

From The Gongola to The Forcados: Colonial Water Transport and Economic Development In Nigeria

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Abstract

In the course of European imperial expansion, movement was done through rivers to penetrate the interior of Africa and establish colonial rule, thereby promoting commercial and industrial development at the expense of Africans. Following the British imperial penetration of the Nigerian area and the military conquest of its peoples, they utilised navigable rivers from the South to the North in the transportation of goods and services to a number of port-towns for redistribution and consumption in the hinterland. European manufactured goods were brought to the Nigerian coastal areas, including Burutu, one of the major ports through which goods were imported and evacuated by cargo ships. Through Burutu port on the Forcados River in the Niger Delta, large quantities of imported goods were transported by ships to Lokoja on the Niger River, Makurdi and Numan on the Benue River, to Nafada and Dadin Kowa ports on the Gongola River. At the same time, large tons of agricultural and forest products were exported through the same waterway. This paper, which is based largely on the use of archival records, examines the process of the utilisation of the Gongola River flood waters in Northern Nigeria in the colonial water transportation of goods and services to the Forcados River in Southern Nigeria, thereby facilitating the process of the economic development of the country.

Introduction

Waterways have played a pivotal role in the European imperial penetration of the interior of Africa and the establishment of colonial rule over its diverse people through the gunboat diplomacy and the signing of trade treaties with rulers of African states.¹ African rivers from the pre-colonial period provided water and fish for human consumption; pasture for livestock development as well as supported crop production for human and animal uses. It has also

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served as a means of livelihood to different groups living on their banks, as well as utilised in the colonial exploitation and transportation of goods and services from the coastal areas to the hinterland. The people living along the banks of the rivers tried to resist the imposition of the European capitalist imperial and colonial control over their rivers and exploit and export their resources for the industrial development of Europe. The Europeans used diplomatic and military tactics, the gunboat and signing of trade treaties with the indigenous rulers to penetrate and subdue the various groups in Africa and arbitrarily created a number of states which they subjected to their colonial rule in the best interest of Metropolitan Europe.²

In the Nigerian area, European explorers, traders, and missionaries started operation in coastal areas and gradually penetrated the northern part of the area. The European chartered companies, particularly the Royal Niger Company (otherwise known as United Africa Company) and its agents, set the pace for the British colonial conquest and administration of the Nigerian area.³ The British experience of colonial rule in other parts of the world coupled with its deep knowledge of river and water system informed by its geographical location in continental Europe, helped it greatly in the effective utilisation of the Rivers Niger and Benue and their tributaries in advancing their imperial interest over the country as a part of the British Empire. Based on their mastery of the maritime industry, they maximally utilised the rivers as waterways promoting the development of the colonial state. They established at strategic locations, military and trading stations in Lagos, Calabar, Burutu, Lokoja, etc. to ensure steady supply of goods and services needed by the colonial state and used different types of water vessels on the rivers in and across the country to transport goods and services to desired destinations, thereby saving a great cost of moving the goods by land carriage when there were no good transportation lines.

Building materials, equipment and consumer goods were imported from the Nigerian coastal areas via Burutu and Lagos ports to Lokoja by cargo ships and then transported with barges and steam-boats to different stations or deports such as Shonga, Ilorin, Jebba, Baro, Yauri and Sokoto on the Niger; Agwatcha, Bagana, Ankpa, Amara, Loko, Makurdi, Katsina-Ala, Ibbi, Lau, Numan, and Yola on the Benue. Other stations were established at Nafada and Dadin Kowa on the Gongola, a tributary of the Benue. Raw materials in the form of agricultural and forest produce collected from hinterland communities were evacuated through the colonial ports strategically located along major rivers that connected the interior with the coastal parts of Nigeria.⁴ Barges and steamers were used to transport the commodities from relatively shallow rivers in the *Far North* to the Confluence area of Lokoja where the raw materials were loaded in cargo ships and transported to the coastal ports of Burutu, Port Harcourt, and Lagos for further shipment overseas.⁵

