

The Instrument of Authority: The Niger river as propaganda in Northern Nigeria 1900-1905

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the ways in which Frederick Lugard used the Niger river and her subsidiaries as a tool to secure funding from Great Britain between 1900-1905. The annual reports written by Lugard were propaganda to convince Parliament of the value of the Nigerian project by showing progress towards the installation of “legitimate commerce”. This paper proves that the British were, especially in these early years of colonisation, to a great degree confined to the Niger river. Three cases are analysed to show to what extent Lugard is bound to the river for his propaganda: the abolition of illegitimate trade, the promotion of Nigeria to replace the USA and India as the new centre for cotton farming, and the redirection of commerce from the trans-Saharan route to the English sphere. This paper concludes that the river held an abstract value for the British coloniser: apart from being the major highway for trade and transport, it was also an important tool for Lugard’s propaganda.

Keywords:

Niger river, Northern Nigeria, colonisation, annual reports, Great Britain.

INTRODUCTION

The history of British colonialism in West Africa is a story of extreme transitions. The advent of paternalistic racism, quinine’s victory over malaria and the opening of the West African hinterland for transoceanic commerce occurred in the 19th century. Westminster’s colonial attitude also reversed completely in the wake of international rivalry at the Berlin conference of 1884, before which Westminster had little interest in West Africa. The reversal that happened in 1900, when the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria was established, was not the result of economic or humanitarian considerations, but of international pressure, as had been the conquest of India.¹ French and German merchants and soldiers were encroaching on the Niger river, and Britain reluctantly retaliated, to stay in control of the profitable waterway.² Frederick Lugard, who was appointed as the first High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria, was commissioned to stabilise and control the territory to deter foreign encroachment and secure commerce. Westminster was still reluctant to establish yet another expensive colony, so Lugard was pressed to

progress and produce tangible results. The survival of his position, his protectorate and the stream of private and public funding, which made up the greater part of his total revenue, depended on the success of his project.

Particularly in the early years of the Protectorate, British control was extremely limited. Commissioned to govern a tract of land twice the size of the British Isles, Lugard controlled only two things effectively: the political elite, which was dependent on the British Administration for their legitimacy, and the Niger river system.³ The role of the river Niger in the colonisation of (Northern) Nigeria, however, has so far evaded the attention of historians. Historians focus on the periods before the establishment of official British control in 1900 or after the amalgamation of the protectorates in 1912.⁴ The Niger river was key to the entire colonisation in general and specifically to Lugard’s representation of the colonisation of the North.

The river Niger was firmly under British control because it was used by the river-borne traders of the Royal Niger Company (RNC) to conquer the Nigerian hinterland. The RNC had constructed trading posts, checkpoints and fortresses along the river banks. The land away from the river, however, was largely outside the British sphere of influence; so much so that the emir of Kontagora told his subjects that the British were a species of fish who could not live away from the river Niger.⁵ Torn between having a very limited impact on the proceedings in the Protectorate on the one hand and the pressure to prove its potential on the other, Lugard was forced to create an imagined positive image of his reign to ensure a continuing flow of funds from Britain. In his annual reports presented to the Colonial office, he wrote about different aspects of his colonial administration. These reports were almost exclusively positive, and intended to convince the British government public of the value of the Nigerian project. The annual report can be considered propaganda to promote the various aspects of the Protectorate and to lure investors, both public and private. The British imperialists used a narrative of “legitimate commerce” to justify their imperial expansion in the 19th century. They argued that, by conquering and administering territories, they were spreading civilisation and improving standards of living. This research is built around the three pillars of legitimate commerce: the abolishment of “illegitimate commerce” such as slavery and the trade in liquor; the importation of wholesome (British) products and the exportation of local produce beneficial to the natives;

¹ P. Moon, *The conquest and dominion of India* (London 1989), 6.

² A. Nzemeke, *Imperialist venture in the Niger valley: 1951-1905: a case study of Afro-British contacts in West Africa* (Munster 1971), 35.

³ This research concerns all the rivers of Northern Nigeria connected to the Niger river: including, but not limited to, the Benue, Kaduna and Gongola rivers. The

term “Niger river system” is used throughout this essay to indicate all these rivers combined.

