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Road Transport Entrepreneurs and Road Transportation Revolution in Igboland, 1920-1999: A Case Study of the Nnewi Igbo of Nigeria

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Abstract

Between 1990 and 1924, the British colonial administration embarked upon a massive road-building programme throughout the colony. The rapid expansion of road development was accompanied by the introduction of motor vehicles. Motor transport industry was dominated by expatriates in the 1920s. From the early 1930s, however, a number of indigenous transporters became involved in the road transport enterprise. More than any other Igbo sub-group; the Nnewi Igbo emerged as pioneer road transport entrepreneurs and charted this novel economic enterprise with huge success. Some of these pioneer transport capitalists were J.C. Ulasi, L.P. Ojukwu, and A.E. Ilodibe. These indigenous entrepreneurs commercialized the

revolution in road transportation in Igboland in the face of challenges of bad roads, rickety wooden bridges, high maintenance costs and cut-throat competition with expatriate interests. They emerged from the ravages of the civil war and continued to blaze the trail in vehicular road transportation by making innovations and expanding the industry to an enviable and unprecedented level. Employing their vast enterprising skills, spirit, initiative, vision and capital, the Nnewi Igbo brought about a profound revolution in this economic enterprise that by 1999, road transport industry had become a formidable and vital sector of the national economy.

Key words: entrepreneur, revolution, transportation, indigenous

Introduction

Between 1900 and 1924, the British colonial administration embarked upon a massive road-building programme throughout the colony. To ensure the successful execution of the road project, Sir Ralph Moor (High Commissioner for Southern Nigeria, 1900-1904), issued the Roads and Creeks Proclamation of 1903. The Proclamation provided the legal framework which empowered the District and Provincial Commissioners to direct warrant chiefs in their areas of jurisdiction to recruit able-bodied men and women between the ages of 15 and 50 to build, repair and maintain roads, bridges, paths and public thoroughfares as well as clear rivers and creeks of snags without pay (Ofonagoro, 1979). Roads were essential to the opening up of the interior for quick and profitable British commercial operations in the hinterland communities. Specifically, the colonial government active policy of road development was not designed to serve the material interests or development needs of the people but to facilitate the movement of British troops and administrative officers in the various districts and divisions. Roads were also necessary to open up and link many hinterland communities, stimulate internal and export trade and complement the railway in the grand economic exploitation of the colony. The importance the colonial government attached to roads resulted in the construction of 2,596 miles of motorable roads between

1924 and 1925. The government roads jumped to 3,595 miles in 1934/35 fiscal year, 24,920 in 1945, 33,696 in 1955 and 46,173 in 1960 (Njoku, 2001; Olanrewaju, 1987). South-eastern Nigeria, of which Igboland constituted the largest part, had a total road length of 14,026 miles out of which 1,060 were tarred (Robinson, et al, cited in Olanrewaju, 1987).

The rapid expansion of road development was accompanied by the introduction of motor vehicles and transport services. The first motor vehicle appeared in Lagos in 1905. Between 1908 and 1909, 1200 motor vehicles were imported into Nigeria. By the end of the colonial period in 1960, the numbers of commercial vehicles, cars, motor-cycles and trailers/tractors were 7,879, 11,615, 7,026 and 487, respectively, that is, a total of 27,000 vehicles (Ekundare, 1973). Although motor vehicles were introduced in the country in the first decade of the 20th century, it was not until the 1920s that the number of such vehicles considerably increased and spread across the country.

At the outset, the motor transport enterprise held out little and daunting prospects of success for a number of reasons. First, motor vehicles were a new invention and the problems of securing spare parts, experienced drivers and skilled technicians to operate and maintain the vehicles became critical factors. Second, the roads were all seasonal, impassable during the rains and had sharp bends and steep gradients. Third, the bridges were built with wood and were often washed away by floods or destroyed by termites. These problems combined together to make road transport an enterprise that would appear to be expensive to run, unprofitable and without any bright future in a colonized and underdeveloped territory. As a matter of fact, Mr. Hulton, the Chairman of the British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA) painted a gloomy picture of roads and motor transport industry when he stated that “metal roads and motor transport are, as far one can judge, a mistake” (cited in Hopkins, 1973:196). The expatriate firms which dominated the motor transport industry in its early years confined their services to government establishments and failed to meet the transport needs of the Igbo who

were and still remain a predominantly commercial and highly peripatetic society. The indigenous transport entrepreneurs emerged to fill the gap. In the words of Esse (2005:38),

The expatriate transport companies played an insignificant role in the development of the industry in southeast Nigeria in terms of the services rendered to the general public and in terms of their spatial spread. They failed to satisfy the needs of Igbo traders and producers of agricultural produce, especially those cut off from the railways. They acted mainly as government contractors, providing services to the Nigerian railway and the military... It was left to indigenous transporters to fill this gap.

