



The Structure of Ijaw Political Economy in the Colonial Administration, C. 1900-1960s: An Assessment

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Abstract. As expected, the colonial economic activities were tailored toward a fulfillment of the British imperial goal. The British colonial power no doubt established certain merceneries in order to build the metropolitan economy in the United Kingdom. The Nigeria territory was meant to provide the needed raw materials for their growing industries with little to develop the colony. Based on this premise, this paper examines the structure of the Ijaw political-economy during the British colonial administration. A particular attention is equally paid to, the continuation of palm oil production, the Colonial Welfare and Development Act of 1945 and local agitation and resistance to mineral ordinance on land matters. Other significant developments discussed included the 1957 Henry Willink Commission of inquiry. This paper employed both primary and secondary sources of data for critical analysis of issues raised. It argue that since the main reason for the establishment of the colonial administration in Nigeria was to increase the supply of manufactured raw materials to UK, the paper suggests that various polices put in place by the British government was not done to accelerate the internal economic growth of the Ijaw people of Niger Delta province, but to the satisfaction of the colonial power. On the other hand, it could be said that though the colonial economic policies seemed draconian, it has laid the foundation for future development of Nigeria. The government is expected to use the available natural resources toward the advancement of the country both in terms of man power and infrastructural facilities. It concludes that, only then would the dreams of founding fathers of Nigeria at independence for rapid socio-economic and development be attained.

Keywords: Colonial Economy, Britain, Niger Delta, Native government, Development.

1. Introduction

Before the creation of the colonial state of Nigeria there were multiple ethnic groups, each with its own system of politically independent form of government (Eluwa, 1987 pp.8-10). They included the Kanem-Bornu Kingdom, the Fulani Emirate in the savannah of Northern Nigeria, the Ife Kingdom, Benin Kingdom, Yoruba Empire of Oyo, and the city-states of the Niger Delta such as Nembe, Bonny, New Kalabar and its hinterland, the Igbo people of the Eastern region (Nmadi & Martins, 1992 pp.24-29; Greene, 1968, pp.54-58). To Nmadi & Martins (1992), these sovereign territories were culturally diverse, until the British colonial rule from 1900 onwards. The period between 1900 and 1906 witnessed multiple acts of resistances to occupation, conquest and establishment of colonial administration in Nigeria territories. The drive of British colonial power at that time was linked with economic expediency and dictated by industrial capitalism. Lasisi (1994, pp.121-123), asserted that the economic imposed on Nigeria between 1914 and 1960 was structured in a way to satisfy the needs and solve the contradictions within the capitalist system, and explains the motivation behind the promotion and production of cash crops by the British to meet their industrial needs, notably palm oil, cocoa, groundnuts, rubber and later coffee. Mineral resources, such as tin and coal, also became important mineral exports.

2. Native Administration

As was the case with all the other regions in the Niger Delta, Ijaw territory came under colonial rule after the charter of Royal Niger Company (RNC) was revoked in 1900 (Flint, 1960 p.104, Obaro, 1977 pp.15-33). In order to enhance smooth running of its administration, the British government established a Native Authority in the Anyama Ogbia district which held authority over Oloibiri, Otuasaga, Elebele and other villages in the immediate area (Dike, 1956 pp.119-120). The Native Authority represented indirect rule in the region and was the system whereby the British colonial government controlled the local people indirectly through their kings, emirs and obas or traditional chiefs (Ekundare, 1973 pp.108-109). Colonial report revealed that the outcome of this was that the Ijaw traditional ruler were no longer independent but had to rely on the colonial authority and thus were required to take orders from the District Officer and execute these as directed (C.O. Colonial Office File 588/1).

In order to ensure the effective governance of Oloibiri and Ijaw territory the British colonial power also appointed warrant chiefs (National Archive Ibadan, NAI, Warri Province, 129/528, Kirk-Greene, 1965 pp.68-69) According to Lugard warrant chiefs: *Were to be Sole Native Authorities in their respective area, with powers to enforce 'Native Laws and Custom' to make new laws subject only to the approval of the governor and to control all natives residing in their areas. They were to have control over land and the sole right to collect taxes or tribute* (NAI, CSO, 1290/589 Native Authority and Administration in Nigeria)

Warrant chiefs were non-traditional chiefs chosen from the new emerging social group who had become wealthy under the export trade system of the British government (NAI, Native Authority 1906 Ordinance). These chiefs had the power to oversee the execution of orders from the colonial District Officer, collect taxation, and encourage the Ijaw farmers and traders in the hinterland to produce more cash crops in the form of palm oil. This further limited the powers and authority of the traditional kings and rulers in the Delta and eastern Nigeria. Umoren (1995, pp.61-72) writes that in 1906, the Native Court Ordinance gave the Native Court three powers of the colonial government namely: the administrative, judicial, and executive powers, which also gave the court members more authority. This was the case in Urhobo, Kwale (Ijaw) and Igbo area in which warrant chiefs were imposed on the people. To Eluwa (1987, p.210) these areas complained

bitterly against the new system of appointed chiefs, sole native authorities and direct taxation.

