

# Rachel Carson Center

## Perspectives

How to cite:

Chimee, Ihediwa Nkemjika. "Coal and British Colonialism in Nigeria." In: "Energy (and) Colonialism, Energy (In)Dependence: Africa, Europe, Greenland, North America," edited by Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga and Helmuth Trischler, *RCC Perspectives* 2014, no. 5, 19–26.

All issues of *RCC Perspectives* are available online. To view past issues, and to learn more about the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, please visit [www.rachelcarsoncenter.de](http://www.rachelcarsoncenter.de).

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society  
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

© Copyright is held by the contributing authors.

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry  
of Education  
and Research

Deutsches Museum 



Ihediwa Nkemjika Chimee

## Coal and British Colonialism in Nigeria

The transition from coal to oil in Nigeria should be understood within its context under British colonial rule. In this paper, I explore one example of conditions under which energy infrastructures were developed in parts of the world that were under colonial rule. Specifically, I am interested in the degree to which the master-servant politics of British *indirect rule* (ruling the colonized through their traditional authorities and structures) related to the production of coal and coal-using industries in Nigeria.

The history of what eventually emerged as Nigeria started with the Niger Expedition of 1841 and the formation of the Royal Niger Company (RNC), a trading company that monopolized trade in both the interior and the coastal regions. The British monarchy had granted the company a charter to occupy territory of present-day Nigeria. The RNC therefore served as a medium through which British colonial and mercantile interests were protected until the revocation of the company's charter in 1900, and the subsequent creation of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria (Falola and Heaton 2008, xiv).

After 1900, the British began to explore avenues through which the resources of the indigenous peoples could be exploited and maximized. To achieve this, they needed to create a structure for indirect rule—controlling Africans through their traditional authorities. The British reasoned that approaching the people through their local leaders would minimize opposition to British rule (Falola 1999, 70). In Northern Nigeria, they used the existing emirs and their traditional institutions. Indirect rule was also extended to the south, where commensurable offices did not exist, and new chieftainship lines were created. The measures were greeted with opposition, particularly in southeastern Nigeria (Falola 1999, 72).

The British converted traditional subsistence farming in many areas to promote the production of cash crops for export, and commissioned a number of railway projects to facilitate this traffic. The Lagos-Ibadan railway started in 1896 and finished in 1900. Between 1907 and 1909, extensions to the Ilorin, Kaduana, Zaria, and Kano lines were completed. Others followed—the line to Kano in 1913, and the Port-Harcourt, Enugu, and Maiduguri links in 1926 (Wright 1998, 18). Agriculture aside, mining development

also spurred railroad development and coal demand. Coal mining in Enugu started in 1916, and the first attempt to mine coal in the Udi Hills yielded 7,000 tons. The coal was used locally to power trains, furnaces in the tin mines, and steamships. Generally speaking, foreign firms controlled the mining sector of Nigeria, making huge profits.

The development of mining depended on three key infrastructural developments. One was the creation and promotion of mining monopolies that enjoyed the protection of the colonial and British governments. The second was the setting up of a legal architecture criminalizing African initiatives, while coercing them to the mines, railroad construction, and agricultural sites to work for close to nothing (Afigbo 1972, 42–3). Examples of such legislation are the first Mineral Ordinance of Nigeria passed in 1902 and a series of amendments culminating in the Mineral Oils Ordinance of 1914 (Bower 1947, 2). The third infrastructure was the office of the warrant chief, who was expected to deliver his people as cheap and coerced labor to the colonial mining cartels.

### **Udi Division, Coal, and the British**

From about 1885 to 1900, British interest in Nigeria deepened in an aggressive way. During this period, the Aro Confederacy constituted the main obstacle to British penetration into the Igbo and Ibibio hinterland (Ijoma 2010, 38–39). The 1902 Aro Expedition brought the Igbo group face-to-face with the British invaders, under the pretext that they wanted “to stop the slave trade” and to open the Igbo area to civilization and trade. Instead, they came with guns blazing (Nwabara 1977). Subsequently, these Igbo groups—the Ngwo, Eke Oghe, Ozalla, Owa, Nsude, etc.—would be renamed the Udi Division in 1908, named after the Udi Hills in the state of Enugu, where coal was discovered. The British proceeded to systematically expropriate African land for the development of mining settlements and administrative buildings for colonial officials.

From that moment onwards, warrant chiefs were installed to administer their own people on behalf of the British Crown. There were two outstanding warrant chiefs in the Udi Division: Ozo-Nebechi Okachi of Oghe, a prosperous trader and the first person there to be appointed a warrant chief in 1909; and Onyeama of Eke, a devious character and the last in the division to be appointed a warrant chief in 1910 (Onyeama

1982, 28). When coal was discovered in the Udi Hills, the status of these chiefs rose dramatically and antagonism towards them increased.

