

COLONIALISM, URBANISATION AND THE GROWTH OF ONITSHA, 1857-1960

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Abstract

There is no gainsaying that colonialism changed the patterns of urbanisation in Africa. What this means is that there were existing patterns of urbanisation in most African communities before colonial incursions and these have inspired scholarly researches of various depth and volumes. Considering an identified problem in African historiography, which tends to give minimal attention to the exigencies that led to changes in patterns of urbanisation in particular African communities, this paper adopts the historical research method, with effective use of primary, secondary and tertiary sources of data that were subjected to qualitative interpretation, to document and analyse the processes of urbanisation in Africa since colonial incursion, with the commercial city of Onitsha as a study area. The study observes that urbanisation in Onitsha was not necessarily an impact of colonialism. Instead, the colonial administration only effected changes on the pattern of urbanisation in the city. Such changes were precipitated by the colonial economic policies, which among other things, used the inland waterways as effective transport facility for primary produce extracted from the various produce centres around the Niger River. However, other factors of change encouraged rapid urbanisation of Onitsha during colonialism in Nigeria. A conspicuous factor is colonial administrative measures, which saw to the establishment of Onitsha as an administrative city.

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Considering the fact that the river had served as trading port over the years in the pre-colonial times, colonialism only enhanced an existing process of urbanisation in a major town that banks the river, which is Onitsha.

Keywords: Colonialism, Urbanisation, Growth, Africa, Onitsha.

Introduction

There existed some urban centres in pre-colonial African states. During this period, urban areas in Africa did develop to some degree. Trade and communication were at the heart of social and economic milieu of the societies, thus precipitating the rise of cities in areas with easy access to the means of transportation prevalent during this period. This explains why many early cities in different parts of Africa were settled along trade routes. The onset of colonialism, however brought about a change in the process of urbanisation in Africa. Little attention began to be paid to the trade routes that hitherto encouraged commercial exchanges among societies. The colonialists, in order to successfully carry out their primary goal of extraction of natural resources and the production of export cash crops embarked on the development of roads and railways in an effort to gain access to the interior where croplands and mines were located. No wonder cities developed near the sites of natural resources and were to serve as colonial administrative centres.

Onitsha, a town located on the bank of the River Niger, had by the first decade of the twentieth century begun to change. It began 1911 when the Resident British Administrator for Onitsha province laid out the town and gave it its first look as an urban settlement. Ever since then Onitsha progressively evolved. Among other colonial cities in Nigeria such as Lagos and Enugu, Onitsha appears to receive lesser attention among scholars. It is on this premise that this paper examines the growth of Onitsha whose economic importance as an entrêpot has increasingly grown.

The literature on colonialism is vast. The academia possesses no widely accepted theory of colonialism.¹ For some

‘colonialism’ refers to a particular model of political organization, typified by settler and exploitation colonies, and is best seen as one specific instance of imperialism, understood as the domination of a territory by a separate metropole. Others use the term more broadly to refer to the general imperial policy of, in particular, Western states from the sixteenth century onward, reflecting an oppressive attitude which, some claim, still persists in the present day, albeit, in different institutional forms.²

Urbanisation involves the shift in population from rural to urban settlements. To say a country or region is urbanising implies that it is becoming more urban. Demographers have interpreted this to mean that a growing share of the population lives in urban settlements.⁶ with the level of urbanisation being the annual growth rate of this urban share.⁷Urbanisation is often used more loosely to refer to a broad-based rural-to-urban transition involving population, land use, economic activity and culture, or indeed any one of these. Thus it is frequently used to refer to changes in land-use for specific areas (usually on the periphery of urban concentrations) as this land becomes ‘urbanized’ and is sold and developed for urban use.⁸Urbanisation is primarily the outcome of (net) migration from rural to urban areas. The expansion of urban boundaries and the formation of new urban centres also contribute to urbanisation, but it should be kept in mind that migration is also an important driver behind the formation of new urban centres and the spatial of expansion of old ones.⁹Cities are products of the process of urbanization. In other words urbanization is the social process that leads to the creation of cities. Thus the relationship between cities and urbanization is one of cause and effect.

