

THE CHALLENGE TO CHANGE: THE NIGERIAN COASTAL STATES IN THE ERA OF 'LEGITIMATE COMMERCE'

Introduction

Nigeria experienced major transformations in the 19th century. Some of the transformations happened in the hinterland and derived their impetus and momentum from the local milieu. There were, for instance, the Islamic revolts in Northern Nigeria, the demise of the long-reigning Sefuwa dynasty and the emergence of the Shehu dynasty, and then the dramatic collapse of the Oyo kingdom. In the coastal states, major transformations also occurred such as the revolt of the 'Blood Men', and secessions in Bonny and Kalabari. But unlike the hinterland cases, the coastal ones were caused by a combination of internal and external ferments.

The key to the transformations in the coastal states was the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and the gradual replacement of this with trade in palm oil and palm kernels, the so-called 'legitimate trade'. The exact duration of the transition has long been debated. Some writers suggest 1870 as the date when trade in agricultural produce in West Africa came finally on its own, some others opt for an earlier date.¹

The transition by European firms from the old trade to the new has received considerable attention in published literature. The generally hostile relations and confrontations between the coastal communities and the European supercargoes and consuls have also been accorded considerable scholarly attention in historical literature. That the supercargoes were "as a rule ruffians of the worst kind, guilty of the most brutal treatment to Africans with whom they dealt"² is an undeniable historical fact. But how the coastal communities adjusted their internal affairs in response to the changing circumstances has not been accorded adequate attention. Rather this issue has tended to be treated in patches in some literature and in some merely as an appendage to the

confrontations between the local people and the Europeans.

Three main reasons explain this bias. One is the tendency, aptly discredited, to write African history through the activities of Europeans. The other is the relative paucity of information on the domestic affairs of the local people. Finally, there is the notion, which has died hard, that the transition from the trade in slaves to agricultural produce was easy and unchallenging. J.E. Flint argues that Africans supplied European traders with palm oil and palm kernels "without undertaking major changes in their own internal economies and structure".³

This paper is concerned, not with the exciting issue of African-European stand-off during the transition, but rather with how the coastal communities and states reorganized their domestic affairs to meet the exigencies of 'legitimate commerce'. Such reorganizations were by no means easy and unchallenging and were fraught with uncertainties. The domestic issues, needless to say, cannot be delinked from the external, nor must it be thought that a sharp divide marked the slave trade period from the 'legitimate trade' period. Continuity and change were a hallmark of the period and intermix of the domestic and the external was common.

There were three primary dimensions to the challenge of adjustment, namely, the commercial, the political and the social. These were, of course, intertwined. For two primary reasons, the focus here is on the Niger delta, including Calabar. One is constraint of space. The other is the fact that the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade posed the greatest challenge to the people of this area, whose economies had become virtually dependent on that trade.

Commercial Challenge

In 1807, Britain, the world's leading slave trading nation, abolished the nefarious business to her citizens. It took another 26 years before she outlawed slavery in her overseas possessions. But while Britain abolished the trade to her citizens, other nationals continued the pursuit. Cashing in on Britain's exit, some nations, such as Brazil, increased their participation in the trade. However, through diplomacy, naval bravado and the logic of the changing

economy of industrializing Europe, the trade eventually petered off significantly in the 1830s. Isolated cases of slavers visiting the Nigerian coast continued, however, until the 1850s. The last slave ship to visit Brass was in 1854.

To the coastal communities, the end of external slave trade posed profound problems, not least of all in the realm of commerce. Over two centuries of trade with Europe had all but transformed them into trading communities: the production of salt and fish, the traditional pursuits of the people, had been pushed into obscurity. Strategically located to mediate exchange between the European traders on the coast and the African slave traders and agricultural producers in the hinterland, the coastal traders made enormous wealth by the standard of the time and of the people. These affluent traders lived a life of luxury and indulgence. As K.O. Dike states, slave trade had become the pillar of their economy.⁴ Its abolition threatened their economic existence. How they reorganized their internal institutions to meet the challenge of the times underlines the resilience and adaptability of the indigenous society.

