

THE PORT OF LAGOS, 1850-1929: THE RISE OF WEST AFRICA'S LEADING SEAPORT

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Abstract

The coastline of West Africa is characterized by the lack of natural harbours. Lagos, a lagoon port shielded from the open sea by a sand bar, epitomised the challenges of making the region's disadvantaged ports accessible to ocean shipping. Focusing on the period 1850-1929, this chapter highlights the interlocking roles of British colonialism, port engineering, mercantile pressure groups and global economic dynamics in the emergence of Lagos as West Africa's leading seaport by the late nineteenth century. It examines, among others, port development, co-ordination of services, tariffs and revenue, trade and shipping. The development of the port is shown to have fostered trade and shipping primarily in the service of British imperialism.

Introduction

A common feature of the West African coastline is the limited number of natural harbours because of the lack of major indentations. This contrasts sharply with the coastlines of Western Europe and Japan, for example. Hence, only Dakar and Freetown have "good natural harbours." (White, 1970, p.14) Consequently, port development in the region has involved extensive engineering works to create or expand port facilities. This chapter details the development, administration and trade of Lagos (Nigeria) from the mid-nineteenth century to the late 1920s. The period begins with British colonization between 1850 and 1861, and ends with the onset of the Great Depression of 1929-33. A combination of the institutional, technological, legal and commercial changes wrought by British colonialism, the transition from a local economy based upon the trans-Atlantic slave trade to one driven by the so-called "legitimate" trade in non-human commodities, the migrations and settlement of returnees from the African Atlantic Diaspora, urbanization and port development, and global dynamics propelled the former lagoon port into the leading port-city of West Africa. (Olukoju, 2004) By 1880, Lagos had

earned the appellation of “the Liverpool of West Africa,” a reference to its preeminence in the maritime economy of the region.¹

The discussion in this chapter draws on original research, primary and secondary source material and the author’s sustained engagement with the subject.(Hopkins, 1964; Ogundana, 1970, 1976, 1980; Olukoju, 1992a, 1992b, 1994, 2004) In addition to secondary sources, academic books and journal articles, the analysis relies on colonial archival sources of various descriptions, not least official correspondence, Blue Books, Annual Reports, reports of commissions of inquiry, private papers and contemporary newspapers. These sources richly document aspects of the development of the port and its trade, relations between the port and its hinterland, colonial policies and the indigenous people’s agency in these developments.

The Development of the Port of Lagos, c.1850-1929

The development of the port of Lagos between 1850 and 1929 can be traced in three broad phases – the period from the establishment of the British colony till 1892, the eve of the declaration of the protectorate, which extended the administrative reach of the colony into the Yoruba hinterland; the next from 1893 till the onset of World War I and, finally, the years between 1914 and 1929. These phases witnessed certain landmarks, such as the construction of the railway, the dredging of the harbour and the creation of the Apapa wharf as the railway-linked port outlet of Lagos. Each of these periods also witnessed successive improvements in port facilities, port entrance accessibility, the draught and size of shipping, and the variety, value and volume of seaborne trade.

The period between 1850 and 1892 may be described as the stage of the “undeveloped” port, when natural conditions prevailed, especially in the entrance to the harbour. As it had been for centuries, Lagos was a lagoon port that was shielded from the open sea by a sandbar, the notoriety of which earned it the nickname of the “Bugbear of the Bight” by the early sixteenth century (Olukoju, 1992a, p.61), when the entrance was described as “really dangerous.” (Ogundana, 1976, p.69) The combination of the heavy surf from the Atlantic and the bar produced by sand propelled by the longshore drift made direct shipment impossible. Consequently, until 1914, ocean shipping had no direct access to Lagos. Better access to ocean shipping was afforded by nearby lagoon ports at Badary, Lekki and Palma. Recourse was,

therefore, made to bar transshipment by surf boats, which added to the cost of shipping and often damaged the cargo. This type of transshipment was in two stages – surf boats took cargo from the ship lying a few miles offshore while branch boats then conveyed the cargo across the bar into the harbour. Exports were conveyed to the ocean-going ships in a reverse order. (Ogundana, 1976, p. 72)