As for the United Nations, the process of urbanization describes a shift in a population from one that is dispersed across small rural settlements in which agriculture is the dominant economic activity to one where the population is concentrated in larger, dense urban settlements characterised by industrial and service activities. Urbanization refers both to a condition at a point in time and to a process occurring over time. The condition of urbanization, referred to as the level of urbanization, is indicated by

the percentage of a population that is living in urban areas, however defined. The process of urbanization has been used in several ways. These includes migration from rural areas to urban areas, absolute growth in the urban population (urban growth) and urban growth that is faster than rural growth.¹⁰ For Tisdale, urbanization is the process of population concentration. It proceeds in two ways; the multiplication of the points of concentration and the increase in the size of individual concentration. It is a process of becoming. It implies a movement, not necessarily direct, steady or continuous, from a state of non-urbanism to a state of complete urbanism, or rather from a state of less concentration to a state of more concentration. Thus as per Tisdale, urbanization is a togetherness of a progressive nature, brought about by a utilization of technological devices resulting in an increase in the population tolerance of the areas in which they operate.¹¹ What constitutes an 'urban' area is conceptually and practically ambiguous. In Nigeria, a settlement is generally classified as urban if it comprises 20,000 people or more, which is a relatively high minimum population threshold compared with many other countries.

Onitsha: The Transition to Urbanity

Onitsha has been an important commercial town from the initial contact with Europeans in the 19th century because of its location on the bank of the River Niger. Onitsha's geographical location marked it out as gateway for trade in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was the northernmost town on the eastern bank of the lower Niger where big vessels from the Niger Delta could dock at any time of the year. Traders from the North, mainly Igala traders from the area around the Niger-Benue confluence, found it necessary to use small canoes and other means of transport to reach Onitsha, where they traded with their counterparts from the Igbo hinterland and from the riverine kingdom of Aboh²²

The dominance of Onitsha as a commercial centre began, following the establishment of European factories in 1857. Prior to that date, the Onitsha market was periodic and Onitsha had trade relations with various towns in the hinterland²³. On a typical trading

day, there were about five hundred people in the market²⁴. Before the middle of the 19th century, slave trading was the dominant trading activity. The European missionary traders who arrived by 1857 brought Western education and Christianity as well as copper coins which gradually replaced cowries as the medium of exchange²⁵. These hastened the replacement of slaves with palm produce as the principal commodity of trade²⁶. Moreover, several local traders switched from trading in fish, pottery, potash and beads to bulking palm produce for overseas market thereby internationalizing trade with the expanding commercial influence and trading activities in Onitsha, the market moved from its original location at Ndende to the Otu Okwodu site which today forms part of the inner central business district. By the standards of the time, the volume of trade in Onitsha must have been large. In the middle of the 19th century, the explorer William Baikie was so impressed with what he saw there that he described it as “the most strategic trading nucleus on the Niger²⁷”

In their early attempts to reach the interior of the Bight of Biafra, British traders and missionaries used river routes, the most important of which was the Niger as they moved beyond the delta, they found it necessary to establish bases on the banks of the river, where traders would buy palm produce and missionaries would launch their conversion programmes. Thus in 1856, Macgregor Laird, the Liverpool merchant and advocate of “legitimate trade” established a trading station at Onitsha. In the following year, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) opened a station there. In 1863, the British consul pressured the Obi (king) and chiefs of Onitsha to sign some treaties with Britain. In these treaties, the chiefs of Onitsha undertook to open up Onitsha to British trade and to end slavery and human sacrifices in the town. Subsequently, Onitsha became the leading port for British trade on the lower Niger. But with time, the Onitsha people began to resent the trading practices of British firms as well as the social activities of the missionaries. Hence they decided to impose stricter controls over the activities of the traders and missionaries, and also decided to allow French companies to start trading in the town. In response to these

measures, especially to the decision to open up Onitsha to French trade, the British consul ordered the evacuation of British citizens and the removal of their trade goods from Onitsha to Asaba. He then let loose the Royal Navy on Onitsha. The navy attacked and burned the town from 1879-1880²⁸.