The single most important factor in the development of Enugu and its environs was the Crown ownership of land on which the town was built (Hair 1975). The chiefs in the Udi Division were made to each sign a “grant” surrendering their lands to the British, and were summarily given a paltry sum of 73 British pounds in compensation for any damage that government actions had caused (Onoh 1997, 9). Similar “agreements” were forced upon East Africa, particularly in Kenya, in 1917. People literally became squatters on their own ancestral lands.

The commencement of mining activities decisively shaped the economic relationship between the indigenous people and the British colonial authority. From the time of the discovery of coal in Udi Hills, the position and role of the warrant chief, whose domain fell within the precincts of the mine in particular and those within Udi Division, changed dramatically. They became a vital mechanism for recruiting and maintaining the stable labor force critical for digging coal from the tunnel, maintaining a reliable rail network to utilize the coal for its daily operations, and extracting ore and other products to the port for exportation. Some of the biggest consumers of coal were the Nigerian Marine (a quasi-military organization), the electric power station, and water works operated by the Public Works Department and the Gold Coast Railways (Nigeria Colliery Department 1938, 3–4). The insatiable demand for coal forced the colonial authorities to place the coal mines under the Nigerian Railway Department from 1917 to 1938, with a mandate to mine the coal and market it through European firms (Nigeria Coal Corporation n.d., 2).

### **Colonial Labor Workforce and the Coal Industry in Nigeria**

In the early days of coal mining, contractors managed the production, and were paid for the amount of coal produced. These contractors in turn employed their own laborers who cut and carried the coal to the surface in head pans; they only paid for the product (Nigeria Coal Corporation n.d., 2). Chief Onyeama of Eke was the principal supplier of labor to the coal mines at Enugu, and for a number of years received a large subsidy from the colonial regime in recognition of his services (Lt. Governor to Secretary 1923). Ordinary people received nothing.

Onyeama's efforts in supplying and forcefully recruiting the laborers for the Enugu Colliery owed much to the Ogwumili society, which the British officials derisively described as "a dreaded band of loyalists that committed all kinds of crime including a number of murders with impunity" (Chukwunze and Emebechi to Chief Secretary 1931). The Ogwumili submitted recruits or conscripts to contractors, who in turn supplied the Nigerian Railway with laborers. It had since been known that the warrant chiefs procured and delivered fellow Africans to colonial authorities as conscript labor, most of which were marshaled towards the construction of the railroad connecting Port Harcourt Harbor to the coal mines at Enugu, which was completed in 1916. How much these laborers were actually paid and how they were procured was of no interest to the colonial regime, as local people had been conscripted into the colonial workforce long before the discovery of coal (Lugard 1915, 10); they greeted ordinary people's complaints about the heavy-handedness of Chief Onyeama of Eke with indifference (Isichei 1976). Not surprisingly, in 1914, a number of towns within a 15-mile radius of what is now Enugu revolted against forced labor and conditions of work on the roads and railway lines, and the corruption and exactions of the warrant chiefs, court clerks, and Native Commissioners' messengers—British rule, generally (Isichei 1976, 134). The British colonial authority opened fire with machine guns and massacred the resisters in their thousands.

Pickaxes, shovels, and baskets were used to mine iron ore, which Africans were then forced to carry on their heads to the port of Onitsha on the Niger—almost a hundred miles. When the influenza epidemic arrived in 1918, it took a huge toll on miners, and the authorities (through their tools, the warrant chiefs) resorted to using even more force (Onjoku 2001, 172). While the workers were paid in peanuts (Nwabara 1977, 122; Ikechukwu 2012), Onyeama of Eke received an annual salary of between 400 to 500 British pounds (Isichei 1976, 204). In the logic of the colonial authorities, the chiefs were doing important work in keeping stable supplies of labor. When labor retainers meted out unjust treatment to workers, they knew they would simply get away with it. Workers were sacked midway into the work-month to compel them to default on their contracts and thereby forfeit their months' pay to their overlords. A miner could fall sick and not be granted sick leave; instead he was relieved of his job and had no recourse (Nebechi 2012). In November 1949, the continuing exploitation of mine laborers generated a serious impasse that led to the shutting down of production altogether. This colliery strike led to the fatal shooting of 21 unarmed miners by the colonial police force and the wounding of 51 others (Akpala 1965). This incident sparked general unrest in the country.

Such were the unethical labor practices and occupational conditions under which coal was produced in Nigeria between 1915 and 1950. The coal industry represents a classic example of colonial exploitation using traditional structures of administration, or indirect rule. Miners' relationship with their employer did not take any other shape from 1915 to 1950 than that of master-servant. Even when exploitation of the mineral sounded promising, the condition of the worker was never put into perspective. Coal production totaled 24,500 tons in 1916, 83,405 in 1917, and 148,214 in 1918—256,119 tons for the three-year period (Boyle 1918, 6). It continued to increase after the war, rising to 175,137 tons from 1922 to 1923—half of it going to the railways, a quarter to government departments, and the rest to private firms (General Manager's Report 1924, 832). The exponential profits made the colonial administration complacent about dealing with the occupational issues of workers.