Moreover, the year 1929 saw a riot by Aba women, linked to the activity of the warrant chiefs who became lords to themselves by imposing taxation on them (Umoren, 1995). A solidarity protest was staged by women in Calabar in Ijawland and its hinterland in support of the Aba women against the warrant chiefs who were alleged to have imposed a tax on women, children and their domestic animals (Perham, 1962 p.204). Despite this riots and protest, direct taxation was collected in the south-eastern part with less resistance when due process was employed by the colonial government representative. In addition, the educated members of the Ijaw community and part of Benin and Delta agitated for their non-participation in the native administration. The anti-tax riot in Warri and the Kwale-Igbo revolts of between 1927 and 1928 showed the resentment amongst the elites to the colonial administration in the area. By the end of 1930s there had been revolts in both the Ijaw land such as New Calabar, Opobo and part of the Delta (Eluwa, 1987 p.210).

The Oloibiri district of Ogbia Ijawland featured prominently in the Native Authority during the British colonial rule, particularly in their political and economic activity. A first class stool created by the Eastern Regional Government in the 1950s for the Regional Council of chiefs and traditional rulers was occupied by a native of Oloibiri called Amangala (Kathryn, 2005 p.474). This accentuated the status of Oloibiri people during the colonial era, as Amangala held the paramount position of the whole of Ogbia in Ijawland.

3. Promotion of Palm Oil Exports in Ijawland

Palm oil exportation was not new to the Oloibiri and other Ijaw people, as they had been involved in the trade during the pre-colonial era. It is noted that the industrial revolution in Europe and the abolition of Atlantic slave trade in the early 1800s saw a switch to palm oil commerce (Northup, 1972, pp.217-36). Given the importance attached with the production and export of palm oil in the colonial era, it became an opportunity for Ijaws to continue in the same trade with the British. According to Aghalino (2004, pp.23-25), the direct involvement of the British colonial administration in the palm oil export in Ijawland started with the new agriculture policy of assisting the peasant farmers with improved planting and production processes. The production of palm oil was therefore intensified in Ijaw land and every part

of the Niger Delta, as well as eastern Nigeria. By doing this, the British hoped to secure more profits in the world market and to serve their home industries. The same principle of allowing the local farmers to own and manage the plantations was applied in the Ijaw-land (Ekundare, 1973 p.158). Agricultural services were extended to the local palm oil producers through the distribution of seedlings and plants, and the incentive given to these farmers led to increase palm oil production in Ijaw land and its hinterland Igbo areas (NAE, (National Archive Enugu), War Prof, Colonial Annual Report, No, 509,).

Allister, (1997 p.460) noted that the British trading companies demanded for concessions to own plantations in the eastern Nigeria in 1900s, as the Joint Committee of Liverpool, London and Manchester Chamber of Commerce argued that the establishment of plantations would improve the production capacity of palm oil in the territory. The British colonial office, however, rejected their presentation, bearing in mind the effect this would have on the African or peasant farmers. The British believed that this should remain a village industry, claiming that any change toward modern method must be done gradually (NAI, Ibadan Ministry of Agriculture (Ib. Min Agric) 1/298/17457, NAE, War Prof, File 367, Plantation Scheme 1948). However,

by 1948 the colonial government started to reconsider its opposition to European plantations in eastern Nigeria, with production of palm oil by the locals that was too low to meet British export demands. The granting of concessions to Europeans did not by mean the alienation of African from their land, (Allister, 1997 p.460) because the companies were expected to incorporate the local people into their plantation programme by entering into agreement with the local landowners. It is noted that despite this, land was also alienated for the purpose of plantations in the Delta.

As an exception to the above, the United African Company (UAC) was granted permission to own plantations in the eastern Delta, Benin and Calabar. Aghalino (2004 pp.23-25) asserts that:

The colonial government had earlier decided to embark upon a programme of assisting the local farmers to cultivate improved seedlings... These were the participation of UAC and the individual farmers. The UAC systematically undertook experiments aimed at improving the method for increased yield, and also the method of palm oil extraction.