Slaves and palm oil and palm kernels differ in their physical characteristics. As a trade commodity, slaves were self-transporting; palm produce was not. The movement of slaves from the hinterland to the coast posed few problems, especially as most of the slave routes were over-land. Even on waterways, slaves could be used as 'pulla-boys'. Apart from transporting themselves, slaves also transported other trade goods. Palm oil and palm kernels - bulky produce - had to be head-loaded to bulking centres and then poled in canoes through treacherous waterways to the coast.⁵

It was easier and more exciting to catch slaves than to organize the production of palm oil and palm kernels, which was very laborious. Furthermore, slaves were less 'perishable' or susceptible to spoilage than palm oil and palm kernels. The latter, therefore, needed more careful handling and adequate measures of preservation. Besides, while slaves could be captured anywhere, the oil palm did not grow everywhere.

Adjustment of the local people to 'legitimate commerce' was, therefore, fraught with difficulties. Initially, the traders combined

the two systems of trade before gradually and finally abandoning the older one. The slow death of the older trade is to be partly explained by the fact that the prospects of the new trade were uncertain. The pace of transition varied from one city state to another, and this was dictated by two primary conditions: the geographical location of a city state and its access to the palm oil markets.

States which were exposed to the visitations of the British naval squadron or had access to rich oil markets in the interior made the transition earlier and with less difficulty than others. Calabar and Bonny were typical examples. Each was easily accessible to British man-of-war, and was also linked to rich palm oil markets by navigable waterways. Bonny was linked to the rich palm belt of northwestern Igboland through the Niger and its tributaries, especially the Imo River. Calabar was linked to the oil markets of the Ibibio and eastern Igboland through the Cross River and its Enyong River tributary. Oguta, Akwete, Ohambele and Itu became major palm produce markets, thanks to their location on accessible waterways linked to the coast. Palm oil and palm kernels are bulky commodities; so the communities able to sell them for export were those near waterways navigable to the coast. The slave markets of Uburu, Bende, Uzuakoli and Nike, located in the interior, soon yielded their commercial status to the new riverain markets.

The markets for palm produce were more circumscribed than those for slaves not only by transport constraints but also by ecology. As stated earlier, the oil palm did not grow everywhere, unlike slaves. East of the Niger, the region lying between the Cross River and the Niger, on an imaginary line approximately joining Itu and Oguta, was the richest in oil palms.⁶ Some areas outside this belt were deficient in oil palms, and those which were not, had no access to waterways.

Before the inception of "legitimate trade", the city states had carved out each for itself areas of influence in the hinterland. For instance, the four major city states of the eastern Delta - Elem Kalabari, Bonny, Nembe and Okrika - had each its area of influence in the interior. Elem Kalabari dominated the Obia markets; Okrika

controlled Ikwere and Ogoni markets; Nembe established strong links with Aboh and Osomari traders while Bonny had to go farther east and north to Ndoki markets.⁷

It seems that by connivance, acquiescence or tacit recognition, these states in general respected one another's area of influence. But this did not eliminate territorial conflicts and encroachments. However, such conflicts appear not to have degenerated into unresolvable acrimony and recrimination. But, during the 'legitimate trade' era, the relations between the city states greatly soured. Elizabeth Isichei aptly argues that:

Economic rivalry had always been characteristic of the relations between the Delta States, but in the 19th century, the need for exclusive access to these limited palm oil markets imbued it with a new bitterness, and led on occasions, to complicated and universal wars.⁸

By the time Amakiri III of Kalabari died, an acrimonious war was raging between Nembe, Kalabari and Okrika. The palaver was the control of the Engenni River, which led to the Niger River and Oguta Lake. This river was vital for the palm oil trade of the kingdoms in much the same way as the Imo was for Bonny.