⁴ For instance: T. Falola, *Nigeria in the twentieth century* (Durham, NC 2002); I. Nicolson, *The administration of Nigeria: men, methods and myths* (Oxford 1969); J. Flint, *Sir George Goldie and the making of Nigeria* (London 1960); M. Crowder, *A short history of Nigeria*. (New York 1966).

⁵ Crowder, *A short history*, 211.

and the introduction of a “fair” system of taxation.⁶

This essay will argue that the Niger river was the most important tool for this propaganda because it was one of two areas of administration where Lugard could effectively exert control. Three case studies, themed after the pillars of legitimate trade, will analyse to what extent Frederick Lugard used the Niger river system as a tool to create a (false) image of progress towards the transition to legitimate commerce in Northern Nigeria between 1900 and 1905 in the annual reports. This period is selected because it formed the basis for colonial policy throughout the history of amalgamated Nigeria and because it is the time in which Lugard shaped the appearance of legitimate commerce in Nigeria. This period is also largely neglected by other historians.

Before discussing the three cases, this research will provide a description of the historic setting and the historiographic background, as well as the place of this research within it. The second chapter will prove that the annual reports cannot be trusted as they are mainly used to propagate Lugard’s agenda and, in a more general sense, provide a critical examination of the value of the annual report as a historic source. A quantitative analysis will show the discrepancy between the priorities portrayed in the annual reports and the aspects of administration that were prioritised in reality.

The first case is the abolishment of illegitimate trade. The abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the prohibition of the institution of slavery in 1833 had not truly ended slavery, so the abolition movement was still strong at the turn of the nineteenth century. Lugard was well aware that joining in this movement would improve the public opinion of his Protectorate. The first case study will analyse how the Niger was used as a tool to put this image forward in the annual reports. Additionally, liquor trading was banned. There are many similarities between the ban on liquor and the slavery ban so it is covered in the same chapter.

The second case study will analyse how Lugard attempted to make Northern Nigeria the new centre of cotton production after the decrease in supply from the United States caused a cotton crisis. Lugard used the river to persuade Westminster to invest in the cotton potential of Northern Nigeria.

The third and final case study discusses the role of the river in Lugard’s portrayal of the internal trade routes of the Protectorate and how he worked to redirect them into the English commercial sphere.

SECTIONS

Quantitative analysis:

The first chapter proves that the annual reports on which this research is based are a fictional depiction of the proceedings in the Protectorate. When compared to the much more factual Original Correspondence, a major dichotomy becomes apparent: the introduction of legitimate commerce that Lugard propagates in the annual reports are not nearly as important as more mundane matters that were handled far more often. Lugard is selective in his annual report and chooses only those subjects that would improve the standing of his functioning and the Protectorate in general for the reader of his report.

Having proven that the annual reports are propaganda, this chapter goes on to show the three most prominent matters in the reports: slavery, trade, and cotton exports. These three subjects are the focal point of this research.

Case study I: The abolition of illegitimate commerce

This chapter shows the importance of the Niger system for the image that Lugard creates regarding slavery and the ban on liquor trading. Because Lugard was very limited in his influence over his territory, he used that part of the Protectorate that he does control effectively to collect success stories. This chapter compares the numerical difference between freed slaves on the land route (north of the river through the bush) and the Benue-borne slave transports. There were far more freed slaves on the river, which is logical following from the ineffectiveness of the land patrols. Lugard, however, presented this as proof that his administration was effectively banishing slavery from the land.

This chapter also discusses both the inability of Lugard to end slavery and the unwillingness to do so. Too much of the local power that Lugard depended on (there are only little over 200 British people in Northern Nigeria at this time) was invested in the status quo of slave-ownership.

Lugard not only used the numbers he gains from the river freeings, but also the horror stories. He used the harsh conditions that slaves, who were often children, to both gather support from the English population and an aversion against the Germans who participate in the slave trade.

A similar argument is made regarding to the ban on the liquor trade, further proving the ineffectiveness of Lugard’s administration and the role of the river in creating a false image of control.