However, port-working by surf boats was most unreliable as turbulent surf conditions at the harbour entrance at Lagos often prevented the operation of surf boats altogether. Under such conditions, Lagos cargo was transhipped by a second method – adjacent entrance transshipment - via Forcados river, 128 miles to the east. The calmer waters at Forcados permitted direct handling of cargo between ocean shipping and branch boats. Though transshipment via Forcados took sixteen hours, the same length of time that it took for cargo to be handled by by transshipment across the Lagos bar, it was with far less damage to or loss of cargo. In 1900, a firm reported only 2.3 per cent loss of cargo via the Forcados route compared to about 10 per cent across the Lagos bar. Even so, branch boats could only operate across the Lagos bar at high tide in day time given the hazards of night crossing. In all, the cost of transshipment was considerable. By 1892, at the rate of five shillings per ton, it totalled £25,000, two and half per cent the value of total Lagos trade for the year. If a higher rate of 12s 6d is accurate, cost of transshipment emburdened Lagos maritime trade. ((Ogundana, 1976, p. 73) Beyond the problem of the sand bar was the shallow depth within the harbour, which, even with access, limited the draught of shipping.

Colonial officials in Lagos and London recognized from as early as the 1860s that improvements to the Lagos port entrance were necessary if the port was to achieve its potential. But up to the 1890s, the competing proposals for such improvements did not attract serious attention because the trade of the port could not match the cost of the project. Even when an American company proposed in 1860 to construct floating breakwaters in return for the revenue from harbour dues for the next twenty years, the offer did not elicit a positive response. But before the end of the century, it was widely accepted that access to the port was contingent upon constant dredging and the construction of breakwaters. ((Ogundana, 1976, p. 74) Accordingly, various proposals were considered for the construction of two stone moles to protect the entrance

and a third mole (the west training bank) to channel water to scour the entrance. This proposal was submitted by Messrs Coode and Partners of London in 1892 at an initial cost of £830,000 that was revised to £797,000 in 1898. Alternative proposals for a canal and a 720-foot pier to ease were considered in the 1890s. ((Ogundana, 1976, p. 76) Apart from considerations of cost, neither offered a better long-term solution to the problem of port working in Lagos. In particular, they were short-term solutions that could not cope with anticipated rapid growth of trade and increase in the size and draught of ocean shipping. Still, though the moles project was widely accepted in Lagos as the best long-term solution to the problem of access to the port, its cost was considered rather prohibitive. Unlike the scepticism in London, given the well-known penny-pinching attitude of the British Treasury, the local colonial officials in Lagos were convinced that revenue from port charges and trade would repay the loans required to finance harbour works.

The year 1906 was a turning point in the history of port development in Lagos. First, the British government amalgamated its two colonial administrations in Southern Nigeria – The Colony and Protectorate of Lagos, and the Colony of Southern Nigeria. This was in accordance with the policy of making the latter colony share its wealth with the latter, and thus make the colonies self-sufficient. The revenue of the combined administration in 1906 was over £1 million in 1906, compared to only £200,000 for Lagos alone by the end of the nineteenth century. In the event, it was now possible for the revenue of the enlarged colonial administration to bear the cost of port development at Lagos. Second, it was in 1906 that the government also decided to make Lagos the sole coastal terminus of the western railway, the construction of which had been started in Lagos in 1895. ((Ogundana, 1976, p.77)

The western railway line was meant to channel the trade of the hinterland to Lagos. Accordingly, it progressed slowly northwards towards the River Niger, the major artery of internal trade in the Nigerian hinterland. The railway line was crucial to the construction of Lagos port for two major reasons. First, it facilitated the transport of stones from the Aro Quarry some 45 miles to the north for the construction of the moles. Second, the line became a major conveyor of trade in both directions between the port and the hinterland.

With the railway facilitating the supply of stone, construction work on the moles project commenced in 1907.² Small wharves were first constructed at Iddo and at the east mole site. Stone discharged at Iddo was then conveyed by barges across the harbour to the mole wharf, from where rail trucks carried it to the tipping point. Work began at the sites of the east and west moles, and at the west training wall in 1908, 1910 and 1915, respectively.

As can be seen from Table 1 below, steady progress was recorded as stone was deposited in the harbour. There was a slight overlap in the commencement and completion of the three projects. On completion, the two moles and the training bank had a combined length of three and half miles built with some 1.8 million tons of stone.