This paper examines how different materials and goods were transported from the Gongola in the northern part of Nigeria through the Benue and Niger to the Focardos River in the coastal part of Nigeria during the colonial period. On the Gongola, Nafada and later Dadin Kowa were the main ports for the evacuation of goods and services, while on the Focardos,

Burutu was the principal port. The variety of materials and consumer goods imported via Burutu upstream to the Gongola region as well as the large quantities of agricultural and forest products transported through the Gongola and the Benue downstream to the coastal region via Burutu for shipment overseas will be examined.

Geographical Description of the Area of Study

It is essential to describe the geographical settings of the Gongola and the Forcados and their relationship in the development of British colonial political economy in Nigeria. It is important to start from the northern part of the country where the Gongola is located and then move downstream to the south where Forcados is located in the coastal area. Gongola is a name of a river that originates from the Plateau highlands and passes through Bauchi, Gombe, Borno and Adamawa States and empties into the Benue River. From its source at the Shere hill of the Plateau to its mouth at Numan on the Benue, the Gongola is about 330 miles (531 kilometers) long.⁶ The Gongola became a popular navigable river during the colonial period when it was effectively utilised to transport building materials and stores to southern Borno and Bauchi Provinces and evacuate raw materials at a time when land transport was difficult and costly.

Forcados is a name of a small town as well as a river that flows through Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. The Forcados River has been an important navigable river in the Niger Delta Region, with Burutu as the major port through which, from the colonial period, several manufactured goods had been imported and agricultural and forest products had been exported overseas.⁷ The Forcados, approximately 198 kilometers (123 miles) in length, flows past Burutu and empties into the sea at the Bight of Benin. Burutu is thus built on two sides of the Forcados, a channel of the Niger River. It is about 32 kilometers (20 miles) upstream from the Bight of Benin, thereby serving as a major exit point to the sea. The Forcados River was therefore, maximally utilised during the colonial period for the importation of goods for the hinterland and evacuation of raw materials across the sea to United Kingdom and other parts of the world controlled by the capitalist colonial powers (countries).⁸

Utilization of the Gongola and Forcados as Colonial Waterways

The British colonial commercial interest was well established in the Nigeria Delta region where European chartered companies operated before the turn of the twentieth century.⁹ The Royal Niger Company (later, renamed as United Africa Company), for example, had established in 1900 its station at Burutu on the Forcados. The company had by this time systematically and through political maneuvers, forced out French and German companies from Nigerian waters and area, assuming almost a monopolistic position. It used Burutu as its major depot at the time. Thus, Burutu served as port terminal for the company discharging goods from ships for onward transport with relatively small river crafts upstream along the Niger northwards. The agents of the company such as Mr. Taubman Goldie and Mr. William Wallace were also active along the banks of the Niger-Benue Rivers, pushing for the penetration and occupation

of communities in the Northern Nigerian area.¹⁰ In 1900, the Royal Charter earlier granted to the company was withdrawn by the British Government which proclaimed Northern Nigeria as a British Protectorate. Captain Frederick Lugard was appointed as the High Commissioner of the Northern Protectorate (Northern Nigeria) with headquarters at Lokoja. He used the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) in the conquest of the states, emirates and chiefdoms in the area. By 1903 all the notable states and emirates were militarily conquered, but a considerable number of small chiefdoms were not fully occupied and pacified by the colonial officers until the 1920s.

