

BRITISH COLONIAL ECONOMIC POLICIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE IN NIGERIA: THE RAIL TRANSPORT EXAMPLE, 1898-1960

By

Nwachukwu J. Obiakor, PhD
Department of History and International Studies
NnamdiAzikiwe University, Awka
nwachukwuobiakor@yahoo.com

&

Abuoma C. Agajelu
Department of History and International Studies
NnamdiAzikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

Transportation proved a major instrument in the hands of the colonial government in Nigeria which enabled them attain their objective of making the colony an export-based economy. Enormous tons of goods left the country through the transport network that connected the produce centres with the coasts. One of the means of transportation that played a very important role in the trend was the railway. A lot of literatures exist on the effects of the colonial infrastructure on the Nigerian colonial economy. However, some serve as eulogy while others are more critical. This informs the need for an objective examination of a particular area of infrastructural development. Adopting the thematic method of analysis, this work attempts a holistic approach towards discussing the colonial rail transport infrastructure development in colonial Nigeria.

Introduction

It has been established that the primary motive of colonialism in Africa was purely for economic gains. To achieve these economic gains, basic infrastructure needed to be in place. The British colonial authorities in Nigeria were aware of the essentiality of infrastructural development towards achieving maximum political, social and economic stronghold in Nigeria area, and their other colonies which were hotly contested for. The basic institutions needed were an effective administrative structure, a modern transport system, and a portable currency and modern banking.¹

Coercive administrative instrument were needed to extract compliance from the resisting peoples of the colony but to establish an export and market distributive

economy, potent transport infrastructure became a necessity. A.A Lawal states the need for transportation and other infrastructural development in the colony when he stated:

Colonial economic policy sought to modernize local transport, the distributive system, money and banking, distribution and use of land and labour with the objective of expanding export production and distribution of European manufactured goods.²

In fact, the need for basic transportation infrastructure in colonial Nigeria cannot be overtly emphasized. Sir Fredrick Lugard summarized the importance when he observed that, “the material development of Africa may be summed up in one word – Transport”.³ Furthermore, with the anticipation and discovery of various produce centres in the hinterlands it was clear that the railway system, which played a magical role in industrial Europe, was needed in the colony.

The railways lay across the colony, from the west to the north, from the north to the south, from the east to the south. Later from east to north-westwards, forms the national grid. It is pertinent to briefly examine the pre-colonial economic infrastructure, to enable us understand better the state of infrastructure in the pre-colonial Nigeria, before we can now adequately delve into the revolutions in the railway sector and its economic effects on the Nigerian colonial economy.

Pre-Colonial Economic Infrastructure

Before the British effective occupation of what later became Nigeria, the ethnic fragments that made up the country existed politically independent of each other. Although, this may not be said of the economic aspect. This is because of the evidence of pre-dominance of economic activities in the pre-colonial inter-group relations. These trade activities were made possible because of a number of infrastructural factors.

One was the natural infrastructure which was seen in the geographical setting. The mountains of far eastern Nigeria - which entered Cameroon and the Lake Chad, that appeared to be natural barriers on the eastern side, have not prevented human movement across them. Then there is the impressive network of rivers and their tributaries. As J.F.A Ajayi and E.J.Alagoa put it “Nigeria is really the basin of the lower Niger south of the Bussa rapids with the Benue, their tributaries and the enormous delta spreading out into several creeks and lagoons”.⁴ These river networks provided media of contact between peoples,

cutting across the north and south axis. Z.A. Konczacki and J.M. Konczacki also lend their voices on the prominence and importance of the waterway system in Nigeria. According to them:

*The seaboard of Nigeria has the most extensive network of waterways in Africa. The Lower Niger, together with the Benue, is navigable by shallow-draught barges for more than 1,000 miles, though the Benue is only navigable for six months in the lower stretches.*⁵

The early navigation of these waters contributed immensely to the pre-colonial internal and external trade. Also, ideas and technologies were diffused from one state, empire and kingdom to another through this means. The Niger-Benue area appeared to be a major crossroad in the general spread of the technology of iron working, and the ideas of state organization, not in one single line of diffusion, but in several interlocking chains.

