

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NIGERIAN STATE: AN OVERVIEW

Aiguosatile Otohile, Ph.D

Abstract

To appreciate the problems the Nigerian nation has faced since independence, an understanding of the nature and evolution of the Nigerian state becomes imperative. The paper takes a critical look at this and concludes that the Nigerian state was established by the British between 1880 and 1914 through a process that involved oppression, suppression and conquest by force. Two sets of forces may be identified in the origin of the Nigerian state. These are the pre-colonial social formations on the one hand and the colonial social formation on the other. The interaction of these two forces gave the Nigerian state a fragile nature.

The Nigerian state did not exist before the coming of the British colonial masters. However, it must be emphasized that there was an interaction amongst the various peoples of present day Nigeria before the coming of the white people (Ekundare, 1973). It follows therefore that an attempt to understand the enormous problems (whether democratic or otherwise) facing Nigeria, like any other post-colonial country, must begin with a serious intellectual concern for its historical, political, social and economic foundations. The problems originated from specific historical events, that is, the history of imposed form of colonial rule and the activities of the pre-colonial capitalist domination which has characterized the exploitation and the underdevelopment of the Nigerian potentials.

This paper takes a critical look at the evolution of the democratic state in Nigeria with a specific attention paid to the colonial epoch. It is sub-divided into the following sections:

- Colonial administration and economic nationalization in colonial Nigeria
- Constitutional developments and the emergence of the Nigerian state
- Indirect rule, class formation and the emergence of the Nigerian state
- Conclusion

Colonial Administration and Economic Nationalization in Colonial Nigeria

Colonialism is characterized by economic, political and social control or domination (Nkrumah, 1962). Thus, the annexation of one country by another and the application of a superior technological strength by one nation for the subjugation and economic exploitation of a people or another nation constitute outright colonialism.

Nigeria came into being in its present form in 1914 when the two protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated by Sir (Later Lord) Fredrick Lugard, the architect of British colonialism in Africa. Until this date, these two protectorates in addition to the colony of Lagos were administered as separate colonies. The amalgamation signaled Britain's complete and effective control of what is now Nigeria. "The present unity of Nigeria as well as disunity" writes Coleman is in part a reflection of the form and character of the colonial governments – the British superstructure and the changes it has undergone since 1990 (Coleman, 1986:46). How did the British create Nigeria and what were the implications of their actions? In this section we shall concentrate on the issue of economic nationalization under colonial rule.

The nationalization of the economy can be regarded as the most glaring evidence of colonialism. This began in the year 1900 when the control of trade was taken from the Royal Niger Company. With this, Lugard aggressively pursued the British policy of supplanting locally produced items, especially cloth, by import. While tolls were imposed on native manufacturers, imported European manufacturers were exempted. This was a deliberate attempt to discourage the growth and expansion of local industries (Williams, 1976).

Another manifestation of economic expansion of the colonial state was the introduction of a uniform currency system throughout British West Africa. This was to facilitate the growth of trade. To this end, a currency board was established based on reserves of gold and securities held in London with coins issued against repayments in sterling.

Another major economic policy of the colonial administration was the levying of taxes. This represents an important aspect of the nationalization of the economy. It helped to create wage labour force and also generate increased production of export crops. People had no alternative but to work in order to be able to pay their taxes. Thus, the economic structure of the country was shifted from subsistence peasant agriculture to an export-oriented cash crop economy.

In the above cash crop oriented economy, the farmers were not allowed to freely market their products. The colonial administration created statutory marketing boards to cover all export crops that were produced in the country. The marketing boards included the Nigerian Cocoa Marketing Board (1947), the Nigerian Groundnut Marketing Board (1949), the Nigerian Oil Palm Produce Marketing Board (1949) and the Nigerian Cotton Marketing Board (1949). These boards ensured the stabilization of prices of the export crops (Hopkins, 1968).

The establishment of these marketing boards engendered severe protest from Nigerian. These agitations led the colonial administration to replace the national marketing boards with regional marketing boards in 1954. Despite this regionalization of marketing boards, the colonial state was still in complete control of the export crops purchased by the regional marketing boards (Tomori, 1978:27)

In addition to controlling trade, the colonial administration also enacted the so-called obnoxious ordinances. These ordinances which were part of the 1946 Richard Constitution included the Mineral Ordinance, the Public Land Acquisition Ordinance, the Crown Lands (Amendment) Ordinance and the Appointment and Disposition of Chiefs (Amendment) Ordinance. The aim of this was to ensure that mineral exploitation and land utilization were the bona-fide rights of the colonial state.

The colonial administration's policy with respect to the exploitation of Nigeria's mineral resources had two main objectives. The first objective was to eliminate oil indigenous mining activities that had existed before the advent of the Europeans. In addition, the colonial state also wanted to exclude foreign and domestic investors from the exploitation of coal resources. Thus, the colonial administration ensured that Nigerian mining industry would be developed not by Nigerians but by the state with the assistance of foreign capital when it became necessary.