The status of miners began to change from 1937, when the colliery was removed from the Railway Department's jurisdiction and established an independent government department. In 1941 the Workers' Council was reconstituted into a legal trade union and only after the colliery massacre did the British Colonial Office set up a council to attend to matters affecting government employees through regular roundtable negotiations (Colonial Office 1950, 6). The Nigerian Coal Corporation was created as a statutory body to manage Nigeria's coal resources; at last the workers could now approach this body and discuss their working conditions.

From 1950 to about 1958, the Nigerian coal industry enjoyed a monopoly on the fuels market. With the discovery of oil in the latter year, however, coal lost some vital sectors of its traditionally captive market. From this date to 1966, the share of coal production in the total energy production of Nigeria declined from 98 percent to 1.6 percent (Nwabueze 1971, 34). When the Nigerian Civil War broke out in 1967, coal production ground to a halt. Its three principal markets—the Railways, the Electricity Undertakings, and the Nigerian Ports Authority, consuming some 80 percent of the total output—also stopped the purchase of coal because of the war. After the war, the coal industry entered a precipitous decline as oil became the number one energy product in Nigeria. It remains so to date.

## Conclusion

Colonial rule no doubt affected the economic development of Nigeria. From the inception of the coal mine in 1915 to about 1948, mine laborers in the coal fields suffered varied degrees of abuse including forced labor, underpayment, outright withholding of salaries on trumped up allegations, and even detention at the mines, particularly during the periods when private concessionaires were in charge of the colliery. The colonial regime was concerned with making profit through subjugating miners to degrading treatment and abuse. The warrant chiefs became a ready instrument with which the colonial authorities turned the local Agbaja people into servants and laborers. Using the pretext of legality, all royalties and revenues that accrued from the mines went into the colonial coffers. Coal was not a blessing to the majority of Africans, but a curse. Rather than enriching them, it impoverished their lives and limbs, denying them the possibility of an improved standard of living.

## Suggested Reading

For a detailed understanding of the powers and functions of the NCC, see The Nigerian Coal Corporation Ordinance No. 29, of 1950, NCC Headquarters Enugu.

## References

- Akpala, Agwu. 1965. "Background of the Enugu Colliery Shooting Incident in 1949." *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria* 32, no. 4: 515–38.
- Afigbo, Adiele. 1972. *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891–1929*. London: Longman Group Ltd.
- Bower, Penelope. 1947. "Commercial Organisation and Trade Policy: The Mining Industry." In *Mining, Commerce, and Finance in Nigeria*, edited by Margery Perham. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Boyle, A. G. 1918. *Colonial Annual Report: No. 1030, Nigeria*. London: H. M. Stationery Office.
- Chukwunze and Emebechi to Chief Secretary, 10 February, 1931, CSO 26/1 09253/V. 1; Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan.

- Falola, Toyin, and Matthew M. Heaton, eds. 2008. *A History of Nigeria*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Falola, Toyin. 1999. *The History of Nigeria*. New Haven, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Colonial Office. 1950. *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Disorders in the Eastern Provinces of Nigeria*. No. 256. London: H. M. Stationery Office.
- General Manager's Report, and a Special Booklet. The Nigerian, Gold Coast, Sierra Leone Railways, West Africa, August 16, 1924.
- Hair, Paul E. 1975. *Enugu: An Industrial and Urban Community in East Nigeria 1914–1953*. Ibadan: NISER.
- Ikechukwu, Agu, aged 92, retired coal miner, interviewed by the author at Ngwo, Enugu State, 23 August 2012.
- Ijoma, J. Okoro. 2010. *Igbo History and the Battle for Survival*. Nsukka: Great AP Publishers Ltd.
- Isichei, Elizabeth. 1976. *A History of the Igbo People*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lt. Governor to Secretary, Southern Provinces, 3 April, 1923, CSO 26/1 09253/V. 1; Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan.
- Lugard, Frederick. 1915. *Colonial Annual Report: No. 920, Nigeria*. London: H. M. Stationery Office.
- Nebechi, Onyia, aged 89, retired coal miner, interviewed by the author at Amokwe Udu Town Enugu, 22 August 2012.
- Nigeria Colliery Department. 1939. *Annual Report on the Colliery Department for the Year 1938*. Nigeria.
- Nigerian Coal Corporation, Rate of Pay and Wage Structure 1916–1960, NIG COAL 0501/B; National Archives Enugu.
- Njoku, Onwuka N. 2001. *Economic History of Nigeria: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Enugu: Magnet Business Enterprises.
- Nwabara, S. N. 1978. *Iboland: A Century of Contact with Britain, 1860–1960*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.



Nwabueze, R. O. 1971. "The Future of the Nigerian Coal Industry." *Economic Bulletin of Ghana* 1, no. 2: 35-44.

Onoh, Christian C. 1997. *Whose Coal City?* Enugu: Frontline Publishers Ltd.

Onyeama, Dillibe. 1982. *Chief Onyeama: The Story of an African God*. Enugu: Delta Publications Nigeria Limited.

Wright, Stephen. 1998. *Nigeria: Struggle for Stability and Status*. Boulder, CO: West View Press.