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POSTWAR BRITISH MARINE TRANSPORT SERVICES IN THE NIGER-BENUE CONFLUENCE AREA OF NIGERIA, 1945 – 1960

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Abstract: This work focuses on the British marine transport services in the Niger-Benue confluence area from the end of the Second World War to the twilight of colonial rule Nigeria in 1960. Marine services were utterly neglected by the British authorities for the prosecution of the war. Personnel and navigational equipment of the Marine Department, the British authority responsible for marine services and inland waterways management, were deployed for the war purposes thereby creating low postwar marine services in the study area. The paper, therefore, examines

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the variations that occurred in the management of inland waterways in Nigeria in the period by focusing on the factors that led to the fall in marine transport services as a result of the war and the efforts of the government to resuscitate the sector. It analyses the restructuring of the Marine Department into the Inland Waterways Department (IWD) by the government in her attempt to resuscitate the moribund marine transport services in 1957. The paper discovers that IWD became a department in the Federal Ministry of Transport, and it was solely charged with the responsibilities to run the Nigerian rivers and render marine transport services for administrative and commercial purposes. It examines how marine services in the confluence area and beyond fared under IWD. It focuses on the IWD's statutory functions by analyzing how differently they were from those of its forerunner. In addition to this, the paper highlights the contributions of IWD to the development of marine transport services in the Niger-Benue confluence area in the period under study.

Keywords: Postwar, British, Marine Transport Services, Niger-Benue Confluence, Nigeria.

Introduction

The Nigerian navigable inland waterways, particularly the river Niger, was the major highways for communication and transportation of people and cargo within the Niger-Benue confluence area and other parts of the country like the Southeast and the Niger Delta long before the Second World War. The major provider of transport services on the river in the 20th century was the Marine Department which was precisely established by the British government in 1900 (Shuaibu, 2022). Though the department was purposely established to engender the colonial motive of Britain, it provided marine services that were more sophisticated and faster that those that were hitherto provided by the local Igala, Nupe, Igbo, Ijaw and Urhobo navigators. This made the Niger and Benue Rivers to become beehive of navigational activities (Shuaibu, 2022).

However, like in the First World War era, the Marine Department abandoned its primary responsibilities and deployed its personnel and vessels in the prosecution of the war. The development created rooms for the exploitation of other means of transportation. Consequently, the rivers within the confluence area and beyond became more dormant by the end of the war due to the rise in road networks (Shuaibu, 2022). The consequent decline in river transport began to take its tolls on the Marine Department to the extent that by the beginning of the 1950s, the call for its restructuring and reorganization to make

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the department live up to its bidding as a developer of inland waterways transport system was intensified by the Nigerian policymakers (Jaekel, 1997).

Literature on marine services, particularly their contributions to intergroup relations, the nation's economy, communications, transportation and aiding the British colonial agenda in Nigeria around the Niger-Benue confluence area and the Niger Delta form the focal point of this study. However, despite the significance of the services in the colonial period, a detailed and systematic examination and analysis of how they fared after the Second World War from 1945 to 1960 is yet to be attempted. This implies that there is a gap in our existing knowledge of the history of marine services in Nigeria. The current effort seeks to bridge this gap by examining the situations of marine services in the Niger-Benue confluence area and the role played by the government to revamp river transportation after the war.

Marine Services in the Aftermath of the Second World War

Aside from the Second World War and its attendant consequences on marine services, the situation in the Niger-Benue confluence area was worsened by the drought that took the better part of the period between 1940 and 1950. The Niger was navigable 537 miles upstream to Jebba; above Jebba, the river was obstructed by rapids. The drought of which a vessel might load was dependent on the season and the annual rise was as much as 35 feet at Onitsha (Information in respect of Nigeria, 1948). The high river season from the Forcados to the Niger-Benue confluence area extended from July to October with a maximum drought of 6 feet to Jebba, during August to October, vessels drawing 13 feet could reach Lokoja and 12 feet to Baro. After October, the river fell rapidly with consequent reductions in the drought, by December droughts were reduced to 4 feet to Lokoja, 3 feet to Baro and only 2 feet to Jebba (Information in respect of Nigeria, 1948). During the low river period in March, April and May, droughts were further reduced to 3 feet 6 inches to Onitsha and 1 foot 6 inches to Lokoja. But in the period between 1943 and 1947, the extreme water level was experienced with droughts of 4 feet to Patani and 3 feet 6 inches to Onitsha. In May 1947, as in 1945 and 1946, the river closed to normal traffic at Ajaokuta, 26 miles below Lokoja, and shallow drought launches drawing 1 foot 6 inches had had difficulties reaching Lokoja which had been before the period the limit of Marine Department's navigation (Information in respect of Nigeria, 1948).

