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## **Oil Exploitation, Neglect of Coal and the Ngwo Society, 1909 - 1987**

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### **Abstract**

*Coal was one of the catalysts of the Industrial Revolution which started in England and spread to other parts of Europe. It provided the main source of primary energy for industry and transportation. The spread of coal mining to Africa was as a result of European conquest and subsequent colonization. The conquest of Ngwo in 1908 led to the discovery and eventual mining of coal in Enugu-Ngwo from 1915. In the period exploitation lasted, coal from the town furnished the energy needed for transportation, industrialization and urban development in Nigeria. It also provided direct and indirect employment to people across Europe and Africa and as well facilitated international trade between Nigeria and her partners across the world. Since petroleum was discovered in Nigeria in 1956 and as was found a better alternative to coal in terms of energy and wealth generation, the coal industry suffered neglect and gradually collapsed. How the collapse of the coal industry as a result of the rise of petroleum affected Ngwo people is the central theme of this paper. It contends that, though petroleum is regarded as a source of wealth to Nigeria, it is, nonetheless a source of poverty to Ngwo people. The British colonialists dispossessed them of massive farmlands upon which they operated their local economy to set up the colliery and other facilities. Also, more than 8,000 of the people who contributed their youthful years mostly as miners lost their jobs without compensation. The development prospects especially*

*under corporate–social responsibilities and employment generation which the people ought to benefit from with the continued existence of the coal exploitation were lost with the demise of the industry. Primary sources constitute greater percentage of the sources deployed for this historical reconstruction. They include oral tradition granted by reliable informants and source materials acquired from the National Archives Enugu. They are be augmented by secondary sources which include books, journal articles and other un-published materials. Available facts will be analyzed using qualitative research methodology.*

## **Introduction**

Coal remains one of the most important sources of energy in the world. It is one of catalyst of Industrial Revolution which started in England and spread across Europe. It removed the geographical limitations on the use of machines and provided a virtually unlimited source of energy for industrial production and transportation.<sup>1</sup> Coal mining and its uses came into Nigeria through the British colonial conquest and eventual colonization. In Igbo land, it was the Aro expeditions of November 1901 through March 1902 which secured for the British 6,000 square miles of territory that opened them to the interior of Igbo land.<sup>2</sup> This was followed by other expeditions which include the Ezza-Ikwo and the Niger-Cross River expeditions of 1905-1908.<sup>3</sup> It was during this expedition that the West African Frontier Force invaded Ngwo through Oghe and Eke in 1908.<sup>4</sup> Within few months, Ngwo fell to British control. It was not long after the British conquest that a team of geological exploration engineers led by Mr. A.E Kiston and E.O Thiele discovered a sub-bituminous coal in Enugu-Ngwo in 1909.<sup>5</sup>

After its discovery, not so much was done concerning its exploitation until the aftermath of the First World War made it imperative.<sup>6</sup> First, the increasing local consumption of imported coal which was at 98,884 tons by 1914 called for immediate exploitation of the discovered coal. Secondly, other West African countries, particularly Ivory Coast, Gold Coast and Sierra Leone could purchase coal cheaper from Nigeria, and lastly, the war posed a great challenge to the external supply of coal both to Nigeria and other West African Countries.<sup>7</sup> Hence in 1916, the British commenced coal mining activities in Enugu-Ngwo. With this development, coal and its miners contributed immeasurably to economic development of Nigeria. Coal maintained a pride of place in Nigeria's economy until petroleum was exploited.

How the rise of petroleum which occasioned the demise of the coal industry affected the economy of Ngwo people is the major focus of this paper. In undertaking this task, the paper first gives an overview of the economic organization of Ngwo before the discovery of coal. This will avail us the opportunity of understanding the nature of production and exchange prevalent in Ngwo in the period. It will be followed by an analysis of colliery and Ngwo economy in order to identify the contradictions it generated and its impact on the economy. The effects of the collapse of the colliery as a result of the rise of petroleum will finally be examined. Ngwo is the research focus of this paper because it was on their land that coal was exploited. They offered more labour to the mines than other communities in the environs and also bore the brunt for the exploitation of coal. This underscores the need for this paper.

