

CENTRES AND CHANNELS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE CENTRAL DISTRICTS OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA, 1899–1907

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The colonial period of Nigeria's history has affected the social and political outlook of her peoples in a way that seems to make one lose sight of the realities of the *status quo ante*. Many a time-honoured traditional usage no longer enjoys the level of respect and prestige that had been accorded it. The process leading to this was gradual. As though the indigenous communities suspected this outcome, they had opposed the in-roads of colonial officials from the very beginning.¹ This explains why the history of Nigeria in the early periods of the consolidation of foreign rule was one of conflicts with colonial officials. In fact, this circumstance flatly contradicts the oft-repeated claim that the transfer of sovereignty by the indigenous chiefs was through a mutual understanding that was signalled by written contractual agreements; for when moves began to be initiated to actualise the terms of such agreements, local uprisings were the answer². In the Lower Niger region within which the Central Districts of Southern Nigeria are located, such conflicts dragged on for something more than a decade. When the indigenous combatants were questioned as to their grievances, they simply answered that they were determined to drive out the white man who had come to deceive them and destroy their customs.

An examination of the general historical process from the time of these conflicts in the 1880's until the time they were concluded about 1920 will disclose that in effect the same results which the struggles were intended to obviate have been largely achieved subsequently. It would not be quite correct to attribute this entirely to the forcible suppression of the local uprisings against colonial authority. What accounts for the change was the introduction into the area of agencies of a novel form of political governance which provided the colonial functionary with that milieu similar to what obtained in his own country and with which he was well acquainted. Such agencies brought the local people for the first time into contact with those Western institutions that normally would provide some elementary but basic human needs. The Central Districts of the Lower Niger offer one of many case examples of this historical process.

The peoples of the region under study here were the Western Igbo and their eastern cousins as far as the town of Awka, together with sections of the Edo speaking people situated on the extreme west and north, as well as the Ndokwa who are in the South of the Western Igbo. The general conflict already alluded to was known in this area as the 'Ekumeku' war. In the course of this conflict Western Igbo territory was the main battle field in the campaigns that were launched by indigenous and colonial commanders respectively. Though localised as the fighting was, the indigenous combatants however enjoyed the sympathy and concrete but

1 Anene, 1966, 85–91.

2 This fact still lives in some cultural expressions which have continued up to this day. The period is usually described locally by the elders who lived through it as one in which they did not know what was happening. See Anene, J. C., 1966, 73–75.

secret support from certain strategically located communities of other ethnic groups on the fringes of their own territory³. This fact must have become known to the colonial administration; for significantly, such localities and their peoples were chosen as centres where the organs of colonial administration came to be based after the conflict. The earliest of such organs was the judiciary, and the motive behind the move coming as it did in the wake of war and pillage was obviously to provide a vantage point from which to watch and control the movements of the local people.

The colonial or western-type judiciary was an imposition in the area. Colonial courts were located in select spots which began to serve as centres of administration. This implied that cases from the surrounding towns and villages would be taken there for adjudication. For the peoples of such places as were affected, this was an innovation with far reaching consequences. Considering that local communities and towns were largely autonomous political units⁴, this new system would tend to bring the various towns and villages together into a kind of social and political association so that the town in which the Court was located would eventually develop into a headquarter.

Such places indeed became recognised administrative centres in the Lower Niger region very early in the colonial period and have continued to be such to this day. Examples of these are Aboh, Asaba, Agbor, Kwale, Oka and Onitsha in the Igbo area of our study, while Benin, Ubiaja, Idah and Ifon served the same purpose in the northern and western fringes of the region. In the south are Sapele, Warri and Forcados which is located on the Atlantic Coast⁵. The surrounding areas that were supervised from these spots were not usually culturally homogeneous; some communities belonging to different groups came to be in the same judicial district, like for instance, parts of Agbor or Ika which were under Ubiaja and Benin located to the north and west respectively.

