



Article

Water Bodies and Colonization of the Niger Delta, 1800 to 1900

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Abstract: It is a truism that water bodies provided the gateway for the colonization of the Niger Delta. The work argues that the explorers, missionaries and traders promoted European political and economic interests in the Niger Delta hence, the Lander Brothers through their exploration opened up the Delta for commerce and used the waterway to explore the interior while providing information of their findings to Britain. The work examines the Trans-Atlantic Trade as one of the channels that led to the loss of sovereignty of the Niger Delta chiefs as most of them were deposed and sent to exile which undermined the development of the region. Agricultural produce and raw materials from the Delta were siphoned to Europe through the waterway for their selfish interests. The paper notes that water bodies paved the way for the planting of British political authority through the British Consuls the Royal Niger Company and provided the ground for British Colonial Government which formally took off in 1900. Primary, secondary sources of information and inter-disciplinary approach were explored for the reconstruction of this work. It recommends that the Niger Delta people should utilize the water bodies in their environment for the overall economic development of the region.

Keywords: Water Bodies, Water Way, Niger Delta, Colonialisation, Britain.

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1. Introduction

Alagoa affirms that the Niger Delta region has been occupied by humans for over ten thousand years ago from sediment brought down by the River Niger and Benue. The predominant vegetation is the mangrove which is thick and impressive that it is being referred to as the mangrove forest belt [1]. The geography of the area indicate that among the Niger Delta peoples are the Ijo, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ogoni, Abua, Odual (saka), Abureni, Ikwerre, Etche, Ekpeye, Ogba among others. Before colonialism, trade in slaves, palm oil and other agricultural produce was conducted along the coast. The move to the hinterland of the Niger Delta was the work of explorers, missionaries and traders. Together their activities helped to lay the foundation on which British rule in Nigeria and especially Niger Delta was established [2].

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British explorers played a key role in the opening up of the Niger Delta interior to British trade and promoted the course of trade by the exploration of River Niger. Results of their findings were regularly sent to Britain. This spurred British companies and individual traders to put to great advantage the benefits of these discoveries they obtained through the water bodies [3].

In 1796, the British Government sponsored a young doctor, Mungo Park to embark on his first journey for the discovery of the direction on the flow of the Niger. Mungo Park was sent out again to obtain more facts about the Niger. Attempts to further provide information led to the expeditions of Clapperton, Denham and Dr. Oudney. However, it was the Lander Brothers who discovered that the Delta where the Europeans had been trading for centuries was indeed the mouth of the Niger.

Immediately, the mystery of the Niger was solved, the humanitarians and missionaries wasted no time in utilizing the waterway, penetrating inland to propagate the doctrine of the Bible and the Plough [3]. The water bodies through the water ways became an avenue for trade in the Niger Delta. Initially, the European traders abided by the rules of engagement and kept to the law and rules of the native chiefs. One of which was that they were duty bound to be under the control or protection of the native chiefs so long as they lived in their domain. But in the 19th century, Britain began to assert their political authority on the people of Niger Delta. It became clearly visibly that water bodies aggravated the loss of independence of the Niger Delta chiefs and kings. Had the Europeans not undertaken the exploration of the River Niger, the chiefs and kings of the Delta would have retained their political and economic powers.

Water bodies contributed to the underdevelopment of the Niger Delta through the Atlantic Slave Trade where very strong, agile and virile young men, women and children were carried away in their stinking ships to realize the dreams of other people in their land. These group of people would have contributed their quota to the growth and development of the Niger Delta communities [4].

2. Materials and Methods

This paper adopted the primary and secondary sources of information to generate data. Oral sources are derived from oral tradition through face to face interviews. Notes that "oral traditions are oral testimonies of the past transmitted by words of mouth from father to son and from generation to generation. Despite the weakness of oral tradition which include exaggeration and embellishment, it remains a major reliable source in historical reconstruction. Written sources used in this work are derived from books, journals, dissertations and thesis of graduate students. Written sources presents a good source for historical reconstruction but have some limitations. Written documents diminish as one penetrates deeper into the past. The psychology of the people written about is not taken into consideration. These limitations makes it necessary for the historian's craft of scrutiny and objectivity to be applied in selecting and analyzing the available information before usage. The study adopted the inter-disciplinary approach which permits the methodologies of other disciplines such as political science and economics in analyzing and synthesizing the data generated in the study.