### **Economic Organization of Ngwo before the Discovery of Coal**

Ngwo stands over an area roughly 20 square miles about 32.19 square kilometers, it lies about 75.79 kilometers east of the Niger in the heart land of north central Igboland.<sup>8</sup> It is a clan of ten towns, namely; Enugu, Etit, Amachalla, Ukaka, Amebo, Okowjo and Umnase. Others are Uborji, Amankwo and Aneke. It stands on the edge of an encampment immediately to the west of what is today known as Enugu Township.<sup>9</sup> Enugu Township is built on the land originally owned by Ngwo people.<sup>10</sup> The territorial area of Ngwo then included the total area of not just the clearly delineated ten towns but also the following land areas which were Ngwo farm lands, they include *Ishiolobo* (Heys and Okpara Mine area), *Ebenaben'abo* (Idaw River Layout Area) *Agba Ichekere* (part of Idaw River Layout area), *Agu Uwani* (Uwani Layout area) *Ofu Ezata* (Ogbete/Asata Coal mine areas), *NgeneIdor* (Ogbete, Government Secretariat and Reservation area), *Ogbete* (Police College area) *Ozum* (Ekulu-Ribadu Coal Mines and Pottery areas) *Ukwuna* (Iva Valley area) *Iga and Ngbune*, *Ugwu Afa*, *Ugwu Ogwu*, *Ugwu Akpuluaku*, *Gbalumna*, *Odo Nwiyi*, *Agu Ajali*, *Ugwu Ori* and *Umuma*, *Abali*, *Eziyi* and *Ntize* areas.<sup>11</sup> The urban town of Enugu is primarily founded and built on Ngwo land. The urban town was known as Enugu-Ngwo Township until 1928 when the suffix "Ngwo" was dropped to distinguish it from Ngwo town.<sup>12</sup> O.N Njoku notes that the environment is key to the type of economic activities that prevail in any given society.<sup>13</sup> Nigeria being technologically undeveloped, the environment preeminently set the parameters of economic activities of people especially in the traditional sectors.<sup>14</sup> This is so with regard to agriculture, the dominant pursuit of Ngwo people. Ngwo society adapts successfully to the tropical rainforest environment of West Africa, its economic activities therefore revolved principally around

agriculture, crop production most importantly.<sup>15</sup> As prevalent in most economies, the mainstay of a society's economy is always the highest creator and employer of labour. Virtually everybody in Ngwo of the period was a farmer. Families cultivated vast expanse of land, growing crops far beyond their subsistent need and exchanged their surplus in open markets. They cultivated on most of the vast expanse of land which was later acquired by the British Crown.<sup>16</sup> Agriculture influenced virtually every facet of the people's lives. Their cultural practices, belief system and festival revolved around agricultural.<sup>17</sup> Although there were other aspects of agriculture; crop production was the dominant pursuit.

Chief among the crops cultivated was yam. It was the most ritualized and the most valuable. It was the means of measuring wealth which was determined by the size of one's barn. It was also used to pay dowries during marriage ceremonies and for induction into the prestigious *ozo* title. The initiation into adulthood, *Odo* and *Maa* traditional institutions were also performed with yam.<sup>18</sup> Very crucial in agriculture in Ngwo was the means of production which was the land. Professor Afigbo noted that with the coming of agriculture, the Igbo gaze would appear to have switched from *Chiukwu* the Supreme God in the sky above to *Ala* the earth below.<sup>19</sup> It was the role which agriculture played in the life of the pre-colonial Igbo that determined the great importance they attached to land.<sup>20</sup> The whole of *Aju* festivals, (the highest festival in Ngwo) were sets of ceremonies and spiritual worship consecrated in devotion to the land deity.<sup>21</sup> In Ngwo, the shrine of the land goddesses existed in all the village squares in the ten towns of the clan. The people appeased them for the fertility of the land to ensure bounty harvest. Ngwo people treasured their land to the extent that they never sold it. Rather, they allocated it to

extended families who, in turn allotted to men within their fold both for habitation and cultivation.

In addition to farming, Ngwo people also engaged in blacksmithing. The art of blacksmithing is believed to have diffused into Ngwo through the itinerant Awka Smiths.<sup>22</sup> They mold farm implements, household utensils and other products. Trade also played a significant role in the traditional economy of Ngwo society. They engaged in short and long distance trade. They traded as far as Ejule, Idah and Kastin-Ala in the lower regions of northern Nigeria where they sold salt and other items purchased from Uburu, Okposi and Afikpo.<sup>23</sup> However, all the other aspects of Ngwo economy were subsidiary and not substitutes to agriculture. It is against this backdrop that one can appreciate the impact of the denudation of their land as a result of the establishment of the coal fields and the Crown land.

