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The Socio-Economic Impact of the Railway

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CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the major findings of the study. The study set out to explore the social and cultural effects of the railway on the rural communities between Kano and Zaria, from 1908 to the 1970s. It began with the following questions: Why was the railway built? How was it built? How did the communities perceive, appropriate, and domesticate the railway? What socio-economic effects did the railway have? What were its effects on indigenous crafts? To what extent did it influence the communities' expansion?

As the study has argued, the railway had huge effects, much more extensive than were previously recognized. The railway made a strong impression on its first arrival, and some of its effects differed markedly from what the planners had anticipated. The effects also differed between the studied communities. Drawing from oral interviews, new tools of historical analysis such as poems, songs, and travelogues, as well as old and new archival records which were rarely accessed previously, the study teased out the lived experience of railway development in the studied communities. Through these tools, we were able to open new vistas on how people encountered and reacted to the experience of railway development and how they used it and the challenges that arose from the development, and on how the colonial state attempted to manage the situation.

As the study indicates in Chapter 2, the proposal for the railway was imperialist-motivated, with the aim to transport cotton from the North. The railway was originally conceived as a separate line to rival the Lagos Government Railway. The very notion of the railway almost from the start provoked controversy and rivalry among other provincial administrators, who perceived it as a rival railway. Contrary to the claim by Tamuno, Anjorin, and Carland that the controversy was a result of the lack of a transport policy to guide the administrators, the chapter argued that the lack of a transport policy was merely a contributing factor. This is so because railway development is always controversial; it is always a political and economic endeavour, due to the initial investment and the expected returns on investment as well as the issue of control. The controversy dragged on for some years, partly because of lack of funds and insufficient knowledge about the region, and partly because the British were not yet ready for a second railway, as the Lagos Railway has not yet paid its way. Furthermore, the Northern Authority, which wanted the railway, could not afford to build the line, being as it was poor and barely surviving on grants in aid. Contrary to

the claim that the Northern Authority opted for a tramway because the railway proposal was rejected, it was shown that the proposal for a tramway was mooted at almost the same time as one for a railway, but for different motives.

By the time the railway was finally approved, it was sanctioned as a branch line of the Lagos Railway—and not as a separate or independent line as the promoter had proposed. As was shown, the line was sanctioned as a pioneer line to open up the Northern Territories to the sea. The principle of the pioneer railway was to build a cheap railway that would be developed to a higher standard when traffic developed. The line was constructed by both free and forced labour, comprising peasants and slaves as well as prisoners. As the chapter argued, the massive labour recruitment and railway construction provoked mixed reactions of fear and awe, contrary to what writers previously assumed, because people did not understand what the railway was all about. The singular efforts of the Emir of Zazzau, Aliyu Dansidi, were important in managing the situation. The reactions were temporary, however, for as people discovered the benefits of steady wages from working on the rail line, they quickly offered their labour. The local authority also played a prominent role in ensuring that labour and food requirements were met without the work having to suffer. Contrary to the claim by Oyamakinde that labourers from the South were not employed on the line and that the Northern Authority preferred to delay the work rather than allow southerners do it, this study found that southerners were employed on the line, even if on a small scale. As the study indicates, the construction of the railway was instrumental in the establishment of Dangora, one of the studied communities.

Chapter 3 recounted how initial encounters with the new transport infrastructure produced mixed reactions of fear and awe owing to people's unfamiliarity with such technology. Contrary to the general impression that Nigerians appropriated the new transport system almost immediately after it was opened, it was demonstrated that many people did not understand what the railway was all about, much less appropriate it. This was so because mixed reactions are common responses to new technology; but these reactions were only temporary, for as familiarity with the steam engine increased and people understood its benefits, they quickly appropriated and integrated it into their daily lives. Nigerian initiatives also played an important role in the domestication of the railway. Although the system was not built for their benefit, Nigerians somehow discovered ways to use it to benefit themselves and transform their lives.

The colonial authority also educated people on how to intensively use the system to advantage. As was shown in the chapter, the railway had dramatic effects on travel time,

distance and population movement, and rural–urban and rural–rural interactions, as well as on local and regional trade, which in the long run contributed new meanings and modes of relationship to people’s lives.

Chapter 4 argued that the railway activated more cash crop exports from the communities than was previously possible. Despite the official belief and hope that the railway would stimulate cotton exports, cotton was largely a failure as far as exports were concerned. Contrary to the claim by Hogendorn and Okediji that cotton was exported from the communities bordering Zaria almost immediately the line was opened, it was shown that cotton export from the communities was anything but a marked success. Instead, groundnuts, which had not attracted official attention, became the most important export crop from the communities immediately after the line was opened. The reason, as was shown, was that groundnuts fetched better prices than cotton. Unlike cotton, groundnuts could be grown without imperilling local food production, and the goal of farmers was to maintain food sufficiency first. Groundnut production and trade also offered employment opportunities to many people, unlike cotton and hides and skins.

The transition to export production was gradual, and it began at the initiative of Hausa traders, a fact overlooked by the vent for surplus theory. Increased expansion was achieved by a combination of household, slave, free, and forced labour. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, the activities of the commercial firms stimulated production. Although the firms were not physically established in the communities until the 1920s, they relied on the Hausa and southerners to purchase cotton, groundnuts, and hides and skins as well as food crops. These firms confined their activities to the more important centres such as Madobi, Gimi, and Dangora, a fact which contributed to the towns’ expansion and popularity. The firms were most concentrated at Madobi, which made it not only the most important railway town southwest of Kano City but also between Kano and Zaria. Centres such as Likoro, Challawa, and Kwankwaso, which did not have trading firms, gradually declined in importance.

