

The Impact of the Lagos Press in Nigeria, 1861 – 1922

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Abstract

Copious literatures had gone down on the Nigerian Press. But none deliberates on the role of the Lagos Press in the south-western part of our country. This is the aim of this study. The history of the Nigerian Press could be divided into three parts. First is the pre-professional media houses that spanned between 1859 and 1914. Second is the proto-professional era that started from 1914 and ended in 1921. This second phase actually initiated the campaigns for constitutional development in Nigeria and has not been historically analysed before now. The Nigerian Press proper commenced on Thursday 10 March, 1921, with the professionalism introduced by Ernest Sisei Ikoli, the first Nigerian newspaper editor. The first and second periods above between 1859 and 1921 formed the Lagos Press that held the south-western forth for sixty years with its influence extending to 1922. Since politics enjoyed great prominence in their writings, they played significant roles of checks and balances in the early colonial administration of our country from 1861, when Lagos became a Crown Colony, to 1922 when the Nigerian Constitution of 1922 was achieved. This acknowledgment actualizes this research on their role in the Colony of Lagos and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria as well as the press campaigns for constitutional development.

Introduction

Circumstances brought many literatures on the Nigerian Press at the expense of the Lagos Press. First are the early works that focussed on the colonial period. It include Macaulay's "History of the Nigerian Press" (1943), Laotan's "The Nigerian Press," (1948), Ernest Ikoli's "The Nigerian Press," (1950), Awolowo's "The Press in Free Nigeria," (1958) and Omu in his *Press and Politics in Nigeria, 1880-1937* (1978). Their subject matters were the origin and growth of the Nigerian Press generally. The Lagos Press lacked adequate treatment in their issues and perspectives. So also were the publications in the post-colonial era. Jakande in his writing "Towards a Virile Press" (1961) deliberated on the power of the print media while Coker's *Landmarks of the Nigerian Press* (1965) and Ainslie concentrated on the ability of The Press in Africa (1966). Other works, such as Dare and Uyo's *Journalism in Nigeria* and Barrett's "Mass Communications in Africa" (1996), craved for a better future for the African Press. Inasmuch as the Lagos Press in the south-western part of Nigeria was not their focus, it gained the attention of this research. South-western Nigeria is the present day Yorubaland of Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo, Ekiti and Osun States. While the word, "press", means the news media such as radio, television and newspaper houses in a country or within a territory, the Lagos Press that reigned between 1859 and 1921 was the newspaper houses in Yorubaland. They were the fourth estate of the realm because of their position, power and influence in the modern society. Governments, nobles, the middle-class gentry and commoners were not doing without

their existence. The Lagos Press was a powerful instrument that shaped personalities, societies and administrations. Their influences were exhibited in the choice of editors and editorials, columnists and publications.

Nevertheless, there is no country the press had not played a virile role and wielded influence. In Japan, Prime Minister Kishi saw the violence of the press more than an opposition party. To him, “violence is not only of guns and fists but also the pen that is mightier than the sword”. In the 1940s, the Daily Mirror, London, was one of the causes of the failure of Winston Churchill (1874-1965) at the British polls. He fought the First World War (1914 – 1918) and the Second World War from 1939 to May 10, 1940 when he succeeded A. Neville Chamberlain (1869 – 1940) as Prime Minister of Britain. After his first tenure in 1945 he craved for a second tenure but the Daily Mirror was against him. The Mirror used editorials, news and columns to dissuade Britons from adopting him for premiership. To them, he was a war monger that would create the Third World War for Britain to fight, if elected.

Coming to Nigeria of our discourse, the power of the press has never been limited. Ernest Ikoli, the father of Nigerian journalism, demonstrated it thrice. His editorials forced Britain not to transfer Nigeria to Germany in 1938 for further colonization. Ikoli’s media houses were the local campaigners for the support of Britain and the victory of the Allies in the Second World War. Finally was his nationalism of the pen for Nigeria’s independence. This treatise analyzes the power of the Lagos Press in the early colonial administration of south-western Nigeria, beginning with the Colony of Lagos.