In a subtle but somewhat effective way, this novel development provided an avenue for a continued and steady mobility among the peoples in the area. The need to travel to the seat of the local courts did ensure this. Statistics and accounts of cases brought to each of these demonstrate a constant movement of people on a much more regular basis than heretofore⁶. There was a sustained hunt for people who had in one way or the other been involved in the previous conflict and this exercise brought the officers of the new judicial establishments into many corners of the territory around the seat of the new colonial courts⁷. With about 55 cases on the average yearly in each of the thirteen new headquarters there began to be formed a continuous link at least in an informal way between the various communities. There were also other faults for which the people were arraigned before the court, as for example petty larceny. Such things did not require a formal citation before a tribunal in traditional law and custom; so that to have to be compelled to undertake long journeys to settle issues of this nature was highly resented. The outcome was an uprising at Agbor in 1906 in which a colonial officer Mr. Crewe-Reade and a local chief named Bamawo who was suspected to be his informant were murdered⁸.

3 Cf. Nzemeke, 1982, 5–12.

4 Jones, 1949, 150–156.

5 Colonial Office Papers (henceforth C. O.) 520/47, Report on 'Central-Province', p. 580.

6 Ibid.

7 Oral information was gathered on May 10, 1983 from Mr. M. O. Ogah who is 78 years and a retired Civil Servant.

8 C. O. 520/47, Report, p. 580.

The uprising and the circumstances out of which it arose entirely took the colonial administration by surprise; for the impression had been created that due to the experiences of the previous Ekumeku conflict no such move was to be expected so soon. Therefore, by way of a precaution, a police command was established in every administrative centre. Thus, each of these was gradually becoming a veritable headquarter in reality as it had been such in name⁹. In a further attempt to minimise the chances of such incidents being repeated, the traditional tribunals came to be recognised. Certain cases of the type that had led to the recent unrest began now to be transferred to these for adjudication but always in the presence of a colonial police officer in attendance. This officer was expected to report on the proceedings to his superiors at headquarters.

This development was very significant. It implied the bringing of the local traditional legal usages under the constant surveillance of the foreign western judicial system. The officers who henceforth liased between 'headquarters' and the indigenous tribunals came to be known in local parlance as *kotuma*: a corrupted and shortened form of the expression 'court messengers'. With this new development in the administrative machinery three levels in the political hierarchy were called into being, namely, the foreign colonial establishment, the indigenous court and the liason between them. These constituted the instruments of political co-ordination in the entire territory. Considering that cultures also differed among the various communities in the region, this innovation can be counted as one of the earliest experiments in 'indirect rule' which was to be articulated much more clearly in the years after 1914.

The newly established headquarters and the organs through which administration was carried on were to become, by the very nature of their operation and objectives, the centres for a graduated introduction of elements of foreign western culture into the communities of the Lower Niger Districts. As earlier observed, the recognition accorded to the local indigenous tribunals in certain instances was intended to guarantee a harmonious operation of both the foreign and traditional legal systems which have *per force* come to exist side by side. But in as much as the demands of the former were to affect clients in the latter, a transformation in some practices current in traditional forensic usage became inevitable. It was in the area of the imposition of fines that this was to make itself felt.

Indigenous polity did not recognise the use of money *per se* for the payment of fines. Not indeed that money as such was not in use; rather, it was not considered as having any internal value as such. The practice instead called for an 'expiation' and this was always in the form of a ritual offering¹⁰. Such usage continued to obtain at the local tribunals without any objections from the administrators at headquarters who were represented by their functionary as earlier pointed out. However, there arose instances in which a case, for one reason or the other, would be transferred from the local to the colonial tribunal at headquarters. Culprits were fined there, but then they were required to pay in foreign currency. In fact it was now decreed that, "fines, forfeitures, penalties, or fees payable under the Court shall be calculated in English money, or, with the consent of the Court, in its equivalent in local currency or produce, or bills of exchange approved by the Court¹¹". If there was any objective that the

9 Ibid. This incident was one among many others which registered the general unwillingness to allow any cultural changes through non-traditional agencies. The 'Ekumeku' War earlier alluded to was the first manifestation of this attitude. For further details, see Anene, 1966: 203, 240–245.

10 C. O. 520/47, Report, p. 581.

11 Onwuejeogwu, 1980: 87–89.

colonial administration was very interested in achieving through this ordinance, it was the eventual substitution of the local currency and forms of exchange with the new system, as it was expected that, "the use of coinage could not fail to result in an increase in the volume of trade,"¹² which was the main reason for the British colonial presence in the territory at all.