### **The Colliery and Ngwo Economy**

With commencement of full exploitation of Coal in Enugu-Ngwo, Ngwo people lost the factor of production (the land upon which their local economy depended) to the British Crown. The colonial government invoked the Public Land Acquisition Proclamation No.5 of 1903 which gave the colonial government right to acquire any land required for public purposes by paying a token to the owners to appropriate Ngwo farmlands.<sup>24</sup> The first deed of acquisition was executed on the 19<sup>th</sup> of November, 1915. The colonial officers compelled eleven Ngwo Chiefs and one Chief Ahum of Ogui Nike to put their marks on the document as follows:

We the undersigned Chiefs of Udi Division, Southern Province of Nigeria, in full appreciation of the benefits to be derived by us and our people by opening a government Colliery at Enugu-Ngwo in the said Udi Division do hereby

grant freely and voluntarily all such land as may be required by the said government for the purpose of a station, a colliery for the working on all coal and other minerals. The building of works and house... and for all other purpose the government may think fit to use the said land for.<sup>25</sup>

The chiefs that executed this deed were Chiefs Ozo Eze, Nnadi, Afe, Okwuani and Ogu; others are sub-Chiefs, Ozugu, Oguwakwa, Ozo Eze, Ajowangu, Onovo and Ngu, with one Chief Ahum of Ogui. The document was signed and sealed in the presence of Chief Onyeama of Eke, Mr. Duncan, District Officer in charge of Udi, J.S Heys, Colliery Manager, and Reginald Mangrove, a commissioner.<sup>26</sup> The persons that signed this document received 73 pounds (Seventy three ponds) which was said to be compensation for damages caused, presumably to economic crops. In 1917 and 1921, similar documents were signed by the Chiefs from Ngwo, Eke, Abor and Nsude. These documents covered the British confiscation of a parcel of land bounded by Ekulu to the north and Nyaba River to the south,<sup>27</sup> and large stretch of land for the government forestry and access roads. Of the land ceded to the British, almost the whole site of Enugu-Ngwo and greater parts of Etiti and Uborji formed the major part of the Crown land upon which Enugu was developed. With this, Ngwo people were dispossessed of the means from which they produced resources that had sustained the people over generations.

The people could not appreciate the import of this loss at the initial stage. The reason was that only small portions out of the land, which is the hill-side where the coal mine was situated and the areas of Asata–Aria and Ogbete Rivers, were developed.

Subsequent expansion especially from the early 1930s dislodged local farmers on the hitherto un-occupied land areas.

It is important to state that at the inception of coal mining in Enugu-Ngwo, the local people held strongly to their traditional livelihood and showed less interest to work in the coal-field. They were of the view that it was a taboo for human beings to enter holes like animals. They also believed that entering the hole to work for the Whiteman was a demonstration of weakness.<sup>28</sup> To them, the demonstration of wealth and the pride of masculinity were not in brandishing the White man's money but the size of one's barn and in the vastness of land cultivated. But a hand- full of Ngwo people opted to work in the mines, for instance Ogbodo Nwangwueze of Enugu-Ngwo, Ude Nwannadi Ogbozo of Uborji to mention a few, were part of the early miners.<sup>29</sup> Some others were conscripted by the Warrant Chiefs, since in the period, production organization was not systemized, and the colliery managers gave the responsibility of procurement of labour to the warrant chiefs. Wages were in turn paid through the warrant chiefs to the labourers.<sup>30</sup> Through these ways, efforts of the labourers were shortchanged by their chiefs who made a fortune from their efforts.

As more and more land was utilized for development, more people were displaced from their farmlands and the colonial government continued putting economic measures to increase production. They also understood that the expansion of labour (in Enugu) would facilitate the control of the economy.<sup>31</sup> In the late 1930s, they sought to expand wage labour. From 1936, payment of wages to miners was no longer through their warrant Chiefs; rather, miners received it directly. Higher incentives were also attached to work in the mines.<sup>32</sup> Thus, more and more people from Ngwo sought employment in the mines in order to earn the



European currency so as to meet the demands created by the emergent society.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, to earn the European currency, which had become the only legal tender, one must engage in economic activities beneficial to the colonialists. In the final analysis many people abandoned indigenous economic pursuits for coal mining.