The Role of the Press in the Colony of Lagos, 1861 – 1906

According to Akinsuroju, the Lagos Press which comprises the newspaper houses in Lagos and Yorubaland pioneered newspaper publishing in Nigeria. Because of their knowledge of the other parts of Nigeria being remote then, their impact was mostly felt in Lagos and Yorubaland where colonial administration was effective. The British started it in 1859 with the CMS Press at Abeokuta that published *Iwe Irohin*, the first newspaper in Nigeria. The landing of the proprietor and editor, Reverend Henry Townsend, in the area in 1843 was for a primary objective of surveying the possibility of palm oil trade replacing the slave trade in the Niger Territory and a secondary motif of Christianizing the people. His positive report gingered England to specifically appoint a palm oil ruffian, John Beecroft, as Consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra in 1849. While Beecroft’s work created an economic base that promoted trade and politics in the Niger Delta, the CMS at Abeokuta pioneered an eight-page bimonthly newspaper in Yoruba language, *Iwe Irohin*, in 1859. Reverend Henry Townsend of the Church of England initially made it a medium of propagating British history and politics. Its advancement in 1860 with the English supplement for the understanding of non-Yoruba speakers played a decisive role in the creation of the Colony of Lagos in 1861.

Iwe Irohin’s popularity and intensity was on the African target. As a result, it championed the British agenda of Christianization, Commercialization and Colonization. On Christianizing the Colony of Lagos, it supported the CMS work of Townsend and Samuel Adjai Crowther and spread the gospel from Abeokuta to every nook and cranny of Yorubaland. Churches were built in Egba, Ondo, Ife, Otta, Ibadan, Oyo, Ijebu, Awori, Oshodi, Egbeda, Igando, Ijanikin as well as Lagos before 1880. Other places, too, outside

south-western Nigeria benefitted. Together with Townsend, they established flourishing Western educational facilities for the training of Africans in Western culture and it contributed to the popularity of the media.

Iwe Irohin made the inhabitants of the Niger area to develop the Western culture of reading newspapers and seeking for written information. Together with the work of the Western educational institutions, English language did not only become the language of government but also the lingua franca in the Niger area, now Nigeria. Townsend claimed that these were his secret objective of establishing the first newspaper in the Colony. He also used it in contributing to the expansion of British trade and the fundamental human rights of the citizens in the second half of the nineteenth century. Actually, the press had been strong in its advocacy of support for British trade. The English Supplement in *Iwe Irohin* introduced the first advertisement column for commercial welfare in the Niger area. Although it contributed to the expansion of the British metropole industries, the development of the English trading economy in the Colony of Lagos was also realized. According to Ajayi, it was the cornerstone of building a Customs House in Egba, along the river near Abeokuta in June 1867 and Beecroft's economic ventures, east of the Niger, also benefitted from this advertisement column.

Prior to 1867, *Iwe Irohin* had also covered the consular activities of John Beecroft in the Niger Delta. It created an enabling environment for him to disseminate British influence from the Delta region to Dahomey, now Republic of Benin, in a coincidence with the colony administration of Governor Glover. Within this period, Beecroft became a guest of Townsend for two weeks. Both of them utilized this pioneer media in promoting the British colonization of their areas of influence. In fact, the contributions of this newspaper were vivid. Initially, it was interested in the native affairs of the Yoruba. Later it could not withhold its criticisms against Governor H. S. Freeman of Lagos which made London to recall Townsend home while the Lagos administration organized the burning down of the paper in 1867.

As Crowder could remember, the paper also aided the government in propagating colonial policies. Hence, the Colony expanded from the Island of Lagos that was ceded to the British Crown to Badagry and Yorubaland. While they established a stronghold west of the Niger, Beecroft's consular administration laid the British foundation east of the Niger. What followed was the British enterprise at Lokoja, manned by Barth, Baikie and their successors that promoted colonial expedition north of the Niger, Hausaland and the Western Sudan. And they completed the circle of Nigeria. From here *Iwe Irohin* became the most powerful imperial mouthpiece needed in the Niger Territory by the British imperialists.

The new Colony of Lagos was expected to be a fortune to the British and the Lagos Press as well. But making it a part of the British West African Settlement in Sierra Leone from 1866 to 1874 could not bring the flow of socio-economic opportunities. So also are the times when it was a part of the Gold Coast administration between 1874 and 1886. As for the few business opportunities that were available between 1861 and 1867, it came from the 22 European traders and five Brazilians in Lagos. Their mercantile houses patronized *Iwe Irohin* with advertisements for trade and few employments for Lagos residents.