The UAC started its plantation farming in the western delta of Ajabodudu, and in the district of Ikotombo in the New Calabar area of Ijaw land (CSO 26/File 43683). The cultivation of these areas increased the volume of palm oil export to Europe.

Table 5: Oil Palm Plantations 1928-36

Year	Number of owners	Number of acres
Dec 31 1928	6	21
1929	27	119
1930	53	236
1931	85	352
1932	218	691
1933	382	1,014
1934	704	1,457
1935	1,382	2,498
1936	2,278	41,172

Sources: Annual Report on the Agricultural Department, 1928-36, Lagos Government Printer, (cited in Ekundare, An Economic History, p.165)

The above table reveals the impact of plantation farming on the Delta province and the eastern part of the country. The effect of the plantation on those centres to a large extent reduced the numbers of acreage of land intended for the production of food crops in the Delta (Aghalino, 2004 p.29).

Table 6: Palm oil production estimates and palm kernel exports 1900-1944

Year	Total production(estimates) palm oil	Total export palm oil	Total export palm kernel
1900-4	117,358	53,729	12,778
1905-9	115,770	65,177	130,241
1910-14	154,878	77,771	174,236
1915-19	164,060	80,485	184,567
1920-24	180,463	90,352	203,021
1925-9	227,084	124,716	255,469
1930-4	224,070	122,302	274, 584
1935-9	296,889	139,000	334,000
1940-4	284,889	134,377	320,613

Sources: Nigerian Handbook 1936, and Nigerian Trade Report 1939, Lagos, Government Printer.

The table above reveals the result of the British support and promotion of cash crops through improved planting of palm trees and seedling in the eastern and western Delta of Nigeria. The increasing number of hand press machines aided the large volume of palm oil supplies from Ijaw land and its hinterland to the United Kingdom between 1900 and 1944 (Ekundare, 1973 p.166).

It became clear that the palm oil producers in the Ijaw land as well as the British administrator benefitted maximally in the plantation scheme. The issue of environmental exploitation that many scholars tend to attribute to the British colonial government must be reviewed, because both the peasant farmers and the British company (UAC) were responsible for the exploitation of natural resources in the Delta region and eastern Nigeria (Aghalino, 2004 p.29). Lastly, improvement in transportation and communication in the Delta area contributed to the opening up those centers that produced palm oil in Ijaw land and its hinterland. For instance, the proximity of the railway terminal to Port Harcourt and Ijaw land facilitated evacuation of palm oil products to Lagos and thence Britain (Interview with Edward, 2021).

4. Impact of the Colonial Welfare and Development Plan on the Ijaw after 1945

This section explores the motives behind the initiation of the welfare and development plan by the British colonial government. In the post-war years, the British colonial administration passed the Colonial Welfare and Development Act in Nigeria, as a ten-year project effective from 1946 and 1956. The plan was initiated as a result of the economic disarray experienced in Britain after the war (West African Review, 1947 p.172), but was to set the colonies on a path towards development, ensure that its colonies benefitted from economic programmes, and prepare them for self-rule. It was also another option for Britain to use and mobilize resources within its colonies for the reconstruction and building of its own economy.

A member of the British parliament, WM. Gallagher, commented at a symposium:

Britain is facing a very deep, very threatening economic crisis. The dollar octopus is sucking the life's blood out of the country. We take American goods, but America doesn't take our goods. Americans demand dollar. To escape this crisis every resources at the disposal of Britain must be utilized. Thus, it explained the urgent need to develop the

long-neglected resources of Africa (West African Review, 1947 p.196).

Ekundare (1973, p.126) asserts that the Act was necessary toward improvement on health, education, and building of research facilities, such as, dietetic research, veterinary scheme, and tsetse-fly investigation. It was aimed at creating an infrastructure that would attract foreign investment in industry and agriculture. Agricultural promotion and production in cash crops was strategically planned to boost the volumes of export to United Kingdom, particularly in palm oil, cocoa and groundnut. Colonial report has revealed that The peasant farmers got more incentives through extensive training and funding toward agricultural productivity in Nigeria (NAI, (National Archive Ibadan), CSO 1290/45).

On the other hand, Onimode (2001, pp.12-13), however, contends that:

The colonial planning was a framework for consolidating and maintaining underdevelopment, which allow British officials to appropriate the countries surpluses back to Britain by discouraging internal dynamics towards development of manufacturing, stagnation of agrarian sector, and to foster mass illiteracy to perpetuate backward technological know-how...

