

AN EXAMINATION OF THE NEXUS BETWEEN MODERN TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROWTH IN COLONIAL EASTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *At the beginning of colonial administration, the British government envisaged her Nigerian territory to play a dual role: source of agricultural raw-materials and mineral resources for British industries; as well as an assured protected market for British manufactures. Thus, the provision of modern transport infrastructure was therefore required to achieve the above economic motive for the British colonization of Nigeria. Modern transport infrastructure in Eastern Nigeria was vital as it was thought as the surest way 'to open up the vast hinterlands of the region to civilization'. Consequently, the colonial government laid emphasis on rail, roads, and harbor development, and these boosted its desired strategy for the economic exploitation of the vast resources of the region. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the development of modern transport infrastructure and their effects on the colonial economy of Eastern Nigeria. Utilizing both primary and secondary sources of data, the paper argues that although the colonial government had ulterior motives in the development of these infrastructure, but they no doubt boosted socio-economic activities, and as well led to the emergence of major urban centers in Eastern Nigeria. It concludes by emphasizing the need for governments at various levels in modern South-east states of Nigeria and the federal government to give priority to the development and sustenance of modern transport infrastructure as this will facilitate the actualization of the much orchestrated Vision Twenty, twenty-twenty [20, 2020] of the present civilian administration in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS- *Modern transport, Infrastructure, Nexus, Growth, Colonial, Eastern Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars are conversant with British colonial economic policy in its overseas territories, particularly Nigeria, which was its prized possession in West Africa. This colonial economic policy was predicated on 'self-sufficiency' for the colonies. The policy specified that the colonial government was not to expend the British tax payers' money on capital intensive projects in the colonies. For this reason, the colonies had to be self-sufficient in public finance¹. Thus, A.G. Hopkins opines that the colonial government in its policy was not envisaged to play a central and

dynamic role in developing the colonies; furthermore, the purpose of acquisition of territories in West Africa as a whole was to secure profitable trade for the motherland². Specifically, the Nigerian colony was meant to serve two major purposes for the British government: a source of raw materials and as a market for finished products from British firms and industries.

Consequently, to actualize British colonial economic policy, provision of modern transport infrastructure was very necessary in all parts of Nigeria. This made Lord Fredrick Lugard (a knighted agent and administrator/ major participant in the British government's colonial enterprise) to argue that: "the material development of Africa is summed up in one word, transport"³. Thus, with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria in January 1914, there was need to open up the vast hinterlands of the Eastern Provinces to "commerce and civilization"; of course, to profitable trade for agents of the British colonial government. It was against this backdrop that provision of modern transport infrastructure became inevitable in Eastern Nigeria.

The first effort made by the colonial government in Nigeria to provide modern transport infrastructure in Eastern Nigeria was noticed in 1903 when the promulgation of the 'Rivers and Creeks Ordinance' was made. The Ordinance made it compulsory for all adult males to work free for the government for a specified period in a quarter; although concerted effort was not made by the government to pursue a purposeful road policy before the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Thus, railway development, which commenced earlier in Western Nigeria during the last decade of the nineteenth century, was approved for Eastern Nigeria in the early 1910s. This approval was as a result of the discovery of coal in commercial quantity at Udi, near Enugu, and as such railway construction for purposes of evacuating the envisaged coal became inevitable.

With regards to harbour development, the foundation of Port Harcourt and construction of its harbour was a land mark in the history of Eastern Nigeria. The railway project and work on Port Harcourt harbour were carried out simultaneously, for each was vital to the development of the other. Serious effort in road development began in the 1920s; and the trio: railways, roads and harbour were the principal modern transport infrastructures that were provided by the colonial government in Eastern Nigeria. No doubt, the three enhanced socio-economic activities during the period under review, and their impact on socio-economic growth of colonial Eastern Nigeria is the thrust of this paper.

Many scholars including historians have contributed to the literature on transport infrastructure in colonial Nigeria. Among these are studies by E.K. Hawkins, whose study emphasized the development of roads and road transport in Nigeria, 1903 to 1939⁴. Two studies undertaken by O.O. Olubomehin also harped on road development and road transport primarily in Southwestern Nigeria⁵, while one of his studies emphasized the Nigerian motor transport since the 1920s⁶. On his part, O.N. Njoku highlighted the development of roads and road transport in Southeastern Nigeria, 1903 to 1939⁷.

