The Depressed Years: the Case of Colonial Nigeria (1929-1940)

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The economic distress which swept Europe in 1929 was brought consequently to West Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Its effect on the Western industrialized countries was great, but its effect on the African producer was even greater.[(1)]The Great Depression, as it was called, caused a drastic fall in the prices of the export products and resulted in the change of the British attitude towards their colonies. This transfer from laissez-faire attitude to government financial intervention originated in 1926 when the Empire Marketing Board was established to give assistance to the Colonial Secretary for Dominion Affairs and was affected by the Keynesian revolution.[(2)]

The present paper attempts to examine the effects of the Depression on colonial Nigeria and the measures adopted by both the British and the colonial governments to overcome it.

1-The Effects of the Depression

During the Great Depression, trade with Britain had greatly affected the African colonies. In a circular despatched to officers of the dependencies in September 1931, the Colonial Office asked them to support Britain:

"the interests of the United Kingdom and those of the Colonies and Dependencies are inseparably bound up with one another, that the perils which face the United Kingdom are perils which menace the whole Empire ....that any general collapse of British credit and decline in the exchange value of sterling must spell ruin for the colonies no less than for the United Kingdom". [(3)]

The world economic crisis of 1929 brought sharp reductions in Nigerian export prices, while the prices of imported goods remained high. Between 1929 and 1931, the value of Nigerian exports declined from £ 17, 8 million to £ 8,8 million and the purchasing power of exports fell by 38%.[(4)] Table 1 shows the impact of the Depression on prices and values of Nigeria's main exports. Concerning cotton the unit values declined by 53 percent, and 78 percent in the case of rubber. Groundnut was less affected than the other crops because the receipts fell by only 39%.

Table 1

Impact of World Depression Upon Principal Nigerian Exports (Percentage Reductions from Peak to Through)

	Export Value	Unit Value
Cocoa	54% (1929&31)	67% (1927&34)
Palm Kernels	64% (1927&34)	69% (1928&34)
Palm Oil	77% (1929&34)	73% (1927&34)
Groundnuts	39% (1929&31)	58% (1927&34)
Tin	71% (1929&33)	60% (1927&31)
Cotton (lint)	90% (1929&32)	53% (1928&31)
Rubber	88% (1927&32)	78% (1927&34)

Source: Heillener, G.K, Peasant Agriculture, Government and Economic Growth in
Nigeria, (Homewood, Illinois, Richard.P, Irwin, 1966), p 19.

Such a fall in the export prices was to cause a reduction in the total revenues of the colony for the colonial government depended largely on external trade for its revenues. Most of these were collected in the form of import and export duties. Between 1929 and 1931, customs revenues fell from £ 3.4 million to £ 2.1 million.(5)

Besides this, the large fluctuations in government revenue from mining resulted from the changes in the volume of production, the reduction of rents and the lower royalty on tin during the crisis. Unlike the royalty on other minerals (6) in Nigeria, the royalty on tin was progressive. It varied according to the sale value of the metal between 2% up to 10%. If the price was less than £180 per ton, the royalty was 2 % of the volume of the output, and when the value was over £ 300, the royalty was 10%.(7)

The economic difficulties experienced by the natives brought great dissatisfaction at the end of 1929. The sharp fall in the prices of palm-oil besides the spread of rumours in the south-eastern provinces that women would be taxed as well provoked demonstrations. Traditionally the women in the south-eastern provinces used to extract the oil from the palm kernels and prepare the final produce for sale to the European merchants, especially to the United African Company.

In order to assess the amount of tax levied by the government, the District Commissioners advised the Warrant Chiefs to make a census of the population and domestic animals within the given areas. It was in the course of carrying out these orders that trouble started. A great number of people gathered at the residences of the British officials and those of the trading companies demanding the abolition of the tax and an increase in the purchasing prices of palm oil in Oloko district.(8)The protest spread rapidly to other areas and on11 December, 1929, the women of Owerri and Aba districts joined the demonstration. This was followed by Ibo women who joined their Ibibo sisters of the Calabar province. Some women beat up European officials and Warrant Chiefs. Others attacked the stores of the European traders and burnt the Native Administration offices, resulting in the damage of the tax records kept by the Chiefs [(9)]. For the first time, a political demand was voiced 'that all white people go back to their country and that the land in this area be returned to the people to whom it belonged in the past, prior to the arrival of the white man'.[(10)]