The importation of smelted iron, farm tools, and other metal wares that were smelted locally forced the blacksmiths to abandon their trades for work in the coal mines. It was at this time that Eneje Nwangwu abandoned his smiting for wage labour. All facets of the traditional economy gradually crippled.<sup>34</sup> Its outcome was evident; Ngwo economy experienced great transformation, it drifted from an agricultural to wage earning economy. Ngwo miners began to mingle with colleagues, and interface with other cultures. Their skepticism about working in the mines and relating with outsiders were dispelled. Numerous miners and other workers resided in Ngwo to work in Enugu Township.<sup>35</sup> Ngwo society gradually transformed from a homogenous to a heterogeneous one. Resources generated from the mines were diversified into other ventures. Residential apartments were developed by different individual for rent to the growing number of tenants, resident in Ngwo. The income miners spent within and around Enugu provided opportunity for business. This led to the development of markets for instance Ogbete market. Ngwo traders began to exploit opportunities available in the market to make money. Numerous coal miners sponsored their children to secondary schools and universities to acquire higher education both in Nigeria and in Europe. For instance Mr. Simon Ani sponsored his son Micheal to the prestigious Denis Memorial Grammar School (DMGS), Onitsha in the 1950s and subsequently to University of Ibadan in the early 1960s.<sup>36</sup> It was a period of educational boom in Ngwo.

The stewardship of Chief Christian Chukwuma Onoh as the Chairman of the Nigeria Coal Corporation between 1959 and 1966 boosted the quality of labour Ngwo people offered at the Corporation. He utilized the Junior Management Staff scholarship scheme to train most secondary school certificate holders from Ngwo working at the Colliery in different areas of Engineering in prestigious Universities in the United Kingdom. The beneficiaries include Engr. Israel Eze, Engr. Ken Onyia, Engr. Nelson Agu, Engr. Wilberforce Egwuto mention a few.<sup>37</sup>

The Colliery Technical School was established in Ngwo in 1963. The school was one of the best in Eastern Nigeria at the period. The curriculum was designed to build capacity in school leavers to the extent that would enable them function in different technical fields.<sup>38</sup> Through the school, higher education was brought to the door steps of Ngwo people. Miners were able to train their children through post primary education after which they secured more decent jobs opportunity or pursued higher education. By 1966 when C.C. Onoh's appointment as chairman of the corporation was terminated, Ngwo People provided up to 65% of unskilled labour base of the corporation and a good number of technical, administrative and managerial staff.<sup>39</sup> In 1982, Engr. Nelson Agu, a Cambridge University trained mining Engineer rose through the ranks to become the General Manager of the Corporation. Wage labour successfully substituted agricultural production as provision of labour in the colliery substituted land as the means of production in Ngwo.

### **Decline and Collapse of the Coal Industry**

Oil was discovered in commercial quantity at Oloibiri, a creek community in present Bayelsa State on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January, 1956 by Shell BP.<sup>40</sup> After series of appraisals and Drill Spem Test, the

well was certified and production started in December, 1957. Production from the field came at the rate of 4,928 barrels per day, production increased as more wells were completed.<sup>41</sup> Shell BP laid the first crude oil pipeline from Oloibiri field to Port-Harcourt in 1958 to access export facilities for the purpose of refining; thereafter, the finished products were imported back to Nigeria for utilization. Diesel offered a better and cheaper alternative to coal in terms of energy generation. This compelled the Nigerian Railway Corporation (the highest consumer of coal) to commence the importation of diesel driven engines in September, 1958.<sup>42</sup>

On the plenary of the Federal House of Representative on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, 1958, Hon. J.I.G Onyia, member representing Asaba Constituency expressed fears over the impending collapse of coal industry as a result of gradual dieselization of the Nigerian Railway Corporation and Electricity Corporation of Nigeria, which constituted the highest consumers of coal. Production of coal maintained an upward course until the exploration of oil in 1956. It started in 1916 with 7,000 tons. By 1920, shipments to Sierra Leone and Gold Coast had commenced. This caused the production to maintain a steady rise with 364,000 tons in 1929. The World War II period was favourable to the industry as production reached 668,000 tons per year.<sup>43</sup>