An average of 44 cases were tried in each of the thirteen headquarters in any one year between 1901 and 1906, and the fines imposed ranged around five shillings and this was to be paid in British currency. On the whole, the sum of £ 391: 10 s was realised for the period and this would give a rough figure of approximately 1365 persons as having been affected by the new regulation in the entire region¹³. Also considering that the alternative for failure to pay was imprisonment which was an innovation so hated because of the social stigma it brought in the eyes of the people on anyone that had to endure it¹⁴, every effort was always undertaken to measure up, with the consequence that those involved would strive to procure the money if they did not actually possess it.

Much as the judicial system provided the channels for the spread of elements of the new culture through its mechanism, it was still not going to be sufficiently effective in this direction because of its obvious negative stance in regard to the inclinations of the local people.¹⁵ In fact, it was bound in the long run to begin to yield diminishing returns in direct proportion as its obnoxious features became more evident. But the change among indigenous society which had been inaugurated in the process of its functions were to be sustained and in fact accelerated through the introduction of the western-type education system in the form of elementary schools into the region. As was the case with the courts these schools were sited at the various headquarters except a few cases where certain communities which, unknown to the colonial administrators to be centres of indigenous culture, had now come to be recognised for what they were. By 1903, about seventeen government schools had been established in the area. To these were added another nineteen through the Catholic and Protestant Missionary organisations, bringing the number to thirty six by 1906¹⁶.

The acceptance of these schools, being novel institutions in the area, varied from place to place. That explains why the number of boys enrolled in some ranged between 43 and 175, and for girls between 33 and 120.¹⁷ However, the majority of the pupils were children of colonial employees from Sierra Leone and Liberia who had come to work under the administration. This circumstance notwithstanding, the school was gradually becoming an attraction to the local communities that lived within reasonable distance from the site of its location. As admissions from such places continued to show an increase, an average of two schools a year continued to be opened every year in the surrounding country, especially by missionary bodies.¹⁸

For such communities from which children attended the schools, this circumstance itself was to provide occasions for certain changes. Links between members of each community

12 C. O. 520/47, Report, pp. 274–275.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 269.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 580.

15 Nzemeke, 1982: 275–276.

16 C. O. 520/47, Report, p. 606. The earliest pioneers in the introduction of the western education system into the area were the Catholic Missionaries. The first schools founded by them were located at the places where they carried on missionary activity.

17 C. O. 520/47, Reports, p. 608.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 606.

with the nearest school developed as appeals went out for children to come forward. The responses to such calls were usually not encouraging at the beginning. But as for the few that came forward, the step itself involved the provision of certain items which attendance demanded. Foremost in the list of such items was the paying of fees.

The amount charged per pupil was not much¹⁹; but payment had to be made in British currency. This would require the procurement of foreign money that was slowly but gradually coming into circulation in the area²⁰. It is however not easy to assess how much of the new legal tender would be in the possession of the parents affected by the new requirements for the attendance of their children at school; but considering that trade by barter and exchange in traditional currency continued to obtain for at least the first three or four decades of the ensuing twentieth century, it would not be much. This assessment of the situation is confirmed by the fact that foreign merchants with whom the people exchanged goods continued to foster trade by barter since it favoured them²¹. Nonetheless, foreign coinage had come into circulation, even though in a limited way. Its regular use however was to be found among those that had come to be involved in the newly emerging education system as well as the non-Nigerian Africans in the employ of the colonial administration. Because transactions with the new currency were thus restricted, the number of persons that came in contact with it must have been initially small. If we consider that the first schools were opened in 1902, and that by 1906 the total fees collected from the thirteen government established schools was merely £ 229: 3 s. 4 d where the charge per pupil was 3 d per month, those involved would be just 1333, a bare 0.08 % of an estimated population or roughly 1,585,000 at the time²².

It was to be expected however that this figure would continue to increase because the government gave out grants of money for running the schools far in excess of what the fees netted in. Thus, for the year under consideration here, the sum of £ 531: 7 s. 6 d, a clear double of the income from fees, was shared out among the schools²³. Such grants were not extended to schools founded and run by missionary bodies and as these initially charged no fees²⁴ the rate of the spread of the new coinage was accordingly affected. Nevertheless, a continued and steady increase was assured because the missionary organisations were particularly enthusiastic in the opening up of new schools in all stations wherever they started some evangelical activity, and it was not long before they also began to charge fees, though on a modest scale. And by comparison the area coming under the influence of the new currencies would increase faster at any one period than was the case through the penal process which we have discussed above. For in the former case, the school was no sooner a feature of life in the administrative centres and headquarters than it appeared shortly afterwards among some of the surrounding communities.