Case study II: Cotton in Northern Nigeria

During the American civil war, the British textile industry suffered a cotton shortage. The British turned to India to replace the USA as their main supply of cotton, but encountered three problems there: a lack of infrastructure, a disagreeable climate, and an inferior breed of cotton. Lugard used the river to promote Northern Nigeria as the best replacement of the USA in the second cotton crisis of 1902, using the three Indian problems as the basis for his appeal.

The river gave Northern Nigeria the added value of transportation. The annual reports are filled with subtle and less-than-subtle remarks on its effectiveness. Also, the river provided specialists on cotton with examples of the climate and the soils as well as the possibility for a proper kind of cotton to be planted in Northern Nigeria.

These examples were then used to portray Northern Nigeria as the best candidate for the cotton hub of the British empire, with all the funding support that would go along with it. Lugard shows why Northern Nigeria is better by discrediting the other British colonies.

Case study III: The redirection of existing trade to the English

⁶ R. Law, *From slave trade to “legitimate” commerce: the commercial transition in nineteenth-century West Africa* (Cambridge, 1995), 21.

sphere.

In this, too, the river would play a vital role. Lugard tried to prove that his Protectorate was worth all investment, because it held many existing trade routes and products available for exports. The existing trade routes were aimed north, towards the Sahara and Tripoli. Lugard used the river both in his narrative and as a tool to divert the northern trade to the coast and hence to Britain.

The river would make a safe route compared to existing routes, because the British had forts along its banks and regularly patrolled it. Also, the river would be faster than the desert route. Thirdly, the river made for cheaper transport because of low exchange rates and camel costs could be largely avoided.

A second way in which the river was used was by taxation. Landed taxation was ineffective, but taxation on the rivers was not. Several tax benefits were offered to traders to divert them south.

CONCLUSION

Frederick Lugard chose to create an image of his rule through his annual reports that did not correspond very closely at all with reality. His reports were written with the ulterior motive of convincing the British government to fund his Protectorate and trust in the commercial potential. He based his narrative on the British ideal of legitimate commerce, the popular movement that aimed to educate and help the native population of the English possessions which was used in reality to legitimise imperial expansion all over the world. Lugard writes about how he was removing slavery, which had always been the most important trade commodity of his region. Fuelled by the missionary ideals, he also fought against the trade in liquor. Both these efforts have been proven not to have happened in the way he described them, nor were they ever real aims of the Northern Nigerian policy. The abolition of illegitimate commerce was one piece of Lugard's propaganda. To support his narrative, Lugard was dependent on the Niger river, where most of his successes came from. In his narrative, Lugard described the river system as the focal point of the slave trade, and when the trade on the river decreased he argued that slave trade throughout the Protectorate was diminishing. In reality, the trade had moved to bush routes beyond his control. Slavery would continue for decades in Nigeria.

Furthermore, Lugard describes how Northern Nigeria was the best candidate to replace the deflating American cotton market during the second cotton crisis. The Niger was central for this argument as well: it provided transport that no other colony had and it provided samples that proved the suitability of the Northern Nigerian soil for the long-stapled cotton variety that the Lancashire industry needed. Again, the administration held no power over the land of the territory beyond the river.

Lastly, the Niger would allow Lugard to redirect the existing trade in the Protectorate from the desert route to the English sphere. It provided safety and cheap transport. Subsequently, it allowed the administration to tax the added revenue. This narrative has also been proven false.

The data gathered in this research can begin to fill the holes in the historiography of Northern Nigeria. It has

added a valuable source to the debate and showed possibilities for continuation of the debate. Overall, it has proven the importance of geological factors in considering history, as no history of Nigeria can be complete without considering the river after which it was named. Lastly, this research has added to the conviction that the early colonial state enjoyed no real control over the peoples in its judiciary.

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ROLE OF THE STUDENT (MANDATORY)

The research was supervised by Jan-Bart Gewald, who made suggestions with regards to language and style. He further acted as a sparring partner but made no significant changes to the study itself. It was his idea to consult the National Archives in London. A final language check was performed by Jo Edwards. All other aspects of the research, including archival studies, analysis and writing, were conducted by the author.

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Articles

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