The importance of the Niger and Benue in early history of Nigeria is further reinforced by the fact that three major kingdoms flourished on their banks. The Jukun Empire embraced most of the Benue valley and exercised influence over much of northern Nigeria as far as Kano, and appears to have been known in the south as far as the estuary of the Cross River. The Igala kingdom controlled areas around the confluence of the Niger and Benue, and traded below the confluence as far south as Aboh and Onya at the head of the Niger Delta. The rivers Niger and Kaduna form the axes of the country of Nupe kingdom. These rivers also served as the kingdom's effective and natural system of communication. The strategic location of these three kingdoms on the Niger-Benue meant that the history of traffic on these rivers would have a great deal to do with the history and relations of peoples comprising them.⁶

However, we cannot overtly dwell on the natural infrastructure of the waterways in Nigeria but the special attention given to it by writers is due to the fact that the country has the most extensive waterways in the region. Other trade routes and infrastructure were also developed to enhance internal and external trades. Various settlements and communities established different markets for locally produced and imported goods. These goods were distributed by a system of exchange prior to the introduction of assorted currencies. Also there was abundance of land. These lands belonged to the whole community even though a

local chief or ruler was entrusted with its control and distribution to whoever wanted land for farming.⁷

Trading posts and fortes also played vital role in pre-colonial economic activities in Nigeria. The land routes also were almost as important as the network of waterways. The inland region of the Igbo country east of the Niger developed very impressive economic activities based on trade routes on land. The Aro were noted to have spread their trade influence through the entire area and to the Middle Belt from periods before the 19th century. Similarly, the Awka people penetrated into many parts of the Igbo hinterland with their crafts, black smithing and carvings.⁸

Head portage and beasts of burden served extensively in the pre-colonial economy of what is today Nigeria. S.D. Neumark observed rather harshly that “in Negro Africa man was his own beast of burden.”⁹ Head portage was very common in the sub-Saharan Area of Africa. The human transport system is particularly valuable in the area of conveying messages. As recorded by Garvin and Oyemakinde;

For the conveyance of messages, nothing could surpass the professional runner, and rulers retained men for this purpose. In the late 19th century a reputed runner carried message from the Emir of Gombe over four hundred miles to the Sultan of Sokoto in eight days – a feat that can stand comparison with present day telegrams.¹⁰

This underscores the invaluableity of the use of human beings as means of transportation, and especially communication in the age of less technological development.

At the north of the Niger and Benue the pack animals – oxen, camels and the donkey were favoured means of transport on land. Donkeys played a very prominent role in the transportation of natron and salt from northern Nigeria to Ghana and southern Nigeria.

Although these pre-colonial economic infrastructures were valuable in the long and short distance commercial activities, they were hardly sufficient to handle the increasing traffic brought about by the colonial economic motive of massive exportation of primary products from Nigerian coasts. These and also the short-

comings of the waterways necessitated the introduction of the railway system in Nigeria by the British imperial government.

Development of Colonial Infrastructure in Nigeria

The nature of the colonial infrastructural development in Nigeria betrays the main motive of colonialism which is economic aggrandizement. To effectively subordinate the colony to a primary producer, the British imperial government introduced measures that will enhance cooperation on the part of the indigenes and effect a competent administrative system. These measures are depicted in the type of infrastructural facilities and institutions provided, and their strategic placement. The basic institutions and infrastructures needed included:

1. *Administration.* The colonizing power did not subjugate the area which is Nigeria today without stiff resistance from the indigenous chiefdoms, kingdoms and empires. These resistances continued well into the second decade of 20th century. Consequently, the British imperial government decided to foist on the people coercive administrative instruments intended to extract their obedience and submission. After the experimentation of the Indirect Rule system in the Northern Protectorate, the colonial government under Sir Fredrick Lugard decided to extend it to the South, leading to the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914. This seem to have been done in ignorance, without adequate anthropological knowledge of the different nationalities that make up Nigeria. Under the Indirect Rule system, local authorities were conferred with legislative, judicial and executive control over their communities. Thus, they made laws, regulated the conduct of affairs in their areas of jurisdiction, adjudicated on cases, and performed administrative functions; all aimed at maintaining law and order and general development in their localities. The colonial army, the police, the judiciary and prison services served as the main instruments of coercion. In the 1880s, the British government established the West African Frontier Force (WAFF). The WAFF served to subjugate and “pacify” the people of the colony. With military might of the colonial power, the people were forced to accept the colonial administration.
2. *Banking and Currency.* Monetisation was a major aspect of the colonial fiscal policy. This was because monetization will ensured the integration of the colonial economy into the imperial capitalist economy. A new and common currency was needed to replace the different currencies circulating in various parts of the country. Most of the currencies lacked

portability and were in fact cumbersome and incapable of sustaining an export market economy. Also without a common currency, it would be difficult for a national market to emerge. The British coins were, therefore, introduced, but it met strong competition against the manila, which was highly valued at the time. This led to the forcible withdrawal of the manilas by the Treasury. The paper money was also introduced during the World War I, but it was not until World War II that it became popular.¹¹ Another means through which the colony was monetized was by the expansion of wage labour. This not only had the advantage of monetising the economy, but also facilitating the control of the economy and a more reliable supply of labour. Taxation was another powerful instrument of monetisation. Taxes were imposed and the colonial administration insisted on payment of these taxes with the introduced British currency.¹² Up till 1912, the metropolitan currency was the currency in circulation in Nigeria. In that year, Britain introduced a separate currency for her West African colonies. Also the West African Currency Board (WACB) was established that year. WACB was given the responsibility over the administration of the new currency. However, the colonial currency was basically an extension of the imperial currency. This facilitated the penetration of the colonial economy by the British capitalism and integration of the economy to the metropolitan system. The monetization of the Nigerian economy necessitated the establishment of commercial banks. The first successful bank to operate in Nigeria was the Bank of British West Africa (BBWA). This bank was established by Alfred Jones in 1894. Though legally a commercial bank, the BBWA was made to serve as the bank of main issue of British currency circulating in Nigeria, until the creation of the West African Currency Board. The British Bank of West Africa remained the only bank in Nigeria until 1926 when a second expatriate bank, Barclays Bank made its appearance. The two banks dominated banking in Nigeria throughout the colonial period. Their lending policies discriminated against African entrepreneurs while favouring European interests. Until 1959, there was no Central Bank in Nigeria which could have regulated the activities of these banks. The excesses of these banks led to the emergence of some indigenous banks which, however, experienced early demise due to factors that ranged from the Great Depression and unhealthy competition from the metropolitan banks.

3. *Transportation.* The short-comings of the pre-colonial transport system necessitated the introduction of more efficient system by the colonial

power to ensure adequate movement of goods and personnel in and out of the Nigerian colony. These short-comings were pointed out by Sir Lugard when he observed "that produce worth £30 a ton at the port of shipment will have cost its full value to transport over a distance of less than 200miles, leaving nothing for original cost of production and profit to the producer."¹³ The high cost of head portorage not only limited the distance over which bulky produce could be conveyed but also inhibited the development of natural resources. Regarding the pre-colonial transport system as crude and inefficient, the colonial government moved swiftly to take advantage of the network of waterways in Nigeria to build ports and harbours which served as terminals for the exportation of raw materials, and importation of manufactured goods. The waterways served as the starting point of colonial government action on investment into the development of transport infrastructure in the Nigerian colony. The rivers were the main traffic lines between the coast and the hinterland. Due to obstacles and blockages at the mouths, the government dispatched annually work parties armed with explosives, dynamites and other equipments, to clear the inland waterways of obstruction to traffic. Governor Ralph Moor promulgated the Roads and Rivers Ordinance in 1903 which made it mandatory for community heads to ensure that land routes and waterways within their domains were kept in satisfactory conditions.¹⁴ At a point it became clear that the waterways were not enough. Some produce centres were quite far away from the rivers that the construction of the railways became inevitable. The roads for motor transportation subsequently followed.

