

AAJMSHEL

**AFRICA AND ASIA JOURNAL OF SOCIAL AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES,
HUMANITIES, EDUCATION AND LEGAL STUDIES , SAN JOSE OCCIDENTAL
MINDORO, PHILIPPINES**

AAJSMSHEL

Africa And Asia Journal of Social And Management Sciences, Humanities, Education and Legal Studies (AAJSMSHEL), San Jose Occidental Mindoro, Philippines

Volume 6, Issue, 1, 2024, ISSN: 2955-0548

Articles are Indexed in Google Scholar Email: aajhsms2080@gmail.com

Published by Africa And Asia Journal of Social and Management Sciences, Humanities, Education and Legal Studies: San Jose Occidental Mindoro, Philippines

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NIGERIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES IN THE CONTEXT OF INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONS: A REFLECTION ON NIGERIAN-BRITISH RELATIONS 1900-1960

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Abstract.

The Nigerian environment was home to several state actors between the 17th and 20th centuries. While available literature on Nigerian-British Relations within the period under reference, dwells more on the socio-political and economic dimensions, there is scanty literature that reflects the impact of the Nigerian environment in such interaction. The interrogation of the environmental factors, in explaining the British scramble, and occupation of the Nigerian region, throughout the colonial era, seems to have been underestimated. Adopting a qualitative approach to historical research methodology in analysing information derived mainly from secondary sources, this study attempts an interrogation into the relevance of the Nigerian environment, in the centrifugal forces that pulled Europeans, viz-a-viz Britain, to the region which was later named Nigeria. The study reveals that aside from the factors of socio-political and economic dimensions of the British colonization, the Nigerian environment; its vast vegetation, arable landmass, and the abundant mineral resources, were all the embodiment of the forces that drew the attention of the British colonial quest. The study further reveals that British economic activities are responsible for Nigeria's environmental challenges. The study concludes that since Nigeria has been integrated into the international environment, global efforts are required to address her environmental challenges.

Keywords: Environment, Interaction, Economic, Colonization, Societies and Resources

Introduction

Before the British conquest, and occupation of the geographical location which later became known as Nigeria, different European nations had made contacts in the region. Following the reports of the various European explorers and Christian missionaries, the stage was set for the scrambling by European power, for the occupation of Africa for economic exploitation. What followed was the partitioning of Africa among the contending European nations, and the region which later became known as Nigeria fell under British colonial authority.

It is instructive to state that before Britain established her sphere of influence in the region, the Portuguese in their bid to locate a more economic trade route to Asia, landed in African. In fact, as far back as the 1470s, a Portuguese, Prince Henry the Navigator had landed in Nigeria. Sequel to this development, a trade relationship was established between the Portuguese merchants and Nigerian communities, particularly the Benin Empire. However, it was British merchants that secured the region for Britain after a series of diplomatic manoeuvring between and amongst the contending European powers. Britain was able to achieve this feat through the instrumentalities of the following; firstly, was the activities of the British explorers; Notable among them were Mungo Park, Hugh Clapperton, the Lander brothers (Richard and John Lander), and Heinrich

Barth. Secondly, there was remarkable influence by the British trading firms namely the Royal Niger Company under the able leadership of Sir Taubman Goldie and John Holt. Thirdly, there was the high impact of the British missionaries led by prominent gospel preachers like Mary Slessor, Birch Freeman, Samuel Bill, and Henry Townsend. Their impact was so penetrating that some Africans, particularly, Nigerians were not only greatly influenced by the Christian faith, but most of them later became powerful Christian Missionaries. Notable among such Nigerians was Bishop Ajayi Crowder.

Subsequently, the above agents of British government were able to establish a grip on the region; a grip strong enough to ward off other European interests to establish an indisputable British sphere of influence. It was, therefore, not surprising that the area was handed over to Britain during the subsequent Berlin conference of 1884/85. Onwuka puts it more succinctly; "The high point of this scramble was the partition of Africa. This was in a conference held in Berlin in 1884/1885, in which the European nations decided the fate of African Nations and shared Africa among themselves. It was the partitioning that brought the various people of present-day Nigeria under the full British sphere of influence".