Of all the institutions that were introduced in the wake of the consolidation of colonial authority in the central districts of the Lower Niger, the school was the first to break out into

19 This varied from time to time. At the beginning, it was 3d but gradually rose to 6 d. Cf. C. O. 520/47, Reports, p. 607. Oral information gathered on June 7, 1984 from Mr. C. D. Njoagwuani, a 67 year-old retired Civil servant confirmed this.

20 Regarding the introduction of British currency into Southern Nigeria, see Nzemeke, Paideuma 1981: 111–119.

21 C. O. 520/47, Reports, pp. 269–270.

22 Ibid., p. 586.

23 Ibid.

24 Ekechi, 1971: 176–204.

the towns and villages of the countryside. But its over-all impact in terms of social change was not immediately felt because it required time for its products to come of age in order to make their presence felt, or for long standing ideas and customs in vogue with the adult population to yield ground to new ones. Nonetheless, it was the nursery of the elite of future years.

While the school was proving itself as a centre for the eventual evolution of the forces of change, other institutions that began to make their mark on society immediately at the time were springing up. One such institution was a local defence establishment which was called into existence soon after the disturbances in Agbor, Oka and Benin earlier referred to had been laid to rest. The contingents that took part in those campaigns had been withdrawn to northern Nigeria where opposition to colonial rule was till very much alive, especially in the period 1903–1906²⁵. Though no further irruptions of the 'Ekumeku' type were anticipated in the Lower Niger, it was felt that from the nature of the tactics employed by the indigenous combatants during that conflict, it might be advisable to recruit a force from the locality; for these being acquainted with local geography they would be most serviceable in an eventuality.

One would have expected that not even one recruit could be had from the region, especially as this would be interpreted in local circles as fraternising with the 'white' enemy for whom so much popular ill-feeling was still in evidence after the latest events. But this ill-feeling would seem to have been restricted to such places where serious fighting had taken place and much material damage done. It is significant however that those arrested and kept in prison by the colonial government during that conflict were even guarded by a handful of men from some of the towns little affected by the punitive expeditions. It is only in this way that one can explain the presence of members of some communities in the region in the new defence force.

The strength of the new contingent that was raised was 222. About 0.014 % of this came from the Lower Niger region itself.²⁶ Compared with the estimated population of the area, this figure was small; but the important thing was that those involved began to be introduced to new technology and a different pattern of life. The effects of this on the various communities was not immediately evident; but the fact was that the event itself provided an example which others followed by taking up sundry employments with this and other establishments that successively came to be introduced in the course of the evolution of the colonial system. The area of the immediate effective influence of the new defence establishment and the schools as agents of social change was very limited. But this situation was soon to improve. For, soon after the introduction of schools and the inauguration of the defence corps, steps were initiated to introduce a health service into the territory. When this was launched early in 1904, the idea was to provide health facilities for the employees of the colonial administration in the first instance; but in places like Warri, Forcados, Sapele, Benin City, Aboh and Onitsha, the services of such government medical personnel began to be requested by various mercantile firms. The health units that operated in these places were however charged additionally with responsibility for health care among the communities in the country districts around them. It is not easy to identify the methods employed by these in their

25 Ikime (ed.), 1980: 449–452.

26 The rest came from Yorubaland in Western Nigeria, Sierra Leone and then the Gold Coast. The list is in C. O. 520/47, Reports, p. 583.

approaches to the communities around their respective areas. But whatever their efforts might have been, they did not meet with any noteworthy success. The peoples preferred the local traditional methods of healing. In fact, missionaries who had as early as 1895 set up health clinics in their stations complained that initially nobody came forward – not even their converts – to take advantage of the facilities offered, especially as these were given free of charge.²⁷ But this was to change when, beginning from 1905, a smallpox epidemic raged for a long time and the event demonstrated the efficacy of the treatments given at the new health centres. With the people, “beginning to appreciate the benefits of vaccination,”²⁸ the various health clinics began to register a gradually increasing attendance for treatment against this and other ailments.