Table 1: Progress of Lagos Harbour Works (Mole Projects), 1908-1922

Year	East Mole	West Mole	West Training Bank
1908	988 feet		
1909	3048		
1910	5571		
1911	7123		
1912	8009	1072 feet	
1913	8813	2111	
1914	10043	2772	
1915	10423	3154	413 feet
1916		3581	1322
1917		3814	2026
1918		4226	2516
1919		4716	2562
1920		4952	2772

1921		5073	3186
1922		5175	3292

Source: Data extracted from Table 1 in Babafemi Ogundana (1976) “Changing the Capacity of Nigeria’s Seaport Entrances,” *Odu: Journal of West African Studies*, 14, 78.

A second major challenge of port development at Lagos was the deepening of the approach channel and the harbour. Between 1877 and 1907, the official bar draught at Lagos fluctuated widely, between the lowest figure of 9 feet 6 inches (December 1899) and the highest of 13 feet (February-March 1889). Whereas the draught was 10-11 feet in 1877, it was 9 feet 9 inches in December 1905.(Olukoju, 1992a, p. 63). The shallow entrance greatly impeded and imperilled navigation. In 1895 alone, three steamers were wrecked on the Lagos bar and totally disabled. A fourth damaged her sternpost and became a hulk in the harbour. The conditions on the bar were further compounded by adverse weather. Heavy rains from June to August created “bad bar” conditions and further hampered shipping at Lagos. Accordingly, dredgers were employed to raise the official bar draught. In May 1907, the first dredger, the *Egerton*, was acquired and it commenced work a month later. A second dredger, the *Sandgrouse*, joined in August 1909. However, the cost of dredging strained the finances of the colony. (Olukoju, 1992a, pp. 60-62)

Yet, after an expenditure of nearly £200,000, dredging seemed to have made little difference as lamented by a Lagos newspaper, which then recommended the constant use of four of more dredgers during a favourable season in the year to create a deep channel across the bar while a local dredger would subsequently rid the channel of further silting. (*Lagos Weekly Record*, 8 October 1910) It appears that this line of action was pursued as consistent dredging did achieve steady improvements of the bar draught, as detailed in Table 2 below. Still, though the minimum bar draught increased steadily throughout the period, the maximum for 1919 was a foot less than the preceding year.

Table 2: Lagos Official Bar Draught, 1907-1919

Year	Minimum	Maximum
1907	9 feet	11 feet

1908	11 feet 6 inches	13 feet
1909	12 feet	14 feet
1910	13 feet	15 feet
1911	11 feet	16 feet
1912	9 feet 6 inches	16 feet 6 inches
1913	12 feet	18 feet
1914	13 feet 6 inches	19 feet
1915	13 feet	17 feet
1916	15 feet	19 feet 6 inches
1917	19 feet 6 inches	20 feet
1918	20 feet	21 feet
1919	20 feet	20 feet

Source: Adapted from Table 4 in Ayodeji Olukoju (1992) “The Development of the Port of Lagos, 1892-1946,” *Journal of Transport History*, third series, 13, 1,66.

An immediate consequence of the improvements in the bar draught was the impact on shipping through the port. By August 1913, with the attainment of a sixteen-foot draught over the bar for seven consecutive months, the long-desired goal of port development at Lagos was achieved: ocean-going shipping could now enter the port for the first time in its history.³ With Germany’s Woermann shipping line blazing the trail, European shipping lines began direct sailings from Europe in February 1914. Consequently, the port of Lagos had become a major outlet for ocean shipping on the Atlantic coast of Africa on the eve of World War I. Yet as much as half of Lagos shipments was carried by branch steamers via Forcados, an indication, as a Lagos newspaper noted, that the conditions on the bar were far from perfect, given occasional low depth of water on the bar. (*Nigerian Pioneer*, 31 July 1914)

While the foregoing has detailed engineering works to narrow and deepen the entrance to Lagos harbour, the discussion now shifts to the provision of increased wharfage accommodation

for ships in the port. Both issues were interwoven and contingent on the direction of port development policy in Nigeria – whether to limit seaborne trade to a few ports (port concentration) or create multiple outlets (port diffusion). (Ogundana, 1970) Throughout the period from 1850 to 1929, Lagos was the preeminent port even as policy oscillated between concentration and diffusion. This arose from the port's locational advantages vis-a-vis other ports, water and rail transport access to a rich and diversified hinterland, a modernizing urban setting and colonial capital-city status, compared to rival Nigerian ports. (Olukoju, 1996)