Based on the approval of Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, the Government of Northern Nigeria, on August 5th, 1903, commissioned the exploration of the Gongola under Lieutenant G.W. Moran as the Officer Commanding, accompanied by Lieutenant W.D. Croft, 15 Rank and File of WAFF based at Ibbi, carrying 1 Maxim gun and 2 Canoe-Men. They were “detailed to proceed up the river Benue and ascend the river Gongola, its tributary, with a view to testing its navigability during the yearly flood for the purpose of using it as a way for transporting stores and supplies to distant out-stations of Bornu.”¹¹ In essence, the Gongola Exploration Team had the mandate to: find out how the river can be utilised for sending up stores and supplies to government stations in parts of Bauchi and Bornu Provinces; prepare a chart of the river; and gather all information possible about the country and the people along its banks. The Officer Commanding was cautioned “to cultivate friendly relations with the natives” along the river banks because they were reported to be “most treacherous, so every precaution must be taken in any dealings the Officer Commanding may have with them or in case of landing,” and firearms should be resorted to only when it becomes really imperative.¹² The Gongola Exploration Team used a steamer-water vessel called “S.W. Black Swan” in the course of expedition, traversing the region and reported back to the Government accordingly.

The Gongola Exploration Team Report revealed that the length of the river from its mouth at Numan to Gombe Abba was a little above 201 miles. That some of the settlements along the riverbanks were found to be friendly while others were hostile, particularly the “pagan towns” from the mouth of the river at Numan to Gasi, who were noted for attacking and killing Hausa traders that were coming to the area to buy gum, gutta percha and other commodities for sale and to export by the UAC. It was reported that, with the exception of Kombo and Gasi, other “pagan towns” along the river banks had little “Hausa Colony.” It was further reported that corn, millet, and maize were extensively grown by the people and that herds of cattle were seen grazing near the settlements.¹³

They further reported that the river was navigable from its mouth to Hashidu by water vessel of the Kampala type, loaded with goods, from middle September to the end of October. They recommended that not so large steamer water vessel of the Swan type was suitable for navigation between the 4 miles stretch of the river from Hashidu to Gombe Abba, the then administrative headquarters of Gombe Division, because of the shallow depth and shifting

sandbanks of the river Hashidu from Gombe Abba. They reported that Nafada or Ashaka were suitable locations for the landing goods and were approximately 2-day trekkable distance to Gujba, the then headquarters of Gujba Division of Borno Province. The towns were further reported to be a 7-day long march to Bauchi while Gombe Abba was at a 3-day trekkable distance to Bauchi, the then headquarters of Bauchi Province. The reason for stating the approximate distance of Gujba and Bauchi to the towns on the riverbanks was informed by the colonial interest to move goods and equipment by land after being transported by water and landed at the ports of Nafada or Gombe Abba.

Colonial Water Transport and Security Concern

The British colonial officials were concerned about the safety and security of the agents of the European commercial companies, their stores and water vessels carrying their goods to different stations for redistribution to desired places. Following the conquest of Gombe and the battle of Bormi in 1903, colonial military garrison, a unit of the Northern Nigeria Regiments, was established at Nafada closer to Bormi, in Gombe Emirate and Dumbulwa in Fika Emirate, to deal with any potential uprising associated with the *Mahdists* around the area. In 1904, Frederick Lugard, the High Commissioner of the Northern Protectorate, selected Nafada as the site for colonial depot and store, where military wares, civil goods, grains, and building materials meant for Bauchi and Borno Provinces would be landed and redistributed.¹⁴ This was informed by the fact that Nafada was positioned along a pre-colonial trade route that connected Kano and Borno with Adamawa and Bauchi. The establishment of a colonial port for the landing of goods and equipment for southern Borno and Bauchi Provinces was possible with the presence of the garrison troops at Nafada to provide security to the stores and goods imported from the coastal area of Burutu.