3. Results and Discussion

The Role Played by Explorers, Missionaries and Traders in the Colonization of the Niger Delta

British commercial connection with the people of the Niger Delta started from the days of the slave trade. In 1796, a British Association sponsored a young doctor to embark on his first journey to discover more about the River Niger. They were given the mandate to discover the course of the waterways of the hinterland especially that of the River Niger.

The European explorers notably Mungo Park, Clapperton and Henrich Barth came mainly from Britain, focused on Nigerian interior along the Niger and Benue Rivers. It was the Lander Brothers who discovered that the Niger flowed into the Atlantic Ocean through many tributaries. This was where the Europeans unknown to them had been trading for over three centuries and later solved the mystery of the great River Niger in 1830. It was in the past predicted by Reichard, a German geographer that the Delta of Rivers in the Bight of Benin was the outlet of the Niger into the sea. But the mystery was finally solved by the lander brothers.

European exploration of the interior of Niger Delta produced some political, social and economic consequences. Politically, Niger Delta Chiefs and Kings were suspicious of the intentions of the explorers into the hinterland and tried to curtail their influence on their areas of operation. Niger Delta chiefs knew that the explorers and their home government were motivated by practical political reasons and not simply by the desire to add to the storehouse of scientific knowledge about the region [5]. Whatever the reservations, it is now in our domain that the water bodies in the Niger Delta created the enabling environment for the explorers to have successfully embarked on the various sponsored exploration to determine the mouth or where the Niger flows to. This attempt they claimed was mainly the desire for scientific knowledge and economic consideration however became glaring that it later robbed the people of Niger Delta of their political powers and freedom. The European soon began to interfere and impose their political authority on the chiefs and people of Niger Delta by forcing our chiefs and kings to sign treaties of "protection" [6].

Immediately the mystery of the Niger was solved, the missionaries and the humanitarians utilized the waterways to penetrate inland in order to propagate the doctrine of the Bible and the Plough. With the view to spreading commerce and Christianity, the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and for the civilization of Africa sponsored the 1841 expedition up the River Niger. This was to promote trade, conclude treaties with local chiefs and to establish a model agricultural farm in the hinterland. It was the tendency on the part of Christian converts in the Niger Delta who already had a glimpse of the intention of the European that made the coastal chiefs, though appreciative of the Western Education to oppose the spread of Christianity. As Chief Bobmanuel told Rev. J.D. Garrick cited in [7] "teach my people to read and write English book, but leave God palaver alone because this God palaver is a trouble". The people of Niger Delta hoped that the missionaries would assist them in achieving economic prosperity and with it, material wealth which will help them improve their competence in accounting and commerce, which would be beneficial in mastering European business techniques. But their aspirations were all shattered as the missionaries played the script of the British government.

Despite all these, the missionaries contributed a lot in the British occupation of the country and have been described by [8] as "the advance troops of the colonial army sent to soften our hearts and dislocate our socio-political system so that when their brothers (the colonial army and administrators) would come to take over our land, there would be no effective resistance". The explorers were followed by traders. As the traders penetrated the hinterland, so did conflicts arise between them and the local peoples, first with the coastal peoples and later with those in the hinterland. The need to protect the European traders led to the appointment of consuls. This was the era of gun boat diplomacy used to put down indigenous opposition to European political interference. Thus, without the organized assistance of the British Navy, they could not have successfully imposed their will on Niger Delta people [9].

The Establishment of British Administration in the Niger Delta

The exploration of the Niger Delta deprived the chiefs and kings, their political and economic powers within their domains as the head of political administration. Being deprived of their powers, Britain appointed consuls and conferred on them political and economic powers to head the administration which our chiefs and kings had held hitherto. Macgregor Laird, a Liverpool merchant showed interest in trade and attempted to establish

trading centres along the Niger but this early attempt was not very successful. But with time some European firms, British, French and German started to trade mainly on legitimate articles. Initially the European traders abided and respected the rulers as long as they remained in the domains of the chiefs and kings, they were assured of their protection [10]. Britain achieved the political dominance through;

Appointment of the British Consul

In the 19th century however, the Britain undermined the powers of our native chiefs and introduced her political authority in Nigeria through the appointment of Consul John Beecroft in 1849. He was incharge of the Bight of Benin (Bonny) and Biafra and was stationed in Fernando Po. The consular period marked the beginning of British interference in the politics of the Delta States as his functions included the protection of British trade including the settlement of disputes between the British traders and the African chiefs as well as the suppression of the slave trade. Right from this time the British traders were no longer under the protection of the African chiefs and could challenge them through blackmail, perhaps of engaging in slave trade or obstructing the introduction of Christianity, education and civilization [11]. The first Court of Equity was established in Bonny in 1854 and by 1872 in Benin, Brass, Opobo, Calabar and Degema. With these courts and the Naval gun boats, the European always exiled or deposed any chief hated or proved stubborn to the British merchants [12].

