

Economic Stability during the Colonial and Post-colonial Era: The Case of Nigeria

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Abstract: Based upon library research, this study analyses the economic activities of the Nigerian people in the pre-colonial times and the impact of the British colonialism on these traditional activities. The study found that various types of economic activities reached its peak of production before the colonial administration. Geographical features played an important role in the emergence of the economic sector with different types of manufacturing and agricultural varieties. The British colonial policies resulted in the economic backwardness and poverty in the region. The independence of Nigeria did not change the situation as the authorities pursued similar policies which was worsened by the discovery of oil. The country remains poor despite oil money. Thus, there exists a direct link between the colonial economic policies and the devastating economic situation at present.

Keywords: *European colonialism, Nigerian economy, the impact of colonialism, African history, corruption in Nigeria*

Introduction

The Federal Republic of Nigeria, or simply known as Nigeria, is a country located on the western coast of Africa. It is the 7th most populated country in the world with over 195.88 million total population as estimated in 2018. Between 2010 and 2015, Nigeria experienced an annual population growth of about 2.7%, according to the United Nation statistics.

Nigeria is of strategic significance to African subcontinent. It is endowed with numerous mineral resources and is the fourteenth largest oil exporting country in the world. Yet, Nigeria is a poor country with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of about U.S. \$374.3 Billion per year. Its

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economic growth is hampered by consumptive cultures, weak institutions and fragile political structures.

Eurocentric studies of African history explain such devastating situation in the country by referring to its pre-colonial history describing it as dark, stagnant and backward with no organized social or economic structures. Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote on African history as follows:

Undergraduates ... demand that they be taught the history of black Africa. Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America... Men existed even in dark countries and dark centuries ... with political life and culture ... but history, I believe, is essentially a form of movement, and purposive movement too (Trevor-Roper, 1965: 9).

However, there are others who claim that African backwardness is a product of European colonialists' exploitation. Colonial rule has disallowed the socio-economic development of Africa. This article studies the pre-colonial economic activities in Nigeria from various primary and secondary sources, and tries to understand the root reasons for current economic backwardness in Nigeria.

Relations between Geography and Economic Activities

Nigeria did not exist in the pre-colonial times. Rather, the territory known as Nigeria was divided among the various types of state formations at different stages of the economic development. The well-established systems of economic, social and political organizations existed in the region, and the most of them were tribal in nature. The native people enjoyed freedom and independence before the coming of the British. The terrain before its colonization by the British in 1886 consisted of diverse ethnic groups who succeeded in developing the complex systems of government such as the Borno Empire, Hausa land, Igbo, Yoruba, Isako and Edo states (Friday, 2006: 10).

The region geographically is divided into four vegetation zones: the savanna zone of the northern part of the country characterized by the low level of rainfall and grassland perfect for rearing of animals; the semi savanna area, situated in between savanna and the forest zone; the forest zone with heavy rainfalls; and, zone situated along the coast, and vegetation consisting of swamps, heavy rainfall (Omolewa, 1986: 10). This avenue provided by the geographical characteristics was responsible for the formation of the states and the occupations of the inhabitants. For instance, the flat landscape caused the formation of independent states in Hausa land and Chad basin. The provision for easy mobility, and the fertile land encouraged the cultivation of the variety of crops and rearing of different animals (Toyin, 1999: 38). The existence of water sources contributed to easy irrigation and transportation. The availability of iron ore and other mineral resources resulted in the manufacturing of farm tools and weapons used as currency for trade (Toyin, 1999: 38).

In the forest region, the dominated groups were the Yoruba and the Edo, who lived in the western and southwest of the present-day Nigeria. In the eastern part and in the southeast, the major ethnic groups were the Igbos, Ibibio, and Ekoi (Mayowa, 2014: 19). Geographical characteristics divided the occupation of these people living in the area. For instance, in the coastal areas, fishing and salt making were the principal economic activities while farming (cola nut and cocoa) and trading were dominant in the Yoruba land of the southwest. For the northern Igboland, due to the nature of the environment, trading was the substitute for farming (Sunday A. A., 2015,: 53-60).