**Table 1: Coal Production in Nigeria before the Discovery of Oil**

Year	Production by Tons
1945/1946	505,565
1946/1947	633,852
1947/1948	511,706
1948/1949	610, 283
1949/1950	526,614
1950/1951	583,433

1951/1952	521,324
1952/1953	510,962
1953/1954	511,362
1954/1955	485,564
1955/1956	466,101

Source: NAE/MINLOC60/4/2290, Annual Report of the Nigerian Coal Corporation, 1957

**Table 2: Coal Production in Nigeria after the Discovery of Oil**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Production by Tons</b>
1971/1972	179,453
1972/1973	322,344
1973/1974	273,498
1974/1975	273,498
1975/1976	296,321
1976/1977	264,212
1977/1978	240,272
1978/1979	185,069
1979/1980	165,259
1981	104,358

Source: NAE/MINEST14/6/6992, Annual Report of the Nigerian Coal Corporation, 1982

As it could be gleaned from the two tables above, coal production plummeted dramatically after the exploitation of oil in 1958. This could be attributed to dieselization of the operations of the Nigerian Railway Corporation and the apparent abandonment of the steam engine which relied on coal. The trend of growth in the coal industry was tied closely to the rate of expansion of the Nigerian Railway as it consumed close to 65% of the total

production of coal up to the 1950s.<sup>44</sup> In the period, coal production depended on the railway both as a market and the most effective means of moving the products to other users. The Electricity Corporation of Nigeria was another high consumer of coal; it consumed over 24% of the total production up to the late 1950s too.<sup>45</sup> The rest were consumed by the Nigeria Ports Authority and other users.

One therefore, understands clearly the strategic position both the NRC and ECN held in the sustenance of coal production. Dieselization invariably meant the demise of the coal industry. Hon. Onyia in that regard urged the Federal Government to examine the possibility of establishing a coal carbonization industry for the diversification of the uses of coal.<sup>46</sup> With the full exploitation of the oil industry, interest in the colliery continued to wane. In 1963, during the tenure of Chief Christian Chukwuma Onoh as the Chairman of the Nigerian Coal Corporation, he constituted a study group on coal carbonization and stages of production which spanned across domestic and industrial purposes. He did this with a view to establishing a carbonization plant to extend the relevance of coal beyond energy generation. The group was led by Engr. Uche Okonkwo, a Cambridge University trained mining engineer and a member, British Association of Mining Engineers.<sup>47</sup> They were sent to London for different levels of trainings; on their return, they established a carbonization plant at Bunker. The plant had just started production of carbonized coal and cooking stoves before the First Republic was sacked on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January, 1966 through a military coup led by Major K.C Nzeogwu.<sup>48</sup>

It was not long after the military take-over that the Nigeria and Biafra war started in 1967. Owing to the fact that the coal mines were located at the theater of war, the mine was deserted for

three years. Within those war years, the NRC, ECN, NPA and other consumers of coal finally dieselized. After the war, the corporation could not survive and the process of decline which was moving at a fast pace. In 1978 during the administration of General Obasanjo, the NCC was given financial assistance to develop the capacities of their workers in different special areas in United Kingdom and Poland.<sup>49</sup> On their return, so much could not be done to reposition the industry. By 1989 when Prof Gregory Iwu was appointed chairman of the corporation, miners had started losing their jobs without benefit and gradually the industry collapsed.

### **Conclusion**

The discovery of coal in Enugu–Ngwo in 1909 which was followed by its exploitation in 1916 caused a major break in the economic history of Ngwo people. The society marked a clear departure from an agricultural production economy to a wage earning economy. They were deprived of their land by the British Crown which, in the period was their means through which they produced food far beyond their immediate needs. Consequent upon the British interest to expand wage labour which will in turn increase coal production, the already deprived youthful men of Ngwo were subtly persuaded to work in the mines. Mining activities, no doubt, brought wealth exposure and human capital development in Ngwo, but it was not without heavy prices which were climaxed with the rise of oil which occasioned the collapse of the coal industry. With the collapse of the industry, more than 8,000 miners and other workers majority of who were from Ngwo lost their jobs. The people who had already been deprived of their land (which had been their main source livelihood) to set up the colliery and other facilities lost the labour they opted to offer at the coal mine as alternative means of survival. The society that

boomed in wealth because of coal began to languish in poverty because of oil exploitation which rendered coal redundant.

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