Although, the above studies are relevant to our understanding of provision of transport infrastructure in Nigeria under colonial rule, but a gap still exist, as most of the studies just emphasized 'road', leaving out railways and harbour, which this study will cover. Other than this, most of the studies emphasized southwestern Nigeria, while the current paper's interest is Eastern Nigeria. A study that covered the three sub-sectors of transport highlighted in this paper is a work carried out by A.O. Olukoju in 1996, which highlighted colonial transportation in the West African sub-region⁸. No doubt, the areas covered are relevant to this paper, but the current effort appraises from a different perspective the nexus between modern transport infrastructure and socio-economic growth in colonial Eastern Nigeria.

At this juncture, it is worthy to stress that Eastern Nigeria as used in this paper include all areas in the old Eastern Provinces, which later became Eastern Region in 1939 when Southern Nigeria was divided into two- Western and Eastern. The old Eastern Region was a unified political unit under one government from 1939 up till the creation of twelve states in Nigeria in May 1967. In modern Nigeria, the old Eastern Region includes five states in the south-east and four in the south-south geo-political zones. These states are- Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River; and Rivers. Till date, most of these nine old Eastern Region states are geo-graphically contiguous. Some of these states have similar cultures and their peoples had engaged in inter-group relations many centuries before the advent of colonial administration. At this juncture, it is worthy to stress that the period covered by this study is the colonial era, taken to be from 1900-1960, while some of the ethnic groups in the area include Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, Izon, Bokyì, Ikwere, Annang; among many others. Thus, for purpose of clarity, this paper is divided into four sections, which are: overview of rail and road development in Eastern Nigeria, overview of harbour development in Eastern Nigeria, consequences of the development of modern transport infrastructure on the colonial economy of Eastern Nigeria; and a conclusion.

Overview of Rail and Road Development in Eastern Nigeria

Unlike in the old Western Region of Nigeria where the construction of the Lagos-Ibadan rail line commenced in 1896, approval for the construction of the Eastern Railway was granted by the colonial government in 1912 as a result of the discovery of coal in commercial quantity at Udi, near Enugu. The subsequent discovery of Port Harcourt as a suitable harbour for coal export facilitated the commencement of work on the Enugu-Port Harcourt rail line in 1913⁹. The rail line was designed as the sole route for the evacuation of coal from Enugu through the Port Harcourt harbor for export and for local use by government agencies in Lagos. The Eastern Railway also served other interests of the colonial government, as it conveyed produce to and imports through the port. Similarly, the Eastern Railway was also meant for the shipment of cash crops from the cotton bearing areas of Northern Nigeria.

Construction work on the Port Harcourt-Enugu rail line reached Udi, the location of the first coal mine in 1916, although outbreak of the First World War in 1914 disrupted plans to link this line to Northern Nigeria. However, work on the line to the North resumed in 1922, and by 1924, the line reached Makurdi, while Jos was connected in 1926¹⁰, thereby linking the northern and eastern parts of the country. This, no doubt was a deliberate colonial government's desire, which ensured the exploitation of resources of Nigerian peoples through all means. Specifically, the Eastern Railway that linked to the north facilitated the exports of tin products from the tin mines in Jos and Bauchi Plateau via the Port Harcourt harbour.

When construction of the Eastern Railway was approved in 1912, the first problem encountered by officials of the colonial government was the issue of land rights. However, this did not prove very difficult because many communities on whose soil the rail tracks were to be laid willingly obliged after explanations by government officials. A.I. Nwabughuogu has aptly observed on the issue of land rights in Eastern Nigeria that:

Unlike Northern Nigeria where land was transferred to the government and managed by Native Authorities, it was an important part of policy to protect the land for the 'natives' of Eastern Nigeria to prevent land alienation to strangers and foreigners. Thus, the land on which the roads and railways were constructed was provided by the indigenous peoples of Eastern Nigeria¹¹.