Before the Second World War droughts of 4 feet were normally expected to Lokoja and 3 feet to Baro throughout the low river period, but they appeared to be a general depreciation in the depth that was obtainable on all reaches of the river above Patani during the low river season. The reason for these seasonal discrepancies could not be ascertained in any of the archival sources or data available for this study, but resource persons at the National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA) and the Nigerian Meteorological Agency collectively proclaimed that it was due to global

warming (personal communication, 2021). This position is debatable because by the 1940s, what could cause global warming of such magnitude that could lead to such a low level of rivers in the Niger-Benue Confluence area of Nigeria and beyond were still at their lowest ebb (Johnson, 1980).

The same fate affected the Benue in the period. The river was navigable for 547 miles from Lokoja to Garua in the Cameroons; the drought in which a vessel may load was dependent on the season and annual rise which was as much as 29 feet at Makurdi before the war. Like the Niger, the high river season extended from July to the middle of October with a drought of 5 feet to Garua (Information in respect of Nigeria, 1948). During August and September when the river was at its greatest height, vessels drawing 7 feet could ascend from the Niger-Benue confluence area of Nigeria to Yola and 6 feet to Garua. After October, the river fell rapidly with a consequent reduction in the drought. In November, the maximum drought to Ibi was 4 feet and 1 foot to Yola. And by February, launches drawing 1 foot 6 inches had difficulties in reaching Makurdi (Information in respect of Nigeria, 1948).

The drought from 1943 to 1947 which extensively and adversely affected the navigability of the Niger and Benue Rivers from the understanding of this study was not different from those of the seasons before 1943 and after 1947. Navigation was only affected because the proper management of the two massive rivers in terms of dredging and buoying by the Marine Department were utterly abandoned for the Second World War. The effect of this development in the period was mostly felt in the Niger-Benue confluence area of Nigeria than in any littoral parts of the country. This is illustrated in the table below:

Table 1: Survey of Vessels and Licensing of Lighters, Boats and Canoes in Nigeria in 1948

Division	Inland Water Vessels	Lighters	Boats and Canoes
Lagos	61	105	582
Forcados	40	155	-
Lokoja	-	-	-
Port Harcourt	7	48	3
Calabar	31	86	-

Source: (Information in respect of Nigeria, 1948)

From the above table, it has been shown that marine activities were no longer booming in the Niger-Benue confluence area in the 1940s as no vessel was surveyed or licensed for commercial or private use in the period. The alternative means of transport, the use of human porterage which the people largely adopted in protest against the British price-ring policy and high cost of freight by the Marine vessels in the 1930s had extended to the 1940s. This problem and myriads of others created by the Second World War

increasingly hampered the Marine Department from carrying out its primary functions of managing the rivers for navigation.

Government's Responses to Low Traffic on the River Niger

The pressure from Nigerians about the poor state of the marine sector at the twilight of colonialism in the 1950s galvanized the government into the administrative reorganization of the department with the hope of getting efficient and quality service delivery on the inland waterways (Information in respect of Nigeria, 1948). This agitation for restructuring was informed by Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's tour of the United States between September 12th and October 3rd, 1952 to understudy how the American government ran the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to make them viable and dependable means of transport and income-earning for the government. Based on his experience in America, Balewa posited that the first thing that was noticed in the administration of the inland waterways was the technical brilliance of the American achievement in harnessing the Mississippi and its tributaries to play a vital part in the economy of the country (Balewa, 1952). The second impression Balewa had was the enormous capital investment by the United States government in river works of all kinds, which had been amply justified by the rapid expansion of industry and agriculture in the Mississippi basin.

Consequent to this development, as Balewa's (1952) report read was that the area was served with a vast network of navigable waterways. The maintenance and further extension of this great system of waterways, similar to those of the confluence area of Nigeria, had been the responsibility of the United States Army Corps of Engineers which was charged by the Congress in 1824 with the care of rivers, harbours and waterways which included the Mississippi (Balewa, 1952). Though the Mississippi valley was fortunate in possessing a natural balance of internal trade, the effective management of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers made them serve as auxiliaries. Through the waterways, petroleum and sulphur were moved upstream from Texas and Louisiana, while coal, grain and manufactured steel products (notably cars and agricultural implements) were moved downstream to the southern markets or, in the case of grain, for export overseas (Balewa, 1952).