Something accounted for the discontinuation of the Colony administration from 1866 to 1886. A new newspaper, the *Anglo-African*, could not keep quiet at colonial injustices. Owned by a West Indian, Robert Campbell, it made its debut in 1863, four years before the

demise of Iwe-Irohin. The incessant criticisms of the Colony administration by Campbell's paper and other reasons drove London to merge Lagos with the British administration at Freetown and Accra. But London immediately gave Anglo-African a death blow by stopping the mercantile houses in Lagos from him advertisements. This distracted the concentration of the newspaper on the colonial administration with which it became moribund in 1865, a year before the transfer of Lagos to Sierra Leone. Campbell lived twenty years longer on salt-making, saw milling, kernel-crushing, rum-distillery and masonry until his death in January, 1884.

However, a Sierra Leonian, Mr R. B. Blaize, with the help of a former apprentice-printer in the *Iwe Irohin*, Andrew M. Thomas, established *The Lagos Times and Gold Coast Colony Advertiser*. Their newspaper reactivated the Lagos newsstand on 10 November, 1880. Except Thomas who was the printer, Blaize was the sole staff of the newspaper. But its target was the British administrations in Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast. Similarly was the case of the *Lagos Observer* (1882 – 1890), owned by Mr J. B. Benjamin and *The Lagos Standard* (1894 – 1920) of George Williams. One fact about them is their influence that was felt in politics and personality assertion. West Africans acknowledged their pioneer nationalist efforts against colonialism. Being the lonely papers of the period, they discouraged the slave trading activities that was reactivated underground. To recall, from the fifteenth century down to the eighteenth century, Lagos Island and the Niger Delta were the leading centres of West African slave trade. The area between St. Paul's Anglican Church Breadfruit and Akani Street in Lagos were among the ancient slave markets. Due to the campaigns of these media in the Lagos Press that slave trade is as bad as colonialism, the early colonial administration promulgated the House Ordinance to free slaves and stop slave trade and slavery.

Because of their anti-colonial roles and opposition of the colonial administration in every ramification before the 1920s, "what the African seemed to be missing in representative government, they appeared to be making up on the pages of newspapers." The confrontational posture of these early newspapers earned British West African nations African representation in the colonial administration of their countries from the 1920s to independence and the Lagos media were not only commended for promoting it but also for evolving a better situation in the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria.

Impact in the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, 1906-1914

The Protectorate of Southern Nigeria started in 1906 with Lagos as its capital. The Oil Rivers Protectorate of 1885 metamorphosed into the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1891 and merged with the Colony of Lagos to form the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria in 1906. It attracted African and European elites and businessmen into Southern Nigeria. About 150 Europeans settled in Lagos between 1896 and 1906. The emerging population of the elite group raised the hope of the Lagos Press, especially the establishment of many print media.

The most viable and nationalist paper amongst them was *The Lagos Weekly Record* (1891-1930). Proprieted in 1891 by a Liberian, John Payne Jackson, its target of attack was Government of Southern Nigeria. The Records criticisms of the government initiated checks and balances in the colonial administration. Duyile documented that when it reached the news stand in 1891, Governor Carter of Lagos patronized its advertisement space

with subsidies of 150 pounds annually from 1891 to 1900. This amount enabled Jackson to develop his media to enviable heights. Like other media houses in Lagos, they were printing between 250 and 300 papers weekly. Though the subsidies from the government helped him, it did not fundamentally alter its nationalist posture. Rather, it increased the number of printed papers from 300 to 500 weekly and boosts the wider circulation of the Record.

Jackson's media house initiated protest marches and petitions against the government. One of it was experienced in 1908 against the introduction of water rate in Lagos. The diplomacy of introducing protest uprisings was the means of putting the administration on its knees to eradicate an unjustified colonial policy. Jackson was known for his thorough grasp of facts. This aided his Weekly Record in publishing accurate facts and to be feared by Government. For nothing else, his newspaper was a public opinion monger. It expresses the views of the Lagos elite of both African and non-African descents. Years later when the administration discontinued the annual grants-in aid, the Record went wild with anti-colonial publications. Its diplomacy in the advocacy for the Africanization of the civil service vilified the colonial rulers that created no opportunity for the army of unemployed Africans.