Colonial welfare planning was merely meant to streamline the British imperialistic exploitation of the country's natural resources to the advantage of its home industries. Despite the intention of the British colonial government to increase the amount of imperial assistance in Nigeria, particularly to be able to develop their own resources, the welfare Act according to Wicker (1958, p.171) discouraged traditional manufacturing by reducing it to mere commercial economy.

As reported by the colonial select committee on estimate, the welfare lasted too long, was realistic and failed for lack of funds (Fifth Report, 1947-48). Despite the total amount of £23 million set aside for the execution of projects, such as agricultural development, construction of trunk roads, education at primary school, technical and vocational training, public health and medical services, only about £8 million was spent between 1945 and 1951 in Nigeria (Fifth Report, 1947-48).

5. Nationalist agitations and reactions of the Ijaws to the British Oil Regulations in 1946

This section examines how the Ijaws participated within the context of the independence struggle and nationalism movement, particularly their reactions to the colonial welfare and development plan on agricultural land and oil ordinances on the local land owners and farmers in 1946.

The Zikist Movement in the 1940s started as a result of the colonial government's proposed amendment to the existing laws, pioneered by Nnamdi Azikwe, a newspaper editor and founder of the West African Pilot had arouse national consciousness on emerging Nigeria (Akinsuroju, 1953 p7). The colonial government under Governor General Richard proposed amendment of the Crown Land Ordinance, the Mineral Ordinance, and the Appointment and Deposition of Chiefs Ordinance in 1945 (Annual Volume of Laws of Nigeria, 1947). The Zikist Movement argued that the public land and mineral ordinances, if amended, would protect the interest of the foreign powers while the local shareholders would reap no benefits. To Ehiedu, (1996, p.33) the nationalist called these the 'obnoxious ordinances'. Kaniye (2001, p.22) believes this to be unjust because it deprived the colonised people of the benefit of their natural property.

As a result of the resentment to the proposed amendment bills, the new Governor General, G.G. John Macpherson in 1947 reviewed the bills, bearing in mind the nationalist demands before it was passed into law (Agricultural Ordinance, 1948). The Zikist Movement represented a revolutionary break with colonialism that expressed a reformist evolutionary way toward freedom in Nigeria. The movement exerted a great influenced on all ethnic groups in the country, but in particular in the East and the Delta where their support base was located.

It is noted that the Ijaw nationalists such as Harold Dappa-Biriye got his inspiration from the Zikist movement, which inspired him and the local people to make demands for the growth and development of the relatively backward Delta area. Dappa-Biriye championed the course of the Ijaws within Oloibiri and elsewhere in the 1940s for a separate political entity, based on the argument that this was a large ethnic group that occupied a very vast area in the Delta (Ehiedu, 1996, p.43). Onduku (2001), argued that the agitation of the Ijaw Rivers People's League in the 1940s, which comprised the city states such as Nembe, Bonny, New Calabari, and villages such as

Oloibiri, encouraged the British colonial government to establish the Rivers Province in 1947.

As was the case with many minority groups within Nigeria by the 1950s, the Ijaw wanted the colonial government to recognize them as a separate ethnic group, specifically because of a fear of domination and lack of infrastructure development. Dappa-Biriye's campaign was channeled through the Niger Delta Congress (NDC) founded in 1947, specifically to have equality with other major ethnic group in the country. This in part, illustrates the resentment bred by the colonial government's practice of favouring the needs of the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani in terms of development during the colonial era to the neglect of the roughly 247 other ethnic groups in the country (NAE (National Archive Enugu) 1280/68).

Kathryn (2009, pp.52-53) opined that within the context of negotiations for an independent Nigerian state, the Ijaw demanded a separate region from the Eastern Region, in which they found themselves, which would cover the whole of Ijaw-land including Ahoada and Port Harcourt. Port Harcourt, after it was established in 1913, had become an important commercial centre for the Ijaws, helped by its closeness to Oloibiri, particularly when oil was found on their land in the 1950s (Encyclopedia of African History, 2005). The Niger Delta wanted new states such as Apa, Itai, Ogoja, Izon (Ijaw), to free them from the Yorubas, Hausa, and Igbo, and make them a majority group at independence. In order to address minority fears, the British government appointed a commission of inquiry into the claims made by the Ijaws and other minority groups in 1957 (Paki, 2011 p.80, Esekumemu, 2017 pp.123-124).