In Nigeria, there already existed (even if on a small scale) a balanced trade in bulk commodities on the Benue which could be capable of further development, notable in the Adamawa and the Cameroons were cement, petrol and corrugated iron was imported against exports of groundnuts and cotton; and insofar as industrial production was concerned, which was a lucrative element in America river transport, there could not be any comparison between the Mississippi and the Niger-Benue system where no major industry had been established on the two Nigerian rivers (Balewa, 1952). However, despite all the comparative deficiencies in the Niger-Benue confluence area of Nigeria, Balewa suggested that the inland waterways administrative system that made the

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Mississippi and its tributaries as alternative transport system should be modelled to administer the Niger and Benue differently from what the Marine Department had done for over five decades without relative improvement.

The Reorganization of the Marine Sector

After a thorough examination of the Balewa's blueprint for river transport development, the government's policy statement for the establishment of a port authority was published in a white paper in 1953 to amongst other things foresee the need to set up an Inland Waterways Department (IWD. At the time it was decided, the only practical course to follow was to place the Marine Department in its entirety under the port authority and as a corollary that the authority should accept the responsibility for certain services that were important to the country but which could not be justly termed port services chargeable to the authority's revenue. The port authority was to gradually reorganize the department with the object not only of maintaining separate accounts but also of furthering the ultimate creation of an Inland Waterways Section within the Department (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). Implementation of the proposal could not be carried out immediately because the Netherlands Engineering Consultants (NEDECO) was carrying out investigations into the seaward approaches to the delta to provide solutions within the financial means of the government to silting on the bars. Unless a solution was found by the consultants, there could not be any improvement in the transshipment of river cargoes to sea-going vessels in the delta without which no major expansion of river communications could be contemplated (Federation of Nigeria, 1956).

However, a project for training works on the Escravos bar was included in the Economic Programme and put forward a solution in the interim so that it could be possible to consider the establishment of an IWD before the NEDECO assignment of finding solutions to navigation problems on the Niger and Benue Rivers were completed. The survey by the consultants, therefore, could not be completed before 1958 but it was designed beforehand with reasonable confidence that the responsibility of an IWD would fall into two broad divisions dictated by the pattern of the inland waterways themselves (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). On the Niger and Benue and later on other Federal rivers, the emphasis of the IWD was placed on river training works such as reservoirs, locks, cut-off, bank stabilization and channel restriction. In the creeks and delta, its work would tend to concentrate on sudd clearance, dredging of channels, control of mangroves, and also the maintenance of beaconing of waterways for sea-going ships as opposed to river craft. Although there would be services common to both, notably hydrographic, the distinction would remain and would require different types of craft and equipment (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). For this task, the government was fortunate in having in Lokoja and Warri centres which were conveniently placed geographically and which could provide the two main operational bases of the future department for the management of the river and creek areas respectively (Federation of Nigeria, 1956a).

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As expected, the investigation by Balewa on the running of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers and the recommendation made them became the practical foundation on which the IWD was to be built like a body solely charged with the responsibility of developing the Nigerian rivers for commercial navigation. He became convinced that the Niger and Benue rivers could play a similar role in Nigeria (Wolf, Emerhi & Okosi, 2013). Balewa's conviction was added to the fact that NEDECO who had first entered Nigeria earlier in the year to undertake some investigations of the Western Delta, as discussed earlier, were able to provide some illumination about the government's knowledge of Nigerian rivers. The Nigerian government was particularly appreciative to the Dutch consultants of the tremendous knowledge and new skills that NEDECO had provided for the control of inland waterways (Nyitoyo, 2009). Consequently, contract for the study of the hydrology and navigability of the Niger and Benue Rivers with specifications to provide a feasibility study on waterways development, which they did in a series of reports (1954, 1959, 1961) was awarded to the NEDECO in 1953 based on Balewa's conviction (Wolf & Okosi, 2013).

The NEDECO report was funded by the Nigerian Groundnut Marketing Board and the Nigerian Cotton Marketing Board with a joint contribution of $200 with a $400 contribution from the Federal Government (Jaekel, 1997). The consultant further added that as the ports were about to be separated from the railway it was essential that such authority did not concentrate on the seas at the expense of the inland waterways and therefore a distinct arm of the Marine Department should be created to take care of the interior (Federation of Nigeria, 1956a).