That said, the expansion of wharfage involved the decision over which of the Lagos wharves would be the terminus of the railway. The consulting engineers had recommended the construction of wharves at a location different from the railway terminus at Iddo, for the cost and disruption attendant upon extending the railway across the Lagos township to link a possible site at Wilmot Point on Victoria Island proved forbidding. Consequently, Nigeria's Governor-General Frederick Lugard recommended to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London in 1913 that the wharves be constructed at Apapa on the opposite side of The Marina, to which the railway had access. Following approval by London in October 1913, work commenced on the Apapa wharf scheme, which on completion in 1919, had a 180-foot wharf with a depth of 26 feet at low water achieved by dredging the approach channel. Additional wharves at Iddo and Lagos Island complemented the Apapa wharf. (Olukoju, 1992a, p.67)

The three wharves handled different components of the external trade of the port (See Table 3). The import trade was handled through the Customs wharf (so-called because it grew from the Customs pier constructed in the 1860s) on Lagos Island and Iddo, the former accounting for two-thirds of the traffic. This was essentially because of the extensive private warehouse accommodation owned by importers on Lagos Island. Iddo also handled the bulk of the export trade until Apapa supplanted it from the 1925/26 financial year. From that year, Apapa wharf captured and controlled all of the export trade, given its rail connections with the hinterland. Indeed, Iddo ceased to handle maritime traffic though it dealt with the local coal traffic. (Olukoju, 1992a, p.71)

It can be said that by 1919, the most significant port engineering works had been accomplished at Lagos. Yet, though dredging continued to increase the bar draught, which

peaked at 25 feet in 1923, depth alone was not the governing factor in navigation across the bar. More important, a contemporary observer noted, was “the strength and direction of the tides.”⁴ Strong tides during the rainy season hampered navigation across the bar by larger vessels which could have taken advantage of the increased depth. It was, therefore, unnecessary to deepen the entrance beyond 25 feet for the rest of the 1920s.

Port Administration: Stakeholders, Coordination of Services, Tariffs and Revenue

A concomitant of port development at Lagos was the political control and financial administration of the port. In terms of control, Nigerian ports up to 1954 were administered by a multiplicity of port authorities, which engaged in turf wars.(Olukoju, 1992b) Given the heavy commitment of government funds to port development, various agencies and departments of government were involved in the administration of Lagos port.(Ogundana, 1980, pp.171-72; Olukoju, 1992b, pp. 158-59) The Marine Department patrolled the entrance to the port and provided technical data on the conditions of the bar. It was responsible for pilotage, storage, the berthing of ships and buoyage (which it took over from Elder Dempster Agencies in 1926). The Harbour Department emerged as the supervisory agency for the port entrance works. In 1922, the Port Engineering Department took over civil engineering maintenance works below the quay face. At the Customs Wharf on Lagos Island, the Public Works Department was involved in the maintenance of port buildings while the Customs itself nominally handled the landing, loading and delivery of cargo. It also collected berthage and harbour dues. The Railway Department took part in port administration from the commencement of railway construction at Iddo in 1895. From then, it handled port operations at other rail-linked wharves at Ijora and Apapa. Shipping firms too were involved in port administration as they controlled lighterage services.(Olukoju, 2001-2002) Inter-departmental rivalry was rife during the pre-1954 period as the various Departments protected their narrow interests at the expense of coordinated port-working. The expected synchronization of railway delivery of cargo with ship sailings coordinated by the Marine did not materialize with adverse effects on shipping turnaround and overall port-working

The negative impact on trade of the diffusion of port authority necessitated the intervention of the business community in Lagos and the United Kingdom, which pressed for remedial action. A report on the Nigerian railway system submitted to the government in 1924

recommended better coordination of port services when Apapa was fully developed and noted the demand by the business community for a Harbour Board. (Hammond, 1924, p.174) The report generated much debate and elicited opposition, especially from mercantile interests, to perceived railway domination of Nigerian ports. The recommendation for absorption of the Port Engineering Department by the Marine Department was also stoutly resisted. Consequently, the administration of the port of Lagos remained under the control of multiple authorities with dire consequences for the trade and administration of the port. As the colonial governor remarked, the various port authorities, rather than cooperate for the common good, “put their own ... interests, as they conceive them, in the forefront and as a consequence they are on many occasions pulling one against the other, public business being hampered and delayed.”⁵ This remained the state of affairs till the Nigerian Ports Authority was created in 1955 as the overall co-ordinating authority for Lagos and other Nigerian ports.