The system and organization of the economic life of the pre-colonial Nigerian societies had obviously reinforced and enabled the growth of external trade. The secret behind the flourishing of external trade was the environment in the region that falls broadly within mangrove swamp, forest and savannah regions, which created an interdependence between the communities and the economic collaboration among them was indispensable for existence. The environmental setting, accordingly, had influenced the mode of production and economic structure at every zone, hence dictating the form of trade and distributive pattern of products from each zone (Sunday A. A., 2015: 53-60). For instance, the people of the savanna region supplied agricultural products like maize, beans, guinea and corn to the people in the forest

region or the southern part, in return, they got the forest products like cola nut and palm oil from the forest region.

In sum, the variety of occupational specialization had emerged as a result of the potentials provided by the natural environment, and these types of occupations resulted in surplus, which led to exchange and distribution through trade. Thus the people living in pre-colonial era had operated considerably market-oriented economies, which thrived on agriculture, industry and trade. Consequently, the area attracted many foreign traders in the past (Sunday A. A., 2015: 53-60).

Pre-colonial International Trade

The natural resources and the capacity of local industries in pre-colonial Nigeria attracted many traders particularly the Arabs from North Africa. Among many others, Kano was a prominent centre of high agricultural production and had a good number of craftsmen who were occupied in leather, weaving and dying (Madugu: 20). The northeastern part of the Empire of Kanem Borno, due to the presence of Lake Chad and its strategic position between North Africa and the interior of Nigeria, was able to attract the traders from North Africa. In fact, the trans-Saharan contacts of Kanem-Borno were the substance to its economic growth. The empire controlled the trade route that penetrated Fezzan towards North Africa and promoted the domestic African slave trade. The tributes paid by outpost sections like Zinder to the Kanem-Borno Empire was a good, although not the only, source of income. It was known for its horse business as well. From the 15th century, the salt trade became also lucrative. The salt was traded all over the Central Sudan and has been used for the medical and culinary purposes, and textile industry. Although the salt trade did not spread widely in the trans-Saharan length as the slave trade, but it was still likely to evoke a local market for this product (Hiribarren, 2016: 4-5).

It is obvious that trade between North Africa and the savannah region of Nigeria brought a lot of social and political changes, including the spread of Islam in the Kanem Borno empire since the eleventh century. Later, Islam spread in the Hausa land in the northwest, and its influence was evident in Katsina and Kano (Yusuf, 2016: 173).

Very soon, various learning centres and intellectual activities had emerged in the savanna region. Katsina town, for example, served as a learning centre and played an important role as a

gateway through which Islamic culture penetrated into other parts of the Hausa land. As a result, educational and intellectual activities had flourished in the region, enhancing the quality of lives of the local people greatly. Books in various fields were produced, and scientific culture and technology started to flow (Tsigia & Adamu, 1997: 37-42).

As the people of the savanna region, the inhabitants who lived in the territory during pre-colonial times had been engaged in international trade with North African Arabs, as well as those who lived in the forest zone and southern counterparts traded with the Europeans. The European slave traders were attracted by a physically strong population of Africa, particularly of the region in Nigeria. Very soon, the region became an important point in the trans-Atlantic slave trade route. From the mid-15th century onwards, the Portuguese brought maize and cassava from the New World to the region of Nigeria. This trade was made mainly in exchange for slaves, gold and ivory. Local farmers, especially from the coastal region, helped in spreading the cultivation of these new crops as well as techniques for processing them into the edible food products (Oluwole, 2010: 10).

Former slaves who were released especially those from Brazil introduced new cultural traits upon their arrival at Nigeria in the 19th century. A Brazilian system of the house building was prominent. This new architectural style included a top story with narrow and curved windows, and plastered ground with ornamental details. This style of building was different from the earlier local house building art and became very attractive as many local people started adopting it around the late 19th century, particularly in the region of Lagos. Later on, this style of architecture spread to the inner parts of Nigeria (Oluwole, 2010: 10).

Besides, trans-Atlantic slave trade provided more chances for the Nigerians to participate in international commerce. Markets served as centres through which goods from Europe via the Atlantic Ocean were distributed. As a result, international trade provided the additional goods to the existing long-distance commerce, such as iron and other types of metals. Even though these new goods were detrimental to local iron industries, imported iron bars were attracted the customers (Eluwa & et.al., 1988:124-125).