A press achievement of the period was the name "Nigeria," a short form of the "Niger area." Inasmuch as it was suggested by The Times, London, in Flora Shaw's column in 1897, its adoption by the British administrators for the Niger Territory in 1900 during the creation of Southern and Northern Protectorates influenced the Lagos Press. Prior to the time, all the media houses in Lagos were signing their masthead, "Lagos, West Africa." But after the adoption they started signing "Lagos, Nigeria". In fact, it was first used in the Nigerian Chronicle (1908-1915), owned by the first Nigerian newspaper proprietor, Mr. Christopher Kumolu-Johnson, in 1908.

Like other media houses in the Protectorate, the Weekly Record, the Chronicle and the *Lagos Standard* (1894-1920), suffered from low patronage to create their impact. Their patronage came from the elite group that was heterogeneous. The inhabitants of Lagos that were patronizing them were the Ijebu who lived in the eastern part of Bariga and Somolu, the Awori of Lagos Island and Oshodi. Others include the Egbeda, Igando, Ijanikin, Egba, Ondo and the Oyo. The literate group amongst them and the Igbo, Ijo, Efik, Edo, Isoko, Urhobo, Hausa-Fulani, Ukwani and Igbirra residing in Lagos formed the reading public of the Lagos Press. Although the foreigners were only 10% of the entire Lagos populace, they were the most avid readers of the newspapers. These were the native Africans of the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, Europeans, Americans and Asians. Given this dense connection, the Lagos Press progressed into the amalgamated Nigeria in 1914.

Press Campaigns for Constitutional Development in Nigeria, 1914-1922

The campaigns for constitutional development started with the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914. The Lagos Press at the time was better positioned than before. It was transformed from pre-professionalism to proto-professionalism. While the pre-professionals were literates but not university graduates, the proto-professionals were graduates in disciplines other than mass communication. The period also witnessed the transformation from editor-printer or sole staff of the pre-professionals to division of labour introduced by the proto-professionals. The newspapers within this period were better equipped in response

to the times that was full of press laws, which restricts their freedom. Judging from their educational background, some of the media houses became more critical of the colonial administration.

The true position that instilled the proto-professionals into the amalgamated Nigeria could be traced. First was the dismay of Governor Walter Egerton of the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, over the attack of the colonial administration from the nationalist's papers, especially the *Lagos Weekly Record*. He shopped unsuccessfully for university graduates that can manage a media house, funded by the colonial government, to counter the pre-professional media houses.

Unlike him, Sir Frederick Lugard who became Governor General of Nigeria between 1914 and 1919 was successful in this regard. Since he was not amenable to the unconstructive criticisms of the pre-professionals, he inspired and funded a Nigerian lawyer, Sir Kitoye Ajasa, to establish a media. This paper was registered on 10 January 1914, ten days after Lugard assumed office. Being the first national weekly in Nigeria, it was christened *The Nigerian Pioneer*. In this tense atmosphere Ajasa's Pioneer was close to professionalism. For the first time in the history of the Lagos Press, a well spelt-out division of labour was established. The funding from the government made him to abandon his lucrative legal practice and became the executive editor. Pressmen, press photographers, news editor, sub-editors, commercial managers as well as printers were all engaged in the production of the *Pioneer*. Ajasa's new dimension improved the printing and make-up of the Lagos Press. With the new printing machines at his disposal, 1500 copies were circulated weekly.

However genuine their intentions might be, the fact remains that "he that pays the piper dictates the tune." Lugard was dictating the tenets of the Pioneer that was countering the campaigns of the Lagos Press, particularly the Weekly Record for constitutional development. *The Pioneer*, too, went into appreciating colonial problems at the expense of incisive criticisms against it. From here it sold its popularity to the colonial rulers and its unpopularity to the ruled. Without effort, The Pioneer headed towards its demise.

Another prominent media within the period was The Times of Nigeria (1914 – 1924) formerly The Nigerian Times. It was jointly sponsored by two friends, James Bright Davies and Sapara Williams, a pioneer Chief Registrar of the Appellate Court, Lagos. The editor, J. B. Davies with MA (English) has been commended as the best journalist of his times with an impeccable command of written and oral expression of English Language. He made The Times a nationalist newspaper and its astute campaigns for constitutional development and African representation in government was immeasurable.