Indeed, the period of "legitimate trade" was characterized by cut-throat commercial rivalry not only between Africans but also between the European supercargoes. It was this rivalry which informed George Goldie to amalgamate the trading firms on the Niger.⁹ On the African side, such rivalries resulted in political turmoil and the intervention of British consuls in their domestic matters.

The palm oil trade was very labour-intensive. More hands were required to collect, bulk and transport produce to European beaches on the waterways or on the coast. The Delta middlemen needed to make considerable investments in canoes to carry the produce and in slaves to pull the canoes. Canoe-borne trade between the Delta and its hinterland was not new. Earliest European visitors to the Delta described such canoes coming back from the interior with assorted local products. However, the bulky nature of palm

oil and palm kernels necessitated enormous investments in canoes and their paddlers. Some of the wealthy traders and chiefs owned hundreds and thousands of canoes and slaves, respectively. King Eyo of Creek Town is said to have owned over 400 canoes and 1000 slaves. Nana Olomu of the Itsekiri kingdom of Warri probably owned more. Because of the intensity of the trade rivalries, the trade canoes were more heavily armed than had been the norm before the 19th century.

Central to the commercial enterprise of the coastal states was the Canoe House, which Dike describes as "at once a cooperative trading unit and a local government institution."¹⁰ A Canoe House differed from the traditional lineage-anchored house: the *Warri* of the Ijo; the *ekpuk* of the Ibibio and the *ufok* of the Efik. A person was born into the traditional house; but membership of a Canoe House could be by birth, choice or enslavement.

The commercial enterprise of the coastal dwellers, expanded by the Atlantic trade, rendered the traditional house inadequate. More hands were required than a household could provide. So the coastal traders retained for their own domestic and commercial needs some of the slaves imported from the interior. The proportion of such slaves *vis-à-vis* the free-born is not known. It seems, however, that before the 19th century, the free-born may have out-numbered the people of servile origins. In the 19th century, vast numbers of slaves, mostly of Igbo origin, were imported into the Eastern Delta city states. This swelled the population of slaves in the coastal states. This increase in slave import was in response to increase in the volume of trade in agricultural produce and the intense competition accompanying it. A Canoe House numbered anything from 300-1000 members, free and unfree. The influx of the slaves into the city states posed far-reaching political and social challenges to the coastal communities.

Political Challenges

It is a well established fact that the line separating economics and politics is often too slim and imperceptible to discern. The same is true of political and social relations. All these tend to inter-twine

rather inextricably in a mutually reinforcing pattern. This truism applied squarely with the city states of the coast in the 19th century; indeed even earlier.

One of the chief consequences of the Atlantic trade for the coastal states was the enlargement of traditional political institutions in scale and scope. We have mentioned the evolution of the Canoe House from the traditional house. Originally, government resided with the village council composed of the heads of the components of the village. The council was presided over by the head of the founding lineage, known as *Amanyabo* in Bonny. His presidency of the village council was informal. Over time, king-type institutions began to develop and the *Amanyabo* evolved into a monarchy.¹¹ Calabar was made up of autonomous republics. But at the beginning of the 19th century, the republics were transforming into a kingdom as the office of the Eyamba (President of the Ekpe society) gradually became domiciled in the Duke House.

The evolution of the lineage institutions into kingships predated the 19th century and, from Alagoa's analysis, derived its logic from internal dynamics.¹² But the expansion of trade, following European advent, dramatically speeded it up. It was necessary for a single authority to collect comeys and adjudicate trade disputes. In the case of Calabar, the *Eyamba* was the logical choice; the *Amanyabo* in the case of Bonny. The Atlantic trade enriched the coastal chiefs and strengthened their authority over their citizens. Their mediation in the relations between European supercargoes and indigenous traders conferred upon them enormous powers as well as influence.

