

**WATER BODIES AS HIGHWAYS OF COMMERCE,
CHRISTIANITY AND COLONIZATION IN THE BENUE
VALLEY 1841 – 1945**

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Abstracts

This paper explores the role of River Benue and her tributaries in the European penetration and the growth of commerce, Christianity and Europeanization among the peoples of the Benue Valley. When the Slave trade was abolished beginning from Britain in 1807 the need to stimulate legitimate trade, promote Christianity and civilization in West Africa became imperative. The British government, the Christian Church and humanitarians collaborated in exploratory missions to open up routes to the interior. The paper advances the extant literature by examining the place of the natural environment in facilitating European activities, the Planting of the Church and the associated colonization and the transformation of the economy from pre-capitalist to a semi capitalist one. It shows that European traders, Missionaries and colonizers worked together to achieve exploitation, conversion and subjugation of the lands and peoples of the Benue Valley. Using Missions records, missionary diaries and memoirs, trading company records, official colonial communications, along with works of Western Anthropologists, sociologists, as well as African historians, the study unveils a history of water ways as access points for entry into the interior of the Benue Valley area and establishing of a foothold of European activities. It is concluded that River Benue and her tributaries had a central place in setting the stage

for the early transformation of the region.

Keywords: Benue-Valley, Christianity, Colonization, Civilization, Commerce, Highway, Waterbodies.

Introduction

Towards the last decade of the eighteenth-century European efforts to find a sea route into the interior of Africa had begun. “The African Association formed by a small group of prominent public figures in 1788 to promote the discovery of the interior parts of Africa”¹ began to send explorers. “Their central purpose was to advance geographical knowledge of the continent, although several members were also active in the campaign to end slavery and others had their eye on the business potential. As one of its priorities, the African Association had developed a particular interest in wanting to learn more about the course of the Niger River.”² This marked the beginning of the history of the exploration of the Niger and Benue Rivers as a route to enter the interior of Africa, particularly West Africa which was known as the slave coast.³

Between 1790 when Major Daniel Houghton commenced his expedition into West Africa with a commission to find an inland route from the Gambia River to the Niger River and 1807 when Parliament in London passed a bill making the participation of British merchants in the slave trade illegal,⁴ there were about seven voyages into West Africa with different levels of success. Houghton had begun from the Gambia River and died at the edge of the Sahara Desert in 1793. Mungo Park undertook two voyages between 1795 and 1806 when he died at Bussa.⁵ The British government sponsored expedition led by Major Dixon Denham and Hugh Clapperton set out from Tripoli crossing the Sahara into the Borno Empire in 1821. They explored the Lake Chad and went onto Sokoto. By 1825 when they returned to England another British army officer named Gordon Laing set out from Tripoli reaching Timbuktu in 1826. Hugh Clapperton led another British expedition setting out from Badagry determined;

to find a route inland from the West Coast rather than cross the desert from north Africa. Instructed by the government to, “following his previous successful encounter, to establish firm relations with Muhammad Bello and seek his help in suppressing the slave trade and supporting ‘legitimate’ commerce instead”.⁶

They crossed the Niger River at Bussa reaching Sokoto in 1826. A week later a young French man Rene’ Cailliè set out from the Núnéz River and reached Timbuktu in April 1828.⁷ Solving the question of the beginning and end of the Niger River was however, only answered for European explorers in 1830. This followed the expedition of the Lander brothers, Richard and John. Travelling from Badagry they encountered the Niger at Bussa and followed its course south ward to the Niger Delta. “The discovery that the Niger River entered the Atlantic in the Bight of Benin

was hailed as opening a great highway into the heart of Africa.”⁸

Motives for Exploration of Niger and Benue Rivers

The period of the late 18th century saw the European agrarian economy changing to an urban one bringing about the emergence of early industrial capitalism. This transformation

had several consequences following from it. The issues that arose from the advent of industrial capitalism were the abolition of slave trade, growing demand for raw materials from overseas for factories and construction industries, as well as markets for the products of European factories. As Ogbogbo and Okpoh, Jr stated; “The industrial Revolution in Europe led to the abolition of the slave trade and created unprecedented demand for palm oil in the 19th century. Palm oil was needed for the manufacture of soap, candle, margarine and tin plate. It was also needed for lubricating the machines in the burgeoning factories, resulting from the industrial revolution.”⁹ Different industries such as the food processing industries, the textile industries, the transportation and communication industries were growing and expanding rapidly. These required raw materials which were needed either for production or machine maintenance and servicing.