In terms of port revenue, various charges were levied for lighterage, lighting and buoyage, berthage, pilotage and harbour services to offset part of the cost of transforming the port as stated above. (Olukoju, 1994) Until 1917, the rate of harbour dues at Lagos was two shillings six pence per ton of cargo landed or shipped from the port. The rate was doubled to four shillings per first and second-class passengers and from six pence to one shilling on others by an ordinance of December 1918. The rate on cargo were set at £1 per ton of hides and skins, 6s 3d per ton of groundnuts and palm kernels, 5s 6d per ton of palm oil and 4s per ton of tin. Berthage dues were charged as from 1917 at the rate of one penny per registered ton for every forty hours that a vessel spent alongside a government wharf, but warships and similar vessels owned by the British imperial government were exempt.⁶ Towage dues were also levied on vessels according to their draught. In 1920, vessels with a draught of 16 feet or below paid £17, and those between sixteen and twenty feet were levied £20 while those exceeding twenty feet paid £22 10s. Additional charges were imposed for services on Sundays and public holidays at the rate of £1 10s for any period exceeding one and half hours and £3 for longer.⁷

In addition to the aforementioned charges on shipping, port charges were levied by railway authorities. At Iddo, which had a rail link, consignees paid five shillings per ton on their cargo while port charges were borne by the shipping firms. At the Lagos Island Customs wharf,

which had no rail links, no handling charges were levied. There, shipping firms included cargo-handling charges in their freight rates. (Olukoju, 1994, p. 114) When added together, the various charges on shipping and port users averaged £60 in 1923.⁸ Compared to the ports of Cape Town, Colombo and West African ports, Lagos was said to be “one of the most expensive in the world – its is undoubtedly an expensive port.”⁹

Yet, a comparison of revenue from the admittedly high and varied charges with the actual cost of constructing and running the port showed that the port was run at a loss. However, it was the terminal charges levied by the railways that unduly inflated Lagos port charges. The Director of Marine therefore recommended that they should be separated from port charges to reduce overall cost per vessel by 2s 6d.¹⁰ This was not entirely altruistic; it was a dig at the rival Railways Department, which duly defended the charges. As the matter generated intense debate without resolution, a committee of experts was convened in 1925 to recommend fair charges for the Apapa and Port Harcourt wharves. After extensive consultations, the committee’s report was submitted in May 1925 but immediate action was delayed by the late response of the British Chambers of Commerce, whose views were considered indispensable.

After extensive consultations, the government introduced new port tariffs in 1926, effective from 1 January 1927. (Olukoju, 1994, p.152) First, ships that exceeded 100 tons were required to pay light and buoyage dues of three pence per net registered tonnage and a maximum of five pence if the vessel visited any other Nigerian port. No vessel paid more than once within a thirty-day period. Second, ships were also required to pay towage dues for the use of tugs within the port. The rate was £17 10s on ships with draught of sixteen feet or less; those with draught between sixteen and twenty feet paid £20 and those above twenty feet paid £22 10s. Vessels were charged special rates for services on Sundays and public holidays. Third, anchorage dues of four pence per ton were collected from all vessels (except government vessels of any nationality) for each day longer than a month in port.

Although mercantile stakeholders had been consulted before these charges were levied, there were complaints that towage dues, for example, fell too heavily on small vessels. A notable British firm, John Holt, declared that “no other port of the world takes the view that small steamers should be penalized because they are small.”¹¹ This protest and the demand for a fairer

tariff regime failed to impress the government, which maintained the rates levied in 1927 till 1932, which is beyond the period considered in this piece.

Meanwhile, as part of the analysis of the administration of the port of Lagos and other Nigerian ports during this period, we shall examine the role of the business community, specifically, chambers of commerce. (Hopkins, 1964, pp. 423-54, Hopkins, 1965; Iyanda, 1989; Olukoju, 1995, 2004) First, a distinction should be made between metropolitan and colonial chambers of commerce. In the first category were the London, Liverpool and Manchester Chambers of Commerce (that is, the Africa Trade Sections of the chambers), and the Association of West African Merchants (AWAM) as contrasted with the Lagos Chamber of Commerce. Second, it is important to highlight their roles and differential influence on government policy. The metropolitan chambers were far more influential than the colonial chambers, which were essentially offshoots of the former.