With the defeat of Onitsha by the British, it became rather easy for the latter to impose their rule on the town. In 1884, the Royal Niger Company (RNC), on behalf of the British government, obtained without fighting a treaty of cession from the Obi and Chiefs of Onitsha. In 1885, the Roman Catholic Mission (RCM) opened a station in Onitsha. In the following year, the British government granted a charter to the RNC to administer the Niger from Delta to Nupeland. Thus, Onitsha, as a town on the Niger, came under the company's jurisdiction. The company's charter was revoked in January 1900, and Onitsha, with other parts of present-day Southern Nigeria, came under direct British rule. It became a part of the protectorate of Southern Nigeria²⁹

New Patterns of Urbanisation in Onitsha during the Colonial Period

The imposition of colonial rule became possible after the Europeans had conquered various African people. In the case of Onitsha, it became rather easy for the European to impose their rule after its defeat. The Royal Niger Company was granted a charter by the British government to administer the Niger from the Delta to Nupeland. In 1899, the royal charter of the company was revoked and consequently Onitsha came under direct British colonial government political control as part of protectorate of Southern Nigeria³⁰. In 1900 the protectorate of Southern Nigeria was divided into three administrative divisions, Eastern, Central and Western. Onitsha was in the Central division. Each division was made up of lower administrative units called districts. Onitsha was in Onitsha District which comprised more than half of present-day Anambra State. The administrative headquarters of this district was located in Onitsha. In the period 1900-1905, Asaba, headquarters of the defunct civil administration of the RNC, was the headquarters of the Central Division³¹. The political profile of Onitsha rose in 1906

when it replaced Asaba as the headquarters of the Central Division. In 1914, with Nigeria's amalgamation, the Southern Protectorate was divided into provinces under a Resident and once again, Onitsha had its own province embracing Onitsha, Awka, Awgu, Udi and Nsukka divisions each under a Divisional Officer (D.O)³².

Having made Onitsha an administrative center, the colonial government needed to acquire large areas of land in the town for "Public Purpose". The British government had hitherto inherited the lands acquired in Onitsha by the RNC (these lands were called "Niger Lands") as well as leased some communal lands from Onitsha Chiefs. Between 1914 and 1917 the government acquired more land in Onitsha, this time directly from landowning families. The lands acquired by government were mainly in waterside, and were collectively called crown Land³³. The year 1917 is of significance in the history of Onitsha. It was in that year that Onitsha became a second class township under the Nigerian Township Ordinance passed in 1917. Thus between 1917 and 1943, Onitsha was administered as a second class township with some administrative institutions which includes the Township Advisory Board, the Offices of the Local Authority (LA) and Station Magistrate (SM), the Native Court (NC) and the Onitsha Native administrative. The townships ordinance gave the responsibility for the administration of second class townships to an administrative officer designated Local authority (LA)³⁴.

With this municipal services were introduced following the implementation of the ordinance. According to Mabogunje, the second class township of Onitsha had a hospital by 1917, water supply by 1929 and electricity in 1950³⁵. These services attracted migrants to the center who also participated in the informal sector. In addition to these improvements, the local government authorities by 1928 erected permanent stalls at the site of today's main market in order to create order in the market place³⁶. This was an incentive because traders were assured of protected space for conducting business. The introduction of the lorry in the 1920's and its proliferation in the 1930's reduced the cost of movement in terms of time, money and human suffering. The immigrants successfully

transferred the concept of the village mini open market system to the urban area, the forerunner to the multiplication in the number of market sites in the area despite government opposition³⁷