It is pertinent here to reinstate that the transport system was not financed to satisfy the economic needs of the colonial subjects but to facilitate the improvement and expansion of British trade and the distributive system.¹⁵

Development of Railway and Rail Transportation in Colonial Nigeria

The railway phenomenon was magical in Africa as it was in industrial Europe. Its effect on the industrial revolution and imperialism were so great that it was described as "the White Hope of the 19th century". No matter how critical they may be of the European adventure in Africa, authors have something good to say about the introduction of the railways in Africa. According to Michael Crowder "only the railways remain as a major legacy of the economic policies of the colonial powers of that period..."¹⁶. Ralph Austen in his book *African Economic*

History presents to the reader a clear picture of the transport challenges and the reason for the introduction of the rather costly railway. He stated inter alia that:

Despite the fixation on rivers of the nineteenth-century European explorers and treaty makers, no major breakthrough in the transport bottleneck of the African economy could be made without investment in new land arteries. Given the technology available to Europeans at the end of the nineteenth century, it was inevitable that this new transport system should take the form of railways, whose high cost, rigid orientation, and capital-intensive structure would leave a lasting imprint on twentieth-century African economies.¹⁷

The decision to delve into the expensive investment in railways in the Nigerian colony was influenced by a number of reasons. They included:

1. Curiosity in Britain about the interior areas of Nigerian.
2. The desire to expand British trade. The British manufacturers desired the opening up of the Nigerian interior as a new market for their goods.
3. To reach the produce centres where the waterways cannot reach. Development of the railway was necessary to help the colonial merchants in moving cash crops and extractive minerals from where they were produced inland to the harbours for export.
4. The bulky nature of both import and export commodities as well as the absence of good roads and unavailability of heavy haulage road vehicles, also made colonial administration decide to establish railway transport.
5. There was also the need to establish a more flexible movement of colonial administrative personnel in the vast colony especially after the amalgamation of 1914.
6. One of the reasons for the construction of the railways was the military control of inland territories. Since the responsibility of railway construction fell on the colonial government, they used it as a strategic tool to assert authority over the people in the hinterlands.

In Nigeria, the construction of the railway can be said to have started in 1898 at Iddo¹⁸. However, the background to the policy of railway dates back to 1877. Although many projects had been put forward for other parts of British West Africa since 1872, it was not until 1877 that the first railway proposal was sketched for Lagos which was the only British colony in Nigeria. This project,

which seemed utopian, was produced by John Whitford, a geographer who had travelled extensively in West Africa between 1853 and 1875. Whitford's theory of the benefits of developing a railway was rather imperialistic and derogatory to the African. He stated thus:

*Think of the benefit that it would be to England in increasing markets for manufactured goods and receiving additional produce in return. And lastly, reflect upon the fact that it would civilize the savage and prepare him for the missionary.*¹⁹

The early proposal notwithstanding, it was not until the last decade of the 19th century that the British mercantile communities both in Lagos and Liverpool succeeded in convincing the British government to approve the construction of a railway to run from Lagos into the Yoruba hinterland. The line eventually approved was to run from Ebute Metta through the Abeokuta - Ilero country which Governor Carter described as "conspicuously rich in oil palm."²⁰ This Carter's statement underscores the validity of the notion that the basic objective of the railway construction in Nigeria was to effectively cart away the industrial produce located in the inlands.

Although Onwuka Njoku recorded that construction commenced in 1898, Michael Crowder reported that the Lagos - Ibadan railway started in 1896 and was completed four years later in 1900. He further stated that the line extended north to join the Northern Nigerian Railway; though until 1916, with the completion of the Jebba railway bridge over the Niger, trains had to be ferried across the River²¹. Before then the line had advanced to Kano in 1911, and the Lagos - Kano route was open to traffic on January 1, 1912. Before the line got to Kano, Sir Lugard, the Governor of the Northern Province, had embarked on his own programme of railway construction. This northern line started in 1901 at Zungeru, the then provincial headquarters, onwards to Kaduna. At Kaduna, railway passengers and cargo could then travel on the Kaduna River and thence via the Niger to the coast. In fact, Njoku gave a concise account of the network of railway lines in Nigeria. He threw more light on the financial paucity of the North and the aids which came from the South and the British Treasury in developing the railway in the North when he stated; "In 1901, a financial advance from the South plus a grant-in-aid from the imperial government made possible the construction of a line from Baro on the Niger to Kano via Zungeru and Zaria".²²