These developments predated the 19th century; but in that century, as a result of 'legitimate trade', kingship experienced vicissitudes. The enhancement of the authority and wealth of monarchy made the institution an object of contest between aspiring members of royal houses. In some cases, some *nouveaux riches*, who had no traditional political standing sought to translate their wealth into political power. The history of the coastal states, from Lagos through the Itsekiri kingdom of Warri and the Ijo states to Calabar, is surfeit with struggles for the monarchy.¹³

The institution paid dearly for this. In the Lagos kingdom, the struggle for the throne raged without let from the accession of Oba Adele in (1800-5) until the British took over the island in 1861.¹⁴ In Bonny, the Manilla Pepple House and the Anna Pepple House, two branches of the Royal House, got locked up in an acrimonious contest for the throne. Anna Pepple House, led by Jaja, decided the matter by secession. It was a move in which commerce and politics were entangled, for Jaja founded the new kingdom of Opobo at a location that clearly underlined his commercial calculations. Strategically located at the mouth of the Imo River, Opobo effectively siphoned off most of the Bonny oil supplies from Ndoki, Qua Iboe and West Igbo communities. In the last three decades of the 19th century, Opobo superseded Bonny as the principal oil exporting city state in the Niger Delta. Bonny sought to redress its battered fortunes by seeking new markets. This brought her head-on against Kalabari. It was, however, not long before the tide of British imperialism swept Jaja off his hard won kingdom.

In Kalabari, too, the Amakiri House and the Barboy House were embroiled in a bitter struggle for the throne. Worsted in the contest, the Barboy House, led by Will Braid, seceded and founded Ewafa and, later, evacuated it and founded Bakama. In Warri, the change from the slave trade to "legitimate commerce" resulted in what amounted to a political revolution. Palm oil shifted trade from the capital, Ode Itsekiri, to the Benin River, some eighty kilometers or so away. The population also shifted to this emerging frontier of commerce. Confined by tradition to his capital, the Olu was left with neither revenue nor political influence and was ignored by leading houses operating on the Benin River. When Olu Akengbuwa died in 1848, an interregnum which was to last for nearly a century, followed until 1936.

Meanwhile, new settlements had sprung up on the Benin River, and the office of 'Governor of the River' acquired especial importance. The officer, hitherto a royal appointee, administered affairs on that river. Now, without firm royal control, the leading families on the river were torn by rivalries which they partially and temporarily resolved by rotating the office among themselves.

However, this rotational arrangement was overturned in 1883 when the Governor, Olomu, died and was succeeded by his son, Nana. Nana Olomu succeeded to immense wealth through which he put his commercial and political rivals in the shed. But in doing so, he incurred the hatred and jealousy of his competitors. These conspired with aggrieved European traders to trump up against him allegations of trade monopoly through terrorism in the oil markets in Urhoboland. Like Jaja before him, Nana Olomu was swept off by the gathering storm of British imperialism.

Social Challenge

It was perhaps in the realm of social relations that some of the most remarkable transformations occurred in the coastal communities. The Atlantic slave trade had enriched many families, and such families over generations had acquired slaves for their domestic use and comfort. The free-born indulged in ostentatious and lavish living. Of course, not all free-born were enriched by the external trade: some barely eked out subsistence existence.

Disparity in wealth and birth polarized social relations, between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', the free and the servile. As in every society, the slaves were the dreg; most of them laboured for their owners with no prospects of improvement in their miserable lot. It was out of the sweat of the slaves that the affluent free-born lived in luxury denied to other citizens. The cessation of external slave trade left many slave owners with unsold slaves. As Samuel Ajayi Crowther and J.C. Taylor observed, slaves became super-abundant.¹⁵

The existence of these slaves posed social and economic problems to their free-born owners, and society. In the hinterland, slaves were self-supporting and cultivated their own farms; in the Delta, most food crops were imported. The economic problem, as we have seen, was solved by deploying the slaves in the emerging palm oil trade and, as in Calabar, on farms established by their owners.