The 1904 murder of Captain D.S. O'Riordan, Mr. Amyatt-Burney and security personnel in the riverain Bassa (later Kabba) Province and the fear of attack on the UAC store at Abinsi in Munchi (later Benue) Province led to the closing down of the company's operations and the declaration of the areas as "Unsettled Districts."¹⁵ When some "pagan" communities along the banks of the Gongola started to demonstrate with a view to disrupting the movement of goods and services by traders and cargos, a military garrison was established in Lokoja, Akwacha, Amara, Ibbi, and Numan while naval patrol team was put on the rivers to ensure the safety of cargos from Burutu through the Niger to the Benue, and then to the Gongola. UAC depots were guarded by security personnel. In Amara at the Confluence area, a European Officer, looked after the cargos coming from Burutu and landed there in July and arranged for shipment up the Gongola in September and October.¹⁶ To ensure safety, reliable and good local ferrymen, mostly Nupe and Kakanda were used on the steamers as guides and pilots in the course of the navigation.¹⁷ Furthermore, flotilla traversed the waterways and routes "to obviate the possibility of any hostile demonstration on the part of the natives to the loaded steamers" and to ensure availability of food and fuel for the steamers. Along the Gongola, the

naval patrol team often provided stacked fuel wood at Billaci, Shelleng, Kombo, Hinna and Ashaka for the steamers.

In addition to the of security concern that led to the establishment of military garrison at Numan and the operation of naval squadron to check the possibility of hostile reaction of “pagan” communities, especially from Billaci to Kombo on the Gongola, the outbreak of religious uprising in 1906 associated with the *Mahdists* around Bima Hill, on the eastern bank of the Gongola, also caused serious breach. The colonial administration used aggressive measure to contain the uprising and executed the leading cleric preaching the extermination of all Europeans, dispersed the *Mahdist* adherents and established a military garrison at Gwani.¹⁸ The troops stationed at Nafada, in the northern part of Gombe Division, helped to provide security to the stores of United Africa Company (UAC) and John Holt Company opened there in 1907 and 1913 respectively. This enabled them to take advantage of the trade routes that converged on Nafada from Maiduguri, Yola and Numan, Lau, Deba Habe, and Bauchi.¹⁹ The position of Nafada was strengthened in 1913 when it became the seat of colonial administration of the Division. It lost this political status after the end of the First World War in 1919 when the seat of the colonial administration was relocated to Gombe Town in the central part of the Division.

Nafada further lost its commercial status in 1924 when the UAC opened a new store and depot at Dadin Kowa, on the eastern bank of the Gongola. Dadin Kowa was about 25 miles distance from the colonial administrative headquarters of Gombe Town in the central part of the Division. Roads were constructed to connect the divisional headquarters of Gombe Town with Dadin Kowa, on the western side of the river and, on the eastern side with Biu, the colonial headquarters of Biu Division of Borno Province. Particular attention was given to Dadin Kowa because of the presence of the UAC store and depot in the area. From the coastal areas of Burutu, goods were transported on quite large water vessels and uploaded on barges at Numan and Billaci which ended up in Dadin Kowa. The security concern over the Bima Hill to the east of Dadin Kowa led to closer monitoring of the area through the periodic sending of armed patrols.

In 1926, out of desire to contain possible “religious disturbance” resulting from the continuous migration and settlement of people around Bima Hill on the eastern bank of the Gongola within what was then Gwani Enclave, the colonial administration transferred the area from Gombe Division of Bauchi Province to Biu Division of Borno Province.²⁰ In 1936, the area was returned to Gombe, thereby further strengthening the position of the UAC.²¹ The security of the European Branch Manager of the UAC store, who made arrangement for the transportation of exportable commodities and the redistribution of imported manufactured goods, was given top priority. The closeness of Dadin Kowa to Gombe than to Biu and the improvement of condition of the road that connected them and the operation of the flotilla waterway patrolmen on the Gongola assisted the UAC Branch Manager to successfully conduct

business in Dadin Kowa and effectively utilise the river as an important colonial waterway for the transportation of goods and services.

