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Colonialism and the Underdevelopment of Abuja Area of Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper examined how colonialism led to the underdevelopment of Abuja area of Nigeria. It relied on written sources, archival materials and oral interviews conducted in the area between 2005 and 2009. The materials were subjected to textual and contextual analysis before use. The theories of development and underdevelopment form the frame work of analysis in the paper. In the pre-colonial period, the economic activities of the people of Abuja area were very diverse. While some were farmers, others were engaged in trading, manufacturing, processing of agricultural produce, cloth weaving and dyeing. The diversity of economic activities stimulated trade not only within the area but also between the people and the neighbouring settlements. Colonialism destroyed their socio-economic initiatives and gave them nothing in return. In the first place, the industrial system of the area was destroyed. Again, the British colonial government neglected the area in the provision of socio-economic amenities and infrastructure such as roads, water, schools, and hospitals. It was in this regard that abject poverty reined in the area up 1976 when the capital of the country was relocated there.

Key words: Colonialism. Development. Underdevelopment. Manufacturing. Socio-economic. Amenities. Infrastructure.

Introduction

Since 1976, Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) of Nigeria has witnessed an unprecedented transformation (Unumen, 2009). This transformation has the capacity to belie not only the underdevelopment of the area in the colonial period but also the deplorable conditions that persisted up to 1976, except a concerted effort is made to properly historicise, analyse and document it. This is the main justification for this study. Indeed, it was the underdeveloped conditions in the area that partly recommended it as the new FCT of the country in 1976 (Akinola, *et. al.* 1975). It is argued that the area demonstrated a capacity for independent development before the imposition of colonialism. Colonialism disrupted the development process, culminating in the underdevelopment of the area.

Abuja area is a land of 8,000 square kilometers that formed different parts of the various emirates, local government areas and districts of the states from which the FCT was carved out in 1976. The area formed part of three states in the middle belt region of Nigeria, namely, Plateau, Kwara and Niger (FCDA, 2005: 18; FCT website, 2005:1). In the pre-colonial and colonial periods, the area was occupied by eight indigenous ethnic groups namely: The Gbagyi (Gwari), Koro, Gade, Bassa, Ganagana, Gwandara, Ibira Koto and a few Hausa or Fulani (Balogun, 1997:109). In the colonial period, the area formed part of four local government areas, nine districts, three emirate council areas and one traditional council area of the three states from which the FCT was carved out in 1976.

Conceptual Clarifications

Development

The word development has defied any generally acceptable definition. According to Simon (2003, p.8), there has never been a consensus over the definition and interpretation of development. Thus, the definition and interpretation of the concept is a “contested territory”. Different scholars have defined the word based on their appreciation of what it entails. It is not uncommon to find words such as increase, growth, expansion or even alterations used as synonyms of development. Thus, the term is a problematic concept and there are as many views of the meaning as there are development scholars (Olufemi, 2006, p. 36). Just like the theories of development, which have under-gone dynamic changes with time, the word “development” has “under-gone a great deal of changes in scholarly literature” (Olufemi, 2006, p. 37).

In this paper, the term development shall be used to mean those changes, progress or transformation of a given phenomenon or society into a higher state, which

enhance better quality of life for the generality of the people in a society (Olufemi, 2006: 39). Such desirable and positive advancements in human endeavour have different dimensions. For development to be said to have occurred in each or all of the different aspects or dimensions of a given phenomenon, the changes must usher in progress for the overall benefit of the entire people in the community or society.

Underdevelopment

Like development, scholars differ on the definition of underdevelopment. Underdevelopment was originally used to define the conditions of poorer countries, which were then called “underdeveloped countries”. This term has now been replaced by the more appropriate terms “developing” or “less developed countries”. It has been argued that underdevelopment is not lack of development, but makes sense when two societies are compared. One of the two societies accumulated more wealth than the other, as a result of which “the quality of life of individuals of that society is really higher than that of the individual member of the other society” (Otite, 2011, p. 123). It could also refer to development that is disarticulated.