The existence of organized and strong political systems in the region also contributed to the development of these significant economic interactions between Nigeria and the rest of the world (North Africa, New World and Europe). In turn, the trade activities strengthened economy

of the local political entities. States like Kanem Borno Empire, Hausa land, Oyo Empire, Benin Kingdom and the Jukun Kingdom became stronger (Hiribarren, 2016, pp.3-4). Hausa land, for instance, achieved its greatness as a result of supplying leather to Europe through North African trade routes (Malcolm, 1981). Far in the forest zone, Benin kingdom also achieved its stability as a result of its trade with the Portuguese. Benin supplied ivory, textiles, spices, and pepper. It was also best known for the craft of brass and bronze. In return for its export, firearms were imported into the kingdom, thus subsequently making it more powerful (Omolewa, 1986: 66).

Small-Scale Industries in the Pre-Colonial Nigeria

The pre-colonial Nigerian local industries had a good level of production similar to industries before the industrial revolution. These traditional industries in the region played the central role in production before they had been demolished by the European penetration to Nigeria as a consequence of industrial revolution. The local traditional industries in pre-colonial Nigeria included traditional soap making, blacksmithing, fishing, wood-carving, textile weaving/dyeing, wood/calabash carving, small-scale farming, brewing/distilling, glass and bead making, pottery and leatherwork (Fidelis, 2013:13). Two examples of these pre-colonial industries, i.e. blacksmithing and leather making, are described in the following sections.

Iron Work/ Blacksmithing

Blacksmithing was one of the main pre-colonial industries in Nigeria. It is a traditional occupation that involves twisting of an iron to useable objects. Tools or equipment that can be found in the blacksmith's traditional workshop were the pairs of bellows, fire point, an anvil, and a water pot or bowl. The main use of the bellows was to fasten the combustion of the charcoal in the fire, where the metal was laid and heated to the point that it became suitable to mold into different forms (Joseph, 2010: 86).

The iron technology dated around 500 B.C. discovered by archeologists in the area of Nuk (Nuk culture), Bauchi, Jos, Kano, Daima, and Zaria (Ade, 1980). Archeological findings of ancient axes and iron spears in Nuk and Kainji as well as smelting furnaces in Taruga prove the existence of a developed blacksmithing technology in the region since the second century BC (Okonwo, Ibeanu, & Emeka, 1999). Bade people were considered the best blacksmiths in the region for many centuries. They were believed to have acquired the knowledge of the use of iron

from the most primitive times, most probably when they peopled the Chad basin area. Archaeological sources indicate the use of iron in Daima in Dikwa area, particularly the change from the stone and bone using technology to the usage of iron between the sixth century BC until the 11th century CE according to the carbon-dating results (Usman B., 1973: 33). The diggings in Kursakata in a similar range with Daima shows the evolutions from the Stone Age to the Iron Age, and also indicate the similar time as in Daima. The Yau excavations on the River Yobe reveal that there was a complete iron using civilization in the area. The pre- Kanuri tribal groups living around the area were known as So, from whom the Bade fell apart. These groups could have been the people who inhabited Yau, Kursakata, and Daima around the Yobe River, south of the Lake Chad. Historical evidences show that Bade people were indigenous people of the Yobe valley in northern Borno (Usman B., 1973: 33).

In traditional societies, a blacksmith played a major role as a manufacturer of tools for the majority of the local industries. The tools produced by the blacksmith included hoe, knife, sickle, rake and axe. The blacksmith also produced weapons for hunting, warfare, and defense purposes such as guns, arrow, and spear. He also produced domestic items such as plates, spoons and also ornaments such as rings. Blacksmithing occupation was a family business and, in some instances, it was a hereditary profession. Also, some people outside of the family could join the profession as trainees. Many people were interested in blacksmithing skills as it was a dependable occupation, full of gains (Kaku, 2018).