In fact, in time, legitimate commerce boosted domestic slave trade in 19th century Nigeria, perhaps to an unprecedented height,

at a time the external trade had ceased. Numerous hands, as noted earlier, were required to man the trade canoes and to bulk palm oil and palm kernels. Import of slaves, mostly of Igbo origin, swelled the coastal population and drastically altered its ethnic composition. Foreign visitors to these parts in the 19th century commented on the dominance of Igbo population in the eastern Delta and Calabar. The first C.S.M. missionary at Calabar was told that over half of the population was Igbo; another missionary referred to the Igbo as "the chief inhabitants of the Niger Delta."¹⁶ Igbo was said to have superseded Ibani and Okrikan in Bonny and Okrika, respectively, as the languages of every-day interaction.

'Igbo peril' was real in these states. The social problem was how to keep the large number of slave population in loyal servitude so that the indigenous, free-born would preserve their own identity. The problem was attempted by the application of the whip as well as the olive branch. In Calabar, the Efik nobility tackled the problem with an iron fist. Their instrument was the *Ekpe* secret society. About this society so much has been written¹⁷, it suffices here to highlight the relevant issues. *Ekpe* was traditionally an exclusive affair of free-born Efik, and every Efik man worth his salt in the community was a member. The society was ranked into grades. The higher grades were reserved for the nobility and free-born while slaves were admitted in the 19th century to the lowest grades but enjoyed little or no social or political weight.

Ekpe was the instrument of social, political and commercial control in Calabar. It wielded immense powers: made laws, adjudicated cases and executed them. *Ekpe* collected debts for its members and for others on request; placed an offending individual or even a whole community under interdiction, boycott or ostracism. It could impose a fine, detain or arrest an offender and, if it came to that, execute criminals. Some European traders joined the society in order to enhance their commercial operations. From the point of view of our discussion, one of the significant social functions of the society was to instill fear into and compel the subservience of slaves to their Efik masters. It was thus an instrument of oppression and subjection of the slaves.

As indicated earlier, some of these slaves were deployed to pull the trade canoes of their masters, some serviced their domestic conveniences while others toiled ceaselessly on their masters' farms. But the misfortune of the slaves did not end with economic exploitation alone. Much worse was the practice of their being immolated at the death of an Efik noble. Slave immolation in Calabar antedated the 19th century; it was also practised in many other traditional Nigerian societies. But in the 19th century, the practice reached unimaginable heights in Calabar due to the abundance of these unfortunate fellows. The main source of supply was the plantation slaves, especially at Akpabuyo.

Unable to bear the inhuman practice any more, the plantation slaves bonded themselves in a blood covenant to resist the practice. They were joined by some free-born Efik who happened to be socially and economically under-privileged. On several occasions, from c.1830 to 1850, at the death of any Efik noble, the plantation slaves trooped to Calabar in arms to ensure that no harm came to any of their members. The presence of Christian missionaries at Calabar added impetus to the "blood men" movement. These missionaries and the British Consul to the Bight of Biafra were vehemently opposed to slave immolation. The slaves were remarkably successful in their mission for the nobility were cowed into submitting to their demand. So successful were the slaves, in fact, that some Efik kings, notably Archibong I and Archibong II, enlisted their support against their political and commercial rivals.¹⁸ Then in 1850, John Beecroft, the British Consul to the Bight, with the active support of the Ekpe society, outlawed ritual murder. Slave immolation had gone but slavery continued. Interestingly enough, the "Blood Men", as the slave confraternity was called, did not protest against their social status, but rather only against the immolation of their members.