A lot has been written concerning European contacts and interaction with Africa, Viz- a- viz Nigeria. The bulk of available literature on the subject matter scarcely addresses the issue of environment and environmental factors in Nigeria's colonial experience. To make matters worse; available records of the earliest European contacts with Nigerian communities, societies, entities and kingdoms were authored by European writers. In light of that, the views expressed in such works are expectedly Eurocentric, subjective and biased against Africa.

The first layer of this bias is evident in the erroneous assumption by Europeans that African states do not deserve the status of statehood, and that Africa does not have a history, other than the activities of Europeans in Africa. This goes to buttress Trevor-Roper's position that there is nothing like African history, let alone the international relations of African states. Consequently, the relevance of the formidable and well-structured pre-colonial Nigerian states of Oyo, Benin, Ife, the northern Sultanate and Emirate system, cum the several other kingdoms and empires of south-west and south-eastern Nigeria are not deservedly treated.

This paper, therefore, sets to interrogate in particular the relevance of the Nigerian environment, its alluring vegetation, vast arable and fertile landmass, and its abundant mineral resources, all of which evoked a compelling attraction for the British occupation throughout the colonial periods. The paper also focuses on the various colonial activities that eventually triggered environmental challenges in the Nigerian geographical landscape within the period of Nigerian-British relations. The baseline dates are of historical relevance, in the sense that 1900 marked the complete conquest and colonization of Nigeria by Britain, while 1960 was significant as the year of Nigeria's independence.

The Environment of Pre-Colonial Nigeria.

Nigeria in the pre-colonial sense simply refers to the peoples that make up the various kingdoms, societies, empires, and communities within the geographical location that later became known as Nigeria. By way of geographical location, Nigeria is situated close to the equator, extending from latitude 4⁰ North and 14⁰ North, and from longitude 3⁰ East to 15⁰ East. It shares its southern boundary with the Atlantic ocean, its western boundary with the Republic of Benin, Northern boundary with the Niger Republic, while lake Chad is on the North-Eastern axis of the country. In

terms of land mass, Nigeria covers an area of about 925,000 square kilometers, hosting well over 350 ethnolinguistic groups, that can rightly qualify as nation-states.

The climate of the region consists of four major climatic belts namely; the sub-equatorial south, the tropical water land, the tropical continental north, and the high plateaux. These four major climatic belts vary in terms of the quality of annual rainfall, humidity, wind and other climate conditions, they can all be classified into two main climate seasons; rainy and dry seasons for the tropical south and savanna north of Nigeria respectively. Thus, the vegetation is mainly forest vegetation in the southern part, while savanna grassland persists in northern Nigeria. It is important to point out that the settlement pattern and the economic lives of the people are to a reasonable extent determined by the condition of their physical environment. Udo (2004) pointed out that it is hardly necessary to say that the economy of groups such as the Ijo of the Niger Delta has been closely related to and very much limited in scope by the conditions of their physical environment.

The climatic factor is significant in understanding the pattern of vegetation, and also the pattern of socio-economic activities of the various Nigerian groups. This explains why Nigerian groups in the Southern riverine communities practice fishing, boat-making salt-making, and hunting, in addition to farming. Whereas the northern groups practice mainly cattle rearing and leather-works, in addition to farming. Even in the area of farming which appears to be a general occupation of all groups irrespective of regional location, there is a great difference in terms of crop production in the various geographical or vegetational zones. Thus, the difference in climate has resulted in the cultivation of grains such as millet, Guinean corn, carrot etc., in the northern axis. The forest people grow root crops like yam, cassava, and cocoyam, while in the middle belt, one could find a mixture of the food crops of the south cultivated side by side with those found in the north.