The Secretary of State to the colonies, Oliver Stanley, announcing the creation of the Willink Commission asserted:

Though the desire for the creation of new states crises from the fear of minorities, it would be impracticable to meet all the fears by the creation of new states. There are many different ethnic groups and people in Nigeria and however many states were created, minorities would still inevitably remain (National Concord Newspaper, 1994 p.13, Guardian Newspaper, 1994, p.4).

The Willink Commission was set up in 1957 to achieve the following objectives:

"1) To ascertain the facts about the fears of minorities in any part of Nigeria and to propose means of allaying those fears whether well or ill founded.

2) To advise what safeguards should be included for this purpose in the constitution of Nigeria.

3) If, but only if, no other solution seems to the commission to meet the case, then as a last resort to make detailed recommendations for the creation of one or more new states and in that case:

- a) to specify the precise area to be included in such a state or states;
- b) to recommend the governmental and administrative structure most appropriate for it.
- c) to assess whether any state recommended would be viable from an economic and administrative point of view and what the effect of its creation would be on the regions from which it would be created and on the federation.

4) To report its findings and recommendations to the Secretary of States for the Colonies” (NAE, 1290/1957).

As was the case with other minorities, the Ijaw’s claim for a separate region was rejected by the Willink Commission (Kathryn, 2009 pp.52-53), as clear in the words of Phillip Manson, a member of the commission, that:

Neither Ogoja nor River showed themselves very anxious to be subject to Calabar, enthusiasm for a state that would have the Benin Empire dwindled as one moved away from Benin; the areas that displayed and interest in the middle belt state... who were either indifferent or, as one of them put it, preferred Fulani rule to Tiv (Akinyele, 1996, pp.79).

The commission argued further that:

It is of the first importance to find means of allaying fears which do not perpetuate differences that might otherwise disappear... This is why we do not accept in its entirety the grouping that is, the principle that a recognizable ethnic group should whenever possible form a political unit.

In short, the Willink Commission found that the creation of more regions would simply create new minority dispute that would in turn be contested by other minority groups. In their view, the creation of new regions to cater for minority fear would simply snowball over the long term and lead to the creation of more and more regions without solving the problem of majority domination. Despite this, the commission did agree that, there was need to permit areas with ‘distinguishable culture’ within a region to preserve the element of their culture.

On the issue of neglect, the commission argued that a special measure to speed up the pace of development in terms of material progress must be put in place in the Niger Delta. The Ijaw, as a result of the commission’s report, would be given special treatment as an area with a development board

instituted by the federal government, as well as the eastern and western regional governments, that would require both human and financial commitments to address the special development problems of the Delta. The Ijaws did not achieve their goal, despite the recommendation of the commission. However, the colonial government established the Niger Delta Development Board in 1960 to hasten the infrastructural development of the region. It was left for the post-colonial government to attend to their needs.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the structure of the Ijaw political economy during the colonial administration in Nigeria. It demonstrated that the British colonial government was motivated to promote cash crops into economy as a means of sourcing for revenue toward the development of its projects within Nigeria such as roads, transport, education and health. At the same time they sought to increase exports of cash crops to their home country. The British economy system had merely intensified a process that was already well established and set before the onset of its administration in Nigeria. As clearly shown in this study, palm oil production was a continuation of the pre-existing export trade relationships in Oloibiri of Ogbia District and the entire Ijaw land with the British. Evidence has revealed that the Native Authority established by the British colonial government was more powerful than the Ijaw kings or chiefs in the palm oil transactions. Although the British also protected the rights of ownership of the local people in terms of land concessions for palm oil production. Many Europeans signified their interests in owning plantations in the Niger Delta, but were turned down by the British. The UAC (United African Company), however, was permitted by the British to owned and managed plantations in Benin and Calabar in 1948. It is noted that the Zikist movement largely serves as an influencing factor on the Ijaw people, particularly when they demanded for a separate state in the Delta region for fear of dominations from the Yorubas, Hausa and the Igbos. Their desire for a separate region was turned down by the Willink Commission of enquiry, but the commission reported that the entire Delta region has being backward and poor that needed urgent government attention. It concludes that the discovery of crude oil of commercial quantity in Oloibiri by 1956, marked a turning point in the history of the Ijaws, Niger Delta and Nigeria, though oil only became a dominant foreign exchange earnings from the early 1970s. The Ijaw oil producing communities were thus in the forefront of petroleum industry that

partly brought some transformation into their socio-economic system in terms of manpower development and capacity building.

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