The Township Administration also saw to the construction and maintenance of roads and drains in Onitsha. From 1936 the Onitsha Native Authority (NA) also began to construct and maintain roads and drains in the township. Generally, the Public Works Department worked on more important roads, leaving others to the public authorities of the township. The bulk of the PWD'S work consisted in metaling (paving) and widening of existing roads and the construction of concrete culverts and drains. By 1930 it had tarred only about three miles of the roads in Onitsha³⁸. Subsequently due to inadequate funds needed to expand the road networks, the hitherto constructed was improved and widened. In respect to buildings, the Local Authority was required to do building inspections and to visit sites where houses were to be built. Thus he could approve or reject building plans from a sanitary point of view.³⁹ The effect of this was that Onitsha became planned to some extent and patterns in which building could be arranged and ensured that there was no overcrowding were established. Assuming that the Local Authority based this opinion on Western architectural standards, it is probably right to assert that by 1930, the residents of Onitsha had largely adopted Western architectural designs and standards for their building⁴⁰.

The penetration of International commerce and the imposition of colonial rule led to commercialisation of land in many parts of Africa including Onitsha. This made land, especially urban land, a valuable new source of wealth – a development that unleashed enormous contests among Africans for its control⁴¹. The penetration of international trade, the imposition of colonial rule, rapid urbanisation, and increasing population pressure had far reaching consequences for changes and developments in land tenure, land use, and land access in Onitsha. By the end of the 19th century, commercialization of land was clearly underway in the town. Land was shifting rapidly from traditionally agricultural uses to urban housing to accommodate the emerging population, as well

as to other modern urban activities. The new traders, businesses owners and missionaries were demanding land for shops, warehouses, stores, churches, schools, residencies, plantations and administrative offices. Urban real estate and rental landlordships was rapidly expanding, and land was becoming an instrument of wealth, accumulation and power⁴². The changes associated with the newly emerging property market began in the waterside district of the town, where expatriate businesses and trading firms located their warehouses and ships because of its proximity to the Niger River and the main Onitsha markets. A large number of immigrants quickly settled in that area, and the value of land rose faster than in other parts of Onitsha⁴³. This development unleashed enormous struggle among Onitsha people for its control. Members of the Mgbelekeke's family or patrilineage in Onitsha used opportunities created by changes in urban land at the turn of the 20th century to acquire enormous wealth and transform themselves from a weak and obscure position in the pre-colonial era to a position of influence and authority in the colonial period. Many of the conflicts involving the changing land system in Onitsha as in most parts of Africa, were played out in the colonial courts.⁴⁴

Before the colonial period, kola was given by Onitsha men to fellow Onitsha kinsmen in exchange for land they could not effectively put into use. Such lands which were either used for farming and building purposes and men who secured such rights could pass them to their children. With urbanization, the value of land rose rapidly in Onitsha, and those who had acquired lands in this way began to make much money from subleasing them or from letting out rooms in buildings erected on them. The original landlords, notably the Mgbelekeke family became envious and wanted to share the gains being made by their tenants, the kola tenants. Naturally, the kola tenants, especially those that were indigenes of Onitsha, objected to these demands, arguing that the demands were contrary to Onitsha custom. In a case that arose from this matter in 1931 the Supreme Court ruled that "superior" landlords had no right to share the rents paid their kola tenants by latter's tenants. It also ruled that, by Onitsha custom, kola landlords

could not withhold their consent to leases granted by kola tenants.⁴⁵ It took the intervention of the Governor of Nigeria, Sir Bernade Bourdillon and even that of the Secretary of State for the colonies before the Kola landlords of Onitsha were compelled to accept “customary kola” of 5% for leases made by their kola tenants to non-indigenes of Onitsha. The Mgbelekekes were said to have been actively involved in shaping the emerging land tenure system in Eastern Nigeria. They came to dominate colonial discourse and the politics of land in Onitsha, as they were at the center of one of the most controversial land tenure debates in the 20th century eastern Nigeria⁴⁶.

