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## Note

# Revision of the Congo Basin Treaty and Japan in the 1930s : Examining the Narratives of Consular Reports <sup>(1)</sup>

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### Abstract

The paper is a part of a wider study which examines the trajectory of Japan's economic interests in Africa in the period between 1914 and the beginning of World War II. It explores the nature of trade necessitated by Japan's growing industrial capitalist economy in response to the African market by noting the complimentary nature of the relationship. By focusing on Japanese consular reports this paper will explore the initiatives of the Japanese official and unofficial sectors in the face of British colonial and imperial policies in Africa. It specifically considers the role of the Congo Basin Treaty as the framework which enabled Japan to advance in African market in the mid-1930s and the Anglo-Japanese rivalries over its revision and abolition.

Keywords : Sub-Saharan Africa, Trade, Japanese Consular Reports, Inter-War Years  
JEL Classification Codes : 04-10, 04-23, 04-50, 06-22, 07-40

## 1 . Introduction : Purpose of this Study

Japan has recently been deeply involved in building global system of political economy. In order to appropriately bring several areas concerned, including Africa, into Japan's global perspective, it is necessary to make clear the reality of her relations with these areas and the factors that defined her relations in the past. (Kitagawa : 2012)

This paper is a part of a wider study of "Japan's Trade Relations with Africa in the inter-war period", based on pre-war Japanese consular reports. After Great Crash in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it was the Congo Basin and its surrounding areas including the Belgian Congo where Japan tried to increase her exports and advance into new markets in Africa. (Kitagawa : 1990, 1997, 2003, 2006, 2017)

The Congo Basin is located in the middle of African continent and occupied a critically important location in both the commercial and strategic sense. The Congo Basin

Treaty originated in the general protocol of the Berlin Conference in 1885, the general protocol of the Brussels Conference in 1890, and the Peace Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Lay signed by Britain, the United States, Japan, France, Italy, Portugal, and Belgium in 1919. (Forster, Mommsen and Robinson : 1988) It essentially gave free and equal opportunity of development, residence, and trade in tropical Africa, especially the Congo Basin, to signatories. It even prohibited countries who had colonies in Africa from putting preferential or discriminatory tariffs on their own products in their own colonies. So in this region, countries that did not possess colonies were not discriminated against, and the safety of their citizens and property was guaranteed. They could buy, sell and transfer property at will.<sup>(2)</sup>

The Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Lay, or the generally called “The Congo Basin Treaty” was the international treaty framework that enabled Japan to make economic advances in this region. This treaty was the one that defined international relations in Colonial Africa, political relations between Africa and signatory nations, and Japan’s relations with Africa under colonial rule. Japan signed this treaty simply because she thought she could proudly show off her international status as one of the big five member countries in the League of Nations and her international acknowledgment among European imperialist powers with vital interests in this region fulfilled her national interests. (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bureau of Trade and Commerce, 1938)

This paper examines revision of the Congo Basin Treaty which defined Japan’s relations with colonial Africa and Japan’s reaction. It attempts to deepen our understanding of Japan’s pre-war policy towards Africa and her relations with Africa under colonial rule.<sup>(3)</sup>

The year 1930 was the tenth year since the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Lay was signed, and after ten years member nations were to have a conference to revise the treaty in the light of their experiences. In July 1930 the British ambassador residing in Japan proposed that the Japanese government convene the conference for the treaty revision on 31 July 1935. The Japanese government in the official letter to the British Embassy replied it found no reason to object to this proposal without other signatory countries’ objections. However, afterwards, the Japanese government worried about the moves of the signatory nations concerned and in particular much attention was paid to the Great Britain’s intentions, because desires for revision or abolition of this treaty was witnessed within both British Empire and her colonies. Given this backdrop, Japan who attached a great

importance to Africa as a new export market, moved toward retaining this treaty. (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bureau of Trade and Commerce, 1938)

## **2. The Move toward Revision of the Congo Basin Treaty and Japan's Informational Strategy**

Since 1930 Japan started to investigate into the movement of European countries toward revision and application of the Congo Basin Treaty. In particular the movement of concerned interest organizations in Britain and her colonies was investigated with scrupulous care and these included official policy making organizations such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Colonial Office and unofficial business organizations such as the Manchester Chamber of Commerce, the Mombasa Chamber of Commerce, the Nairobi Chamber of Commerce, Association of Chamber of Commerce of East Africa, British Empire Federation of Chamber of Commerce.