Underdevelopment theory first emerged as a reaction to liberal free trade theory in the 1950s. The theory, however, became popular in the 1960s and 1970s as a reaction to and a criticism of modernisation theory that was then losing popularity due to the continued widespread poverty of large parts of the less developed countries of the world (Chilcote, 1984). Within the underdevelopment school, there are different variants.

Underdevelopment theorists emphasized the fact that underdevelopment is not an original state. They posited that conditions in the LDCs were not because they were lacking in internal dynamics but a reflection of the way they were incorporated into the world capitalist system. It was only a consequence of the negative impact of capitalism and the product of capitalist exploitation. The theory also argued that the now developed countries were never “underdeveloped”, although they might have been “undeveloped”. Thus, before imperialism and capitalism, there was no underdevelopment in the Less Developed Countries of Africa Asia and Latin America. Underdevelopment and economic development are the simultaneous and related products of a single integrated capitalist economic system (Afonja and Pearce, 1984); they represent two sides of the same coin.

Economic Activities of the People of Abuja Area in the Pre-colonial Period

In the pre-colonial period, the economic activities of the people of Abuja area were very diverse. While some were farmers, others were engaged in manufacturing, processing of agricultural produce, pottery and keeping of livestock. The manufacturing activities included iron working and cloth weaving with dyeing (Unumen, 2009, p. 75; Hocking, 1977; Na’Ibi Hassan, 1969, p. 22 Agbaje Williams *et*

al, 1996, p. 61). The diversity in economic activities stimulated trade not only within the territory but also between the people and their neighbouring settlements (Agbaje-Williams *et al*, 1996, p. 61). Shekwo (1986, p. 46) argued that the availability of certain mineral deposits like iron ore in the area attracted Hausa people who came into the area from as far north as Kano, Katsina and Zaria for the purposes of extracting the mineral deposits and trading.

Agriculture was the mainstay of the economy of the area. The majority of the population was engaged in farming. Other agriculture related economic activities included: hunting, keeping of domestic animals and brewing of local beer. These agricultural activities were part-time occupations. Hunting, for instance, was mostly engaged in by farmers, especially during the dry season when there was less work to do in the farm. The women who kept domestic animals and brewed local beer did so in addition to farming (Abumere, 1990, p. 21). It is important to reiterate that the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, which the area under consideration was part of, was not generally noted for the production of cash crops. The climatic conditions in the region generally favoured root crops and cereals. According to Udo (1980:10-11), climatic factors are significant, not only in relation to their effect on the character of the vegetation, but also because, by and large, they played a dominant role in the ways of life, including the pattern of economic activities, of the various people of Nigeria.

Iron working was a major economic activity in the area. Archaeological survey and other sources reveal that the area had a very developed manufacturing system with regard to iron working (Agbaje-Williams *et al*, 1996: 47-65). Iron working was widespread in the area. Iron ore mining and smelting were done in many areas including Kao in the Ushafa district, Bwari, Kawu, Garki and Maitama. (Agbaje-Williams *et al*, 1996: 47-65). Iron working consisted of prospecting and mining iron ore from the soil, smelting it by separating the iron from the ore in locally made furnaces and then breaking the iron into smaller "ironstones". It was the "ironstones" that the local blacksmiths used in the manufacture of farming and hunting implements (ACAC, 1992).

The miners were often different from the iron-workers. Miners were either farmers or professional smelters (ACAC, 1992, p.16-17). It was the miners that sold the smelted iron sheets or "ironstones" to the professional iron-workers. The iron-workers completed the iron working process by using the "ironstones" to manufacture hoes, cutlasses, axes, knives, ornaments and hunting weapons (Bonat, 1988: 7). The iron-workers in Abuja area, especially those of Bwari, Jere, Dangara and Chemanri, made excellent farming and hunting implements (Na'Ibi and Hassan, 1969, p. 22). They supplied all the requirements in the area and to the neighbouring settlements. The implements made in the area were specifically noted for good qualities (NAK, MINPROF or 194, 1925).