Together with the Weekly Record and The Times of Nigeria, other media houses of the Lagos Press mounted campaigns for the granting of elective principles in the Lagos Town Council elections. The implementation of this demand by Lugard in May 1919 was a welcome device that furthered the campaigns for the elective principle into the Nigerian Legislative Council. Lugard, seeing the Lagos Press weathering the storm of turbulent times, reinvoked the press laws already in existence to restrict their freedom. To recall, these laws include the Official Secrets Ordinance of 1891 that restricted the press from delving into the official secrets of the government. The Newspaper Ordinance of 1903 regulated the establishment of media houses. Even the Seditious Offences Act of 1909 that forbids pressmen from publishing anything against the colonial administration was also invoked. The Newspaper Ordinances of 1917 by Lugard retained all the above laws and

advised censorship with a fine of £100.

Before proceeding further let us examine how Lugard used these laws to fight the press during his administration. Two newspapers were the most vocal in the campaigns for representative government and constitutional development. They were the *Lagos Weekly Record* edited by Thomas Horatio Jackson after the death of his father, J. P. Jackson, in 1915 and *The Times of Nigeria* of J. B. Davies. An editorial in *The Times* condemning colonial policies of Lugard earned Mr Davies a court trial under the Seditious Offences Act of 1909 incorporated into the Newspaper Ordinances of 1917. In the case of the *Weekly Record* that committed the same offence, the editor, Horatio Jackson, was jailed. This silenced their media houses for a while.

In fact, the Newspaper Ordinance of 1917 was for editors who went beyond constructive criticisms of the colonial government. First, it restricted the freedom of the press and stipulates that the addresses of editors and proprietors must be deposited with the government. Supporting it was the affidavit of correct news reporting, a guarantor and a surety of £250 as security fund to assure Government of the loyalty of the media and ability to withstand libel and litigation cost, if sued.

The media houses saw the laws as harsh. But the populace were in support of their nationalist influence in Lagos politics. According to Ikoli, their uncompromising posture against imperialism contributed “in removing cases of injustices and put many wrongs right.” As soon as Lugard left office and was replaced by Sir Hugh Clifford in August 1919, the Lagos Press resumed its campaigns for constitutional development. Clifford promised to extend the elective principle to the Legislative Council. He then designed a scheme to effect the establishment of the Nigerian Legislative Council, made up of official and unofficial members, nominated and elected representatives. His recommendations to the Secretary of State for the Colonies received approval and the Clifford Constitutional of 1922 manifested.

It is germane to point out at this juncture that the victory of the Lagos Press lies in the manifestation of the Nigerian Constitution of 1922. They made public opinions a guide to the colonial administration. Their campaigns for constitutional development were to ensure the good administration of Nigeria. Yet their anxiety to bring in professionalism manifested in the employment and training of Ernest Sisei Ikoli by the Lagos Weekly Record. He became the greatest gift of the Lagos Press for the formation of the Nigerian Press in March 1921.

Concluding Remarks

The essay deliberated on the impact of the Lagos Press in the early colonial Nigeria. Like the British and Japanese Press, to mention but two, the Lagos Press exhibited its influence for 60 years in the Colony of Lagos, Southern Protectorate and the amalgamated Nigeria. It started at Abeokuta with *Iwe Irohin* of the CMS in 1859 and progressed into a group of newspapers in the metropolitan Lagos. In the Colony of Lagos, *Iwe Irohin* gingered the Christianization and educational development of the people. So also was its impetus to colonization and British trade. *Iwe Irohin* ventilated the opinion of the people on good governance and fundamental human rights. This incurred the reaction of the government who misinterpreted the paper as disbanding colonial arrangements and contributed to its demise in 1867. Other media houses like the *Anglo-African*, *The Lagos Observer* and *The*

Lagos Standard aired their grievances against colonialism.

However, the Lagos Press did not relent in the Southern Protectorate. One of the media, *The Lagos Weekly Record*, developed the reputation of not keeping quiet over colonial injustices. It ventilated public opinions, organised petitions and protest marches against the colonial government and called for the Africanization of the civil service. In the press campaigns for constitutional development in the amalgamated Nigeria, *The Times of Nigeria*, *Nigerian Chronicle* and the *Weekly Record* played leading roles, despite the press laws reinvoked by Lugard. Finally, the Nigerian Constitution of 1922 was achieved. To crown it all, the Lagos Press became the cornerstone of the Nigerian Press through the employment and training of Ernest Sisei Ikoli, the father of Nigerian professional journalism.

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