### **Investigative Report of official policy-making organizations**

On 19 February 1930, Japanese Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Britain, Tsuneo Matsudaira, inquired the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United Kingdom, Arthur Henderson, whether revision of the Congo Basin Treaty was being discussed in the British Parliament. The Minister, Henderson, replied that it had not been decided yet but is still under consideration. Matsudaira sent this report to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Japan, Kijuro Shidehara. (Letter on 27 February 1930 from Matudaira Tsuneo, the Minister Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Britain to Kijuro Shidehara, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

In addition, in November 1933 and October 1934, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Japan, Koki Hirota, sent official notice to the Japanese Embassies in Britain, France, Belgium, Italy, Portugal, and the United States, and the Japanese Consulates in Alexandria, Cape Town and Mombasa, and ordered those offices to investigate and report the movement of signatory countries interested in the Congo Basin Treaty. (Letter on 7 November 1933, from Koki Hirota the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Tsuneo Matsudaira the Minister Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Britain)

In October 1934, the Acing Ambassador to Portugal, Kumabe, investigated into the application of the Congo Basin Treaty in Mozambique, Angola, Italian Somaliland, French

Equatorial Africa, Cameroon and sent his report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Koki Hirota. In December 1934, Japanese Embassy in Belgium sent the report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “The Belgian Foreign Ministry says that this problem is so complicated that close communication among concerned countries is of necessity. And a certain official in charge of the Belgian Foreign Ministry replied that he expected the conference to be convened under the initiative of Britain and Japan.” (Letter on 31 October 1934, Kumabe the Minister of Portugal to Hirota the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Letter on 11 December 1934, Hachiro Arita the Minister Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Belgium to Koki Hirota the Minister of Foreign Affairs)

### Investigative Report of Unofficial Business Organizations

In January 1930, a report was sent from the Japanese Consulate in Cape Town to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “On 25 January, East African Federation of Chamber of Commerce in the Kenyan Colony carried out deliberation on the revision of the Congo Basin Treaty and as a result disagreed on the bill of establishing the British Imperial Preferential Tariff System in East Africa” “In the meeting of the Federation of Chamber of Commerce of the British Empire, which will be held in London at the end of May, delegates of Chambers of Commerce from African colonies under the British rule will discuss on the issue of revision of the Congo Basin Treaty.” (Letter on 24 January 1930, Letter on 27 January 1930 from Yamazaki Socho the Consul of Cape Town to Kijuro Shidehara the Minister of Foreign Affairs)

Subsequently, in May and June 1932, the Mombasa Consulate reported to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: “Some members of parliament in Britain who have economic interests in East Africa called for revision of the Congo Basin Treaty, but the Mombasa Chamber of Commerce rejected this motion because abolition of this treaty does not make a profit to the trade of the British Empire.” On the contrary, “The Nairobi Chamber of Commerce preferred abolition of the Congo Basin Treaty, and at the same time the formation of Customs in the Union of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanganyika as well as making a claim for revision of the mandate articles.” (Letter on 14 May 1932, from Kuga the Consul of Mombasa to Yoshizawa the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Letter on 21 June 1932, From Kuga the consul of Mombasa to Saito the Minister of Foreign Affairs)

In addition, Consul Kuga, in the Mombasa consulate, sent the statement by the

chairperson of the Mombasa Chamber of Commerce, John Seidman Allen, in September 1933: "An extraordinary general assembly of the Mombasa Chamber of Commerce shelved a judgement of revision of the Congo Basin Treaty as difficult, because it intertwined with articles of the Tanganyika mandate and other treaties. Besides, East Africa itself exports to Japan." (Letter on 5 September 1933, from Kuga the Consul of Mombasa to Uchida the Minister of Foreign Affairs) In Tanganyika, free trade was secured by the article of mandate of the League of Nations and unanimous acceptance by members of the League of Nations was an essential condition to revise it. In addition, signatory countries that had political and economic interests in this region and signed Saint-Germain-en-Lay Treaty had involved in more than 30 international treaties, including the Zanzibar Treaty. In this regard, even though the Congo Basin Treaty was abolished, exclusion of Japan was judged as a highly difficulty task, since one of these treaties contained an article of most favoured nation trade advantages.