The production of these implements stimulated trade not only within the area but also between them and some neighbouring settlements (NAK, MINPOF, 1925: 17; ACAC, 1992, pp. 17-18). The iron ore extracted in the area had the reputation of being the best in the entire Northern Provinces (NAK, MINPROF 194, 1925, p. 17). It has been argued that a considerable number of people were accustomed to come every year from other northern Emirates as far away as Katsina, to extract iron ore from Kao. They usually stayed from december to march, sold a part of the iron ore extracted to those people of Kao, and returned home with the remainder (NAK, MINPROF 194, 1925: 16-17).

Cloth weaving and dyeing were also widespread in the area. Dyeing was a supplementary activity of the cloth weaving industry. Until the imposition of colonial rule when cotton growing for Manchester textile factories was introduced in the country, the people of Abuja area grew local cotton on limited basis for their domestic use (NAK, MINPROF 194, 1925). Cotton was processed locally and was utilized for weaving cloth known as “joboje” or “gbayije”. It was woven by women on vertical looms. Dyeing also became an industrial activity because a large amount of this weaving was usually dyed to reflect deep blue, midnight blue and lapis blue colours (Bassa, 2007). The multi-coloured cloth was worn almost exclusively by adults, usually on special or ceremonial occasions. Plain ones were used by everybody who could afford them (Shewo, 1986, p. 46).

Other local crafts in the area included: mat weaving, wood carving and pottery. In particular, pottery was very well developed and fairly widespread. In Kwali, Giri and Ushafa, women produced very high quality pottery that won international acclaim (Cardew, 1961: 199). A unique characteristic of the pottery of the area was that sometimes, the pots were decorated with animal motifs, such as chameleons, crocodiles, fishes and drums (Agbaje-Williams *et al*, 1996, pp. 48-49). In addition, unconventional designs such as flags, bicycles and airplanes were used to decorate the pots (Shekwo, 1986, p. 46). Each motif was marked off from the next by vertical bands, which divided the pot into segments.

The pots were usually glazed with liquid made from locust bean pods. The glazing technique had both a practical and an artistic purpose since the glaze also improved the strength of the pots (Cardew, 1961: 200-2001). Traders came from other parts of the northern and middle belt regions to exchange their goods for these pots or to out rightly buy them and take them to their areas for sale. Thus, there is no doubt whatsoever that the area had attained a certain level of development comparable, in many respects, to many other parts of what later became Nigeria in the colonial period.

Impact of Colonialism on Local Industries

The imposition of colonialism led to the retardation and underdevelopment of Abuja Area. Colonialism led to the destruction of local manufacturing industries in the area. For iron working, it has been argued that of all the four basic stages in traditional iron working namely, prospecting, mining, smelting and smiting, the last stage was the only surviving one among the people in the area by the end of colonialism in 1960 (ACAC, 1992, pp. 19-20). Even then, the iron-workers were no longer using the traditional processed bloom but imported iron scraps and discarded iron implements. Apart from the fact that the imported iron scraps were cheaper, some iron scraps could even be gotten freely.

Available evidence suggests that in the area, as in some other parts of Nigeria, the colonial administration discouraged iron working and encouraged the iron-workers to use imported iron scraps from Europe, which were readily available. In some parts of northern Nigeria, local miners were known to have been forcefully dislodged from iron working activities. Local mining of iron ore was outlawed in some areas. Some mines were declared British property. Recalcitrant iron smelters were said to have their workshops sealed off or destroyed and the smelters were chased off, killed or converted to labourers (ACAC, 1992: 20-21; Bonat, 1988, pp. 6-7).