The difference in climate conditions, vegetation, and by extension, food crop production and occupation generally have culminated in intergroup relations among the different groups in Nigeria. This type of inter-group relations is such that Okwuidegbe (2013) described it as that wherein the Nigerian communities did not live in isolation but had links with one another both far and near. Trade provided one reason for this, as the search for commodities and where to sell them created a network of relations. Thus, there was movement of goods and services from areas where they were produced, to other parts where they were needed. Therefore, there was a migratory phenomenon occasioned by the movement of people who were in search of either commodity of trade, more fertile land for farming or greener pastures for grazing. The major routes of such movements were the footpaths or sea routes. Udo (2004), while describing the means of transportation in the riverine parts of Nigeria observed that the main routes of early migrations as well as of trade followed navigable waterways which were not silted up.

The above notwithstanding, it would be wrong to assume that inter-group relations between and among pre-colonial Nigerian groups were always usually cordial and convivial. These groups had reasons to also interrelate in warfare occasioned by conflict over grazing and farming land, fish ponds, trade routes, and boundary issues.

The Nigerian Environment in the Colonial Era

If we accept the Oxford Dictionary of Current English definition of the term environment, as the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates; the natural world, then, we should not have any challenge accepting that all the colonial socio-political and

economic activities in the communities that make up Nigeria, were only centred on the Nigerian environment. It is pertinent to note that the alluring Nigerian environment, its green vegetation, its serene locale, its arable and fertile landmass, and above all, the abundant mineral resources, constituted a force of attraction for the British occupation and colonization of the Nigerian region.

Economic gain was the major motive behind European interest in Africa. The British colonial authority did not spare any opportunity in her exploitative economic policies. British economic interest was vigorously pursued, without recourse to the adverse effects of such economic activities, or what negative impacts such economic ventures could have on the environment of the colony. There was a deliberate effort by the British colonial administration to exploit the land, labour and natural resources of Nigerian territory.

To actualize their economic desire, the British colonial administration discouraged the existing pre-colonial farming system, which was centred on food crop production. Instead, cash crop farming was introduced and encouraged by the British colonial administration to meet up with the raw material needs of British fledging industries. In respect of the entire Africa as applicable to Nigeria, Rodney was right when he posited that; "In those parts of the continent where land was still in African hand, colonial governments forced Africans to produce cash-crops no matter how low the prices were". Obviously, the prices of such newly introduced cash-crops were fixed by the British merchants through the British colonial administration, which deliberately downplayed on food crop production.

In a bid to ensure large-scale production of such cash crops, a large expanse of Nigeria's arable farmlands was cultivated thereby altering the vegetational zone. Thus, Nigeria's environment became altered, as large forest reserves gave way to the establishment of large plantations of cocoa, oil palm, and rubber. Lands which were hitherto cultivated on a rotational basis to preserve soil fertility were converted to plantations, where perennial cash crops like oil palm, cocoa and rubber were planted. The result was that plantation farming flourished over subsistence food crop farming, with its attendant consequences of pressure on land, and the land losing its fertility. Also, the colonial economy which fostered the practice of cash-crop farming did not only alter the traditional land tenure system in Nigeria. It also degraded the environment as the pressure on the land increased. Alluding to the above, Uwazierem posited that cash crops took over the production and sale of food crops, hence, producing raw materials for industries abroad at the detriment of food crop production.

A corollary to the above was the lumbering, and logging business introduced in Nigeria by British firms, and was sustained throughout the colonial era. Nigeria's large forest reserve was invaded and a large quantity of timber was exploited. Such timber was either ferried through the sea to Europe or processed into wood by British companies in Nigeria. A good example of such a British companies was African Timber and Plywood (AT&P) situated in Sapele, Nigeria. Michael explained that when the tree is cut down, it is cut into logs and handed down the stream and canals dug by the people. The logs produced were sailed to the port and sold to Europeans who later drafted the logs and shipped them abroad. In all, the mercantile venture was under the firm grip of the British firms through the colonial administration. British companies and economic interests throughout the colonial era blossomed to the detriment of the Nigerian people. Arguing in the same vein, Bello remarked that it is quite evident that the colonial government labour, land tenure, fiscal and monetary policies were geared towards creating and guaranteeing the colonial companies with preferential land holdings, monopoly over mines, supply of cheap labour, supply

of cheap raw materials for exports and a protected market for imported manufactured goods.