For the above reasons, colonial officials sought permissions from community leaders in many communities across Eastern Nigeria before surveys were conducted for laying of rail tracks. It is on record that those communities such as Azumini, Nsulu, Amasiri, Okigwe; among others, were surveyed for purpose of laying of rail tracks in 1913¹².

With regards to labour for construction works on the Eastern Railway, two types of labour: political and contract was put to use. Specifically, during the construction of the Port Harcourt – Enugu rail line between 1913 and 1916, political labourers were used. The colonial government relied on unpaid forced labour sent in gangs by the Warrant Chiefs through directives of District Officers. These gangs worked in the various locations leveling ground, carried rails and sleepers and did other works assigned to them connected with rail construction. Each gang worked for two months and was replaced by another set from different parts of Eastern Nigeria. In all, a total of about 11,200 political labourers were recruited for the construction of Port Harcourt-Enugu rail line up till 1916¹³.

With regards to contract labour in the construction of the Eastern Railway, the first category of paid labour was hired by contractors for the maintenance of the rail tracks before the commencement of work on the extension of the Eastern Railway to the north. Thus, some Warrant Chiefs were contracted for the routine maintenance of the rail routes. The contract provisions included supply of quarried stones and clearing and cutting of grasses; and the value of these contracts between 1916 and 1917 was about one pound per square mile¹⁴. To execute the contracts, the Chiefs hired and paid labour as they desired without the intervention of the colonial government. However, the local chiefs later abused this contract system by paying very

poor wages to labour. Consequently, most of the contracts were left uncompleted to the displeasure of the government.

Another form of contract labour was also put to use during the extension of the Eastern Railway to the north. This category of labour was the non-Eastern Nigerian labourers, principally Hausa and Yoruba indigenes who had experienced laying of rail tracks. This group, although were contracted, but they did not constitute a very significant portion of the labour force in the construction of the Eastern Railway¹⁵. Paid casual labour also formed part of the labour force during the extension of the railway to the north. This category of labourers were initially conscripted as political labourers; but on completion of stipulated period, went back to the rail track sites as casual labourers. Many of these were migrant wage seekers from different parts of Eastern Nigeria, particularly Igboland. For instance, in the first quarter of 1921 (January-March), most of the 3,859 casual labourers employed for the extension of the Eastern Railway at the rate of one shilling per day were from Aba, Bende and Okigwe Districts in the old Owerri Province¹⁶. The colonial government also made efforts in the development of roads, which led to growth in road transport in Eastern Nigeria. The history of road building in Eastern Nigeria can be divided into two phases: 1903-1924 and the post-1924 era¹⁷. Most of the early roads were built by mere widening of the existing footpaths through clearing with cut-lashes. The essence was to make movement easy because in the early years of colonial conquest up till 1912, there were virtually no vehicles that made use of roads. Thus, the first phase witnessed construction of roads to enhance effective administration of most of the areas in Eastern Nigeria that had been 'pacified'. These early roads were also vital to expedite the export of agricultural raw-materials from the hinterlands of Eastern Nigeria. Consequently, most of the roads that were built in the second decade of the twentieth century were meant to complement the railway, especially in those areas that had no access to rail transport.

It is worthy to stress that during the first quarter of the last century; most of the roads constructed in Eastern Nigeria were undertaken through voluntary labour. However, the supply of labour that worked on the roads depended on the season of the year. People worked on the roads during the dry season months of October to January, while most communities refused to supply labour during the planting season, particularly the months of April to June, when clearing and planting were carried out by farmers. On the other hand, due to the fact that labour was voluntary, many communities located quite far from road construction sites deliberately refused to supply labour. The resultant effects were delays in the completion of certain roads, to the displeasure of the European site engineers. Thus, in 1924, due to the previous delay tactics of workers, the construction engineers for the repair works on Onitsha-Orlu Road requested the use of hired labour, which was turned down by government because it would be a bad precedent to pay for labour for the repair of bad roads¹⁸.