Goods and Services Transported from the Gongola to the Forcados and Vice-Versa

The opening up of the Gongola, a tributary of the Benue, for colonial navigation and water transport during the rainy season when the flood water was high was necessary to enable the colonial administration import stores, building materials, telegraphic infrastructure and other manufactured goods to different distant stations, as well as export agricultural and forest products from the northern stations to the coastal areas such as Burutu. The colonial water transport from the Forcados to the Gongola was cheaper in comparison with the cost of moving the goods by land transport using beasts of burden when roads were limited and not in good condition to facilitate long distance movement of goods and services. When the Gongola water transport of goods and services started in the 1904, the fear of “pagan” settlements along the Rivers Benue and Gongola attacking or showing hostility to the loaded steamers passing through the waterway near their settlements along the riverbanks intensified. Such fears were overcome from coastal area of Burutu through which large cargos of goods and materials meant for the Provinces within the Gongola valley passed through the Niger and Benue upstream.

In 1904, Federick Lugard, the High Commissioner of the Northern Protectorate, sanctioned the British Crown Agents “to comply at the earliest possible time with the requisitions concerning telegraph material, buildings for out-stations and West African Frontier Force clothing and stores in order that they may arrive Burutu not later than the middle of July.”²² Large water vessels transported manufactured goods and materials as cargos from Burutu to Lokoja, the headquarters of the Northern Marine Department. That was where ships coming to, from Southern to Northern Nigeria were cleared by the Marine Superintendent, who was responsible for the collection of import and export duty from shippers.²³ After the 1914 Amalgamation of the Southern and Northern parts of Nigeria into one political entity (country), the Superintendent of the Marine Department at Lokoja, was subordinated under the Director, Marine Department at Lagos. They regulated the movement of goods and services through the waterways and closely monitored the rise and fall of the rivers.²⁴ All stores and other goods meant for the Gongola were shipped by steamers from Lokoja or Amara and landed at Numan mount of the Gongola by the end of August. With the rise of the flood water in September and October not so large vessels proceeded up the Gongola with the stores and other materials which landed at Nafada and sometimes went beyond Gombe Abba to Kafin Sarkin Yaki, on the eastern bank of the river in Bauchi Division.

From available records, the main steamer-water vessels used in the transportation of goods and services on the Gongola comprised the “Kampala”, “Swan” and “Gull” types.²⁵ The Kampala carried very little above 20 tons while the Swan carried 6 tons maximum. Barge Gull carried lesser tons of loads. Local canoes were also used in the transportation of goods

and services, especially within the stretch from Gombe Abba to Kafin Sarkin Yaki and beyond, where the depth of the water was shallow and thus large and loaded vessels had difficulty navigating through the river because of the shifting sandbanks.²⁶ Local canoes were used up to December to transport goods and services in the shallow parts of the Gongola.

Among the main materials imported during the early colonial period through the Burutu port and transported through the Niger, Benue and Gongola for use in out-stations such as Bauchi, Nafada and Gujba were building materials of the Public Works Department (PWD). Based on available freight shipment records of the Marine Department, the building materials imported included cement, hardwood timber, telegraphic poles, bases, insulators, coil-line wire, binding wire, lighting rods, screws, plates, brackets, spindles, galvanized iron sheets, corrugated zinc roofs, angle irons, matchboard, scantlings, iron doors and windows, bolts and nuts.²⁷ These building materials were landed at Nafada depot from where they were redistributed to the out-stations. The building materials and other stores meant for southern Borno landed at Nafada and transported by carts via Ngalda to Potiskum and Gujba in Borno Province. Those meant for Bauchi Station were transported through the Gongola by relatively small barges from Nafada to Kafin Sarkin Yaki, from where donkeys and carts were used to transport the building materials and stores to Bauchi and other places. Food items, medicine, uniform and ammunition were brought for use by WAFF military personnel stationed at Nafada, Gwani and other places.