The Lagos Chamber of Commerce had a chequered history. (Hopkins, 1965; Iyanda, 1989) Founded in Lagos in 1888, it collapsed within two years, and its second coming in 1890 also lasted two years. It was finally re-established in 1897 and has survived till date. From inception, it was not an exclusive European body as it had African members till 1903. Africans were re-admitted in the late 1920s and one of them, Peter Thomas, was elected president in 1929. But the Chamber was never an influential body in the administration of the port of Lagos or even the colonial economy of Nigeria. Though local expatriate traders in Lagos represented mercantile interests on the colonial Legislative Council, they always referred important issues to their principals in the metropolitan chambers, who exercised real influence on colonial policy. Yet, the colonial government routinely sought the views of the Lagos Chamber of Commerce on any proposed legislation relating to economic policy especially, shipping and port tariffs, and even every-day issues such as sanitation and urban planning. (Olukoju, 1995)

Considered as a whole, the mercantile community in Lagos consisted of two broad categories – importers and exporters – and three racial groups – Europeans, Asians and Africans. Even among Europeans, there were differences on the basis of nationality, with the British enjoying an advantage over the Germans and French since Nigeria was a British colony. During World War I, for example, German firms were expelled as “enemy firms.” British firms, aided

by their home and colonial governments, then captured the trade previously handled by the “enemy firms.” In effect, the business community was not homogeneous – they varied in the size of the firms, individual firms’ specialization in various aspects of the import and export trade, the spatial range of their operations and the nationality of the firms. Competition was fierce and cartelization by the expatriate firms was common, especially during World War I and in periods of economic depression, such as during the late 1890s. Generally, expatriate firms dominated the export trade but indigenous firms were represented in the import business, though often as agents of the former. It was easier for indigenous traders to raise the capital required to participate in the import business.

Maritime Trade and Commercial Enterprise in Lagos

Allusion has been made in the foregoing discussion to the multiplicity of mercantile interests, both indigenous and expatriate, in Lagos. Undoubtedly, their commercial enterprises were tied to the port, both in the shipping and commodity trades. The trade of the port consisted of forest products from its immediate hinterland (Yorubaland). But the extension of the railway to Northern Nigeria in 1912 expanded the range of Lagos exports. (Hopkins, 1964, ch.6; Olukoju, 2004) In effect, until the end of World War I, Lagos depended on a substantial canoe-borne lagoon traffic in palm oil and palm kernels, which constituted more than 70 per cent of its exports up to World War I. The Ogun River, which is navigable from Abeokuta, forty-five north of Lagos, and the lagoon network running east and west of Lagos provided a natural and an ancient artery of trade that underpinned the economy of Lagos. Indeed, the port-city was dependent on the river- and lagoon trade for its foodstuff supplies and for the forest produce that it exported.

Lagos had a symbiotic economic and political relationship with the important lagoon markets and settlements of Badagry, Ejirin and Epe, which covered a distance of some 90 miles in a west-east direction, with Atijere much farther to the east. Up to this time, European traders were based in Lagos and depended on African “middlemen” traders to procure the commodities from the hinterland markets by the lagoon traffic. The river and lagoon trade utilized an efficient canoe transport which operated water craft ranging from dug outs with a draught of nine inches

to canoes that were 72 feet long and 10.5 feet wide.¹² Depending upon the commodities that they carried (cocoa, corn, palm kernels and farina/garri) and the distance covered (Badagry, 48 miles to the west and Ejinrin, 42 miles to the east), canoe operators' rates ranged between three and six pence. As late as 1914, the lagoon traffic yielded 25,000 of the 63,000 tons of palm kernels and 9,000 out of 13,000 tons of palm oil exported from Lagos.¹³ Table 3 below details Lagos import and export trade through three wharves between 1919 and 1929.

