

COLONIAL RAIL SYSTEM AND ITS IMPACTS ON THE PRE-CAPITALIST IGBO ECONOMY

BY

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Abstract

Rail system was the most important infrastructure in the colonial economy. In colonial Igbo land, the high premium placed on railway building was informed by British political interests and foreign capital. The railway incidentally impacted on Igbo land in many ways such as the creation of a new class of salary earners in European currency, the establishment of European trading firms in the emerging railway towns, and the conscription of the Igbo economy into the international capitalist system. This work examines these and other impacts of the railway using secondary and archival sources. It argues that beyond the colonial railway, post-colonial Igbo land and Nigeria as a whole need efficient railway to encourage economic growth and greater inter-group socio-economic relations

Keywords: colonialism, colonial economy, railways, foreign capital, monetization

Introduction

Many reasons have been advanced for the European colonialism of the 19th century in Africa and other parts of the world ranging from economic, political to humanitarian among others. However, economic factors more than any other appeared to have underscored Europe's quest for colonies in the later half of the 19th century. The Industrial Revolution equipped Europe with the technology in navigation and weaponry, which allowed her easy access to other parts of the globe and endowed her with the military capacity to enforce her interests in distant lands. It also produced in Europe surplus capital and consumer goods and resultant need to look for foreign markets for more investments and disposal of surplus manufactured goods.

There was also the urgent need to source raw materials from these distant markets for further production of goods in metropolitan industries. Colonialism was therefore an enterprise undertaken to secure markets abroad and to ensure a more efficient exploitation of natural resources in colonial territories for the benefit of the colonial powers, (Shenton, 1986, Njoku, 1998).

The direction of this work however, is the railways, which were inextricably linked to colonialism and capitalist interests (Lenin, 1983, Shenton 1986). The

construction of the railway in Igboland had diverse implications on the pre-capitalist Igbo economy. In few areas of the economy, the railway brought about profound changes, whilst in others the transformation was only superficial.

Colonial Economy and the Railways

Colonies in Africa were acquired by European powers at the instigation of capitalist interests to serve as sources of cheap agricultural and mineral resources for European industries and also to secure markets for European manufactured goods (Njoku, 2001). It provided basic infrastructure in forms of roads, railways and harbours designed to connect centres of raw material production and markets such as tin fields, coal fields, palm oil rich areas, etc with the entre ports for easy evacuation of their products to Europe. The same route was used to convey imported finished products into the hinterlands.

The colonial economic system grafted African economies into the international capitalist system and consolidated what is often described as the international division of labour, which had consistently positioned many states in Africa as producers of raw materials and consumers of imported manufactured goods.

Nature of the Colonial Economy

The colonial economy was dominated by raw material production and trade. It made no serious and consistent attempts to promote manufacturing activities in the colonies. Colonial governments believed that industrial activities in the territories would hurt the interest of metropolitan industries and manufacturers. Njoku, (2001:167) recognized this and argued that colonial government and private business concerns did not only avoid establishing industries in the colonies but also adopted measures that de-industrialized the indigenous economy, which destroyed or limited existing industries and industrial skills.

Another important aspect of the colonial economy was increasing monetization of the economy, which by implication integrated it into the capitalist economic system. Monetization is not only the introduction of currency in circulation but also includes promoting production anchored on exchange and profit (Ake, 1981). Colonial governments initially employed different methods to promote the monetization of the economy, some of which were payment of taxes in European currency, promotion of cash crop production and wage labour. Soon after the second decade of European rule colonial currencies replaced the traditional currencies of iron rod, manila, cowries etc.

As a corollary to monetization, colonial banks were established in the colonies. These banks were owned by Europeans and catered mainly for European interests throughout the colonial period.

European Penetration of Igboland

European incursion into Nigeria of which Igbo land is a part, came through the sea and for this reason Europeans first came into contact with the coastal states before thrusting into the hinterlands. This contact led to the establishment of trade relations that spanned for centuries between the coastal states and the Europeans. This trade came to be dominated by slaves as a major export item from Africa.

However, with the passage of time, a combination of factors such as the industrial revolution, abolition of the slave trade and the production of effective drugs to combat malaria and other tropical diseases enabled them to venture inland. The hitherto economic relationship began to assume political dimensions when Britain appointed a Consul named John Beecroft in 1849 to represent her interest and traders in the Niger Delta and its hinterlands. The Consul and the Courts of Equity which were later established first in Bonny in 1854 and later in other trading towns began to interfere in the internal politics of the Delta States. Within the same period they began to establish their presence in few riverside Igbo communities such as Onitsha.