Though the clinics were expected to serve the villages and communities in the neighbourhood, it was not easy for the medical teams to visit the various localities with all the necessary equipment because of the absence of good roads²⁹. Exceptions to this were only such places that were accessible through water transportation. Communities that did not enjoy this advantage had no alternative than to find their way to the health centres at headquarters where treatment could be had. Under such circumstantial constraints, the level of communication between the countryside and the centres of administration increased, and this development led to a noticeable swelling of the population in these centres. According to official reports, at Benin, Warri and Onitsha some increase in the local indigenous population was in evidence³⁰. Though no census as such was taken to concretely establish this fact, the claim seems to have rested on the impression that a “great change . . . has come over the habits of the majority . . . of the population”³¹.

This observation explains some developments which began as from 1907 to give the headquarters the look of urban centres. The ‘Government Reservation Area’ – popularly known as the G. R. A. – that is so characteristic of many Nigerian Cities today was introduced into Warri, Sapele and Benin³². However, such areas catered exclusively for the comfort of personnel of the colonial administration. Considerable clearing and drainage work were carried out in places like Benin and Warri. As for the latter, the exodus from the rural areas had been such that a sector known as ‘New Warri’ but under the same municipal administration as the original community sprang into existence. ‘New Warri’ was planned and constructed with modern – type streets and a Public Square. Additionally a large area of ground was acquired with the view to erecting a Race Course and other public recreational facilities. These measures were bound in the long run to exert a further pull on the country side.

About the later part of 1907 when these public amenities were becoming part of normal life, the leading role of the respective headquarters as determinants of the pace of social development had been firmly established. Subsequent innovations came to consolidate this po-

27 Society of African Missions (S. M. A. henceforth) Archives, Rome, 2 E 30, pp. 89–99.

28 C. D. 520/47, Reports, p. 585.

29 Waterways served as the only means of communication up to the period of our study and beyond. It was only in 1920 that the building of roads was taken up seriously. Cf. Anene, 1966: 289–291.

30 C. O. 520/47, Reports, p. 587. This opinion was not the result of a census conducted as such but rather from medical and other records. These however would not provide dependable grounds for such a conclusion because it was possible that those involved came from the Countryside but never took up permanent abode at the centres.

31 C. O. 520/47, Reports, p. 588.

32 Ibid.

sition. The first in the series was the plan for the unaustration of the timber and rubber industries. The Lower Niger Districts are part of the West African forest belt that abounds in commodities that encourage the introduction and growth of such industries. Rubber was particularly on demand at the early part of the twentieth century when the automobile industry was fast gaining in importance³³. And though there were large tracts of territory in which the rubber tree flourished, the first systematic attempts at developing its cultivation were centred around Benin, Warri and Sapele. The local people were encouraged to set up rubber plantations. This measure did not appear to have met with much success in the last two places; but at Benin, it was noted that there began to spring up a "number of small private plantations made by individual Natives"³⁴. In 1907, the sum of £ 114: 10 s was paid to some Benin chiefs by private entrepreneurs for the right to operate plantations after the model of the new system on their lands.

The novelty in the rubber enterprise as one can see here lies in the introduction of a plantation system; for rubber is a natural product of this part of the tropical belt. With this new system of cultivation there came also a new method of preparation and by degrees, with the impetus thus generated from one of the several headquarters, the country around began to accustom itself to an economic enterprise that brought a change to entrepreneurship; for many farmers around now began to devote more attention to the cultivation of rubber³⁵.

It was in this way that other enterprises began to emerge. As they consolidated their hold at the centres of administration, they steadily spread out into the surrounding country. The coming of changes or modifications in the life of the peoples of the Lower Niger which began to be manifest shortly after the imposition of colonial rule developed after this pattern. The primacy which had been enjoyed by specific localities in the process has remained unchallenged ever since. Not only have they retained their positions as headquarters with respect to the political establishment, they have also continued to be the first recipients of any innovations during and after the colonial period. This pattern of development was not peculiar to the Lower Niger Districts alone; for there is abundant evidence to show that the process of social change in other parts of Nigeria had not been otherwise.

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