The Establishment of the Inland Waterways Department

Based on Balewa's experience and suggestion, a policy for the establishment of IWD was proposed by the Government of the Federation and laid before the House of Representatives as sessional paper no. 7 of 1956 for legislative actions (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). Balewa's proposal was consequent upon his tour of the United States in 1952 to understudy the running of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to ascertain the mechanisms adopted by the American government that made the rivers great transport systems to adopt those mechanisms to make marine transport services on the Niger and Benue Rivers better for the economic wellbeing of Nigeria (Federation of Nigeria, 1956a).

Despite all the pending technical and hydrological issues on the rivers that were under investigation by the NEDECO since 1953, at a meeting of the National Executive Council in February 1956, the regional governments drew attention to the need for a federal hydrological service, which would necessarily be a major responsibility of the IWD to be established (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). The adherence to the regional governments' recommendation meant the IWD had to be established before NEDECO complete its work. Consequently, the government in the white paper No 7 of 1956, established the

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IWD, and from the first of April 1957, it began to put its structures in stages (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). The establishment of the IWD led to the dissolution of the Marine Department into three other agencies of government by Sir James Robertson, the last British Governor-General of Nigeria. The last director of the Marine Department who supervised its restructuring and reorganization into the Nigerian Navy (NN), the Nigerian Port Authority (NPA) and the Coastal Agency (CA) was F.W.J Skutil. He served between June 9th, 1953 and July 1st 1956, when he became the Director of the Nigerian Naval Services. A.J. Tyrrell became the government agent for the Coastal Agency, and the Inland Waterways Department (IWD), came under Commander Emmanuel Rice as its Director (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). The creation of the IWD was solely for the development and management of marine services as a viable and alternative mode of transport, and to achieve multimodality in the Nigerian transport sector.

Role of Inland Waterways Department in Developing Marine Transport Services

The IWD officially commenced operation on the 1st of April 1957 when R.A. Njoku was Transport Minister with the object of development, operation of essential marine services, and clearance of the inland waterways for navigation (Jaekel, 1997) At the inception of its operations, the IWD was empowered to carry out its responsibilities as the developer and manager of the inland waterways. The sum of £383,000 was appropriated for consideration and approval by the Federal House of Representatives for the financial year 1957 — 58, as a takeoff grant for the IWD. This was a large sum for Nigeria's purse, especially for a department that was only one year old (Wolf & Okosi, 2013). Also, to facilitate the IWD work, the government provided the department with two survey vessels, six voyage vessels, about 19 ferries of various capacities with twin engines distributed throughout the federation and two tug boats of 750 horsepower caterpillar engines (Wolf & Okosi, 2013). The vessels it inherited from the Marine Department were *Wagtail* for sudd clearance, *Vampire* for buoyage tender, and *Dainty* for station launch. Those in the passengers and cargo service categories were 4 *Accra* canoes, 16 polling barges, 13 dinghies, 9 Gigs and 13 Lighters (Federation of Nigeria, 1956a).

Figure 1: Some of the survey vessels inherited from the Marine Department by the IWD at the Dockyard Lokoja

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Source: Fieldwork on 21/04/2021

The plans of the IWD as of 1958 were to better the efforts of the Marine Department by solving the problems of the inland waterways that were ignored or unattended to. The actualization of all these plans and programmes - both scientific and administrative - depended not just on financial considerations but the human factor. This was because the IWD was added responsibilities that were not part of that of its precursor's (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). For instance, Nigeria in the 1950s had no staff trained in the specialist skills of hydrology, hydrographic and hydraulic engineering. Hydrological and hydrographical surveys were never carried out by the Marine Department (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). The one way out of the problem was to attract and train competent staff that would man those sections of IWD for the immediate future. The Nigerian government was quite prepared to partner with the Netherlands on whose recommendation the hydraulic and the hydrological branches were established, to train her indigenous workforce in these critical sectors of the maritime industry (Nyitoyo, 2009). Consequently, provision was made by the buoyage programme and river patrols on the Benue, especially during the shipping season. An experimental buoyage was established between Lokoja and Baro. Even at this experimental stage, with occasional disappointments, the buoys proved their work and were able to render some services the moment they were mastered. In addition to the buoys, there was a standard organization of patrols - all of which rendered important assistance to river shipping. Future patrol services were extended to all the more difficult stretches of the rivers and creeks (Nyitoyo, 2009).