The Emergence of Nnewi indigenous road transport entrepreneurs

The Igbo embraced motor transport industry in the 1920s. They were preceded in this enterprise by the Yoruba of western Nigeria and the Ibibio and Efik of Eastern Nigeria. Between 1928 and 1937, however, a number of notable Igbo transport capitalists emerged. Although the Igbo came late into road vehicular transportation, they subsequently dominated and took effective control of the industry. And of all the sub-groups that embraced this novel economic enterprise, the most successful were the Nnewi Igbo of Anambra State. Employing their vast enterprising skills, initiative, vision and capital, the Nnewi entrepreneurs were quick to exploit the niche of motor vehicle transport business. They operated the business in many important towns and urban centres in Nigeria such as Onitsha, Aba, Port Harcourt, Nnewi, Enugu and Nsukka in the East, Lagos and Ibadan in the West, Asaba and Benin in the mid-western region and Jos, Makurdi, Kano and Kaduna in the north. The most prominent transport capitalists that emerged between the 1920s and 1960s were J.C. Ulasi, L.P. Ojukwu, Albert Igbokwe, D.D. Onyemelukwe, A. E. Ilodibe, F.A. Obi, D.C. Ubajaka, F.N. Okonkwo, D.C. Emefo and

L.C. Amazu, among others. These motor transport magnates pioneered and dominated the industry in Igboland and beyond before and after the Biafra-Nigeria war of 1967-1970. It is germane to discuss a few of these transport icons who commercialized and revolutionized road transport business in Igboland.

J. C. Ulasi was perhaps the first well-known Nnewi person to engage in the road transport enterprise (Joseph Chukwuka, personal communication/interview, Otolu, Nnewi, 6th January, 2009). He was born in 1895 in Ndingbu-Otolu Nnewi. He started his business career in the 1930s at Aba, first as a textile dealer and later as a produce trader. From these businesses, he accumulated considerable experience and capital which enabled him to enter into road transport industry in 1935. His transport vehicles plied the Aba-Onitsha and Aba-Ikot-Ekpene routes. What, however, promoted his transport business was the contract job he secured to carry government mails from Aba to Onitsha, Nnewi and Ikot-Ekpene (Forrest, 1995). By the time he died in 1945, he had built up his fleet from six in the 1930s to ten (Esse, 2005; Forrest, 1995). Apart from engaging in motor transport business, he also invested in buildings and lands. He became so wealthy and influential in Aba that he was made a warrant chief and a street in the city was also named after him.

Another transport icon was Sir Louis Philip Odumegwu Ojukwu. He was born in 1909 in Obiuno-Umudim Nnewi. Between 1928 and 1934, he worked in the colonial civil service as a produce inspector in the Department of Agriculture and John Holt & Co. Ltd as a clerk. He entered the road transport business in 1937 with one fairly used lorry. The experience and capital he acquired as a produce examiner and clerk facilitated his rise to business prominence. As an astute businessman with great vision and initiative, he established a transport company known as Ojukwu Transport Co. Ltd and rose to become the wealthiest and most successful Igbo transporter in the first half of the 20th century. At the peak of his transport business in the 1940s, he paraded a fleet of over 200 vehicles out of which 50 or 60 were

Lorries (Isichei, 1976). Tom Forrest (1995:75) also postulated that in the 1940s, Ojukwu rapidly

built up a large fleet of vehicles, with lorries, Buick station wagons, town limousines and buses that worked for the West African Airways Corporation... Ojukwu was able to supply transport for the Produce Control Board. In the early 1950s, he had over 200 vehicles and employed 600 persons, including 3 expatriate technicians. Meticulous attention to detail was one ingredient in his success.

In the 1950s, one Ejikeme Ilodibe also emerged as a transport magnate. Although he had a vision of becoming a motor transport dealer, Chief Ilodibe started his business life as a motor spare parts trader at Onitsha. According to Ilodibe (2001: ix), even though “I started life as a dealer in motor spare parts, I had my eyes on motor transport business”. As a dealer in auto spare parts, his business trips took him to Lagos and Gold Coast (now Ghana). He was also inspired to enter into motor transport industry by the success of some Nnewi pioneer transport entrepreneurs. According to Ilodibe (2001: ix),

Impressed by the success achieved by my late cousin and master, Chief J.C. Ulasi, and inspired by other successful motor transport operators at the time like Chief D.C. Emefo, Sir Odumegwu Ojukwu and Mr. Albert Igbokwe, I began to nurse a strong ambition to become a transport magnate.