Troops intervened to restore order killing 18 women and wounding 19. On 17 December, 1929 about 32 more women were shot dead and 31 wounded.[(11)] Such a bloody massacre was known in history as the 'Aba Riots'. After this incident, terror prevailed. The colonial government sued the villagers of Azumini to pay a sum of £ 2.300 within 24 hours to reimburse the trading companies for the losses incurred during the demonstrations. On the other hand, those who were responsible for the massacre of the women were exonerated by a commission which included the Administrator of the Colony of Lagos and the Crown Counsel.[(12)]Thus, the effects of the Great Depression drove the colonial government to take measures to recover from it including the Colonial Development Fund , tax reform and the organization of agricultural and mining production.

2- The Measures to Overcome the Depression

2-1 The Colonial Development Fund and Tax Reform

The first government measure that was adopted to overcome the Depression consisted of the Colonial Development Fund (C.D.F). The latter which originated in the Empire Marketing Board of 1926 was set up by an Act of Parliament. The Colonial Development Act was introduced in 1929 because the Conservative government needed anti-unemployment measures to present to the electorate at a time of serious unemployment in the United Kingdom and because it realized that the 1926 Act had failed. It consisted of an amount of £1.000.000[(13)] a year which was to be spent on colonial development, and established a committee known as the Colonial Development Advisory Committee (C.D.A.C) to deal with schemes submitted by local colonial governments for Colonial Office assistance.[(14)] The Act aimed at 'aiding and developing agriculture and industry in the colonies thereby promoting commerce with and industry in the United Kingdom'.[(15)] Its main implication was that self-sufficiency was not sufficient, and that financial assistance was a necessity.

In addition to the C.D.F, direct taxation was one of the most effective government measures to recover from the Depression. In the 1930s, a number of amendments were made to the former ordinances in order to broaden the base of the tax system

[16].The new reforms consisted of two new taxes namely- personal income tax and company tax[17]. In 1931, the Non- Natives Income Tax (Protectorate) Ordinance[18]was enacted. The aim was to extend the income tax at the rates of the 1927 Income Tax (Colony) Ordinance to 'non- natives' in the Protectorate. During the same year, the Income Tax (Colony) (Amendment) Ordinance, no.22 brought the provisions of the Income Tax (Colony) Ordinance into line with those of the Non-Natives Income Tax (Protectorate) Ordinance. This implied that an income tax of 1 percent should be levied on incomes of non-natives in the Colony and Protectorate; and a graduated income tax of not more than 1 percent should be imposed on Africans residing in the colony.

In 1936, the colonial government enacted for the first time a law directed against tax evasion. The Income Tax (Colony) (Amendment no.1) Ordinance no.17 [19] made it an offence for a person to refuse to pay tax. Such an ordinance was extended during the same year to include the protectorate by the: Non-Natives Tax (Protectorate) (Amendment) Ordinance no.23.[20]By the end of 1936, the rates of taxes had been increased in many provinces as a result of the rise in the prices of the agricultural produce. One year later, the 1927 Income Tax Ordinance was amended on the same lines as the British system, except that the Nigerian Ordinance did not provide for company taxation, and adults whose incomes did not exceed £ 30 per year were exempted .[21]

Four amendments about the tax system were made in 1939. First, the colonial government introduced a tax of 2s.6d in the pound on company profits through the Income Tax Ordinance no.14 of 1939. Second, the local rate was increased from 1% to 1 ½ % on all incomes over £50.[22] Third, tax-exemption for 'non-natives' was removed, and fourth, a tax was imposed on all incomes earned in Nigeria regardless of the recipients' residence.[23]

Regarding indirect taxes, the colonial government introduced the imperial preference. Import duties were increased to 15% in 1932. Export duties which were introduced during WWI were reviewed to meet the crisis. During the depressed years, the colonial government reduced duties on the chief export produce – cocoa, palm produce and groundnuts in order to stimulate production. Where this failed, some duties were repealed to be revived at the outbreak of the Second World War.[24] Excise duties on locally manufactured produce were first introduced in 1939 on the cigarette industry.[25]The colonial government stressed also the organization of the agricultural and mining production to recover from the Depression.