The development made the James Roberson led colonial authorities' proposal for improving the Escravos Bar with extending navigational improvement on the Niger from the confluence area, as contained in the Economic Programme and approved earlier in 1956 to start getting implementation (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). Consequently, the navigation branch of the IWD easily assumed responsibility for the dockyards at Forcados in the lower Niger and Lokoja in the Niger-Benue confluence area for the maintenance of all Regional Government craft and operational ferries. The scheme for providing seamless navigation services to the river fleets on the Niger-Benue Rivers was being prepared with the aid of the NEDECO survey which provided useful information for permanent deep-water access to the delta port through the Escravos channel of the Niger (Federation of Nigeria, 1956). Marine services, therefore, witnessed a continuous increase in passengers and vehicles carried.

The IWD also carried out water transport and waterways operations all over Nigeria inland waterways. Such operations were undertaken in the Niger, Calabar, Port Harcourt and Cameroon Division. The IWD also engaged in sudd cutting in the creeks of the Lagos-Sapele Mail Launch routes and the area in which Okitipupa, Gbekebo and Agbabu are situated (Ali, 2012). Other regular transport services retained and maintained by the

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IWD in Nigeria's inland waterways included the Lagos-Sapele mail and passenger services. IWD connected Benin and Warri provinces with the outward and homeward mail steamers of Elder Dempster Lines Limited. It connected Burutu-Forcados-Koko service with the Lagos-Sapele mail and passenger services with Benin and Warri provinces. It also maintained the Forcados-Burutu service which served Messrs Elder Dempster Lines' Branch at Forcados, and the transport and lighter services between ship and shore and vice versa at the port of Victoria (Ali, 2012). The IWD also rendered special transport services to other government transport departments and the public as the occasion warranted. Many Crafts were maintained specifically by the IWD for administrative service, police, medical, and customs departments (Ali, 2012).

In the Niger-Benue confluence area, Jamata-KotonKarfe, Itobe-Ajaokuta, Lokoja-Shintaku, Lokoja-Gbobe, Gbagana-Loko and Idah Agenebode ferry services were retained and maintained by the IWD. The cost of maintaining the launch and ferry services in the area as from 1957 was £123,000 while £10, 500 was expended to clear rapid wreckages on the Niger in the same year. It had a significant impact on the people and the economy. The ferry users in the area were charged free while payments were made on cargoes and vehicles. The amount charged on vehicles was N10 for car, N20 for lorry, and so on depending on the nature of the vehicle (Shuaibu, 2017). From 1957 to 1960, it was estimated that 2,500 vehicles were conveyed across River Niger annually and most of the cars belonged to the British government officials (Iweze, 2011). Despite the humanitarian services, the IWD earning rose significantly from £50, 000 in 1957 to £129, 516 in 1958 and by 1959, earnings from the department's ferry services were projected to reach £146, 000.

However, ferry services in the IWD era did not go without hitches. Since it was partly run as social welfare, the bureaucracy in charge of the department's ferry services across the country became less responsive and efficient in making the services to be smoothly rendered to the people. As result, the finance for sustaining the system was not released as promptly as approved in the budget (Ikya, 1993). This development led to the frequent break in services due to inadequate maintenance of vessels meant for the services till 1960 when the administration of the entire country was handed over to Nigeria by the colonial authorities to mark the beginning of the nation's independence from Britain.

Conclusion

The paper proves that the last attempt made in the last fifteen years before the Nigerian independence and after the Second World War to revamp the marine sector was done haphazardly by its overzealous officials who wanted to see the Nigerian waterways in the light of what was obtainable in the USA without delay. The development led to the dissolution of the Marine Department and the establishment of a succeeding department (IWD) piecemeal between 1956 and 1958. Consequently, it could not start a holistic

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operation on the inland waterways in the period as all its branches like Hydrology and Hydraulic Engineering were not ready until the winter of 1958 to provide effective and seamless marine transport services in the confluence area and beyond. However, with the establishment of all the branches in 1958, marine services became a money-spinning venture for the federal government as it began to generate more revenue than its predecessor in 1959. The services provided by the IWD in the period did not go without hitches; its ferry services in the confluence area were not regularly provided due to funds. Despite the revenue generated from the ferry services, funds were not promptly provided by the government to maintain launches and vessels for the services.

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