While the Bauchi light Railway to Bukuru was constructed to serve the Tin mines, an Eastern line was ignored till the discovery of coal at Udi escarpment. This colonial attitude towards infrastructural development further betrays its imperialistic motives. The Eastern railway line ran from Enugu to Port Harcourt due to the presence of a deep sea harbor from where the precious mineral could be evacuated. After World War I, the Eastern line was constructed northwards through Makurdi and joined the Western line at Kaduna in 1926. The Western and Eastern lines formed the national grid of the railway system in Nigeria.

Impact of the Railway on Colonial Nigeria

The railway transport infrastructure had both positive and negative impacts on the British colonial administration as well as the people of the colony. The colonial administration benefited immensely from the railway lines because they:

1. *Became sources of Internally Generated Revenue (IGR):* The Southern Nigeria line was built at the enormous cost of £13,000 a mile, compared with only £3,800 for the Northern line, and yet by 1913 was showing a net surplus of over £250,000.²³
2. *Enhanced the effective evacuation of primary products:* The policy objective of the introduction of the railway system in Nigeria was to link the sea ports with the produce centres inland. Because the railway transport was cheaper than the traditional means, the tonnage of the products which were transported to the coasts for export shot up. This trend brought with it a substantial development and extension of European commercial hegemony.
3. *Stimulated export production:* Closely related with the above point is the railway's role in further colonial emphasis on export production in Nigeria. The railway made its impact away from navigable rivers and its importance grew the further it stretched beyond the range of other forms of cheap transportation. Gavin and Oyemakinde noted that the effect of its arrival in the close settled zone of Kano in 1911 was greater than practically anywhere else. There it set off a sudden and massive upsurge in groundnut production for export²⁴. This upsurge in the production of export crops and mining was also felt in the areas of other crops and minerals found in Nigeria.
4. *Enhanced administrative control:* The railway not only transported commercial goods, it also transported the British administrative personnel. It also provided a quicker mobility for administrative officers during the colonial period. A system of telegraph communications essential to

commercial exploitation as well as administrative control spread across the countryside, following the track of the railway.²⁵ This, in effect strengthened the colonial control of the British on the Nigerian colony.

There are numerous other benefits of railway system to the colonial government however, the impact of the railway revolution in Nigeria was not only felt by the colonial government. The indigenous people also tasted the fruits of some of the benefits of railway system in the following areas:

1. *Growth of internal commerce*: This was well felt in the growth of the kolanuts cultivation and sales in Nigeria instead of depending on the importation of the crop from Ghana. From the beginning the railway was used for the northward movement of kolanuts; the Gonja - Bussa route was soon abandoned and Ghanaian kola came by ship to Lagos and thence by rail toward northern markets. Then, around 1910, the planting of the more productive kola trees began to the south of Abeokuta. Rail freights were altered to discriminate against Ghanaian nuts, and by the mid-twenties, the kola industry of south-western Nigeria had been established and Ghanaian imports fell to small proportions.²⁶ The railway had similar effects on the production of food crops for markets around the country.
2. *Urbanization*: Most urban centres which emerged during colonial times were found around the railways. Njoku further noted that the lines magnetized the European firms from the coast to the hinterlands, and this resulted in the emergence of chains of the firms' trading depots on the lines. In the West, such depots appeared at Abeokuta, Ibadan, Oshogbo, Ilaro and Ilorin; in the north of Kano, Kaduna, Kafanchan and Jos; in the East at Port Harcourt, Aba, Umuahia, Uzuakoli, Enugu, Otukpo and Makurdi. These locations became the focal points of trade and new frontiers of economic opportunities, attracting local traders from immediate and distant communities.²⁷
3. *Provided Employment Opportunities*: It afforded employment for people who were not able to engage themselves in farming activities. It could be said of the railway to be the first major wage labour provider in Nigeria. In furtherance, it also provided some revenue to the government.²⁸ The wages derived from the employment opportunities it offered improved the standard of living of the people. This led to increased enrolment in schools, mostly by children of the railway workers.