2-2 Agricultural Organization

With regard to agriculture, the new programme that was followed during the 1930s to stimulate production for the sake of increasing government revenue, did not

consist of only the development of the existing export crops but also that of the fostering of new produce such as rice, citrus fruits, kolanut and gum Arabic.[(26)]
Serious attempts were made to encourage native-owned plantations by introducing improved seeds to local farmers and persuading them to adopt better cultivation methods. The Department of Agriculture had not started to fight the shortcomings of the output of tree crops until the year 1928. It supplied the native producer with small estates under the control of the agricultural assistants.[(27)] During this period, the colonial government abandoned its anti- plantation policy and established 6500- acre Cowan Oil Palm Estate in Warri Province and 7000- acre were established in Calabar.[(28)]

The colonial government stressed its efforts on improving the native methods of extraction. In 1935, the Cultivated Oil Palm Ordinance declared that 'if a grower registered his plot with the government and the oil produced by him met the required quality, he would receive the full rebate of the export duty in force'.[(29)] By 1939, the Agricultural Department created an Oil Palm Research Station at Benin which covered 1.000 acres and the UAC granted 250 palm oil hand press machines for use by farmers.

The second export crop which received government encouragement was cocoa. In 1930, the total acreage had expanded sixteen times over that of 1915, and the annual increase was 41.115 acres.[(30)]Cocoa was an important export crop and was equal in rank with the oil product. In 1939, about 100.000 tons were exported from Nigeria. Such a growth was the result of the government efforts against black pot diseases, swollen shoot and capside insects. In 1937, cocoa earnings were valued at £ 305.000[(31)] in foreign trade.

Concerning cotton, the colonial government industrial policy had mixed results in the 1930s. In her book, Bulk Buying from the Colonies, Leubuscher, C, notes that the type of cotton demanded most by the Lancashive spinners was the American middling. She claims that, "of colonial growths only Nigerian cotton can be directly substituted for United States cotton".[(32)] The total export of Nigerian cotton averaged about 30.799 bales and fluctuated between 4.811 bales in 1930-31 and 57.928 bales in 1935-36 [(33)]. By 1937-38 about 70% of all Nigerian cotton exports went to Britain, most of it was Allen Grade 1 because it suited the needs of the British cotton industry[(34)].Tobacco production was also stimulated by the British American Tobacco Company in collaboration with the Agricultural Department which introduced improved tobacco for local production.

In addition to encouraging the major export crops, the policy born out of the Depression aimed to foster new produce. In 1933, an agricultural officer from Sierra Leone was invited by the Department of Agriculture to introduce rice-growing to the mangrove swamps of Nigeria.[(35)]He chose Warri as his experimental station, and encouraged some farmers in the area to grow rice. Since little profit was earned, the colonial government abandoned its efforts. The production of citrus fruits was also encouraged but did not succeed beyond meeting the local needs [36].The other crop which gained importance was kola-nut and during the early 1930s, the colonial government encouraged its cultivation to help farmers whose cocoa trees were affected by the black pod disease.

The other new crop to which attention was turned as a result of the Depression was gum Arabic. In 1929, a British Company, James Laing, the largest importer of gum Arabic made a request to A.H.W. Weir [37] on the possibility of establishing regular trade with Nigeria. Weir pointed out that although a regular gum trade could be started with Nigeria, it was not sufficiently attractive to the native collectors. He added:

"The natives are much more prosperous than the Sudani and to pick gum pays them less than most of their other interests, skins, hides, and salt, etc., so that they have to be attracted to the industry".[38]

By 1930, another British firm, Messrs.B. Seebohm Rowntree was engaged in the development of the gum Arabic industry in Nigeria. This company established its collecting station at Nguru in Bornu and appointed two Europeans who used to visit both the district chiefs and village heads to whom they had to explain the importance of gum for the country.

In December 1932, Rowntree visited Nigeria; he stated that he had spent much time and money showing the local population the method of tapping the gum properly. He reported also that the collectors did not bring the gum to his company but to the open market where he had to compete for it with other firms, which helped the native producers to benefit from the competition of the European buyers by securing a profitable bargain[39].