Table 3: Total annual tonnages of imports and exports (including coal and railway materials) handled at the Iddo, Ijora and Apapa wharves, 1919 – 28/29

	Exports			Imports							
	Iddo	Ijora	Apapa		Iddo		Ijora			Apapa	
Year	Goods	Goods	Goods	Goods	Railway Materials	Coal	Goods	Coals	Goods	Railway Materials	Coal
1919	85,688	-	3,049	32,696	35,582a	-	-	-	-	384	16,923
1920	88,136	-	16,318	30,183	45,939a	-	-	-	135	170	28,322
1921-22	89,527	-	11,899	28,489	52,849a	-	-	-	114	13,942	39,694
1922-23	87,040	-	11,436	34,489	42,428a	-	-	-	352	80	4,074
1923-24	111,258	-	17,125	32,825	80,051	62,418	-	-	58	-	5,236
1924-25	173,921	-	24,772	45,546	6,949	49,807	-	19,996	37	-	8,747
1925-26	182,609	-	55,786	55,454	7,167	-	2,362b	106,219	-	-	-
1926-27	87,180	-	127,241	62,006	4,121	-	7,886b	100,205	9,574	1,921	-
1927-28	-	-	178,128	1,005	-	-	3,571b	82,960	103,933	31,823	-
1928-29	-	417	201,307	-	-	-	11,457	74,144	111,470	14,134	-

Notes:

a Railway materials and coal

b Timber, kerosene, etc.

Source, CSO 1/32/97 702 of 25 June 1929, Baddeley to Webb, enc. 2.

Three major developments between the 1890s and 1914 altered the composition of Lagos trade. (Olukoju, 2004) These were railway construction, the introduction of modern currency and the development of the cocoa industry in the Yoruba hinterland of Lagos. With the extension of the railway northwards across the forest belt towards the River Niger, a greater quantity and variety of produce was conveyed to the port and the railway also facilitated the distribution of foreign imports into wider areas of the hinterland. As indicated above, the railway enabled Apapa wharf, which had a rail link to the hinterland, to displace Iddo and Lagos Island, which had relied heavily on the lagoon traffic. From 1912 onwards, rail-borne commodities from northern Nigeria – groundnuts and cotton – and cocoa from western Nigeria significantly expanded the range of Lagos exports. The imposition of European currency and the demonetization of existing currency – cowries in Lagos and its proximate hinterland - and the introduction of modern banking institutions facilitated trade within the Nigerian colony and between it and foreign markets. British coinage and currency notes coexisted with earlier media of exchange till the 1930s, or even later in other parts of Nigeria. But in Lagos, the adoption of British currencies was rapid and had been completed before World War I. However, the transition was fraught with difficulties, as epitomised by the colonial subjects' reservations and poor handling by the colonial authorities during the introduction of currency notes between 1916 and 1920. (Olukoju, 1997)

While the export trade of Lagos throughout the period between 1850 and 1929 consisted of forest products and tin from northern Nigeria, imports consisted of a wide range of European manufactures. (Hopkins, 1964; Olukoju, 2004) Imports reflected the changing tastes and levels of modernisation in Lagos and the hinterland. Already, in addition to resident European officials, missionaries and traders, an emergent class of indigenous Western-educated professionals (lawyers, doctors, journalists and clergymen) and merchants had imbibed Western tastes and values. Accordingly, in addition to items of mass consumption (clothing, kerosene, household utensils, building materials and foodstuffs), luxury items, such as motor cars, were imported in large quantities. The railway facilitated the spread of such imports to a widening hinterland.

The volume and direction of Lagos trade throughout the period from 1880 to 1929 varied with prevailing economic conditions (trade boom or depression) and global and local

developments, such as war, anti-colonial disturbances, crop failures, locust infestation and epidemics (exemplified by cattle diseases, bubonic plagues and influenza). Otherwise, Britain, the imperial power, generally took the lion's share of the trade. Yet, other countries, especially Germany, were key players in certain sectors of the external trade of the port. For example, German firms dominated the palm kernel export trade of Lagos up to the outbreak of World War I because they superseded their European rivals in the crushing and processing of the kernels and in the domestic consumption of the resultant cattle feed. Germany was also a strong competitor in the import trade because it understood and met indigenous peoples' tastes, was able to manufacture such products at a lower cost compared to its British competitors, and dominated the "trade spirits" business. But the British took over the German share of the kernel and import business when German traders were expelled during the war. Otherwise, the two countries – Britain and Germany – together controlled 96 per cent of the exports and supplied some 87 per cent of the imports into Lagos between 1880 and 1914. (Hopkins, 1964, p.383) The exit of the Germans from the shipping and commodity trades merely strengthened the grip of the United Kingdom on the maritime trade of Lagos.