Following the establishment of commercial stores and canteens by the UAC (1907) and John Holt (1913) in Nafada, they used their agents to buy commodities needed for export and sell imported goods for local consumption. At first, the agents of the companies engaged in trade by barter with the local people in the course of the exchange of goods and services. For example, the agents of the companies used imported rice to pay canoe-men. It was said to be preferred more by the local people than imported salt.²⁸ They imported and sold or exchanged manufactured wares and goods such as salt, fabric materials, clothes, shoes, bags, kerosene, matches, candles, lamps, padlocks, forks, spoons, cooking utensils, cutlery, stationary, gramophone phones, cameras, razor blades, scissors, sewing machines and bicycles. Others were cement, insecticides, tying ropes, sacks, rubber mats, detergent, petroleum jelly, cigarette, beer stout (liquor) and other exotic drinks and culinary products. The UAC agents bought for export, hides and skins, ostrich feathers, gums, gutta percha, beeswax, tamarind silk, shea nuts, benniseed, groundnut, cotton, among others. When the UAC opened a station and depot at Dadin Kowa in 1924 and a store in Gombe in 1928, attention shifted to the south, making Gombe Town a major administrative and commercial centre and Dadin Kowa the main port of Gombe Division and southern Borno. The Licensed Buying Agents (LBA) of UAC and other companies went to countryside villages to buy exportable commodities from local producers and sold imported consumer goods to willing buyers. The UAC stores or canteens in Gombe and Dadin Kowa made good sales of imported goods and wear, bringing

about “an air of prosperity” in terms of commercial development and the increased consumption of manufactured goods and services.²⁹

During the early colonial period when lorry transport was not fully developed, donkeys and carts were used to transport commodities needed for export and those imported for redistribution from Nafada, Gombe and other places. Many Hausa and Kanuri traders from Kano and Borno frequently visited Nafada, Gombe and Dadin Kowa to exchange goods and services. There is no available information on fares paid to steamers and canoe-men for transport services and comprehensive statistics of shipping items. Available records indicate that large quantities of cotton, groundnut, hides and skins, gum, shea nuts, for example, purchased from parts of Bauchi and Borno Provinces were brought in the dry season to Dadin Kowa for shipment during the rainy season when the flood water of the Gongola was high.³⁰ Local natron (Borno potash), sheep, goats, among other articles of trade were also transported from Nafada and Dadin Kowa by steamers downstream to Onitsha and Asaba, among the riverain markets on the Niger.³¹ It was reported in the 1950s that 6,000 tons of groundnut was annually transported by barges and steamers from the Dadin Kowa port through the Benue to Burutu for shipment overseas.³² In 1958, the UAC closed down its station at Dadin Kowa thus marking the end of the long history of the colonial evacuation of agriculture and forest produce through the Gongola waterway system because of the remarkable improvement in road development and lorry transport which was reported to have proved to be “quicker, cheaper and more reliable.”³³

Conclusion

This paper discussed the contribution of rivers as colonial waterways in the transportation of goods and services through the example of the Gongola and Forcados Rivers located in the northern and southern parts of Nigeria respectively. It examined how the waterways contributed to the socio-economic development of the Nigeria in relation to the position of the UAC as the first and dominant European commercial company that established depots at Burutu on the Forcados in the coastal area as well as in Nafada and later Dadin Kowa on the Gongola in northern Nigeria. Burutu was the major depot where large consignments of imported building materials and other consumer goods were kept before redistribution to various hinterland stations such as Amara, Makurdi, Ibbi, Lau, Yola, Numan, Nafada and Dadin Kowa. The peak period of the flood waters of the Gongola and Benue Rivers (from August to October) was utilised for colonial water transportation when land or road transport was costly and difficult. Large quantities of agricultural and forest products obtained from Bauchi and Gombe Divisions of Bauchi Province and Fika, Gujba and Biu Divisions of Borno Province were brought to Nafada and Dadin Kowa on the Gongola and thus transported through the Benue and Niger to Burutu port and from there to the coastal area of Lagos for shipment overseas, thereby promoting colonial commercial and industrial development in Nigeria in relation with Metropolitan Europe.

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