In fact, Rowntree was not the only businessman who encouraged the natives to collect the gum; there were some Residents and government forest officers who were commissioned by the colonial administration to attract the natives to collect gum Arabic for the export trade. It was estimated that during the 1930s, Nigeria exported about 446.4 tons [40] a year and Britain was the largest importer of gum.

Since the European firms had offered low prices to the producers of gum, they were prevented from engaging in large scale collection for export. [41] Hence, Weir and the Resident of Bornu could not secure a non-European buying agent for Messrs James Laing Company as demanded in 1929.

K.R MacDonald pointed out that the ruling local price for Nigerian gum per pound was only 2d,[42] and because gum was sold in the ordinary market, the firms' buying agents were able to decrease prices by means of price rings and the producer could not obtain the real value for his produce.

As Rowntree failed to obtain a monopoly of his firm in gum buying, he demanded an exclusive concession over a limited area. In order to convince the colonial

government to take into account his request, he stated that such a concession would bring advantages. First, it would ensure the development of a source of wealth. Second, it would develop the area under extort European guidance. Third, the area under concession would serve as a valuable demonstration plot to encourage gum Arabic production in the other areas and fourth, the product of the concession would increase the freight for railway and African animal transport
Sir Donald Cameron [(43)] presented Rowntree's request to the Colonial Office and the application was approved because it would encourage the gum Arabic industry and would serve the home government. The concession applied for consisted of four forest areas which were declared forest reserves and was granted for a period of 25 years. Thus, the value of Nigerian gum exports reached one million pounds- about 4.464 tons a year. In fact, on the grounds that no increase in the transport rate should be made for a period of five years owing to a possible increase in the value of gum in the world market, the agreement was to serve only the concessionaire.

2-3 Mining Organization

Concerning mining, the world economic crisis drove the colonial government to undertake urgent measures to encourage and organize the production of minerals such as tin, coal, gold, silver , petroleum, wolfram and columbite.

The first important mineral which received great attention by the colonial government was tin. In 1929, Nigerian tin output had reached a peak and Nigeria had become the fourth largest tin - producing country in the world. [(44)] During the same year, engineer J.G. Foley estimated the value of Nigerian tin-mining at £ 2 million. Half of this was retained in Nigeria and 90% of the remaining half was exported to Great- Britain.[(45)]

The increase in tin production had greatly affected the price of tin and consequently the Tin Producer's Association demanded the government to cooperate in a scheme with Bolivia to restrict overproduction and consequently increase the price level. The colonial government then, adopted a scheme for voluntary restriction of output in 1930, the object of which was to regulate output in accordance with demand and to smooth out violent fluctuations in price. [(46)]

Such a voluntary scheme was introduced in March 1931[(47)] by an international tin control scheme which included the Governments of Bolivia, the East Indies, Nigeria and Siam. It was controlled by the International Tin Committee composed of representatives of these governments and aimed to secure a fair relation between consumption and production in order to prevent price changes and ensure the use of surplus stock [(48)].

Under such a scheme, annual production of tin throughout the World fell from 192.600 tons in 1929 to 91.000 tons in 1933. In Nigeria, tin output decreased from 15.335 tons in 1929 to 11. 902 tons in 1930 and went down to 4.956 tons in 1933 but by 1936 tin production started to increase and because the market conditions improved and as a result of the restriction, prices began to increase. The voluntary scheme succeeded also to reduce the number of tin companies engaged from 122 in 1929 to 75 in 1933[(49)].

In 1938, a buffer stock was created to which producers of the signatory governments had participated[(50)] whose aim was twofold: first put in the hands of its managers a stock of tin which had become surplus due to over-production, and second stabilize the price of tin between £ 200 and £ 230 per ton.[(51)] However, due to severe competition, the operation of small firms in tin became inadequate. This drove the colonial government to unite all the companies involved in tin in Nigeria resulting in the establishment of the Tin Mines of Nigeria Ltd. The tin boom of the 1930s brought great profits for the companies resulting from lower wages to their employees and thus lower production costs.