Endowed with immense entrepreneurial skills, he accumulated sufficient capital within a short period of time and decided to diversify to the transport sector of the economy. Ilodibe bought his first lorry from SCOA in August 1955. By November of the same year, he had purchased a second lorry. The spectacular achievement he recorded in a short space of time induced him to wind up his spare business “so as to fully concentrate on road transport business” (Ilodibe, 2001: ix).

By the out-break of the civil war in 1967, Ilodibe had built up a large fleet of over fifty four vehicles consisting of Mercedes trucks and Peugeot station wagon cars which he used in both intra-and-inter-city services.

The Nnewi transport entrepreneurs not only pioneered motor transport business in Igboland but also commercialized the industry. The Nnewi Igbo brought about a profound revolution in the industry that by 1999, they had not only dominated and out-paced other Igbo operators in the enterprise but road transport industry had also become a formidable and vital sector of the national economy. A number of reasons could be adduced to explain the remarkable and matchless success story of the people in this enterprise. First, Nnewi is classified as one of the areas in south-eastern Nigeria “notorious for their high population concentration and poor agricultural resource base” (Okafor, 2005:14). Population density ranges from 900 to 1500 persons per square kilometre. A major consequence of this population pressure and decreasing soil fertility was occupational diversification. By the third decade of the 20th century, many people had begun to abandon farming in increasing numbers for alternative economic pursuits and migrated to other parts of the country in search of economic opportunities as traders, transporters, salaried or wage workers in the civil service or expatriate companies, artisans, craftsmen, technicians, drivers, etc. These economic pursuits in which they were very successful became veritable sources of capital formation and accumulation and facilitated their entry into road transport business. What Field (1945:70) wrote about the people is instructive;

The shortage of land drives an increasing number of men to seek their fortune as clerks, traders and lorry owners in which pursuits they are as a rule very successful...

Second, as shrewd, enterprising, peripatetic and professional traders imbued with tremendous vision and initiative, they were quick to

respond to economic incentives and open up new frontiers of economic opportunities. It is little wonder they embraced motor transport business at its incipient stage with huge success. Third, kinship ties and influence were strong among the people. Strong ties of affinity encouraged mutual financial assistance and also promoted the development of a collective identity through motor transport enterprise. Fourth, as a predominantly trading community, some of the professional traders started motor transport business to meet their transport needs and those of their customers. L.P. Ojukwu, for example, established a textile business at Onitsha and to solve the transportation problems of his textile customers and palm produce producers and marketers from the eastern part of Nigeria was one of the cardinal motives for venturing into the transport industry (Maduewesi, personal communication/interview, Otolu, Nnewi, 5th May, 2010; Forrest, 1995:75). Finally, like other Igbo people, the Nnewi are highly individualistic. The policy of the colonial government that road transport should be operated as a private enterprise without government financial assistance enabled the indigenous entrepreneurs to invest in the industry. The Nnewi indigenous transport entrepreneurs exhibited the virtues of individualism, competition, enterprise, achievement, vision and initiative usually characteristic of Igbo people and society with great distinction and remarkable success.

Post-civil war developments

Prior to and during the civil war, the transporters suffered serious setback. The large-scale killing of the Igbo and massive dispossession, looting and destruction of their investments resulted in their mass flight to their home-towns. In the course of the war itself, the transporters donated or volunteered their vehicles for the movement of troops and supplies as a practical demonstration of their unflinching loyalty and solidarity with their illustrious son, General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Biafran Armed Forces. In some cases, their vehicles were commandeered by the Biafran soldiers. The late

chiefs F.A. Obi and A.E. Ilodibe were some notable Nnewi transport operators who donated their vehicles towards the Biafran war efforts. The war therefore led to the stagnation of motor transport industry.

