the Lower Niger region. \(^{13}\)

In his study Dike \(^{14}\) Observed that British trade in the Lower Niger region thrived from 1869 but faced kin competition from other European trading firms until 1879 when Taubman Goldie arrived the Lower Niger and using his business acumen he amalgamated all four major British trading firms on the Lower Niger in order to eliminate competition. These companies were the West African Company of Manchester, Messrs Alexander Miller Brothers, and Co. of Glasgow, the Central African Trading Company of London and James Pinnock and Co. of Liverpool. \(^{15}\) From 1870, export trade to Europe include groundnut, leather, beniseed, shea nut, tobacco, cotton, soya beans and other commodities such as palm oil and palm kernel, elephant tusk, snail shell and reed. These items were transported on the Niger to Burutu and Warri where they were transshipped to overseas. These ‘cash crops’ were purchased from different parts of Northern Nigeria especially, Makurdi, Gboko, Lokoja, Idah, Dekina, Umaisha, Koton-Karfi, Loko, Yola, Jimeta, Adamawa, Bauchi and Gombe. Items which were taken upstream from the Lower Niger River include palm oil, gari, fish, fruits, vegetables and bamboo sticks. In the course of trade some of the Kakanda were reported to have migrated and settled at Onitsha south of the River Niger and Yola on the River Benue. \(^{16}\)

Goods such as: salt, sugar, kerosene, clothes, shoes, cooking utensils, building materials, corrugated roofing sheets, iron beds, leadpan, bicycles, drugs, gun powder, head pans, etc were imported from overseas to the provinces in the Lower Niger via Burutu and Warri ports. The principal exports from Warri were palm oil and palm kernel. Consumption of imported provisions like rice, tinned fish, sugar, oven tea and coffee was considerable among the Itsekiri and Ijaw. \(^{17}\) Prices of agricultural produce fluctuated according to the season. Commodity prices are lower in the harvest season months of June to October as most farmers offer their produce for sale. This is particularly true of perishable commodities such as vegetables and fruits. On the contrary prices of farm produce are higher during the planting season months of February to May. Trade in the three provinces had certain common features. These features include; fluctuation in prices of agricultural produce, export of staple crops as a major source of income to farmers, farmers spent a larger part of their income to purchase imported manufactured goods.

During the harvest season farmers have more income (cash) from the sale of their produce. Standard of living was higher in the provinces during this season when farmers exchanged their produce for cash with which they purchased provisions. Although prices of farm produce are higher in the planting season but farmers get lesser income because most farmers would have sold their produce soon after harvest. On the whole, produce prices are subject to fluctuation due to the uncertainties of global market price. \(^{18}\) Prices of export crops were fixed by European traders in anticipation of market situation in Europe. In turn, the indigenous traders would refuse to sell if prices were too low. Ikime report that the delta traders, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century were more successful than the European traders. \(^{19}\) He wrote:

Opubu the Great who ruled Bonny during the opening years of the century was quick to see the need to organize the palm oil trade on an
While he reigned, he was able to keep Bonny strong and united.\textsuperscript{20}

Palm oil was measured in units of ‘casks’ while palm kernel and other non-liquid commodities were measured in bags or tons. The major British palm oil importing ports were Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool and London.\textsuperscript{21} As a result of the fluctuation in produce prices some traders of the Warri province conveyed their goods as far as Lagos for sale for higher profit and when returning, purchased trade goods far cheaper than at Warri or Sapele. For example, Chief Sam Itsekiri usually ship large canoe loads of oil and kernels through the creeks to Lagos, returning with trade goods bought in Lagos far cheaper than they can be in Warri or Sapele. The trip took only twelve days wherefore he reaped much bigger profit than he would by dealing with local firms. By this transaction, large quantities of palm oil and palm kernels left Warri province direct for Lagos for export thereby depriving Warri of such shipment.\textsuperscript{22}

The transaction described above perhaps, justifies Frederick Lugard’s main argument that transport enables trade to take place on a larger scale than was hitherto possible and that trade between groups of people increases the well-being of society.\textsuperscript{23} A.M. Milne also enumerated the economic importance of transportation as the most vibrant lubricant to trade.\textsuperscript{24} The Itsekiri country is connected by a network of creeks to the Lagos Lagoon which made it possible for goods to be delivered from Itsekiri kingdom to Lagos and Quidah. Firms in the province protested against this method of trading as it deprived them of some revenue and considering that they had to pay tax on rent. Nevertheless, the colonial authorities refused to intervene despite protest from foreign traders insisting that the firms brought down their prices to what (or close to) prevailed in Lagos.