Besides, in June 1935, the Japanese Embassy in Belgium reported by quoting some articles in the magazine, "Soir" : The British government will not convene the Parliament in order to discuss revision of the Congo Basin Treaty. This issue was examined in concerned ministries but so complicated that they could not arrive at a conclusion. However, fear of competition of Japanese goods in Central Africa was seriously felt among industrialists in Britain, and the Manchester Chamber of Commerce appealed for urgent investigation into the state of affairs. (Letter on 29 June 1935, from Hachiro Arita the Minister Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Belgium to Hirota the Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

### **3. Strategy to prevent the Movement toward Revision of the Congo Basin Treaty**

In the mid-1930s "cotton diplomacy" or "primary products purchasing strategy" was proposed in order to prevent the movement of revision of the Congo Basin Treaty in Japan. In February and March 1934, Anglo-Japanese cotton negotiations were held in London, but finally broken off. In May 1934, Walter Runciman, the president of the Board of Trade announced that import quota system would be placed on foreign manufactures such as cotton piece goods and artificial silk in the colonies and protectorates under British rule. Consequently, the import quota system was introduced in the British colonies of West

Africa. Recognizing that East Africa was important market for British cotton textiles, revision or abolition of the Congo Basin Treaty was discussed in order to prevent Japanese cotton goods from advancing there. (Kitagawa 1997, 2006, 2015)

In this situation, the Japanese Consul in Mombasa, Chosaku Mogaki, expressed his consciousness of the impending crisis as follows: “It is thought that the British government sees the Congo Basin Treaty as a burden in the process to materialize Ranciman’s announcement and go into action toward depriving the validity of the Congo Basin Treaty in spite of the lack of an abrogation article. Our empire should move other concerned signatories to prevent the British maneuvers and put up a stubborn defense to retain this treaty. Understanding a variety of diplomatic measures have been already taken, abolition of this international treaty would mean an irreparable loss in the future of our Empire.” (Letter on 22 August 1934, Chosaku Mogaki the Consul of Mombasa to Koki Hirota the Minister of Foreign Affairs)

Against this backdrop, Consul Mogaki suggested as follow: “As a provisional measure regarding this matter, our Empire should adjust the balance of trade on a reciprocal base and construct close relations with this region. If necessary, our Empire should strategically buy raw cotton in Uganda and natural soda in Kenya to improve in the balance of trade and by the same token encourage selling cotton cloth, cotton piece goods, artificial silk, and general merchandise in this market. However, such local products as coffee, sisal, wattle, maize, except for raw cotton, are traded only in a sample watch. Thinking it takes much time to import these products substantially, our Empire should focus on strategic buying of raw cotton and natural soda as a measure to prevent abolition of the Congo Basin Treaty.” (Letter on 22 August 1934, Chosaku Mogaki the Consul of Mombasa to Koki Hirota the Minister of Foreign Affairs)

Consul Mogaki continued: “Considering diplomatic move against the prevention of Japanese goods from increasing in East Africa, the state of affairs of this region is not a matter of the utmost urgency compared with South Africa, even if this area obviously stands at critically significant transitional period. In this regard, Japan needs more powerful measures of national policy in East Africa than wool buying in South Africa. The rise and fall of Japan’s export trade with East and Central Africa heavily depends on the fate of the Congo Basin Treaty. Although alternative policies might be possibly drafted in order to retain this treaty, it is expected that the improvement in balance of trade can be

realized by buying raw cotton, the only commodity that East Africa longed for exporting to Japan. It is thought that this is an essential maneuver because serious attention should be paid on the most important exports from Japan, cotton cloth and cotton piece goods, which are not separated from import of cotton. By and large, Japanese exports to South Africa are not so closely connected to South African wool. Business interests in Japan felt some difficulty in promoting wool buying. However, concerned traders and manufacturers in Japan thought that promotion of cotton buying in East Africa is easier to deal than wool buying in South Africa.” (Letter on 18 February 1935, Chosaku Mogaki the Consul of Mombasa to Koki Hirota the Minister of Foreign Affairs)

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

The period from the Versailles Conference in 1919 to the Greater East Asian Conference in 1943 was only a quarter century. However, this period was one of substantial ups and downs for Japanese economic growth by any criteria. In 1919 Japan had already clearly become one of the imperial powers in the world and achieved outstanding success in both economic and political development. In the following 25 years, Japan continued further economic growth and founded the quasi-colony or puppet state of Manchukuo under the rule of the Japanese Empire. The prosperity of Japanese Imperial economy substantially depended on her exports to overseas countries. The leaders of the business world in Imperial Japan maintained high industrial productivity by recruiting low wage labourers and exploiting low raw material prices, and expected to increase exports to the overseas market. (Nish 2002)