The need to source for raw materials became increased as the agricultural sector in Europe and America could not supply enough or did not have the climate and soil required for their production. To source for raw materials outside of Europe, explorative voyages were commissioned into Africa beyond the coastal areas that had served as ports for slave trade. As Meredith Martin opined:

During these years, ... the campaign in Britain to abolish slave trade gathered momentum. led by William Wilberforce, a coalition of abolitionists stressed both ethical and pragmatic arguments to make their point. Christian activists, propelled by evangelical (sic) fervor, emphasized the evils of the trade. Industrialists, at the forefront of Britain’s industrial revolution, were keen to find new markets for manufactured goods, promote ‘legitimate’ trade and gain access to tropical products.¹⁰

The needs of industrializing Europe were growing, as was their determination to find sources to meet those needs. Though West Africa was said to be the white man’s grave – the British would not give up on their efforts to exploit the possibilities of the African interior. More so

that the British government had made it illegal to deal in slaves, merchants had to venture into alternative trade.¹¹ Siollun said that;

As Europe industrialized and became less dependent on human and slave labour, and more reliant on machinery for production, West

Africa offered a natural supply of goods that Britain and other European countries needed ... the raw commodities that Britain required to power its industrial revolution were in the River Niger area... The abundant palm oil extracted from palm trees which grew wild in the forests along the River Niger could supply Britain's demand for both machine lubricant and soap. The invention of the pneumatic rubber tyre in the 19th century (1888) ¹² also created a demand for rubber. Fortunately for Britain, rubber, gum and shea trees grew in the Lower River Niger area. ¹³

Many of the trading companies from Britain switched from buying slaves to buying other commodities which included but not limited to palm oil, rubber, shea butter, gum, among other commodities.

As demands increased the need to promote and develop the need for production of these commodities beyond the traditional methods became apparent. Also, it became important to introduce the production of new commodities which hitherto were none existent in the West African region or were very scanty. Crops such as groundnuts, cocoa, sesame, soya beans, hard wood, cotton, as well as hides and skins were introduced into the West African agricultural export commodities. Up to the close of the 18th century British traders stopped at the coast and collected their principal commodity which was slaves, loaded their ships and departed. But with the turn of the century and the abolition of the slave trade a new crop of traders arose on the scene who sought to penetrate the interior of West Africa particularly and Africa generally to explore the possibility of new trade opportunities. "As a first step, they supported exploration of the interior especially the Niger Waterway" ¹⁴ following the success of Richard and John Lander in getting to the mouth of the Niger River

the new crop of traders and humanitarians declared "a new hope has been opened for Africa a new opportunity of bringing into cultivation the vast lands of Africa to the benefit of the rest of the world and urged England to take up the opportunity. ¹⁵ These thoughts were held by persons with influence among both the evangelical Christians and abolitionists such as Thomas F. Buxton. In his work the 'African Slave Trade and its Remedy', Buxton argued that the most effective way to stop the slave trade was from its source, by calling forth the resources of the soil and making agriculture to flourish. He encouraged the British government to both undertake exploration of large waterways and naval blockade on the coast. Buxton's emphasis was that exploration and the gunboat diplomacy were to aim at stimulating agriculture. ¹⁶

The Niger Expedition which was a response of the British government to the ideas of Buxton and the evangelical humanist abolitionists, had scientists who were to make observations about climate, plants, animals, nature of soil, social-political institutions of the people, trade possibilities, currency, traffic on the river; and the CMS missionaries to report on the feasibility of missionary work. The Agricultural Society also had members on the expedition who were to start a model

farm at the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers to teach the people how to farm certain crops for export. ¹⁷ Buxton saw the Niger as the highway for the penetration into the heart of the Coast of West Africa for the purpose of commerce and Christianity through the help of the colonial structures of the British government to bring civilization to the people by abolishing slave trade and opening the land for legitimate trade. Buxton speaking through the Society for the Extinction of Slavery advocated assistance to the natives through educating them on better methods of crop production, that will ensure higher yields and steady markets, as well as improved agricultural implements and seeds. It was an assumption and expectation that Christianity, commerce and civilization would work together opening up Africa. In practice also “traders and missionaries were interdependent. The Christian Missions made a considerable impact on the trading situation. In turn, the expansion of European trade and political influence greatly facilitated the work of missionaries. ¹⁸ **Establishment of Christianity in the Benue Valley**