Soon after he was appointed consul, Beecroft became involved in Bonny politics. English traders in Bonny complained to him about the ill-treatment meted out to them by William Dappa Pepple due to constant quarrels with the supercargoes which made trade in Bonny to suffer. The supercargoes reported him to Consul Beecroft and in January, 1854, he was deposed by Consul Beecroft, deported to Fernando Po, then to Ascension Island and lastly to England.

The next king in line was Jaja of Opobo. He was not ready to compromise his sovereignty with any power no matter how mighty. He was suspicious of the intentions of the British and refused to sign any treaty until the full meaning of the word "protectorate" was explained to him. He opposed European merchants who wanted to trade directly with the hinterland producers. He was arrested by Consul Harry Johnson and was sent to Accra, finally deported to the West Indies. Nana of Itsekiri also suffered the same fate. He controlled trade on the Benin River and because of this he was accused with unnecessary charges in 1894 by Acting Consul Ralph More, who attacked and captured Ebrohim, his capital. He was deported to the Gold Coast (Ghana) and was later pardoned (Eluwa et al., 1988:179-180).

Oba Overanwen of Benin also tasted the evil of the consular system of administration. In 1892, he signed a treaty with consul Galway who promised to stop the slave trade and human sacrifice. Though, he did not keep to the terms of agreement, but he warned the European visitors to postpone their visit to a more convenient time since he was busy with an important festival at the period. The refusal of the European to adhere to the Oba led to the death of many Europeans. On February 18, 1897, Benin was captured by Rear Admiral Rawson and was deported to Calabar where he died in 1914. The activities of the consuls as an instrument for the effective planting of British influence in the Niger Delta was made possible through the exploration of the waterways in River Niger which opened up the way for British penetration into the Niger Delta. Without the water bodies, there wouldn't have been exploration of River Niger. The implication would have been the retention of the political powers of Niger Delta chiefs to govern their communities or their areas of jurisdiction without foreign interference.

The Royal Niger Company and the Akassa War of 1895

Due to the discovery of the mouths of the River Niger, English merchants started to trade on the river especially with palm oil, later known as "Oil Rivers". The people of Niger Delta and those within the Oil Rivers resisted the European merchants from trading directly with the hinterland producers because they earned their living by acting as middlemen between the hinterland producers and the European merchants at the coast. This generated disagreements and hostilities especially when the Royal Niger Company

proceeded to monopolies trade by trading directly with the hinterland producers while undermining the middleman position enjoyed by the natives. The Delta State of Brass was treated like a foreigner by the company who excluded them from its markets. In 1889, the Brass people made a formal complaint to Major Macdonald, the special commissioner sent by Britain to investigate certain allegations against the company [13].

The company could not settle the complaints which the Brass people brought before it. What the Royal Niger Company did was to enforce series of stringent custom regulations, which dealt with the Brass people negatively and excluded them from their former markets. The company imposed on Brass people, exorbitant trade license and even more for those who wished to trade on alcoholic drinks. This was too high for the Brassmen who had even considered themselves as living within the company's territory. Despite excluding Brass from her former markets there was what [14] cited in [15] called "provocative acts" of which the company ship fired live bullets on canoes carrying foodstuffs. Also, certain company servants treated the Nembe Brass brutally, telling them that they would be forced to eat dust. Additionally, a captain ordered that a woman should be stripped naked and covered with mud, which aggravated the already tensed environment.

As the mutual resentment increased, there were threats that Akassa, the headquarters of the company would be attacked. However, on January 29, 1895 a fleet of canoes containing over 1,500 men left the various Nembe Brass towns and attacked the company at Akassa. The government of the Niger Coast protectorate decided to avenge the attack and in the ensuing battle, the Brass people put up fierce resistance but finally succumbed to superior firepower of the protectorate forces that captured and burnt Nembe after severe fighting in February 22, 1895 destroying also Twon and fish town (Okpoma), who joined in the attack on Akassa. British government revoked the company's charter in December 31, 1899 and in January 1, 1900, the British government took over formal administration of the company's territories. This loss of sovereignty was made possible through the exploration of the water bodies and consequently the waterways which opened up the Niger Delta for commercial cum political activities.