The utilization of wage labour for road construction and maintenance in Eastern Nigeria became significant after the Roads and Creeks Ordinance of 1903 was repealed by the government in

April 1927, as a prelude to the introduction of direct taxation. A factor that also boosted this was the specification of roads into categories by the central government in 1928. Roads across the country were classified into three: trunks A-C¹⁹. The building and maintenance of trunk 'A' roads was the responsibility of the central government, the trunk 'B' roads linked the provinces and later regions; whereas the trunk 'C' roads were maintained by the various local authorities or Native Administrations. Generally, the Native Authority roads were more in number than the trunks 'A' and 'B' roads. These roads passed through many communities; some constructed to link trunk 'B', while few linked the trunk 'A' or Public Works Department (PWD) roads.

Wage labour was put to use to construct bridges across some roads in Okigwe and Owerri Divisions in 1928 and 1932 respectively. These were the bridges at 6th mile of Okigwe-Owerri road²⁰, and at Akabo²¹, a town along the same road. Wage labour was also utilized for the maintenance of the Okigwe-Orlu road; and most of the labourers who participated in the repair work on that road were recruited from communities within then old Okigwe division²². The colonial government continued its road construction in Eastern Nigeria, and in 1930, the Aba-Port Harcourt road was opened to traffic. Roads were equally constructed by the colonial government in the five major urban centres and administrative headquarters like Enugu, Calabar, Onitsha, Port Harcourt and Aba; as well as the emerging urban centres of Ogoja, Umuahia, Orlu and Afikpo.

Generally, development of a road network across Eastern Nigeria led to emergence of "roadmen". These principally were labourers employed by Native Authorities under the supervision of road overseers for road construction and routine maintenance works. The 'roadmen' were poorly paid, and despite this, they were also required to carry out services other than road works, such as the repairs of houses of District Officers, building of garages and rest houses, and the houses of police officers. Worse still, those employed by the Native Authorities were in most cases, compelled to purchase their own tools such as shovels and head pans. Their superior officers, they alleged, insisted that the old ones became worn out because they ('roadmen') did not use such tools with care²³.

These developments, no doubt had impact on socio-economic activities within Eastern Nigeria. The development of roads led to the increasing use of motor vehicles and bicycles as means of transport in Eastern Nigeria. The bicycles particularly served the dual purpose of carrying palm produce from the hinterlands to the produce- buying centres and also served the needs of District Officers and their subordinates, on their routine tour of communities and clans under their jurisdiction. Specifically, the increased use of bicycles in the 1930s led to the emergence of professional cyclists. These men conveyed palm products from the rural areas to the produce-buying centres located in such urban centers as Aba, Onitsha, Owerri and Umuahia. However, activities of the cyclists were curtailed by shortages of bicycle spare parts during the early 1940s, caused principally by the raging WW II²⁴. No doubt, the most vital aspect of road development

across Eastern Nigeria was that it enhanced labour migrations mostly from the rural areas to the emerging urban centers in the region.

Overview of Harbour Development in Eastern Nigeria

As observed earlier, the need for a port for the evacuation of coal from Udi, near Enugu led to the founding of Port Harcourt, the development of its harbour and its subsequent growth as the commercial nerve-center of Eastern Region during the period under review. Its location was discovered by colonial government officials in 1912 at the village of Isaka, a site suitable for a deep water port. The indigenous inhabitants of the area were the Diobu, a sub-group within Ikwere ethnic nationality²⁵. A distinct feature of Port Harcourt in its role as an important harbour and a modern administrative and commercial center is that it was created from scratch. The colonial government in Nigeria bought land for the construction of Port Harcourt from the local Chiefs, who ceded the lands opposite the cliffs for 100 pounds²⁶. Construction work started at the site on 10 November 1913²⁷. A temporary wharf that was completed towards the end of 1914 facilitated the discharge of construction materials for both the construction of the railway and further development of other wharves.