The development of blacksmithing as a major occupation is also related to the availability of iron in the region. The iron workshop had been usually a hut in a rectangular shape with stocks of hay as a roof, with cross ventilation as no walls that cover the workshop. The flow needed no decoration with cement hence not smooth, but on it, crude form, with tools and raw material everywhere (Okpolo & Ibeanu, 1999: 34-43).. Usually, the blacksmith's workshops were located near their houses, types of tools depend on the blacksmith's community, as working equipment varies from society to society.

Leather Industry

The rearing of animals, particularly in the savanna region of Nigeria, made leatherwork as one of the major occupations during the pre-colonial times. Leatherwork was very much associated with hunting. In the beginning, the raw materials involved in this occupation encompassed principally

of treated hides and skin of some wild and domestic animals such as leopard, crocodiles, antelope, goat, sheep, cattle, alligators and hyena (Masaje, 2018).

Leatherwork consisted of several stages until hides or skin were produced. The term hides were used to refer to the skin of large animals, for instance, cowhide. While the term skin was used for smaller animals like sheepskin or goatskin (Sunday O. A., 2015: 39). The people used a chemical process called tanning, using *Acacia Nilotica*, to transform the then-fresh skin to an unchanging and non-decaying product (Sunday O. A., 2015: 40). The material used in tanning process was the pod of the tree, which was grown locally. In fact, *Acacia Nilotica* tree was the real African one, had seasonal small yellow blossoms, which got ripped in 24 months and could produce pods with more than ten years' shelf life. These acacias were dried from October to January and their pods were gathered. It was similar to dehydrated lupine pods, even though a bit bigger, approximately 5 to 6 inches wide. The pods were compressed by women in a corn mortar and pestle and the black hard seeds were separated by sorting. The leftover fine particles were later used to prepare the tanning substance. This substance was gentle and mild, and the leather was further light-fast compared to those produced by using mimosa or chestnut for the process. The native herbalists also used the pod to cure dysentery (Malcolm, 1981: 3).

Materials that had been produced by leather industry included knife and sword cases, bags, shoes, scabbards, containers for antimony and charms, mats, and loincloths (Sunama, 2010: 41). Also, it provided the bellows used by blacksmith saddles, Berber's wallets, bookcases, horses' leather shields and water vessels (Masaje, 2018). The skin of wild animals like leopard, lion and the hyena was decorated and conserved predominantly by the *Muzam*, the hunters for pride (Sunama, 2010: 42)..

In the pre-colonial Nigerian societies, there was an interdependence among the different manufacturers. For instance, a leather worker needed knives and other related working equipment from the blacksmith, and, at the same time, the blacksmith needed bellows in order to go on with his job (Masaje, 2018). Such interdependence provided a social harmony and economic sustainability.

The Colonial Effects on Nigerian Traditional Industry

Like the most of African societies, pre-colonial Nigerian inhabitants had a well-established and profitable indigenous industries (Rodney, 2009: 119). One of the essential ways to access the

indigenous industries in Africa was through the quality of its products. The Europeans got access to a greater type red leather brought to Europe from Kano in Hausa land and Mandigo of northern Nigeria through North Africa, which was called a “Moroccan leather.” But it originally was from northern Nigeria (Rodney, 2009: 47-48) and local people owned the technique of making this red leather as they were the best in leatherwork before the arrival of the British.

There were two policies that led to the consolidation and the establishment of the colonial economic policy in northern Nigeria, which led to the consequent decline in the indigenous industries. The first policy was the land revenue proclamation of 1906, which was used to instate the wide-ranging tax throughout the northern Nigeria. The second policy was the Native Rights Proclamation No. 9 of 1910, which placed the entire land of the northern Nigeria under the control of the colonial government (Mustapha, 2008: 14).

The arrival of the British into the region effected negatively the activities of the local industries. Part of the traditional techniques were taken by the British colonialists due to the individual colonial taxation system, which required the payment with the British introduced currency. This policy forced the local people to embark on the cash crop farming in order to get currency needed for the payment of taxes. This policy consequently led to the stagnation of the production of local industries (Galadima, 2018).