The “Report of Research on the Congo Basin Treaty” circulated within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1938, recorded reasons why Japan stood in a strong-minded position to retain this treaty as follows: “Needless to say, Japan, who is limited in area and whose population is increasing year by year and with more than 70 million people, her survival and development depends heavily on the promotion of import and export trade. Therefore, Japan consistently insisted on freedom to acquire natural resources and to expand overseas markets of manufactured goods over the years. In the A mandate and the B mandate, the Covenant of the League of Nations and articles of each mandate prescribe the principle of open-door and free trade policy, and the Congo Basin Treaty provides free and equal opportunities of development, residence and trade in Central Africa to signatory



countries. These principles are in total accord with the Empire's assertion over the years even though application of the Treaty was limited. The Empire supported and retained these principles and at the same time made an extraordinary effort to extend this will to uncivilized areas. However, on the one hand, after withdraw from the League of Nations, among member countries, discussion to exclude Japan from equal opportunity to trade emerges, while discussion to repeal the Congo Basin Treaty comes up in Great Britain as well as in other signatories. Needless to say, Japan had to pay serious attention to these developments". (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bureau of Trade and Commerce 1938)

In concluding this brief paper, more consideration of several problems is of necessity. (1) further research and analysis on the primary product buying strategy is claimed in order to examine the process of policy making toward Africa during the inter-war period. (2) Considering Japan's relations with Africa in the 1930s in particular and international economic and political relations between Africa and Asia or Afrasia (Afroasia) in general, it is understandable that Great Britain's presence was a significant factor. In this regard, the way how to interpret Britain's stance toward the Congo Basin Treaty provides one slice on how to extend our understanding of her world strategy in the 1930s. In other words, Britain's insistence on revision and abolition of the Congo Basin Treaty shows either consistency or continuity of her providing international public goods in the nineteenth century, including such as Free Trade System and International Monetary System, or contradiction or discontinuity of changing her role in the international arena. (3) It is of necessity to examine how effective the primary products buying strategy was, insisted on by Consul Mogaki to protect the Congo Basin Treaty, for adjusting or collaborating political and economic relations between Japan and Britain and preserving Asia-Africa relations under the Imperialist regime. (4) Through making a brief analysis of the Congo Basin Treaty, there seems to be both cooperation and conflict in the international relations in the mid-1930s and immediately before the World War II. (Letter on 9 January 1936, from Kurusu the Minister of Brussel to Arita the Minister of Foreign affairs) However, Britain and the United States made a certain of doubtful point to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs as follows. Looking at Japan's founding of a puppet state, Manchukuo in 1932, and exploitation of exclusive economic interests there, they insisted that Japan's stance to China and Manchukuo was contradictory to her claim that the Congo Basin Treaty should support open-door trade and equal opportunity. (Letter on 8 March 1937,

from Genichiro Omori the Minister of Portugal to Hisatake Sato the Minister of Foreign Affairs) From 1937 to 1938, Britain's actions on treatment of the Congo Basin Treaty in Central Africa and Japan's stance of development of natural resources (in particular, petroleum) in Manchukuo were connected to a deeper dimension of political and economic international relations in the 1930s.

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### Endnote

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(2) Article of the treaty established equal trading rights to those countries which signed. This applied to the basin of the Congo River and its tributaries, the attached coastal zone from latitude South 2°30' to the mouth of the Loge River and the Congo Basin to the Indian Ocean from latitude 5° North to the mouth of Zambezi River. In other words it applied to part of French Equatorial Africa and French Cameroon, the Belgian Congo, Belgian Rwanda and Ulundi, part of Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) and Angola in West Africa, part of British Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, Zanzibar, Kenya, British Tanganyika, part of British Somaliland, Southern Ethiopia and part of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs 'Bureau of Trade and Commerce, "A Study of Equal Treatment in the Mandate Territories and the Congo Basin Treaty" (1938), pp. 119-120.

(3) This paper is mainly based on diplomatic record. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Bureau of Trade and Commerce, (1938), "A Study of Equal Trade Treatment in the Mandate Territories and the Congo Basin Treaty (The Congo Basin Treaty)" (1919~1937), Diplomatic Record Office, File B-10-5-0-8.

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