Following the expeditions on the Niger and Benue River especially from 1841, efforts to establish the Christian Church began with the presence of Samuel Ajayi Crowther and other missionaries on the team. Following the 1854 expedition under the leadership of William Belfour Baikie, Samuel Ajayi Crowther commented that the time had fully come for the expectation of planting Christianity on the banks of the Niger and the Benue had come. And God provided the liberated Africans from Sierra Leone who were natives of the riverine areas to carry on the work. Ajayi Crowther himself commenced the work when they were shipwrecked on the Jebba rocks about 27kms after Lokoja at the confluence of the Niger and

the Benue where they spent over one year waiting for a ship to rescue them. He started studying Nupe language and visiting the several villages along the river with the Christian message. ¹⁹

The Church finally began in the Benue Valley with the voyage of Karl Kumm of the Sudan United Mission (SUM) to Wase in 1904, Ibi and Wukari 1906. According to Walter Fitzgerald from the Forcados during high river small sea going boats can ascend the Niger beyond Lokoja and the lower Benue... some 200 miles (321.8km) as far as Ibi” ²⁰

Edgar H. Smith’s testimony is that the mission established its headquarters at Ibi at that time because it was accessible by river and it was easy to reach the other stations such as Wukari, Donga, Gindiri, Langtang and back to Lokoja from there. ²¹

The Catholic Mission under the leadership of Father Carlos Zappa of the SMA Missionaries sent out some of its priests from Asaba to the Middle Belt region in Shendam which was about 483km from the Asaba base in south east. The distance

from the River Benue at Ibi to Shendam is about 81kilometers. The Church was established in Shendam in 1907 and expanded to what is today the Catholic Arch Dioceses of Jos, Abuja and Kaduna.²²

Other stations started by the Roman Catholic Missionaries along the river were in Makurdi beginning from 1922.²³ From here Churches were opened across north and south banks of the river resulting into the modern-day dioceses of Makurdi, Gboko and Katsina Ala. The Anglicans also came into Makurdi in 1930 and spread on the south bank of the Benue River. The SUM party led by Karl Kumm had made contact with the people at Abinsi 1904, though there was an earlier contact with Europeans in 1879. They opened a station on the upper Benue among the Mbula in 1908 on the Gongola which is a tributary of the Benue in what is today, Adamawa State.

By 1911 the SUM opened a work among the Tiv at Sai village along the Wukari Takum road.²⁴ Edgar Smith stressed the fact that the towns of Ibi and Donga received their Mission stations early because they were on navigable rivers. The Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) under the leadership of Rev. George Sanderson and Rev. Charles Dudley opened a Station at Karu among the Gbagyi in 1910. While the SUM in what became Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ open the Keana Station in 1916 with Vincent Henry, Hosking, Mr. and Mrs. Brailsford, A.S. Judd, Rev. Ivan D. Hepburn and Miss Ayliff Fred as pioneers among the Alago. Another Station was opened in 1920 at Randa and Assakio in 1945. The work of SUM – ERCC was also established at Wamba in 1936-1939 and Kanga in 1944. The Bassa-Komo who spread from the banks of the Niger extending to the banks of the Benue at Toto received a Mission Station when Mr. George Curry, an Irish Missionary of the Qua Iboe Mission moved from Dinjere in Koton Karfe to Kanyehu in 1936 where he built a Mission Station. Many other locations such as Omaisha, Dampar, Lantang, Lezin-Lafia (Wana) were opened up to 1926, and Alushin latter.²⁵