The development of Port Harcourt became very significant because its harbour displaced the existing pre-colonial ports in Eastern Nigeria. Its growth led to the decline in commercial activities of the eleven existing ports of Opobo, Obokun, Ekwanga, Ikang, Bonny, Bakana, Degema, Buguma, Brass, Akassa and Calabar²⁸. The dwindling fortunes of Calabar port need be stressed here. Up till the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, Calabar port was still considered the best to handle the produce of Eastern Nigeria. However, it has been argued that Calabar port lost its place of glory to Port Harcourt as a result of the availability of modern port facilities at the Port Harcourt harbour, while these were lacking in Calabar²⁹. Construction work at the harbour and the emerging Port Harcourt township generated a lot of labour from different parts of Eastern Nigeria and beyond. The number of migrant wage earners to the town further increased when the construction of a permanent wharf began in 1923. With its completion in 1927, there was a tremendous increase in economic activities in Port Harcourt. The port handled the shipment of coal and export of other resources from Eastern Nigeria. It also handled traffic of goods from the Northern Region of Nigeria. By the beginning of the 1930s, Port Harcourt had begun to expand rapidly due to the influx of migrants from different parts of Eastern Nigeria and beyond. Thus the harbour and the new city of Port Harcourt attracted diverse categories of wage earners, which led to increase in socio-economic activities both at the harbour and in the town. For instance, the population of the city increased from 79, 634 in 1952 to 179,563 in 1963; which represented an annual growth rate of 8.7 percent³⁰.

Generally, most of the migrants from different parts of Eastern Nigeria were unskilled and semi-skilled wage earners. Many of them were engaged as labourers, civil servants, messengers, cooks

and stewards to the European employees of the big trading firms. Some were employed as porters and as artisans in the various activities at the port, few semi-literate ones were policemen, while others worked with the Public Works Department (PWD). Few literate ones worked with the civil service, especially the Railway and other government departments; while others were independent wage earners as petty traders. The average monthly wage of most of the workers employed by the colonial government during the early 1950s ranged from 3 pounds to 8 pounds.³¹

Consequences of the Development of Modern Transport Infrastructure on the Colonial Economy of Eastern Nigeria

From the foregoing analysis, it can be observed that socio-economic activities during the period under review were dictated by the development of modern transport infrastructure. No doubt, these developments had consequences on communities across Eastern Nigeria. For instance, rail development and the subsequent creation of job opportunities in laying the rails led to the out-migrations of young people to work as wage earners in areas other than their homes. The accelerated road development that followed the development of the Railway led to the emergence of 'group migrations' to the centers of wage employment. Although the out migrations from the rural to the urban centers benefitted individual migrants, but economic activities in the rural areas such as agricultural pursuits and rural handicrafts dwindled. Social life in the rural area was also affected³².

The developments had both adverse and positive effects on the economy of Nigeria in general, and Eastern Nigeria in particular. The economy of Nigeria was affected adversely because the nation's resources were utilized to import capital goods from Europe, particularly Britain, thereby providing employment for metropolitan capital goods industries; a consideration, which in some cases placed additional cost on the Nigerian economy by excluding competitive goods from other industrialized countries, which might have offered more efficient and better services³³. More important, perhaps, was the subversion of the indigenous economy, converting it into an appendage of the metropolitan economy on a center-periphery basis. On the economy of Eastern Nigeria, developments in transport infrastructure led to the emergence of new centers of commerce and the domination of trading activities by the large British trading firms such as the United African Company (UAC), John Holt, PZ, and G.B. Olivant.

On the other hand, the development of the railway, roads and the harbour at Port Harcourt facilitated the export of natural and agricultural resources of the country such as coal, tin, palm produce, cotton and groundnuts, thereby contributing to the growth of the Nigerian economy. Rail development in particular facilitated trade between Eastern and Northern Nigeria to the extent that in 1948, Eastern Nigeria dispatched to Northern Nigeria through the railway, food items, specifically palm oil and garri worth 5, 548 tones and 8, 790 tones respectively³⁴. The development also boosted the economy of Eastern Nigeria, workers who received wages

obtained modern goods, which led to a rise in the standard of living. The peasant producers benefitted because of the rise in food consumption in the urban centers.

Other than the above, development of modern transport infrastructure opened up Eastern Nigeria and led to the emergence of many urban centers, which hitherto were mere villages. For instance, the towns of Onitsha and Aba developed rapidly due to the existence of modern transport infrastructure. Specifically, Aba, which can be regarded as the commercial nerve-centre of Eastern Nigeria attained its status because of its strategic location on the railway and as the main link to the communities in the Cross River basin of Eastern Nigeria.