Unlike their Efik counterparts, the Ijo adopted a less inhuman approach in tackling the social crisis posed by the influx of slaves in their midst. As in other societies, Delta slaves were a disadvantaged group by the fact of their birth. However, the commercial rivalry generated by the Atlantic trade dictated that

merit, not ascription or birth, should be the chief criterion for the headship of a Canoe House. Otherwise, a House could find itself sunk into obscurity through inept leadership. Some Houses who persisted in their reliance on birth as the chief criterion for leadership found themselves in decline and soon atrophied.

Leadership by achievement in the Delta predated the 19th century. It became most critical in the 19th century amidst the sterling demands of legitimate commerce. This situation paved the way for the rise of forceful and energetic slaves of Igbo extraction to the leadership of Canoe Houses. On the Canoe House, Mary Kingsley stated in the 1890s that "The best thing in it is that it gives the poorest boy who paddles an oil canoe a chance of becoming King."¹⁹ Kingsley exaggerated the situation somewhat for a slave could never, by Ijo tradition, become a king. But that the house system provided opportunities for social, political and economic mobility to people of servile origins is not in doubt.

Such mobility was best exemplified by events in Bonny. Here the two royal Houses of the Pepples produced remarkable rulers of Igbo origin who, for nearly thirty years, following the death of King Opubu, dominated the politics of the city state. The Anna Pepple House was led in succession by remarkable Igbo ex-slaves in the persons Maduka, Alali, Ili and, the most remarkable of them, Jaja. Maduka acted as regent from the death of king Opubu until the accession of King William Dappa Pepple. The Manila Pepple House produced its own remarkable leader of Igbo slave origin in Oko Jumbo. It may be recalled that it was the confrontation between the Manilla Pepple House and the Anna Pepple House led, respectively, by Oko Jumbo and Jaja, which resulted in the latter's secession. An analysis by G.I. Jones of cases of succession to Canoe House headships shows that in more than half the cases, succession passed to slaves.²⁰

Of course, the successful slaves were a tiny minority. Their lives did not necessarily typify those of thousands of other slaves who continued to lead a life of servitude, down-right exploitation and even physical abuse. But the successes of their more fortunate peers kept alive in them the hope, albeit slim, of repeating the feat.

It was this hope, writes Dike, "ever present in the House system that made it in the 19th century an institution full of vitality, flexible and in a large measure beneficial to all".²¹

We have seen that the influx of a large number of slaves into the Delta threatened to obscure or erase the language and cultural identity of the indigenous population. The Ijo in general and the Kalabari in particular tackled this problem firmly but subtly. *Ekiné* was an elite society open to any person, irrespective of birth, who met the requirements for admission. These included, *inter alia*, a thorough mastery of the local language and culture. Members of the society enjoyed privileges not open to other citizens. *Ekiné* became a major instrument for acculturating strangers into the Kalabari society.²² The activities of the society in this regard were augmented by the *koronogbo* society. The *koronogbo* challenged in the Kalabari language anybody they met on the street at night. Those who responded in foreign accent were beaten up or could even be killed.²³ Through these various measures, the Ijo endeavoured to acculturate and integrate into their society people of foreign or slave origins.

Conclusion

Legitimate commerce posed to the coastal states of Nigeria challenge to change in the 19th century. In responding to the challenge, the people had to modify and, in some instances, discard long standing institutions, social relations, political alignments and patterns of commercial organization. "Legitimate commerce" was a 19th century development, but the instruments the coastal people applied in addressing its attendant problems ante-dated that century. The fact of continuity was in evidence. The changes were not always revolutionary and marked no sharp divide with the past. Nevertheless, they were effective and their overall import was profound and underlined the resilience and flexibility of the indigenous society. The contrasting ways in which the Efik and the Ijo tackled in their respective communities the social crisis of abundant slaves and the outcome of the attempts are instructive. Solving human problems through violence is counter-productive.

Violence ultimately breeds violence, not submission, in the long run or short run. It also tends to stiffen prejudices while narrowing sympathies. A humane approach to human problems yields more enduring positive results. African leaders, civilian and military, are invited to ponder over this matter.

END NOTES

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