The railway revolution also impacted negatively on Nigeria and this is much evident on the environmental degradation it caused. Since timber was the only source of fuel before deposits of coal were found in Enugu, the railways contributed greatly to the rapid deforestation that took place in the early colonial period.²⁹

Secondly, the railway caused an imbalanced development in the transport sector. It drastically drew away traffic from the waterways to itself. The trading ports which had enjoyed much prominence in the external trade of Nigeria experienced serious decline. The Eastern railway siphoned trade from the ports of Calabar, Opobo and Oguta to its terminal at Port Harcourt; the Western line, from Warri and Badagri to Lagos. Arochukwu, whose commercial fortune was linked to Calabar, declined into commercial obscurity.³⁰

Thirdly, the disadvantages of the railway system were seen in the cost which was both human and material. While proposing for a railway policy for the Nigerian colony, John Whitford anticipated no engineering difficulties that might impede construction of proposed lines.³¹ However, he was mistaken as construction workers recorded death tolls and injuries. Crowder observed that the rail lines were built over uncharted country, through thick forests, over massive hill ranges, and were often marked by the grave-stones of workers.³² This shows the enormous task this huge project presented and the sacrifices made to accomplish it. Also due to the self-sufficient policy of the British imperial government on the colonies the funding of the construction of these railways became a herculean task. Ralph Austen depicted this strain when he noted, "the great financial burden of railway construction in tropical Africa was felt first through the role it gave the state in planning transport and second through the pressure it put upon African revenue."³³

Finally, the railway policy was not geared towards the development of the indigenous economy but towards strengthening of the metropolitan economy. The railway in Nigeria and indeed in the whole of colonial Africa clearly depicted the centre-fringe relationship which existed between the colonial powers and the colonized.

Conclusion

It is no longer news and in fact an established fact that colonial infrastructural development was meant to meet metropolitan needs and in some instances

further underdeveloped Africa. There are long lists of proponents of Dependency Theory who did not see anything good in the European adventure in Africa. Nevertheless, Eurocentric apologists still believe that colonialism opened the doors of civilization and modernization to Africa. Crowder quoted Alan McPhee as one of such. According to McPhee:

English capital has come in and built the railways and constructed the harbours and cleared the channels; it has also introduced new cultures and improved old ones; it has built roads and towns and established markets; it has introduced banks and a convenient currency; it has exploited minerals. More than this, English government has brought peace and security and abolished slavery.³³

While one cannot deny the facts of the above claims, the question to be asked is; for what motives did the British make such sacrifices? The answer undoubtedly lies in imperialism which took the form of colonialism in the 19th century in Africa. One can therefore draw the conclusion that the railway revolution in Nigeria was an instrument of imperialism. Its nature and strategic placement betrayed the motives. None of the lines were made to service internal trade and communication, even though it only became a fall-out benefit especially for the kolanut trade.

Nevertheless, the railway did not holistically represent the transport revolution it was heavily funded to do. The tarmac road, which was never intended to compete with the railway shrouded its relevance and made it almost moribund in Nigeria, thanks to the rigidity of the railways and flexibility of the tarmac roads.

End Notes

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25. Crowder, *West Africa*, 278.
26. Gavin and Oyemakinde, "Economic Development," 500.
27. Njoku, *Economic History*, 140.
28. Alli, *Trade and Transport*, 138.
29. Crowder, *West Africa*, 277 – 278.
30. Njoku, *Economic History*, 142.
31. Omosini, "Background," 148.

32. Crowder, *West Africa*, 276.
33. Austen, *Africa*, 126.
34. Crowder, *West Africa*, 273.