On agriculture, the colonial state pursued the policy of preventing the growth of white-settler community in Nigeria and any investment of capital in Nigeria agriculture was absolutely forbidden. In fact, in 1911 and again in 1920, the Governor General of Nigeria emphatically rejected efforts by foreign interest to establish plantations in any part of the country.

On land, the colonial state preserved the traditional form of land tenure, thus, inhibiting free movement of people. People who moved out in search of jobs now discovered that they could not own land in their new residence. Thus, contradictions erupted between the preservation of traditional land tenure policy and political control of the economy. This, in part, accounted for inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic tensions and conflicts that have plagued the Nigerian political scene ever since.

Another contradiction of the colonial administration was the two separate protective policies regarding land ownership between the North and the South. While in the North state power was more evident in that non-Nigerians and non-Northerners were prohibited from acquiring freehold title, in the South, individual land tenure was allowed to develop extensively without state opposition.

The Evolution of the Nigerian State: An Overview

On transportation, the colonial state only built roads and railways with forced labour to link the seaports at Lagos and Port Harcourt directly with the agricultural and mining centres in the interior. Furthermore, the colonial state discouraged any form of private enterprise. Thus, at independence in 1960, the entire Nigerian economy had been nationalized. In fact, the state had virtually become the economy and as a result, the various and varied Nigerian ethnic groups were thrown into direct competition that had political ramifications.

Constitutional Developments and the Emergence of the Nigerian State

A look at the colonial history of Nigeria would reveal a deliberate attempt on the part of the colonial masters to create divisive tendencies in the country. Despite Lugard's amalgamation of 1914, the colony and protectorate of Northern and Southern Nigeria continued to be administered separately. Each protectorate had a distinct colonial bureaucracy which fought zealously to retain its autonomy. The officials of the two bureaucracies spoke different official languages. In 1939, however, the country was divided into the Colony of Lagos and three groups of provinces – North, East and West were established, each having a Lieutenant Governor who was responsible to the Governor-General in Lagos (Osuntokun, 1979). Substantial powers and functions were devolved to the headquarters of the three groups of provinces. Thus, by the end of World War II, the degree of administrative devolution had been of such magnitude that it almost boiled down to complete autonomy.

The Richard Constitution of 1946 strengthened and formalized the administrative devolution and gave each political unit fairly broad powers. Though the Richard Constitution was expected to last for nine years, subject to limited review after the third and sixth year of operation, it did not last long for a number of reasons. Apart from the criticisms levelled against the constitution, the replacement of Richard with Governor Macpherson spelt doom for the constitution and was subsequently replaced with the McPherson Constitution.

The McPherson Constitution had its features, merits and demerits. The constitution assigned legislative authority to the regional houses of assembly, established an executive council for the central government and also created a concurrent list of issues over which the central and regional houses could legislate. Despite the above, the Macpherson Constitution also collapsed. The Macpherson Constitution collapsed not only because of its inherent defects but also because of the political crisis at the time. On the first point, it is important to state that Macpherson Constitution had two major defects. It introduced the principle of collective responsibility without creating room for ministerial responsibility. Ministers could not make and execute policies. Secondly, a situation in which each region was dominated by a political party made the operation of the constitution a most difficult task. On the political crisis, it is important to state that two significant political crises were the Eastern Regional crisis of 1953 and the crisis over the motion for self-government in 1956 (Ojiako, 1981).

The Lyttleton Constitution replaced the Macpherson Constitution. This constitution essentially provided for separate governors, separate premiers and cabinet, separate legislatures, separate judiciaries, separate public service commission, civil services, marketing boards and development plans (Ezera, 1964).

The period between 1954 and 1960 witnessed the process of decolonization in which the emergent nationalist movements tended to identify with and crystallize around the regions and the major ethnic groups. At the approach of independence in 1960, the apparent united fronts which the major ethnic groups projected through nationalist slogans had been transformed into an unhealthy competition for state power.

Indirect Rule, Class Formation and the Emergence of the Nigerian State

Colonial capitalism came into contact with the different nationalities that make up present day Nigeria at different times. The incursion of colonialism was piece-meal, starting in 1861 with the annexation of Lagos. These nationalities were at different stages of development hence different class

structures. The exposure of these different nationalities to colonial capitalism resulted in the emergence of a new set of classes. These new classes came about as a result of the impact of colonialism's indirect rule, economic forces and education.

The manpower problem and the fact that as the Selborne Committee of 1888 pointed out that the overriding concern of the British colonial government was to cut administrative cost, led the committee to recommend ruling through the native institutions as the most effective means of keeping to a minimum the cost that would be involved in trying to govern in any other way. The above led to the introduction of indirect rule in Nigeria, which was basically the subtle tele-guiding of the native administrative structures by the British officials in areas of general policies.