The second mineral which gained importance was coal. Although coal was under government control, the colonial government did not export it until the 1930 s.[(52)]The bulk of the coal produced was sold to the Nigerian Railway which organized its production and other government departments. The remaining proportion was sold to mining and trading companies and to the Gold Coast. By 1937 a separate Colliery Department was established to take over responsibility for the mines from the Railway Department. Coal was regarded as a source of supply of the energy source on the West African coastline because it was produced in no other place apart from Nigeria. It was used to produce tar and synthetic fertilisers but Nigerian coal was poor in terms of quality and could not compete with industrial coal from other parts of the world. Coal was exported to Ghana and Sierra Leone; between 1930 and 1937, the annual average of coal exported to Ghana amounted to 34.687 tons, but the quantity of coal sold to companies witnessed a noticeable decrease from 17 % in 1929 to 6 % in 1937. This decrease was partly due to the electrification of the tin-mining industry which started in 1930 besides the falling price of British coal which resulted in the increase in imports.

Unlike other minerals, gold did not receive enough government attention until the 1930s. In a letter sent to Sir MacDonald, Mr. R.S. Jameson, a gold miner in the Northern Provinces declared:

'the alluvial gold deposits were discovered a long time ago, but no serious efforts were made to work these until the end of 1931'. [(53)]

The gold-mining industry grew rapidly during the thirties due to the rise in the price of gold and the sudden appearance of a well- trained labour supply.[(54)] The latter resulted from the Tin Restriction Scheme which limited the employment opportunities to Nigerian workers on the tinfields.

Compared with the industry of the Gold-Coast, the gold mining industry in Nigeria was primitive. In 1938, there existed only 19 companies which employed about 130 Africans.[55] Most of the output was obtained from alluvial and detrital deposits by manual methods. Many small auriferous quartz lodes were also worked by old methods. The Nigerian Gold Mines, the only company which had a labour force of 800[56], used a machinery that operated with two steam- driven gravel pumps monitors. In 1935, Dr. Russ reported that alluvial gold mining in Nigeria had reached a peak of 38,962 ounces. [57]

As to silver, it was mined by the Nigerian Base Metals Corporation which stopped production in 1932. During the same time, the North Nigeria Lead Mines Ltd introduced machinery to exploit the ore at depth, and by 1934, the Mines Department published a cost figure. In the following year, the price increased by 33% and drove the company to install costly equipment to increase output. However, the company realized that it was working on a 'faulted depth' which led to its liquidation in 1937.

With regard to petroleum, a renewed interest started in 1937 by Shell d'Arcy Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria, an affiliate of the mineral oil companies Shell Petroleum Company and British Petroleum Company. Such a company acquired the first mineral oil concession from the colonial government in 1938 and asked for an oil exploration licence for the entire mainland of Nigeria about 357 .000 square miles.[58]

Wolfram was obtained from detrital deposits on hillsides .When these were exhausted, operations were concentrated on lode deposits. These were mined easily by open-cast methods but costs increased with depth because the harder rock had to be drilled and blasted. In 1934, wolfram output amounted to 5.31 tons, increasing to15 tons in 1935 and reaching 44 tons [59] in 1938.

Concerning columbite, a by-product of tin, it occurred with tinstone from which it had to be removed by means of magnetic separators. Columbite was used in some steel alloys to increase their resistance to corrosion and oxidation, for welding chromium nickel steels in the manufacture of certain cathodes. It became a separate industry in 1933 and its output amounted to 3.233 tons. This decreased to 339 tons in 1936 and went up to 717 tons [60] in 1937.

To sum up, the Great Depression of 1929 had greatly affected Nigerian agriculture and mining. As a result of the drastic fall in the prices of agricultural products and the large fluctuations in government revenue from mining due to the reduction of production, rents and royalties, the British government realized that it was its duty to develop the economic potentialities of Africa. The British financial assistance was reflected in the Colonial Development Act of 1929 which established a fund of £1 million a year for schemes of economic development. This was followed by the direct introduction of direct taxation. In agriculture, the British introduced new crops and encouraged native owned plantations and native methods. In mining, a new programme was followed to organize the production of minerals. In fact, all these measures were to serve only the British.

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