In addition to the export products, the railway also stimulated production and trade in sugar cane. Unlike cotton, groundnuts, and hides and skins, it was grown mainly for internal consumption, for chewing and for making brown sugar. The sugar cane trade expanded and reached its widest market owing to the railway. Unlike the other crops, it was grown mainly in Makarfi District because of the favourable conditions there. As the chapter demonstrated, the sugar cane trade unexpectedly stimulated the brown sugar trade. Brown sugar technology was originally introduced by missionaries for their Christian converts; but having discovered its benefits, people quickly embraced it to transform their lives. The sugar cane and brown

sugar trade expanded in the 1920s, reached its peak in the 1940s, and began to decline in the 1950s.

Contrary to the proponents of the vent for surplus theory that the expansion of cash crops was achieved without a decline in subsistence production, Chapter 4 showed that cash cropping did in fact reduce food production, rendering the rural producers vulnerable to hunger. The popular assumption among scholars that the communities were self-sufficient in food to the extent of feeding the urban populations is misleading, as most communities were not sufficient in food, never mind being capable of feeding the cities. Although farmers always produced enough to sustain household requirements, this was insufficient. This was because production was largely household- and not plantation-based—even though the aristocrat and merchant classes made use of slaves and forced labour— production under such conditions inevitably led to a decline in food production. In addition, the tendency across the communities, including those deficient in food, was to sell their surplus at the slightest price increase. The situation was so bad that whenever natural calamities struck, the communities became vulnerable to hunger and starvation.

As the chapter showed, the railway stimulated production in areas far removed from the rail line, but it could not intensively exploit these markets. This was circumvented by professional animal transporters, who used the situation to their advantage. The colonial authority made efforts to stimulate production in such areas by building roads to feed the rail line with traffic; however, they were careful to ensure the roads did not compete with the railway itself. In the 1940s, when the marketing boards were established, they also invested in road development to stimulate production in such far-flung areas. The railway authority also operated a motor service to feed the railway with traffic. The roads become more important in the 1970s, when road transport became popular. The effect of the roads on agriculture and the communities deserves more systematic attention than it has received hitherto.

As Chapter 5 demonstrated, the railway led to the emergence of new settlements and an intermingling of cultures along the rail line. The chapter argued that it was the socio-economic opportunities engendered by the railway and the commercial firms that attracted migrants, which in turn led to the establishment of new settlements as melting pots of cultural interaction. The colonial authority established these settlements to control and segregate migrants politically, economically, and medically. The influx of migrants came via the railway, people having heard about the opportunities in the studied communities through social networks. These migrants came with their own cultural capital, which made them

relevant in their new environment. The migrants concentrated at those centres with the greatest economic opportunities, such as Madobi, Gimi, Yako, Auchan, and Dangora (a colonial creation), thereby contributing to the expansion of these towns. Owing to the concentration of migrants at Madobi, the migrant settlement there was upgraded to a village unit called Sabon Gari (new town) and was administered independently of the indigenous community.

Despite the attempts to isolate the migrants from their hosts, social relations such as trade, language, marriage, and religion brought the two groups together, which facilitated national integration. The migrants, as the study showed, were agents of change, though the relationship between the two groups was symbiotic. When the Civil War broke out in the 1960s, many of these migrants fled. By the time they returned at the end of the war, the former attractions of export trade and the railway were in decline, leading to migrants' relocating elsewhere in search of new opportunities.

Chapter 6 discussed how the railway bred criminality and offered a platform to criminals to operate. The chapter argued that various types of criminality were actually forms of protest and reaction to poverty and the uneven socio-economic transformations engendered by British colonialism. British colonial policies undermined rural mining and smelting, while the railway—and most particularly its distribution of imported iron and scrap—indirectly accelerated the eventual decline of these occupations, forcing many into criminality such as iron theft from the rail line and train robbery. Contrary to the claim by Jaggar and Rogers that iron was abundant and that smithing expanded in the countryside, the chapter demonstrated that mining, smelting, and smithing declined. Iron was scarce in the countryside and was available only at high prices. The iron delivered by the railway also did not circulate widely; it was confined to urban centres, which forced rural smiths to steal from the rail line to compensate for the scarcity.

The chapter also showed that the iron theft and train robbery were fuelled by the existence of a demand for, and an organized fencing of, stolen goods. The rise of the crimes took the Railway and the colonial state unawares. Their attempts to stem the crime rate failed, as neither had enough men to police the line. The thieves were aware of this insufficient manpower and exploited it to their own advantage. Amendments to the penal code in the case of iron theft also did not stem the incidence of the crime. Inhabitants of those communities where the lines passed encouraged the crime, as they did not see it as something bad and often participated in the activity or turned a blind eye to what was occurring. The Railway

authority was eventually forced to placate the smiths by distributing its surplus scrap to them, a policy which, as was pointed out, still did not prevent the incidence of theft.

This study has attempted to write the story of the experience of railway development in the rural communities between Kano and Zaria. It is the first systematic discussion of the interrelationship between these communities and the railway, though some of the communities have previously elicited comments in the literature. It is hoped that the study has provided insights that will stimulate further discussion on some of the issues raised. If this is the case, then the study will have achieved its goal.