At the end of the war, the Federal Government punitively paid a flat rate of £20 to every Igbo person who lodged his/her Biafran currencies with the banks, no matter the amount of money one deposited. The entire transport infrastructure in Igboland – roads, bridges, vehicles – was devastated. The major centres of commerce and transport such as Onitsha, Aba, Enugu, Owerri and Umuahia lay in ruins. Following the slow but gradual rehabilitation of transport infrastructure, many pre-war transport operators were back on their feet again. In the absence of requisite government policies and programmes for road transport rehabilitation soon after the war, some of the transport entrepreneurs mobilized capital by selling their cars, buildings, lands and other treasured items. For example, Chief A.E. Ilodibe, (Chief Executive Officer and Managing Director [CEO/MD] of Ekene Dili Chukwu Transport Ltd) “sold his only personal Mercedes Benz car that survived the civil war at a price of 400.00 pounds (£400) to assist him acquire two 911 Mercedes Benz lorries on hire purchase from Leventis Motors Ltd” (Ilodibe, 2007:4). It is instructive that Chief A.E. Ilodibe had a long standing good business trust and understanding with Leventis Motors Ltd, a motor company noted as a distributor of mercedes vehicles and spare parts. Others secured or exploited the goodwill of their pre-war business partners within and outside the country.

The civil war, however, marked an important landmark in motor transport industry in Nigeria. As pre-war transport operators recovered from the reverses of the war, new entrepreneurs emerged. The scale of transport operations not only grew larger but the commercialization of the industry increased in volume and tempo while innovations and specialization came to characterize the sector. Entrepreneurs from other Igbo and non-Igbo communities entered into the business in increasing numbers. All these developments

dramatically resulted to improvement of the services provided by road transport operators.

Leading the way in the expansion, commercialization and innovations which the industry witnessed were indigenous Nnewi transport entrepreneurs. The introduction of luxury bus services was a post-civil war phenomenon and Ilodibe was the first Nnewi and Igbo private transport entrepreneur to achieve this feat. His success as a pioneer luxury bus inter-state operator inspired a host of other notable transporters both within and outside Nnewi town to venture into the business. Some prominent Nnewi indigenous luxury bus transport operators who were influenced by Chief Ilodibe included D.C. Ubajaka (CEO, Izuchukwu Transport Co. Ltd.), L.C. Amazu (CEO, Chidi Ebere Transport Services Ltd.), E. E. Ojukwu (CEO, Ekesons Bros Nig. Ltd, Nnewi) and D.C. Emefo (CEO, Ijeoma Transport Services, Nnewi). Beyond the borders of Nnewi were P.N. Emerah (CEO, P.N. Emerah & Sons Nigeria Ltd, Ukpör), Igwe James Ogbonna Mamah (CEO, Ifesinachi Transport Company, Umuozzi-Enugwu Ezike), G.U.O. Okeke (CEO, G.U.O. Okeke & Sons Ltd, Adazi-Ani), Vincent Obianodo (CEO, The Young Shall Grow Motors, Neni), C.N. Okoli (CEO, C.N. Okoli Investment Co. Nig. Ltd, Nanka), C. Anyaegbu (CEO, Chisco Transport Nig. Ltd, Amichi) and Frank Nneji (CEO, ABC Transport, Mbaise), among others. The sources of capital mobilization and vehicle acquisition widened to include not only personal savings, financial assistance from nuclear and extended family systems and profits from other enterprises but also loans from banks, individuals, voluntary organizations such as clubs, hire purchase or lease facilities provided by Federal Urban Mass Transit Agency (FUMTA) and vehicle manufacturers and dealers (Ilodibe, 2001).

Other innovations introduced in the operation of road transport industry were the establishment of private parks or stations, maintenance workshops, employment of managerial and technical staff, purchase of recovery vans, ticketing, night travels or operations and the formation of Luxury Bus Owners' Association of Nigeria

(LUBOAN). There was also the introduction of service advertising through mass and electronic media and posters, hire of the services of armed police escorts, use of metal detectors to screen passengers, use of buses equipped with air-condition and television sets and meal services (Esse, 2005).

Conclusion

Nnewi people have a long and strong tradition of trading and road transport business. In the first half of the 20th century, population pressure, land hunger, decreasing soil fertility, their shrewd, enterprising and individualistic spirit as well as their capitalist philosophy drove them not only to exploit their immediate environment but also to venture beyond their own frontiers in search of economic opportunities. The people pioneered, dominated and commercialized road freight and passenger transport in Igboland. They also inspired a host of entrepreneurs from other Igbo communities to enter into vehicular road transportation. The revolution the Nnewi transport entrepreneurs brought about in the industry was of profound significance in terms of facilitating the transportation of goods and services beyond Igboland, placing Nnewi people and society on the transport map of Nigeria, assisting in the establishment of the Nkwo Nnewi market as the largest auto spare parts market in Africa and bringing to the fore the transport industry as a formidable and vital sector of the national economy.

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