The local cloth weaving industry was equally destroyed. According to Rodney (1972), when European cloth became dominant on the African market, it meant African producers were cut off from increasing demand of their product. As a consequence, local cloth producers abandoned their tasks in the face of cheap available European cloth or they continued on the same small hand-worked instrument to create styles and pieces in localized markets. According to Bonat (1988), the destruction of the indigenous cloth industry was necessary for the British Colonial Administration because their existence was diametrically opposed to the aims of colonialism, which included tapping available raw materials, capturing and monopolizing the local market for British goods and creating avenue for British capital

In Abuja area, British colonial government prohibited the growing of local cotton for the indigenous cloth in 1920. Farmers were instructed to grow only imported American cotton seed meant for export by the British Cotton Growing Association, which first established a ginnery in Suleja (then Abuja) in 1914 (NAK, MINPROF, 1994, p. 27). Although dyeing was done on an industrial scale in the area in the pre-colonial period (Agbaje-Williams, *et al*, 1996, p. 61), the decline of the cloth weaving industry resulted also in the abandonment of large scale dyeing. The prohibition of the growing of local cotton in the territory signaled the collapse of the dyeing industry in particular and the cloth weaving industry in general.

Thus, as has been noted by Rodney (1972), one of the catastrophic effects of colonialism was the disruption and destruction of the nascent vibrant indigenous technological development of the continent of Africa. This also agrees with the argument by Bonat (1988, pp. 6-7) that colonialism systematically destroyed indigenous African industries to make room for imported European manufactured goods. As part of the consequences of the destruction of the local industrial productions, the area became homogeneously agricultural as an overwhelming proportion of the population was now engaged in subsistence farming at the end of colonialism in 1960 (UICU, n.d: 17). Large scale trading activities also became uncommon in the area by the end of colonialism. It was in this regard that poverty became the lot of the people in the colonial period.

Provision of Socio-economic Amenities in the Area

With regard to the provision of socio-economic amenities, the Abuja area is typical of the general state of neglect and deprivation in the Middle Belt region of the country in the colonial period. From the colonial period to the immediate post-colonial era, the Middle Belt region was generally regarded as among the least developed parts of the country in terms of modern amenities. The region was generally characterised by sparse population, poor communication facilities, relatively limited resources, lack of industrial base and a general lack of federal and state government presence (Adeniyi, 1990: 173). Within the region, the Abuja area was among the least developed in terms of modern amenities (Abumere, 1990, p. 4).

Indeed, the presence of the British colonial government in the area was almost totally void at the time the country gained independence in 1960. Neither the northern regional government nor the various local councils and native authorities in the region had any field office of any type within the area (ABUIA, 1979, p. 3). The few and inadequate amenities were provided by the local councils.

By the end of colonialism, there were no tarred roads in the area. The few available earth roads were not motorable. Similarly, there were no hospitals, health centres or any registered pharmacy shop, telephone or telegraph, postal services, electricity, pipe borne water, secondary schools but a handful of primary schools. Indeed, there was no government establishment of any sort, whether local, regional or federal, apart from the few primary schools, in the area at the end of colonialism (Abumere, 1990; Unumen, 2009; UICU, n.d.).

One major explanation for this situation was the colonial policy of extending socio-economic infrastructure only to areas that were viable for exploitation. The area, like most other parts of the middle belt region of the country, produced mainly food crops such as yams, corn and grains. Since these were not exportable crops, the area did not, therefore, receive enough attention of the colonial government in the

distribution of socio-economic amenities. Thus, there is no doubt whatsoever that the Abuja area was neglected in the provision of socio-economic amenities in the colonial period.

Many other factors could be advanced to explain the relative neglect of Abuja area in the provision of socio-economic amenities in the colonial period. For the Middle Belt as a whole to which the Abuja area is a part, the low level of development is often traced to colonial neglect. The British colonial government neglected the region in the distribution of social amenities and infrastructure such as roads, water, schools, and hospitals. The reason for this was that the colonial policy only extended socio-economic infrastructure to areas that were viable for exploitation. In the northern part of the country, exportable cash crops such as groundnut and cotton were produced. In the south, palm oil, palm kernels, rubber and cocoa were produced. The Middle Belt on the other hand produced mainly food crops such as yam, corn and grains. Since these were not exportable cash crop, the region did not, therefore, receive enough attention of the colonial government in the distribution of socio-economic amenities (Adeniyi, 1990: 173-174). This confirms Rodney's (1972, p. 228) argument that the economic infrastructure provided under the colonial system had a clear geographical distribution according to the extent to which any particular region opened up to import/export activities.