But for many of the hinterland Igbo communities, European presence was not directly felt until the first decade of the 20th century, after the British - Aro War of 1901-1902 (Afigbo, 1971). The defeat of Arochukwu in 1902 did not bring the expected capitulation of Igbo land, because Aro influence in the area was based on economic relationship and not political hegemony. Many independent Igbo village states continued to resist British invasion. According to Onwumere (2002) it took several wars or military expeditions to subjugate the area as the Igbo village states did not willingly surrender their sovereignty to the British.

The Niger Delta and especially its hinterland states were chief producers of palm oil and kernel. Even before the era of legitimate trade, the hinterland communities particularly in Igboland had been an important source of slaves sold along the coastal ports through coastal middlemen. The elimination of slaves from goods traded following the abolition increased the profile and demand for palm oil in the international trade. British traders desiring direct trade with hinterland producers and an improved profit appealed for the intervention of the British government in penetrating the interior markets. Britain's eventual intervention in Igboland was to bring the area under firm control in order to establish full scale economic exploitation of the region.

Factors that Influenced Railway Construction in Igboland

The railway was one of the most important infrastructure in the establishment and sustenance of colonial rule and the colonial economy. Indeed a combination of factors influenced specifically railway construction in the colonies. Some reasons appeared to be more dominant than others and varied according to localities.

In Igboland, the chief products were palm oil and kernels. Demand for these products in the international market increased tremendously with the Industrial Revolution and abolition of the slave trade. British traders involved in the legitimate trade through a network of African middlemen in the coast felt they could improve

profit through direct trade with the hinterland Igbo producers. They therefore appealed for the intervention of the British government in penetrating the interior markets. Britain's intervention brought Igboland under firm control and so began full blown colonialism and economic exploitation of the region's human and natural resources. This in turn made the British colonial government give serious consideration to the development of a railway system in Igboland (Seymour, 1952). Moreover, the discovery of high quality coal in Enugwu Ngwo in 1909 gave an additional economic impetus to the proposals for a rail line in Igboland. According to Njoku (2001:140),

the mineral (Enugu coal) was strategically and economically important being the only source of such power in West Africa. British West African colonies as well as European firms depended for their supplies on imports from Europe. And these supplies were not only costly but also uncertain because of constant strikes by British coal miners.

A suitable deep water harbour was soon discovered by the Marine Department in Port Harcourt, which served as a terminal port for the Enugu coal. With this new development, the colonial government wasted no time in taking a decision to construct the eastern railway to serve as a suitable terminal port for the Enugu coal. The motive for the construction of railway in Igboland was mainly to achieve effective colonization and full exploitation of the region's resources.

Implications of Railway in Colonial Igboland

Work on the Eastern railway which traversed Igboland started from the Port Harcourt end in November 1913. The railway project was to go beyond Enugu to Makurdi and was carried out in two phases. The first phase (1913-1916) covered the area from Port Harcourt to Enugu. The second phase, which lasted from 1920 to 1926 covered the area between Enugu and Makurdi. By 1916 the first coal train had reached Port Harcourt from Udi.

The construction of the Nigerian Eastern Railway ensured that indigenous and expatriate labour was used (Syer, 1914). These railway workers were paid some money in European currency for their labour. As the railway project was completed many of the labourers ventured into the railway service on their own adapting readily to the new way of earning wage. Thus, the railway incidentally led to the infusion of some form of capital into Igbo land with certain multiplier effects such as a rise in purchasing power and a corresponding increase in the demand for manufactured and agricultural goods. Afigbo (1981) describes the creation of this wage-earning class and the opportunity to secure salaried employment as the main economic innovation of British colonialism in Igboland. This new economic order resulted to increased monetization of the society, placing a high premium on the possession of European currency. Social

standing and progress came to be measured on the basis of the amount of cash one had accumulated and no longer on such traditional qualifications as age, titles and ancestry.

The railway system in Igboland led to effective establishment of mines and increased exploitation of natural resources. The case of coal production will be quite illuminating. In the pre-rail period of 1915, coal output from Enugu was only seven thousand tons and production was carried out using locally made simple tools of picks and shovels. This mined coal was transported to Onitsha port, a distance of one hundred and fifty miles by human head portage. This undoubtedly was a very tedious and time wasting engagement.

The coming of the Eastern Railway however, led to some improvements with the railing of heavy mining equipment into the mines for production and the evacuation of mined coal to Port Harcourt. The rail period consequently witnessed increased coal production. In 1916, coal output increased to 24,000 tons from 7,000 tons of the previous year and by 1958 it peaked at 925,000 tons (Ekundare, 1973).