The success of this policy was based on the degree of centralization of the native administrative structure and the dominance of the ruling class. Thus, it met with an almost complete success in the North that had a homogenous ruling class and in the West that had developed two powerful classes – the petty-bourgeoisie and the feudal landlords. Finally, in the East, it failed because of lack of any centralized political authority and the absence of any dominant ruling class.

It is incontestable that colonial rule was founded in order to serve the capitalist and mother country, but its success and continuation in power, given the above variables of manpower problem and its profit means, was largely dependent on the cooperation of the ruling classes in the different communities (Potholm, 1979). The power of these traditional ruling classes was rooted in non-capitalist form of organization. Consequently, the outcome was a curious paradox, the establishment of a capitalist state based and dependent on pre-capitalist institutions.

This had two effects: one was to undermine the pre-colonial social-economic structure. For traditional rulers like chiefs and emirs either adapted to the exigencies of the economic order or yielded a good portion of their authority to more business minded individuals. In the absence of a traditional ruling class in the East, there arose the dominance of the merchant capitalists that Western education created in the peripheral economic activities that colonial capitalism left in the hands of the natives. Thus, the pre-colonial socio-economic structure of the Western and Eastern regions was terribly undermined while the status quo was retained in the North.

The second effect of the contradiction of the indirect rule system of colonial administration was that it failed to transform societies so as to enable it to cope with the requirements of the new socio-economic order. This effect was inevitably given the profit means-end of colonialism. Thus, a new class of powerful chiefs was created.

Furthermore, British government in order to achieve their aim in the colonies broke down the integrated self-sufficient villages and kingdoms and channeled the productive forces of these communities into production of cash crops. This was effectively done by the introduction of coinage, which had become a new medium of exchange and measuring wealth. In the North, taxes were paid with this new medium of exchange.

This coinage that was introduced by the colonial government also affected the land tenure system in Nigeria. For although the land tenure system varied from one area of Nigeria to another, it was essentially communal in character and vested on the family, village or town (Nnoli, 1978). The peasant farmer in receiving an allocation of the right to occupy and use a piece of land from the traditional authorities was free to use the land in the way he deserves, so long it does not alienate the land from the community. But with the coming of colonialism, and its money economy, there was gradually a general shift towards individual ownership and the assignment of market value to land which was formerly free (Nnoli, 1978). This resulted in the displacement of the peasants who cannot afford their own land, creating a class of the Limpon proletariats that migrated to the cities doing unskilled and semi-skilled jobs on day pay.

The Evolution of the Nigerian State: An Overview

One major outcome of the colonial economic policy was the creation of local merchant capitalist who were only interested in accumulation for its survival (Kay, 1975). These local merchant capitalists later metamorphosed into the comprador bourgeoisie who connived with the industrialized Western countries to exploit their country's economy. The predominant position of this class was later to cause monumental crisis for Nigeria.

Another factor that led to the reshaping of the class structure of the different Nigerian nationalities was the impact of Western education. The British did not have a national educational policy; rather, they left the Christian missionaries to introduce Western education in the colonies. It is important to underline the motive for the introduction of Western education in the colonies. The British colonial government knew that the introduction of Western education was a sine qua non for the exploitation of the colony. Without this education, there certainly would not have been clerks and technicians to execute those essential tasks in the government and commerce, particularly those the white people could not carry out themselves. Literate Africans were useful in many ways, although too much literacy was considered dangerous and undesirable. A certain amount of (rudimentary) technical training was essential to provide cheap semi-skilled labour but it should not be allowed to continue beyond a given standard or Africans would soon be competing with whites (Turnbull, 1968:96).

A few Africans who initially patronized Western missionary education were drawn mainly from the lower strata of the various Southern communities, mainly slaves. This led to the catapulting of these "scums of society" to the position of economic wealth and political power.

So, colonial education produced in the Southern Nigeria a class that constituted part of the ruling class but who by the nature of its composition was antagonistic to the traditional ruling class that formed the other part of the ruling class. The compradors came from the lower strata of traditional societies while the later came from the apex. While this was happening in the South, the North was protected from missionary activities and this had the effect of the non-creation of westernized literates in the North. However, the indirect rule system helped to create a class of comprador bourgeoisie in the north made up of mainly traditional rulers.

With the approach of independence, the composition of the ruling class changed somewhat. A new political class emerged. The political class evolved from out of all of the pre-eminent Nigerian colonial groups; wealth was required to finance capital campaigns including the dispensation of patronage; the support and sanctions of the traditional rulers were indispensable to assure popular support; and Western-style education would be needed to manipulate new governing systems and effectively to communicate on an intra and inter-national plane (Graff, 1984).