Before the advent of the railway in the Benue valley travel by land was quite challenging and a major obstacle to spread of Missions into the interior of Africa. Rondo Cameron saw the presence of waterways as a tremendous advantage to Britain over continental Europe and North America. He pointed out that “Before the railway inadequate transportation facilities constituted a major obstacle to industrialization in both continental Europe and the United States. Lacking Britain’s endowment of natural waterways... [they were] handicapped by greater distances to cover.”²⁶ During the period under consideration land routes were more difficult to ply covering long distances, particularly within the Benue Valley as beasts of burden were hardly available, because of the havoc of Tsetse fly that killed them shortly after their arrival. Waterways were the easier and cheaper mode of transportation. Most of the Mission Stations were first opened along the course of the River Benue and her tributaries such as Katsina Ala, Taraba, Gongola, Shemankar, Suntai, Bantaji, Wase, Bauchi among others. From these River banks, locations proximate were also reached with Mission Stations.

The Establishment of European Commerce in the Benue Valley

As indicated in this paper before, the motives for the exploration of the inland waterways of Africa had the opening up of the area for new commercial opportunities in addition to the evangelical aim of planting Christianity and the humanitarian's purpose of abolishing the slave trade. It was the opinion of leading humanist evangelicals like Buxton that "legitimate" trade must replace the slave trade for abolition to succeed. Siollun pointed out that;

Excitement about the economic opportunities that lay in the River Niger (and Benue) area led many European companies, British, French and German, to set up trading stations on the banks of the river [and its tributaries], from where they traded with local chiefs and shipped produce to Europe.²⁷

Many of the European trading companies had traded on the coasts buying slaves before the abolition. There were however new companies that came in to trade in the commodity trade that was expanding with the increasing demand. The trade relationship however did not change. There were no standard currency and the mode of exchange many times was by barter for European wares or the use of cowries as currency.

At the beginning, produce such as palm oil were in the domain of women industry without any particular effort to expand production. These plants most times grew naturally and were hardly cared for except where the current farm plot incorporated them. With the increasing demand however, there began deliberate efforts to expand production. New export crops like palm kernel, rubber, cocoa, cotton, ground nuts, shea butter as well as such commodities as hides and skins came into play. A crop like groundnuts was introduced into Nigeria by the Portuguese explorers in the 16th century and became one of the major commodities of trade at the close of the 19th century. The Nigerian economy before colonialism was dynamic, responding to the changing demands of the market; whether local or external such as the trans-Saharan, transatlantic or the so - called "legitimate" trade. Africa was set to meet the demands of industrializing Europe for primary goods needed in factories and for construction as well as markets for goods of European industries by the middle of the 19th century. "The period between 1800 to 1880-90 was characterized by attempts – at least in certain regions within the influence of Atlantic mercantilism to establish a new form of dependence with that part of the world where capitalism was firmly entrenched by industrialization."²⁸

With the active support of the British government traders of that country penetrated the hinterland and set up factories and trading posts along the river and her tributaries. "The Niger River proved to be a profitable highway. A host of British

companies competed vigorously to hold a position there. In some small trading stations as many as five firms were engaged in cut-throat rivalry.”²⁹ The competition was profitable to the native traders as higher prices were more likely to be offered. This was however a great means of reduction of profits for the European firms.

Before 1870 the competition was between British companies only. However, at the close of that decade French and German companies entered the equation adding to the stiffness of the competition. To reduce the competition and shore up profits through monopoly, George Tubbman Goldie bought out most of the British companies, merging them with his United African Company to form the National African Company and expanded his trade as far out as the Benue up Sokoko.³⁰ The treaties that Goldie entered in with the native chiefs gave him exclusive trading rights in their territories, the right of first refusal of their commodities, and could not be broken or abandoned by the natives. In payment of what may look like tributes to the chiefs they received guns, pieces of European cloth, hats and alcohol, with very important native rulers receiving about 3000 cowries worth approximately £1,500 a year from the UAC. By 1884 Goldie had bought out all the French and German trading firms and formed the National African Company (NAC) which received a charter in 1886 and changed its name to the Royal Niger Company (RNC). Its trading concerns covered most of what is today called the Middle Belt and part of today's southern Nigeria on the southern confluence of the Niger-Benue confluence.³¹