As higher crime rates are usually associated with urbanisation, it appears the reverse was the case in Onitsha between 1927 and 1930 as there was a yearly decline in the number of criminal cases. According to archival records, The Station Magistrate of Onitsha reported that “increased police activity” was responsible for the decline in criminal cases⁴⁷. In 1929, the Native court handled 177 criminal cases. In the same year, Magistrate court handled 299 criminal cases. In 1930, 181 criminal cases⁴⁸. Increasing number of immigrants, mostly traders began to settle in Onitsha during the colonial period. The largest groups were Hausa, Yoruba, Nupe and Kakanda. With time, the colonial government allowed them to have their own heads. These heads were chosen to lead and represent their people in the institutions of local government in Onitsha. Unlike other elements that were absorbed by the Onitsha indigenes, these group refused and withheld their culture and religion.⁴⁹ Apart from these elements, in 1930 there were several aliens which includes the Syrians, Armenians and Indians trading in Onitsha.

Inter and Intra group rivalries emerged as a result of changes brought by urbanisation. The struggle over representation in the council lasted for years. The Onitsha indigenes insisted that they have the exclusive right to rule in their land while the non-Onitsha Igbo challenged such rights, maintaining that they have the right to represent their interest in the NA Council. Out of this struggle came the formation of the Ibo Union in 1941 and led by

Nnamdi Azikiwe in the late 1940's. Subsequently the non-Onitsha Igbo were allocated 6 Seats in the council.

By July 1951, a new general hospital made up of 5 wards and 102 beds, and built at a cost of 68,000 pounds were completed in Onitsha⁵⁰. The proposal of the Onitsha NA council to establish leprosy hospital received mass opposition in Onitsha. Hence the colonial government decided to establish large leprosy settlements in rural areas. In October 1951, a new post office and a new telephone block were completed in Onitsha. A new telephone exchange of 500 lines was brought into the town and installed the following year. A sports stadium was also completed in late 1951, and new facilities were put in place to improve water supply in inland town and in the next few years to extend supplies to Fegge and Modebe layouts.⁵¹ There was also provision of ferry services across the Niger, from Onitsha to Asaba and vice versa, and the government exercised monopoly over it. The Marine Department was responsible for it. When the government found it inadequate, it conceded power to private companies to operate ferry services⁵²

The government also tried to develop Onitsha through the provision of an industrial area for private investors. Between 1953 and 1954, it acquired 33.5 acres of land, excluding roads, for this purpose. By the end of 1954 eight private companies had acquired plots in the area. They included companies that were to be engaged in tire retreading, bread making, and singlet (undershirt) making. In the 1960's, the Eastern regional government established a soft drinks company in Onitsha. Clearly, the government wanted Onitsha to become not only a commercial town, but an industrial one as well.⁵³ Among other development projects carried out in Onitsha during 1950-1966 were the construction of the town's main market and the supply of electricity to the town. The construction of the market thus helped to consolidate the town's commercial position in Nigeria. Besides, the Onitsha market was reputed to be the biggest and most modern in West Africa in the late 1950's and the 1960's. This probably boosted the civic pride of the residents of the town⁵⁴

Conclusion

Arising from the foregoing, we can make bold to state that the beginning of urbanisation in Onitsha cannot be attributed to colonialism. As shown in the paper, Onitsha before colonialism had already an existing pattern of urbanisation. Like most traditional urban centres, Onitsha's urban status is mainly attributable to its strategic location along the River Niger, which attracted traders from various places. Nonetheless, colonial rule launched a new pattern of Urbanisation in Onitsha and this emanated from colonial government administrative and economic policies. The economic policies, such as concentrating economic infrastructure where it would broadly serve the purpose of colonial motive of exploitation, indeed placed Onitsha on the path of Western-styled urbanisation. People no longer sought settlement in Onitsha basically for trade purposes but also for the desire to enrol in the colonial "white-collar" jobs. This trend had a ripple effect as some other communities, which are of appreciable proximity to Onitsha, also started witnessing some level of urbanisation. In the more recent times, one without a clear knowledge of the geographical area of Onitsha may mistake parts of such proxy towns as Nkpor, Obosi, Nkwelle-Ezunaka among others as parts of Onitsha. In the final analysis, Onitsha has been an ancient urban community that has an important place in the history of Igboland. However, certain change factors – principally colonialism – further triggered its growth and the town has increasingly proved to be of great importance in the economic relations of Nigeria and its West African neighbours.

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