The emergence of these classes had monumental implications for the nascent Nigerian society. The immediate pre-independence politics was characterized by the conflicts of these classes and till date, the issue still remains part of the problem of the Nigerian state. The inevitability of political instability within a class society becomes clearer when one realizes that real political stability exists only in society with total class harmony or a near total class harmony.

The genesis of political parties in colonial Nigeria can be traced to the Clifford Constitution of 1922 that introduced the elective principle. The constitution made provision for the election of four members – three elected members representing the municipalities of Lagos and one Calabar (Nnoli, 1978). Political parties were now formed to contest for these newly created positions. The major political parties during this period were the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) and the Peoples' Union (PU).

The NNDP was formed on June 24, 1923 by the late Herbert Macaulay and his close associates. The major aims of the party were the provision of higher education in Nigeria and the Africanization of the civil service (Sklar, 1963).

Aiguosatile Otohile. Ph.D

The NYM which represented another formidable political party at the time is an offshoot of the Lagos Youth Movements (LYM). Formed in 1933 by a group of young educated, radical Nigerians, including Ikoli, Davies, Vaughan and Akinsanya, the LYM's main objective was to protest against the alleged inferior status of the new Yaba Higher College which it was felt should have been of university standard.

The name LYM was however changed to NYM in 1937 to give it a national outlook. The main objective of the NYM was to:

Unify the different tribes of Nigeria by adopting encouraging means which would foster better understanding and cooperation between the tribes so that they may come to have a common deal (Epelle, 1960:55)

The Peoples' Union was formed in 1908 'as a protest association to the imposition of a general rate to finance a new water scheme. It was led by persons like Obasa, Randle and Alakija. It operated a conservative policy as opposed to the radical aims of the NNDP and its leaders believed in gradualism. Its female counterparts were the Women's Union.

Finally, political parties in Nigeria at that period could be said to end with the formation of National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) later National Council of Nigerian Citizens, which participated in Nigerian politics till the fall of the first republic. The NCNC came into existence in 1944.

Conclusion

This paper has so far been tracing the history of the Nigerian state with a specific reference to its evolution under the colonial masters. It shows clearly that the effects of colonial policies on Nigeria's economic development were indeed devastating given the underlying colonial motive of exploitation.

The nationalization of the economy had fundamental implications for the nature of politics that post-colonial Nigeria witnessed. It made the state very attractive as it became the major vehicle for socio-economic mobility. The contest for state power became more intense because of a somewhat contradictory policy of decentralization of the administration.

Thus, what emerged out of British colonialism according to Ogbeide (1984) was a state structure which had a monopoly over the commanding heights of the Nigeria economy. But this superstructure was contradictory in design since nationalization of the economy was diametrically opposed to the unbalanced tripartite federal polity bequeathed to Nigeria at independence.

References

- Adigwe, F. (1974). *Essentials of government for West Africa*, Ibadan: University Press Ltd.
- Coleman, J. (1986). *Nigeria: Background to nationalism*; Katnehohn, Broburg and Wistrom
- Ekundare, R.O. (1973). *An economic history of Nigeria*, London: Medthuen and Company Ltd.
- Ekpelle, S. (1960). *The promise of Nigeria*, London: Pan Books Ltd.
- Ezera, L.K. (1964). *Constitutional Development in Nigeria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Graff, W.D. (1984). *Constitution making and elite formation*; paper presented at the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Benin, Benin City, Post Graduate Seminar.

The Evolution of the Nigerian State: An Overview

- Hopkins, A.G. (1968). Economic aspects of political movements in Nigeria and Gold Coast 1918-39 In *Journal of African History*, 1(7),25-38.
- Kay, G. (1975). *Development and underdevelopment: A Marxist analysis*, London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Nnoli, O. (1978). *Ethnic politics in Nigeria*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers.
- Ogbeide, U.E. (1984). *The expansion of the state and ethnic mobilization: The Nigerian experience*"; Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, USA.
- Ojiako, S.O. (1981). *Nigeria: Yesterday, today and...*; Lagos: Africana Publishers.
- Osuntokun, J. (1979). The historical background of Nigerian federalism" In A.B. Akinyemi (ed.) *Readings on Federalism*, Lagos: NIIA.
- Potholm, C. (1979). *The theory and practice of African politics*, Englewood Cliff NJ; Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Sklar, R. (1963). *Nigerian political parties: Power in an emergent African nation*, Enugu: Nok Publishers.
- Tomori, S. (1979). Agriculture forestry and fishing" In F.A. Olaloku (Ed) *Structure of the Nigerian economy*, London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Turnbull, C. (1968). *The lonely African*, New York: Claredon.
- Williams, G. (ed) (1976). *Nigeria: Economy and Society*, London: Rex Collins.