Along the Benue at Makurdi Katsina-Ala, Abinsi, Ibi and Jimeta, European firms had trading stations as well as along its tributaries. There were companies like John Holt who had stations along the banks of the Benue and her tributaries among others.³²

Colonial Conquest in the Benue Valley

Though Britain had resisted the expansion of its colonial holdings in West Africa, by 1851 Lagos was annexed and declared a British colony by 1861. “Britain wanted to do business and make money, but sending its citizens and armies abroad to conquer and colonize foreign territories involved trouble and expense it could do without, unless there was a commercial incentive. It had to find a method of protecting its economic interest that was cheaper and less laborious than colonialism.”³³

At the end of the day her Majesty's government issued a royal Charter to the Royal Niger Company. The RNC was going to bear the cost of administering the area of its Charter without cost to the British Crown. Before the issue of the Charter to RNC in 1886 “the British Foreign Office declared a Protectorate over the area of the Niger-delta coastline calling it the Oil Rivers Protectorate, making it the third British interest in the region that became Nigeria.”³⁴

There was also law enforcement apparatus owned by the British – the naval

squadron, the RNC Constabulary and the West African Frontier Force (WAFF), created in 1897.³⁵ These forces executed the mandate of Europeans in enforcing the abolition of the slave trade and signing of treaties with African chiefs, the protection of European traders and missionaries, and the enforcement of treaties of monopoly. The Africans were suppressed in their own land by forces made up of their own people who had become stooges and instruments of the foreign powers seeking to subjugate, dominate, rule and exploit them.

The Charter of the RNC was revoked in 1889 and the British government assumed full control of governmental affairs of the protectorates.³⁶ By 1900, the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria was declared with Sir Frederick Lugard as the High Commissioner headquartered at Lokoja. By 1914 the Lagos Colony and Southern Protectorate, the Oil Rivers Protectorate and the Northern Protectorate were all amalgamated into one territory called Nigeria. The country had two main regions which were the Southern and Northern Protectorates.

The declaration of the Protectorates was based on treaties that had been purportedly signed with native chiefs beginning from the period of the abolition of slave trade. Though at the time of the amalgamation most of the land was unoccupied by British. They went through the length and breadth of the land and pacified the people through violence and deception of divide and rule.

Within the Benue Valley, locations by the banks of the river were first subjugated and gradually penetration into the hinterland was accomplished. The British West African Frontier Force began in 1863 with Glover's Hausas Security Force in Lagos, which undertook expeditions even to Kumasi. By 1886 they were renamed the Hausa Constabulary. This became the Lagos Constabulary which served as the police force for Lagos. Part of that force combined with the RNC Constabulary and what was created in 1891 by Sir Ralph Moor in the Niger Delta called the Oil Rivers Irregulars and later became the Niger Coast Constabulary formed the West African Frontier Force in 1900.

The British Colonial Office made concerted efforts to establish a strong hold over the land and peoples of the Benue Valley. Like pointed out by S. G. Nyityo; "it took the British almost seven years to establish a district headquarters at Katsina-Ala the eastern part of Tivland on the 1st of April 1907."³⁷ This was the similar process for other places within the area. Those who resisted were brutally subdued.

The effort to centralized and create an indirect system of government saw hitherto independent peoples placed under the rulership of other peoples who had some form of centralization.³⁸ Several of the Middle Belt peoples who had resisted the invasion of the Islamic north were placed under emirates.³⁹ New emirates were also created to whittle down the power of those emirs that were perceived as too strong. By 1945 British administration, Christian Missions and European commerce had overwhelmingly subdued the Benue Valley people establishing, Christianity, commerce and colonialism.

Conclusion

The paper looked at the role that the River Niger and Benue and their tributaries played in the establishing of Christianity, commerce and colonialism in the Benue Valley region between 1841 – 1945. The water bodies served as highways for missionaries, traders and colonisers. The explorers opened the gate for the trio to follow. Explorations from the outset had the motive of helping stop the African slave trade, open up the interior for expansion of trade so called 'legitimate', the establishing of Christianity and the civilization of the peoples of the African continent.

The outcome of the entry of Britain into the West African interior was the disarticulation of the economies of the area by linking them with the capitalist European economy. The economy was transformed from rural agrarian to a semi capitalist one without industrialization.

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