The trade in palm oil, from Igboland with Europeans in the coasts of Bonny, Opobo, Brass and Onitsha actually ante-dated the Eastern Railway (Dike, 1956). The construction of the railway however affected this trade in several ways, one of which was to create the opportunity for direct penetration of the inland markets by European trading firms which hitherto were restricted to the coast and relied exclusively on coastal middlemen for procurement of hinterland produce. In relation to the impact of the railway on the produce trade, Afigbo (1981:327) observes that:

...the European commercial companies which hitherto hugged the coast and the river banks ... now penetrated the Igbo interior establishing posts and depots at vital points on the rail line. As a result, the railway stations and halts became produce-buying points of varying degrees of importance. Among such points were Port Harcourt... Aba, Umuoba, Umuahia, Uzuakoli, Ovim, Afikpo Road, Agbani and EhaAmufu.

In many Igbo communities like Umuahia, Aba, Uzuakoli, the European mercantile companies of 'Patterson and Zochonis (PZ), McIver, G.B.O. Olivant, John Holt, etc. established permanent operational bases few years after the completion of the Eastern Railway. So as trading firms followed the railways inland from the coast of Port Harcourt, establishing trading stations along the rail line, more and more non - littoral communities in the Igbo interior were drawn into the 20th century international capitalist orbit. The water-ways and access to ports became less important conditions for participation by local communities and traders in the production trade in this period. The railway became not only a carrier of colonialism but of economic activities of different dimensions. Thriving markets in produce especially in palm oil and kernel developed among Igbo producers and traders close to the railway stations. These places

of exchange became known in local parlance as "beaches". Many small scale producers brought their produce of varying quantities to the 'beaches' where they sold to the agents of the European trading companies.

The description of these inland produce markets as 'beaches' appeared to have been borrowed from the pre-rail practice of conveying palm oil and kernels to the coastal communities for sale. Palm oil, the most important export crop in Igboland, being bulky could only be transported easily at that time through the water-ways. For this reason, important markets in produce grew in certain port towns located in Igbo land and contiguous communities. The ports and river banks of Onitsha, Ohambele, Owerinta, Degema and Azumiri became very active in the produce trade more than those oil producing communities that did not have navigable rivers but whose produce had to pass through these ports. The Eastern railway however changed this pattern and created a new order in the import - export trade. It did not entirely eliminate the importance of ports and water-ways in the trade but rather reduced their prominence and allowed those areas outside the coast and river banks to participate more actively and directly in the produce trade. Njoku, (2001:142) aptly captures the radical change introduced by the railway by asserting that; *"One marked effect of the railway is that it considerably rewrote the economic geography of Nigeria. It drastically drew away traffic from the water ways to itself..."*

The Eastern Railway evidently led to the decline of old trade routes, markets and ports and the emergence of new ones. The ports of Opobo, Bonny and Degema which had previously played important roles in international trade were from the rail period completely eclipsed by Port Harcourt, the port terminus of the Eastern Railway.

The coastal middle men who hitherto mediated between the hinterland producers and traders on one hand and European traders at the coast on the other, lost their age long position to a new group of traders in the interior. In many of the railway centres and beyond, the buying of produce was undertaken mainly by local agents of the European firms.

In the absence of large-scale production, European firms needed these local agents to buy produce from the army of petty producers and traders in the immediate and remote villages. These agents were also known to have deliberately prevented producers from selling directly to European firms. In the Umuahia area there were reports of producers from across the Imo River that were physically attacked by local agents of European trading firms for attempting to sell directly to the mercantile firms in Umuahia town (Ingles, 1922). Agents were paid on commission basis for certain quantity of oil or palm kernel they bought for the company that engaged their services. It was therefore seen as a loss of income, when traders or producers by-passed them to sell directly to the European firms.

In the pre-rail period, the mass of the people lived in their various villages. Many people never ventured outside their villages or village groups or clan because of

heightened insecurity, difficult terrain, absence of pack animals and vehicular means of transport. Inter-village and inter-clan travels were highly circumscribed being left to certain groups like professional traders. The colonial period however saw a considerable increase in long distance travels within and outside Igboland mainly due to the railway system.