Trans-Atlantic Trade and Water Bodies in the Niger Delta

By the beginning of the 19th century, the most important states were the Itsekiri kingdom, the kingdom of Nembe Brass, Elem Kalabari, Grand Bonny and the Kingdom of Calabar at the mouth of the Cross and Calabar Rivers. The 19th century brought a lot of changes in the Niger Delta which include, the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade with its attendant effects, the introduction of the legitimate trade on forest produce which led to the gradual encroachment of British consular officials on the sovereignty of the Delta States. The renewed European interest in Nigeria led to the incorporation of the Delta States into the British Empire.

In the process to stop the slave trade and ensure conversion to legitimate trade, Britain encroached on the sovereignty of the Niger Delta States by blockading the Delta ports. Britain violated the sovereignty and freedom of these states to trade with any country of their choice. Thus, in 1836, the Anti-Slave Trade Squadron seized a Spanish ship trading in slaves in Bonny. Alali who was then the Bonny regent retaliated by arresting and imprisoning some British merchants in Bonny. The British Navy threatened to destroy Bonny unless the merchants were released. The British government forced Alali to accept his own deportation on the ground that Prince Dappa Pepple co-operated with the British and agreed never to arrest British subjects again.

Orugbani posits that Prince Dappa Pepple's understanding with the British soon broke up since he was not paid the four years subsidy promised to him to switch over from slaves to oil. In 1854, Prince Dappa seized a British merchant ship so that he could be paid the money he was promised after signing the anti-slave treaty four times but refused to ratify it. Alali later cooperated with the British and with the assistance of gun boat from the British navy and the support of the British merchants in Bonny, Alali and his supporters now signed a proclamation for Dappa's deportation and he was deported.

Alali and the new men were not able to hold Bonny together as chaos and confusion became the order of the day. This persisted until the British traders called for the reinstatement of the deposed king who was allowed to return in 1861 while carrying out their instructions such that he would not engage in trade but to rely on comeys which is the customs duties paid by foreign traders. The British wanted a king who would maintain law and order according to their instruction while they controlled trade which was the source of wealth.

Consequently, legitimate trade was introduced after the abolition of the slave trade. It was conducted on the basis of credit where European merchants advanced goods on credit to the Delta rulers who in turn advanced a portion to their trading agents in the hinterland known as the trust system. The trust system was a source of conflict between the European and the Niger Delta traders. The European traders never wanted the Delta traders to fully repay their trust so that they would not trade with other Europeans. When a Delta trader broke his trust, the affected European trader would seize his goods. Conversely, a Delta trader could declare a trade boycott if the European trader thought contrary of not fulfilling his obligation. It was such crises that led to the introduction of Court of Equity which was later given legal backing and incorporated into the order in council of 1872. By 1870, such courts had been established at Calabar, Bonny, Brass, Akassa, New Calabar, Opobo and the Benin River. It is pertinent to state that these courts were one of the instruments used in planting British authority in Nigeria vis-a-vis the Niger Delta. The activities of the Europeans in the Niger Delta was possible only through the water bodies.

4. Conclusion

The British explorers played vital role in opening up the Niger Delta interior for commerce through the exploration of the River Niger. Immediately the mystery of the River Niger was solved, the humanitarians and missionaries utilized the waterway penetrating inland to propagate the doctrine of the Bible and plough. The missionaries contributed a lot in the British occupation of Nigeria and have been described as advance troops of the colonial army sent to soften our heart and dislocate our socio-political systems. The explorers were followed by the traders and as they ventured into the hinterland, so did conflict arise between the European traders and the Niger Delta people leading to the appointment of consuls and the introduction of court of equity which undermined the powers and jurisdiction of the Niger Delta chiefs. The 19th century brought a lot of changes such as; the abolition of the slave trade and the introduction of the legitimate commerce on forest produce. The issues that arose from this trade led to the gradual encroachment of British consular officials on the sovereignty of the Niger Delta States. Also, in an attempt to stop the Delta States from engaging in slave trade, Britain violated the independence of the Delta States to trade with any country of their choice. These brought allegations and counter allegations over the conduct of trade on the Niger Delta Chiefs such as Alali and Prince Dappa Pepple.

The work recommends that;

The water bodies in the Niger Delta should be utilized to improve the development of Niger Delta economically, socially and otherwise.

Niger Delta Chiefs should come together in unity to plan on how they can develop the resources found in the water bodies which can provide employment opportunities for our teeming youths. This will pull them out of crisis because an idle mind is the devil's workshop and if they are employed, they will not have the time to ferment trouble.

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