The implication is that Nigeria's large forest reserve was tampered with, and the forest ecosystem became disrupted through the indiscriminate falling of trees to foster the British lumbering business. This is the genesis of deforestation, and desert encroachment in Nigeria, with its attendant environmental hazard of global warming. The mining and extractive industries of the British colonial administration did not leave less negative environmental impact on the Nigerian region. British mining firms carried out extensive extraction of Nigeria's minerals, ranging from gold, uranium, coal etc., from the Nigerian soil. Such mining activities left far-reaching consequences on the Nigerian environment in terms of environmental degradation.

Another aspect of British economic activities that impacted negatively on the Nigerian environment is oil exploration. The origin of British oil exploration is traceable to 1956, when oil was discovered in commercial quantity at Oloibiri, in present-day Bayelsa state of Nigeria. Subsequently, British Petroleum (BP), through its subsidiary, Shell Petroleum Development Company commenced exploration and oil exportation from Nigeria in 1958. Ogbogbo in consonance with the above remarked that the company's dominant presence in Nigeria is partly a result of the country's colonial antecedents. It exploited the opportunity of its being registered in the seat of the colonial administration to virtually sequester exploration and exploitation rights for decades.

It is, however, important to note that the environmental degradation occasioned by oil exploratory activities by the British oil companies, and by extension other foreign oil companies operating in Nigeria is so devastating to be ignored. It is also important to mention that no deliberate effort was made by the British oil companies to preserve the Nigerian environment upon which they are operating. Hence, they pretentiously keep a blind eye to the series of oil spillages and other environmental hazards caused by their oil exploration activities. Dode opined that it is an incontrovertible fact that key environmental issues in the Niger Delta of Nigeria relate to its petroleum industry. Oil spills in the region occur due to several causes, including the corrosion of pipelines and tankers.

The Nigerian environment, particularly the oil-rich Niger Delta terrain has been subjected to one form of degradation to another due to oil spillage and gas flaring. Arguing further, Dode annotated that we can never get bored, referring to the damage done to the environment by the activities of international oil companies (IOCs) in the Niger Delta because it constitutes the primary reason for the heating up of the region, and indeed the whole Nigeria has experienced in the past five decades and counting, a major source of climate change.

The extractive sector was not left out of British exploitation throughout the colonial era. The coal mine site at Enugu was a bee-hive of activities, as British firms under the consortium of Royal Niger Company ensured full exploitation of large coal deposits in Enugu and its environs. A British mine engineer, Albert Kitson was the first to discover coal at Udi Ridge in Enugu, in 1909 but mining activities started in 1916. While the British Coal mining companies made fortunes and repatriated their proceeds to their home country, the Nigerian environment, and the Nigerian's source of livelihood were destroyed by the miners. The culture of exploration and degradation which was introduced by British coal mining companies was inherited by indigenous Nigerian firms after independence.

The devastating effect of coal mining can better be appreciated when one considers its effects in

terms of deforestation, biodiversity, water, air and soil pollution occasioned by the release of toxic chemicals. All these culminate into global warming and depletion of the ozone layer as is currently being witnessed across the globe.

Similarly, tin mining activities of the British colonialists started in Jos between 1906 and 1911. However, there are accounts of indigenous mining activities in northern Nigeria as far back as the 1850s and 1860s. Kiriwain Kano has strong pre-colonial tin mining and smelting activities. Kiriwain Kano was a walled Muslim Hausa-speaking town at the foot of hills where streams yielded tin ore. It was upon the conquest of Northern Nigeria by the British Colonialists that traditional tin mining and smelting was banned. In its stead, colonial tin mining activities commenced. The first multinational expatriate tin mining company to establish its presence and initiated tin mining activities on the Jos Plateau was the Royal Niger Company (RNC). This opened the way for the British monopoly of tin mining activities in Nigeria with its attendant effects of environment degradation and destruction of the Natural Eco-System by mining companies.