The development of steam shipping in the nineteenth century coincidentally with the transition from the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the commodity trade in forest products strengthened existing maritime links between West Africa and Europe. This was further bolstered by the acquisition of colonies in West Africa by Britain, France and Germany. From the 1880s till the outbreak of World War I, the shipping trade of the port of Lagos was dominated by British, German, Dutch and French shipping lines. Elder Dempster, Woermann Linie, Holland West Afrika Lijn and Chargeurs Reunis provided regular sailings between Europe and West Africa. (Davies, 1973; Hopkins, 1988) From the late nineteenth century till the end of our period, these expatriate lines tightened their grip on the shipping of Lagos and other West African ports by operating under a liner conference, a very effective cartel which kept out any significant competition. However, World War I displaced Woermann Linie, which could not regain its pre-war position after war. American and Italian shipping lines too called at the port of Lagos, including the last of the sailing ships of the era. What is significant about the shipping trade of Lagos during the period under review is not merely how shipping services facilitated maritime enterprise, but the way it sustained the predominance of expatriate trading firms, who

received secret rebates and preferential freight rates to the exclusion of their indigenous competitors. Shipping thus aided the marginalization of indigenous enterprise in the maritime economy of Lagos. (Olukoju,1992c)

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the development of the port of Lagos, the administration and finances of the port, and its trade and entrepreneurs. It is important to emphasize the context in which these developments took place for a better appreciation of the role of the stakeholders and the peculiar situation of the port. Essentially, the interlocking contexts of British imperialism, cycles of trade boom (1906-14, 1918-20) and depression (1880-92, 1920-22), the locational advantages of Lagos vis-avis other ports, and the asymmetrical competition between expatriate and indigenous entrepreneurs were the undercurrents that drove the developments examined in this chapter.

That said, the rise of Lagos to pre-eminence in West Africa emanated from a long-drawn process that began with the imposition of British rule and its concomitants, and the application of technology to surmount the natural disadvantages of the port. Lagos thus epitomizes the triumph of human ingenuity over environmental challenges. But the colonial context in which this feat took place meant that whatever material development accrued from it was the outcome of an imperial project aimed primarily at harnessing the resources of the colony, including its improved harbour, indigenous labour and enterprise, and forest products, in the interest of the metropolitan economy.

Notes

¹ National Archives of Nigeria (NAI), Chief Secretary's Office (CSO) 1/19/45, Boyle to Harcourt, Financial Report for the Year 1910, p.2.

² Details of the issues discussed in this paragraph are available in Ogundana, 1976, p. 77; and Olukoju, 1992a

³ NAI CSO 1/19/59, Frederick Lugard to Lewis Harcourt, 18 August 1913.

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- ⁴ NAI, AR.5/MI, Nigeria: Annual Report on the Marine Department for the year 1923, p.2.
- ⁵ NAI CSO 26/1 09860, vol. II: :”Scheme for co-ordinating all works in connection with shipping,” D.C. Cameron to J.H. Thomas, 12 September 1931
- ⁶ NAI, CSO 26/1 09049, vol. I, Comptroller of Customs to Sec to Government (CSG), 9 March 1923.
- ⁷ NAI, CSO 1/32/58, Clifford to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1 December 1920.
- ⁸ NAI, CSO 26.06788, Governor’s Address to the Nigerian Council, 1923, 26 February 1923.
- ⁹ NAI, CSO 26/09049, vol. I, CSG to Comptroller of Customs, Director of Marine and General Manager of the Railways, 6 April 1923.
- ¹⁰ NAI, CSO 26/09049, vol. I, R.H.W. Hughes to CSG, 24 September 1923
- ¹¹ NAI, CSO 26/1/03535, vol. I, “Pilotage, Towage Services,” John Holt to CSG, 13 January 1928.
- ¹² NAI, CSO 26/1 09860, vol. I: Lagos Harbour Survey, Southern Nigeria, Abridged Report by Mr. Coode, 24 December 1910, p.44.
- ¹³ NAI, CSO 1/32/18 853 of 24 September 1915, Lugard to Law, enc: Comptroller of Customs’ memorandum, dated 26 August 1915.

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