One of the important industries that suffered most was the blacksmithing industry. Iron-ore, which was the needed raw material for blacksmith, became very challenging to find by the local blacksmiths as a result of a new policy implemented by the British administration that granted a license for mineral exploration to European companies only. This resulted in the drastic fall of local blacksmith’s production and consequently led to the over reliance on foreign tools exported from Europe and sold at much higher price than the locally produced tools (Manase, 1985: 130). As a result of the formation of the British colonial strategies on taxation, land, labour, cash crop farming and the import of the British manufactured goods to the region, the industrial spirit declined extremely. For example, the colonial administration banned the cultivation of local cotton seeds in the entire northern Nigeria. In turn, a new type of improved seeds were introduced to the local peasants under the very strict laws and punishment for anyone that deviated from the new laws related to trade and agriculture. The British made it worse by establishing the markets with its own agents who controlled the entire transaction process. The local farmers consequently were obliged to stop producing the local cotton as it was impossible

to sell it to the British. This made it difficult for the local industries, according to Bulama Kabo Bizi, to get cotton, which led to the drastic decline in the production of textile by the local industries (Bizi, 2018).

This policy led the British textile industries to produce cheaper clothes from the cotton imported to Nigeria. The local industries could not survive such competition and were forced to shut down. Another factor that damaged the local industries was related to the fact that there was a high demand for cash among the local people in order to pay compulsory colonial taxation. Therefore, the people were given the European textile clothes in exchange for their cash crops and the local people, in turn, sold these clothes at the cheaper prices just to get cash for the payment of compulsory tax (Bizi, 2018). Thus indigenous producers were left with two options, either they stop producing and surrender the market to the low-priced imported European goods or they will continue their production with a similar small hand tool without any potential growth (Rodney, 2009: 270).

Other local craft industries were not spared by the British who enacted tolls on canoe taxes and caravan on the local traders. These taxes were up to 15% of the products' price produced by the local industries and being traded from one emirate to another. In addition, the British charged 5% import tax at each boarder. The British colonialists argued that it was the only means through which the traders could be taxed. They also claimed that the traders had to pay the security tax for the protection of the river ways and trade routes (Mustapha, 2008, p. 151).

It is important to note that, at that particular time, the European manufactured products were excused from paying such taxes. The British made it difficult for the local people to run their local production and industry. This was carried out to guarantee the superiority of the European manufactured products over the locally produced ones, and consequently, the local industries were completely destroyed as they could not stand such challenges (Mustapha, 2008: 152). In sum, colonization influenced indigenous African industries negatively and caused the fall of production drastically.

Results of Neglecting Pre-Colonial Economic Activities

The prime reason for the British colonial rule in Nigeria was the access to cheap raw materials and the market for the manufactured goods. Thus the British administrators, upon their arrival, purposely discouraged the indigenous industries through heavy taxation, structural changes,

legislation, economic competition and the dependent system of education. The destruction of the local industries was necessary for the British as it may challenge their primary aim of colonization, free access to raw material and market (Unumen, 2015: 26).

Nigeria gained independence on 1st October 1960. New Nigerian administration inherited the British system of rule, legislation and economic structure ignoring the pre-colonial local socio-economic structure and activities. Perhaps, this was one of the big mistakes that keeps the country economically backward, corrupt and poor.

Nigeria, despite its vast and fertile agricultural lands, is importing crops and food products from outside. Relying on imported basic food products is not only extravagant, but also a blow to the growth of local agricultural segment and the national economy. A country that cannot feed its population is not as independent as it is assumed (Vaughan I. & et.al., 2014: 2-3).

Numerous varieties of food supplies are imported into the nation yearly. For example in 2010 alone, Nigeria paid ₦635 billion Nigerian Naira to import wheat, ₦356 billion Nigerian Naira to import rice, which is equivalent to spending about ₦1.0 billion Naira in a day for rice and wheat only. In addition, it spent ₦217 billion Naira on sugar and ₦97 billion Naira on fish despite the presence of local rivers, marine resources, creeks, lakes in the country. These food types that are being imported into the country cause many diseases, particularly spices and fish (Vaughan I. & et.al., 2014: 3).