Another factor, which can be identified as responsible for the neglect of the area in the provision of socio-economic amenities, especially when compared to the neighbouring regions, was the policy and operation of the colonial township ordinance of 1917, which encourage skewed development in favour of urban areas. Under the ordinance, some selected towns relevant to the functioning of colonial administration and in some cases only recently created by it, were classified into three categories in order of significance. These were First Class Townships, Second Class Townships and Third Class Townships. Social amenities tended to be provided in these towns because they served as important administrative centres, sometimes with substantial expatriate colonial officials in the British Colonial Administration. The policy action that followed the categorization of Nigeria towns under the 1917 Township Ordinance also resulted in what has been described as significant differentiation in the availability of modern facilities, which are basic to satisfying urban life, first among the three classes of towns and second, between them and the vast majority of the unclassified urban centres (Oboba and Fajana, 1980, pp. 588-589).

What is even more significant for our analysis is that the provision of such modern amenities tended to be concentrated in urban centres. Moreover, the volume and quality of such amenities vary in direct proportion to their relative administrative importance. The rural communities were almost totally excluded from benefiting from such amenities. It was this administrative practice, which contributed substantially to a

skewed pattern of development in the country during the colonial period. (Osoba and Fajana, 1980, p. 589). This further accentuated the disparity between the urban and rural areas. Indeed, no part of Abuja area was an emirate headquarter or a local government headquarter during the colonial period. Thus, the area, like many other rural areas in the country, did not attract any “government amenities”.

Unfortunately, in the immediate post-colonial period, the British colonial government’s neglect of the area and concentration of amenities in bigger settlements was merely continued “without any significant change” (Balogun, 2001, p. 1). This situation can also be explained by two other factors. Firstly, politicians and traditional rulers in post-colonial Nigeria were known to have attracted socio-economic amenities to their areas. Abuja area did not have any politician of influence within the period under consideration. In the same vein, the territory did not have any traditional ruler of influence. The highest traditional ruler in the entire area was the Etsu of Kara. Other parts had village heads and, perhaps, representatives of the Emir of Suleja (Unumen, 2009, p. 95).

Secondly, religious factor contributed to the neglect of the area in the post-colonial period. The area was outside the predominantly Muslim area of the region, and later, states that the area was part of up to 1976. Due to the fact that the people of the area were not Muslims, they were not considered in the distribution of amenities (Bassa, 2007). It was in this regard that the area remained one of the least developed in the country by 1976, when it was selected as the new capital of the country.

Conclusion

A basic argument in this paper is that colonialism led to the underdevelopment of Abuja area. In the pre-colonial period, the economic activities of the people of the area were diverse. While some were farmers, others were engaged in trading, manufacturing, processing of agricultural produce, pottery, cloth weaving and dyeing. The diversity of economic activities stimulated trade not only within the area but also between the people and the neighbouring settlements.

Colonialism led to the underdevelopment of the area by destroying its industrial system, neglecting the area in the distribution of social amenities and infrastructure and skewing provision of social amenities in favour of neighbouring settlements. Colonialism destroyed the industrial system in the area such that at the end of colonialism the area was almost homogenously agricultural. As a consequence, there were very low trading activities in the area. It was in this regard that prices of foodstuff were very low. Since trade is both a reflection of the quality of goods produced and a way of obtaining goods not locally produced, it is obvious that the area was in a state of isolation in the colonial period. This situation led to food glut and the consequent widespread poverty in the territory.

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