The Itsekiri dominated the colonial trade for many years. They were respected by the Urhobo for this reason. For this reason, many Urhobo women were attracted to Itsekiri men who married them. Similarly, many Urhobo men took pride in marrying Itsekiri women. But in later year the Urhobo started to trade more on their own instead of using the Itsekiri as middle men. They took the Initiative of trading directly with the foreign firms or using their own Urhobo middle men when they discovered that they were being exploited by the Itsekiri. The Urhobo discovered that the Itsekiri middle men use to tamper with the cask measurement so as to reduce the quantity of palm oil and kernel it could hold. It was for this reason that the Urhobo nick-named the Itsekiri ‘Wayo’ i.e. cheat.\textsuperscript{25} The trust system (a system whereby the European traders gave goods in trust to the Urhobo traders for an agreed quantity of oil) though encouraged the growth of trade and intensified relationships between the Itsekiri and Urhobo on the one hand, and the Itsekiri and the Europeans on the other, it encouraged rivalry among Itsekiri leaders. The European traders gave goods in trust to the oil producers to ensure the increased production demanded by the overseas trade. The conflict which arose from this system often had to do with differences over the amount of outstanding debt in the Itsekiri kingdom as Ikime puts it:

The trust system between the Itsekiri and Urhobo produced disputes as did that between the Europeans and the Itsekiri. Disputes usually arose from the failure of the Urhobo to produce the agreed quantities of oil on time. Such disputes at time resulted in Itsekiri raids against the offenders during which slaves were taken. Very few specific instances of such raids are now remembered but both Lomu and his son Nana are known to have fought the Urhobo of Abraka and Agbon clans. Sometimes to avoid such raids, the Urhobo gave their own slaves or even relatives as pawns to the Itsekiri as a guarantee that outstanding debts would be paid.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{20} Effendi, \textit{Nigeria\textquoteright s History} (London: 1976), 58.
\textsuperscript{21} M. Beauty, \textit{The Native Merchant} (Harlow: 1975), 187.
\textsuperscript{22} A.M. Milne, \textit{African Agriculture and Foreign Trade} (New York: 1956), 104.
\textsuperscript{23} F.R. Lugard, \textit{Decolonization and Self government} (London: 1925), 170.
\textsuperscript{24} A.M. Milne, \textit{African Agriculture and Foreign Trade} (New York: 1956), 104.
\textsuperscript{25} T.B. Ikime, \textit{The Itsekiri (Yoruba) of Nigeria: Social and Economic History} (London: 1936), 15.
\textsuperscript{26} T.B. Ikime, \textit{The Itsekiri (Yoruba) of Nigeria: Social and Economic History} (London: 1936), 15.
Such differences also led to conflict in Boni in 1862 when one Iketuwa attacked the factory of Mr. Henry.\textsuperscript{27} Frequent rivalry sometimes led to armed conflict between leading Itsekiri traders to secure customers and connections in the Urhobo hinterlands to ensure continued supply of palm oil. For instance, in 1867, King Olomu fought against his own kinsman Idiare over some Urhobo market. Nana Olomu’s son made many enemies during the struggle to secure a greater share of the trade in the Urhobo hinterland. Incessant crisis caused some successful traders to migrate to other settlements of commercial interest, notably Jakpa, Batere, and later Ibrohimi. This movement shifted focus away from Ode Itsekiri as the seat of government.

The office of the Governor of the Benin River was of great importance because it collected customs duties and acted as trading agent on behalf of the Olu who depended heavily on revenue from trade. The office of the Governor was important to the Itsekiri as they depended upon it to protect their interest against European traders. On the other hand, the Europeans relied on the Governor to protect their interest in their conflict with the Itsekiri. In all, Itsekiri trade with the Europeans depended on Itsekiri trade with the Urhobo in the hinterland.\textsuperscript{28} From the commodity export trade in Warri province between 1850 and 1900, rose highly successful merchants who competed favourably with European merchants such as chief Nana of Itsekiri. Nana had many fleet of canoes and employer of many labour, Chief Ogboni in Abraka, Chief Ovieghe from Oloma, Chief Bekedermoro from Okigbodo, Mukoromawo who was the first African to own a building in London (1890-1948).\textsuperscript{29} Popular Urhobo indigenous traders who participated in the commodity export trade on the Niger from around 1900 include Mr. Tate from Oteri, Inuma from Okpare, Umukoro from Odete, Eghagha from Ogbodu, Jamani from Ejohe. Popular Ijaw traders who were active in the Niger delta river trade include Etubene, Tabuwe and Mukoro.\textsuperscript{30}

In later years other prominent indigenes from Warri province succeeded the Europeans in the trade in cash crops. The most popular were, Chief Alfred Rewane, Chief Michael Ibru who owned fishing trawlers. He started sea foods. He was registered in 1956, Chief Ovedje, Great Ogboru who owned shipping line and fishing trawlers.\textsuperscript{31} From Asaba there were shipping magnates who also became captains of industries such as Chief Sunny Odogwu, and Chief P.I.G. Onyeobi, an oil magnate. Prominent Lokoja indigenes who participated in the colonial export trade as middle men and agents were; AuduKenin Captain, TeeditHukuGishiri, Alhaji Ibrahim DogonAziki, Imuraina, ShehuTure, MallamGana (who traded in groundnut, locust bean, and cotton from Northern Nigeria to Lokja). Others were, Alhaji Zaria, Shara Quaria (traded solely in kolanut between Ikare, Lokoja, Cameroun and Wuroboki in Yola. According to A.D. Ali:

\textbf{As far as Lokoja is concerned the history of transportation on the Lower Niger will not be complete without a mention of these middlemen. Many Lokoja men also trained as captains and pilots. They were mostly from the Nupe, Kakanda and Igbira Koto ethnic groups.}\textsuperscript{32}

After the 1950s, a new generation of traders came up. The traders bought goods from the big merchants in the north on credit, shipped it to Lokoja and to other towns in the Lower Niger for sale after which they returned the capital to their creditors. Such were the likes of Umar Danduniya, Adamulda, MallamWaziriIdris, Chief of Okene, AlhajiAttha Ibrahim, AlhajiKasimuGana and Alhaji Kaka.\textsuperscript{33} However, unlike in Warri and Onitsha, middle men and agents from the Lokoja area could not compete with their European counterparts. Rather, they operated on a smaller scale; neither were they able to set up trading firms that would have continued on business after the departure of the Europeans. Reasons for this has been adduced to lack of capital, technical competence and low level education of those who participated in the business.\textsuperscript{34} AlhajiDauda Musa explained that the failure of traders in Kabba province either in the previous or later generation to
emerge to become big-time merchants, manufacturers or industrialists as their counterparts in Warri and Onitsha province is due to the fact that:

They failed to develop the business acumen required in the new pattern of trade.
They could not easily adapt and adopt changes. They would rather remain conservative in the ways of their fathers.\(^{35}\)

Altogether, before the construction of roads and the building of railways the canoe was the universal vehicle of transportation particularly in the Warri province. In the Itsekiri and Urhobo controlled waterways the canoe was popularly used for conveying passengers and goods. In the pre-colonial period, the canoes were propelled manually using wooden paddles. When the steam engine came to use from 1870, boats and ships became more popular as vehicles of water transportation. The Nupe, Kupa, Kakanda, Kede, Ijaw and Igbira Koto who were principally canoe men became pilots and captains of ships during the colonial period because of their mastery of the River Niger. They piloted ships conveying goods and passengers downstream to and from the south – Bida, Lokoja, Idah, Onitsha, Warri, Burutu and to the sea.\(^{36}\) Because of their familiarity with the River Niger, they could predict or tell the safest direction for the vessel. The river ports in the Lower Niger are linked to Burutu. Thus, Burutu occupied a significant position in the network of communication in the Lower Niger.\(^{37}\)

The journey from Onitsha on the Niger to Lokoja at the confluence took two days by the engine boat moving upstream. It was easier for the canoe men to come downstream because it is a one-way movement so they spent one day. They spent more days while moving upstream because they had to move against the tide. After the construction of roads, traffic on the Lower Niger River declined. Passengers who traveled by these boats were mostly villagers and traders who were not linked by roads.\(^{38}\) The location of Onitsha on the eastern bank of the Niger directly opposite Asaba and the road which crossed the Niger from the western part of Nigeria gave it an advantage of serving as the gateway to eastern Nigeria and to Igbo land. Also because of its location Onitsha grew to become an important commercial nerve centre of Igbo land. Indeed, Onitsha market is one of the biggest in Nigeria. Onitsha market has grown to accommodate both imported European merchandise and locally produced goods.\(^{39}\)

Because of the advantage of its location along the River Niger Onitsha receive regular food supplies throughout the year (depending on the season of that crop). Agricultural produce were conveyed in canoe downstream to Onitsha mostly on Oye days (Onitsha market days). On their return journey the traders purchased cloths, cooking utensils such as iron pots, furniture, hot drinks and other manufactured products both imported and from the local industries at Onitsha.

**Conclusion**

The paper is focused on trade in agricultural produce or ‘cash crops’ by the peoples of the Lower Niger region. The paper has examined the commercial activities of the peoples of the Lower Niger in the pre-colonial and colonial period. The Lower Niger is a very important highway. It is navigable by ocean-going vessels during the rainy season months of June to October. This position of the Lower Niger River attracted European trading firms who used the Lower Niger extensively for shipment of goods in and out of the region. During the colonial period emphasis on trade shifted to the production and sale of export commodities. It is from this point that the term ‘cash crop’ was derived. The study discussed important internal changes among the people of the Lower Niger in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some of these developments were the abolition of slave trade, establishment of trade in agricultural produce and the promotion of trade in imported European manufactured goods.
End Notes
3. Ibid., 59.
8. Ibid., 4-26.
11. Ibid., 6.
16 Interview, Pa Sylvester Okocha, 94 Yrs. (Rtd) Principal Welfare Officer, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria, 9/5/2007
20. Ibid., 17.
23. Lady Lugard, *A Tropical Dependence: An Outline of the Ancient History of Western Sudan, with an Account of the Modern Settlement of Northern Nigeria.* (London, Frank Cass, 1964), 351, 356. And W. Ibekwe Ofonagoro identify that European merchants often get the backing of their governments to establish or improve facilities in expectation of substantial increases in the quantity of raw materials available for export. See Ofonagoro,


25. Ibid., 3-5.


27. Ibid., 262.