The oil boom in the 1970s led Nigeria to neglect its strong agricultural and traditional manufacturing sector, thus creating an unhealthy dependence on crude oil. In 2000, oil and gas exports accounted for more than 98 per cent of export earnings and about 83 per cent of federal government revenue. New oil wealth, the concurrent decline of other economic sectors, and a lurch toward a static economic model fueled massive migration to the cities and increased poverty, especially in rural areas. A collapse of basic infrastructure and social services since the early 1980s accompanied this trend. By 2000, Nigeria's per capita income had plunged to about one-quarter of its mid-1970s high per capita, below the level of independence. Along with the endemic malaise of Nigeria's non-oil sectors, the economy continues to witness massive growth

of ‘informal sector’ economic activities, estimated by some to be as high as 75 per cent of the total economy (National Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

At the same time, Nigerians, particularly the youth, are deprived of job opportunities. In 2012, Nigerian total population was estimated around 167 million (BusinessNews, 2013). Almost 50 per cent of the total population consists of youth at the average age between 18 and 35 (Adebowale, 2015: 29). Sadly, youth population is mostly unemployed (Adebowale, 2015, p. 29). For example, unemployed Nigerian youth numbered around 11.1 million in 2012. It is certain that neglecting to revive the pre-colonial economic activities, which were sufficient to feed the population completely, resulted in the lack of job opportunities. This problem increased the number of rural migration to the cities to look for job opportunities there. Nigerian cities also failed to provide jobs to youth population (Abayomi, 2013: 350).

The universities and schools produce thousands of graduates every year but there is no job created for them. Nigerian towns are beleaguered with youth hawkers who normally would have found profitable work in some innovativeness. The large number of unemployed citizens are destabilizing the security and well-being of citizens through their unlawful actions and crimes (Abayomi, 2014: 480). Today, the youth unemployment is connected to the various types of crimes such as kidnapping, militancy, restiveness, violent crimes, and political unpredictability (Uddin & Uddin, 2013: 397). Such situation jeopardises the well-being and security of the Nigerian citizens. Certainly, without the security of the citizens, the policies for the development of the nation will not succeed, be it political, economic or social. Any country that is driving towards development should provide the basic needs and well-being for its citizens (Abayomi, 2014: 481).

Nigeria, due to neglecting its traditional industries and abundant natural resources, is considered among the poorest countries in the world. The level of poverty in Nigeria has gotten worse since the 1990s. The desperation and frustration created by poverty and unemployment causes the crime rate to boom.

Conclusion

In the pre-colonial times, Nigerian local industries and agricultural activities were at a satisfactory level. The socioeconomic situation was stable and people had been engaged in

various agricultural and local industrial activities. Local and international trade was flourishing. Considering the geographical settings of the area, its inhabitants were engaged in different kinds of economic activities. Geographically, Nigeria is divided into four vegetation zones and these differences also influenced the type of economic activities different from one zone to another. Such conditions resulted in socio-economic interactions between communities living in different geographical zones, and also attracted the foreign traders. Economic potentialities attracted trans-Saharan traders and trans-Atlantic traders, and, later, these potentials were the main reasons for the arrival of the British colonialists at Nigeria.

The colonial power was mainly interested in raw materials for the industries at home. To avoid the competition and other potential factors, which may hinder them to achieve their economic goals, the colonial administration set up several plans that discouraged the local industries (Omolewa, 1986, p.177). Regarding agricultural production, the British encouraged to cultivate crops suitable for their industrial needs as raw material only. These policies consequently resulted in the economic backwardness in Africa, particularly in Nigeria (Barkindo & et.al., 1994, pp. 62-63).

The consequences of the British colonialism on the national economy can be noticed until the present times. The independence of Nigeria from the British in 1960 did not initiate huge changes. Rather, the post-independence leaders, instead of reforming the economic system in order to make it self-sustainable, continued exporting raw materials from the country and importing ready-made goods to Nigeria.

The discovery of petroleum in Nigeria in the early 1970s was a final blow to the traditional economic activities. The government neglected the previous sources of its revenue completely and began to concentrate on oil exportation alone. This approach exposed Nigeria to the mono-economic system, closing doors for different job opportunities for many of its citizens. In the 1960s, Nigeria started development programmes with the countries like Brazil, Malaysia, Indonesia, Chile and Mexico. Today, these partner countries have reached the status of emerging economies of the world (Nathaniel, 2014, p. 5), while Nigeria is still a developing-country with many social ills, high-rate crimes, corruption and poverty.

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