The Eastern Railway also led to the development of many urban centres in Igbo land. Port Harcourt, Aba, Umuahia and Enugu developed as a result of the construction of the Eastern Railway through them. As Afigbo (1981:343) points out; “...*Port Harcourt ... came into being as a port and railway terminal for the evacuation of the produce trade of the former Eastern Region and of Enugu coal.*”

Umuahia, another area that developed into urban status and became prominent in the colonial period started as a railway town. Allen (1938) writes, that:

The Umuahia township was originally established during the construction of the Nigerian Eastern Railway at mile 67 near the Olokoro village of Umuahia from which it took its name. After its transfer in 1917 to its present site, the name (Umuahia) remained unchanged...

From the early years of colonial rule, nearness to a rail line became an advantage in the selection or choice of administrative headquarters. Administrators and commercial interests came to prefer these emerging railway centres. For this reason, railway centres like Aba and Umuahia soon became administrative and commercial headquarters replacing Akwete and Bende respectively.

Evidently, the expanded market economy failed to destroy the pre-colonial methods of production in Igbo land. The cultivators produced raw materials with the same traditional methods and agricultural implements under the old - style family labour and land tenure system. For example, palm oil production which was the mainstay of the produce economy was not undertaken except in very few places by large-scale entrepreneurs. The vast majority of producers remained peasants who brought their produce of about five to ten litres of palm oil to markets once in a while. It was largely this absence of large scale producers that made over-whelming reliance on a horde of buying agents necessary to procure reasonable amount of produce over a period of time by trading firms.

In developed countries, the construction and operation of railways led to increased demand for and production of locomotives, rolling stock, iron and steel and the emergence in railway towns of engineering activities that serviced the railway. On the contrary, locomotives, iron and steel and other equipment required by the railway in Igboland throughout the colonial period were imported from Britain.

The Eastern Railway was not able to reproduce a truly local industry involved in the fabrication of simple tools and equipment needed for operation and maintenance

of trains and lines in the railway system. This largely explains the superficial impact of the once dominant railway sector on Igbo economy.

Need to Revive the Eastern Railway

In Nigeria rail transportation has declined. The Eastern Railway, which for decades serviced the colonial economy and contributed in opening up many areas for trade had since 1980s become moribund largely because of the transition of Nigeria from an agrarian economy to a petroleum monoculture economy and governments' lopsided development of the transportation sector, which unduly favoured road and air transportation.

However, beyond the colonial economy, the railway remains relevant in providing the safest and cheapest means of transportation in modern economies especially in conveying people as well as heavy and bulky materials across long range locations. In recent time, governments in the South East have made efforts to promote commodity production in such items as palm oil, palm kernel, cocoa, cashew nuts and cassava. The surplus of palm oil the traditional South East produce and processed cassava which has become an important staple are exported to other parts of Nigeria. These and other private industries and businesses in the South East can exploit the cheap and safe services offered by the railways.

Like in other parts of Nigeria, motor roads are in deplorable condition. For example, the Enugu - Port-Harcourt express way has become impassable for the many vehicles that ply the road daily. An activated Eastern railway, which in the previous decades connected these two cities can ease the heavy traffic on that road and help save lives and property that are lost daily as a result of its poor condition.

It is significant that the Federal Government under the Obasanjo and later Jonathan administration realized the need to develop and expand the rail system in Nigeria "to reduce pressure on the roads and make them last longer" (Manuaka, 2011). Subsequent administrations should continue to develop the railway until an efficient rail system is achieved. However, in addition to prolonging the life span of the roads and impacting directly on economic development, the railway in an independent country as culturally diversified as Nigeria can promote friendly and mutually beneficial inter-group economic and social relations among Nigerians.

Conclusion

Railways were the most important infrastructure in the colonial economies. Capitalist, liberal and Marxist minds of the late 19th and early 20th centuries had envisaged that modern means of transportation and communication like the railway would lead to drastic and progressive transformation of African and Asiatic colonies by generating conditions that would replace pre-capitalist methods of production with capitalist methods. However, Nigeria and particularly Igboland belied this prognosis. The railway did not destroy the pre-capitalist modes of production. Production continued to

be carried out on a small scale and with labour intensive instruments. Plantation and mechanized production hardly became the practice.

The railway attracted foreign firms into the interior of Igboland. But these were trading companies whose activities did not go beyond the selling of manufactured goods and buying of raw materials. This explains why these companies left no outstanding legacies of economic development in Igboland.

On the positive side the railway was able to connect Igbo land with other parts of Nigeria and the outside world. It made long distance movement easy and safe and increased the level of interaction between the Igbo and other groups. A revitalized Eastern Railway will increase economic opportunities not only in Igboland but in other parts of Nigeria. It will also ease intra and inter-regional movements of people and capital.

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