From the foregoing, Nigeria's colonial History is replete with harmful economic exploitative ventures orchestrated by Britain. The above-cited cases of exploratory and exploitative ventures of the British Colonial Authority, through its Royal Niger Company, is simply aimed at establishing the obvious nexus between such colonial economic ventures and their attendant environmental challenges that have continued to bedevilled Nigeria. Such environmental issues essentially form the fulcrum of this article, as it has been observed that the Nigerian environment is marred by destruction, degradation, exploitation, and deprivation; the genesis of which is only traceable to the colonial era.

Contextualizing Nigeria's Environmental Challenges within the Framework of International Environmental Relations.

From the realist's state-centric interpretation of the international system, it can be deduced that every state within the international system is situated in a geographical space, often referred to as territory. Such territory is uniquely marked by a combination of its location, size, shape, climate and natural resources, all of which combine to distinguish one state from others. Due to the obvious differentials in environmental or territorial endowments, there is a compelling need for states to inter-relate in varying symbiosis terms.

In the context of international politics, power and struggle, is a common features. Meanwhile, the relationship between power and geography, often referred to as 'geopolitics' cannot be overemphasized in understanding the politics of the international political system. Thus, Eneka (2019) emphasized that the relationship between geography and power (geo-politics), which has been integral to the realist theory of international relations, resides in the ability, at any time, of one state or another to move power in order to influence or control desires territory deemed to be of strategic importance.

It is, therefore, within the above explanatory framework that Britain's quest for territory in Africa, viz-a-viz Nigeria, and the resultant environmental challenges can aptly be situated. In the event of geopolitical power play among European powers, the stage was set for the scramble for, and partitioning of African territories, which was eventually resolved at the Berlin Conference of 1884/85. Within the period under review, Britain as part of her measures to retain national power ensured that her ability to project her capabilities over territories in overseas, was necessary if her dominant role in the international system could be retained. In that sense, Eneka further argues,

that in a hierarchical international system, access to natural resources and a favourable geographical position have been key elements for the achievement of state power. For those with the capabilities to do so, these assets should be protected by military means and increased through overseas expansion or conquest if necessary.

Through the conquest and eventual colonization of Nigeria by Britain, the former was incorporated into the global environmental relations in which conflicts and wars are not only manifest but incessant struggles over scarce natural resources became rife. Thus, Nigeria entered into a phase defined mainly by exploitative ventures of British agencies, culminating in British-imposed environmental changes that take expression in Ozone layer depletion, loss of biological diversity, climate change, water pollution and water scarcity, air pollution, acid rain etc., most of which were not known to Nigerian societies and peoples before the advent of colonialism. Consequently, the approaches to addressing the numerous environmental challenges should reflect the global dimension. In that light, the Nigerian government, policymakers and international agencies should deploy all global best practices in combating the globally induced environmental challenges in Nigeria.

Conclusion

As far as the Nigerian environment within the context of Nigerian-British relations between 1900-1960 was concerned, this research effort has been able to establish a nexus between the relevance of the Nigerian environment and the British scramble for the Nigerian territory. Such relevance was a determinant factor that sustained British interest in the Nigeria territory in the ensuing international interactions amongst European nations while the Berlin conference of 1884/1884 lasted. The paper further reiterates the abiding components in the Nigerian environment which harbours vast vegetation, arable and fertile land, and abundant mineral resources, all of which combined to constitute a force of attraction to the British colonial powers. The research effort has further exposed the nexus between the environmental challenges being experienced in parts of Nigeria to the exploitative economic activities of Britain, its agents, and its companies. The study finally concludes that the various environmental challenges ranging from oil spoilage, gas flaring, acid rain as well as other forms of environmental degradation are all traceable to the exploratory activities of the British firms. Thus, since Nigeria has become part of the international environment, global efforts are required to combat the menace of colonial-imposed environmental challenges.

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