Similarly, Onitsha owes its growth to the River Niger, which stimulated trade, and road routes, being the principal transit town connecting the Eastern Region with the old Western Region. E.K' Hawkins concludes that the major contribution of road transport to economic development has been to provide facilities where none existed before; and the general reduction in freight charges. Road transport also created regional and provincial markets, while the railway integrated these markets into a national economy, thereby integrating not just Eastern Nigeria, but the various parts of the country³⁵.

Enugu and Port Harcourt came to limelight because of the development of modern transport infrastructure. In the case of Enugu, economic activities commenced with the discovery of coal, which attracted wage earners, but when the Eastern Railway reached Enugu, this triggered the movement of the population from the traditional setting to the nucleus on the railway station. Thus, on completion of the railway station on its junction with the colliery in 1916, the Government station was moved from Udi, about fourteen miles away to the Railway Junction because the railway station offered a better strategic position for the supervision and coordination of administration. People were attracted by the urban setting, and the population of Enugu rose from mere 3,170 in 1921 to 60,000 in 1950³⁶.

Similarly, Calabar (despite its displacement as the major port in Eastern Nigeria by Port Harcourt) witnessed growth in its population during this period. The population of Calabar rose from 15,438 in 1921 to 76,410 in 1963³⁷. These demographic changes were generally stimulated by increased commercial activities, especially the role of large European conglomerates, and the Asian trading firms. These two commercial interests dominated the import-export sub-sector during the period. To date, virtually all these towns that emerged /came into prominence as a result of the development of modern infrastructure are cities, as well as state capitals.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing sections highlighted the socio-economic changes in colonial Eastern Nigeria brought about by the development of three types of modern transport infrastructure: railway, roads and harbour. No doubt, a nexus really existed between the development of modern transport infrastructure and socio-economic growth of Eastern Nigeria. This was because

provision of modern transport infrastructure acted as a catalyst, which opened up economic activities during the period under review and led to the economic growth witnessed in virtually all the sectors of the colonial economy of Eastern Nigeria for the greater part of the period.

As observed in the course of analysis, each of the transport infrastructures generated employment opportunities and the related out-migrations from the hinterlands to the emerging urban centers. Although the out-migrations had adverse effects on the rural areas, but the fact that most of the young persons who embarked on the migrations to the towns were better off than lives in the rural area, the wages they received generally improved their standards of living. As also observed in our analysis, the transport infrastructure facilitated the export of both natural and agricultural raw materials, and as well made it possible for products of peasant producers to reach all nooks and corners of Eastern Nigeria and beyond.

More importantly, development of modern transport infrastructure led to the emergence of many urban centers in Eastern Nigeria, some of which have become model towns in modern Nigeria. The relevance of modern transport infrastructure in colonial Eastern Nigeria cannot just be dismissed with a mere wave of hand, because till date, more than fifty-three years after independence, government at various levels in Nigeria, especially the federal and state government have not been able to recreate the functional infrastructures that were witnessed during the colonial period. The case of railway is quite worrisome, as most of the tracks constructed in Eastern Nigeria are now in deplorable conditions and out of use. Unfortunately none of the nine states located currently in the former old Eastern Region has any plans for a functional railway network in their states.

With respect to road development, although most of the states have constructed quite a good number of intra state roads, but some of these are not as durable as the ones constructed by the old Eastern Region in the 1950s, few of which have remained till date. The respective state governments, especially in the southeast geo-political zone should ensure construction of durable roads, no matter even if such roads were meant for rural communities. The governments should try to pull their resources together and construct a new Eastern Railway, which will cut across the old Eastern Nigeria and take care of freights, especially heavy materials, which have continued to lead to the collapse of most roads constructed due to the texture of the soil in most parts of the old Eastern Nigeria.

Finally, the provision of modern functional and effective infrastructure in the states that falls in our area of study is possible given the right political will by the different political leaders in the states. This can be achieved by the emergence of proactive and selfless charismatic leaders, who can make the difference, so that the nexus that existed in the development of modern transport infrastructure and economic growth in Eastern Nigeria under colonial rule could be recreated in the states that now occupy the area that was formerly old Eastern Region of Nigeria. No doubt,

the actualization of this will spur Nigeria's quest to be among the top twenty economies in the world by the year, 2020.

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