

Disintegration of an Agricultural Infrastructure under the Weight of Colonial Domination: The Case of the Jos Tin Fields 1902-1950

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ABSTRACT: *The Jos Tin Fields which the British administratively constituted as the Jos Division and also which is coterminous with the geographical massif of the Jos Plateau was doubtlessly one of the choicest part of colonial Nigeria. It bore both overland and underground, thousands of tons of tin deposits which eventually became one of the busiest spots of the colonial economy. Within the ambit of the entire stretch of activities the colonialist engaged in to win this tin, unfolded one of the ugliest stories of colonialism in Nigeria, leaving the agricultural infrastructure of the people splintered and broken. Thus, a region that had remained in long relative isolation, especially from the international trading systems across the Sahara desert and the Atlantic Ocean, with her economy intact, was torn open by the double edge of the state and mining capital. It plummeted from a society of food sufficiency, within four decades, to one characterized by diet discrepancies, food deficits and out right hunger after the disintegration of its agricultural system.*

KEY WORDS: *Agricultural, infrastructure, disintegrate.*

I. INTRODUCTION

We shall in this paper seek to piece together the story of this destruction. We begin with sketching a general picture of the agricultural system of the region as it stood at the eve of colonialism and proceed from there to look at the specifics with which it was conquered to pave way for an eagerly waiting mining capital into the region.

The colonial experiences of the people of the Jos Division between 1902 and 1950 was delineated by blood and destruction in such a total manner that left them as double losers of the natural resources of their land and their agricultural infrastructure which took them centuries to build.

After looking at the first phase of the colonial conquest of the region (1903 - 1907) in the manner of Hitler's *blitzkrieg*, a colonial administrative superstructure was quickly put in place to create the "peace" "law" and "order" required for the mining industry to flourish; the paper moves to its main concern: the systematic ruination of an agricultural system that had survived centuries of evolution. We shall make a step by step account of how this process unfolded to arrive at where it left the land, the people and their agricultural infrastructure torn part.

II. AN EVOLVING AGRARIAN SOCIETY

Atop the massif of the Jos Plateau is an impressive agricultural ecology characterized by winding and long stretching plains, water courses and valleys with a very little balance of wastelands. In pre-colonial times as confirmed by geographers, the physical environment which today lies virtually bare and denuded, was once clad in good vegetation. The colonial state in a commissioned study came up with a discovery of a "relic vegetation" to confirm the presence of a good vegetation cover in pre-colonial times.¹ It is not surprising that the first impression the colonialist got of this environment was to develop it into an agricultural enclave. This was however not to be, but the very opposite of it, i. e the destruction of the pre-colonial agriculture of the area when it was tin they found here in large commercial quantities.

The groups that live in the area covered by this study are the Berom, Rukuba, Irigwe, Anaguta and Afizere, being the main people whose land, labour and traditions were either destroyed or diverted to serve the interest of mining capital. Before then, their agricultural system stood on solid infrastructural foundations which included rich land resources, blessed by two volcanic periods that enriched their soils especially in Hoss, Heipang, Kwall, Wereng and Vwang. The natural fertility of the soils was further enhanced by the use of animal manure, crop rotation and shifting cultivation given the approximate nature of the population of the region in relation to the arable land available. It is no wonder that early Census figures of the region designated these places as having the highest populations.

The basic institutions of the people consisted first of the political community, numerous and small sized, headed by a Priest Chief which the Berom called *Da Gwom*, *Ngwe* by the Irigwe, *Gwom* by the Afizere and *Utu* by the Rukuba. The household, the most basic institutional unit of production was the next most important institution. Thus while the political community determined the identify and location of the individual, it was the household and lineage that determined his matrix of land ownership and land use. With this arrangement, these societies could easily and effectively control their citizens. Mobilizing them for communal and farm work was done without any debilitating encumbrances. The relatively diminutive nature of the space these units took up easily precluded deviance and indolence as forms of social behavior that closely knitted the social fabric as it was mobilized round the year for farming, smelting and smithing, trading, fabricating, weaving and crafting implements.

Labour mobilization amongst the people within the political framework described above was done at three levels. Basically, labour was mobilized at the household level by household heads on household farms. Labour was secondly mobilized cooperatively at the age grade level to tap the benefits that come from synergy. The third level was where the whole community or sections of it where mobilized on the farms of individual who could afford the material requirements for mobilizing this form of labour known in common parlance as *Gayya*.

The technology of production which was an important sector of the agricultural system was predicated a hundred percent on the use of local materials from the environment. It was able to supply farm instruments through smelting and smithing and also through wood carving, pottery and weaving. The biggest iron working sites where located in Hoss, Kwall and Binchin, in Berom, Irigwe and Rukuba homelands, respectively.

The World view of the people was closely tied up with their agricultural preoccupations. Their World and their preoccupations revolved around their agricultural calendar which began in April with the Berom *Mandyeng*- a prayer festival for crop fertility as the new farming year is ushered in. Everything was done to protect the agricultural hearth from both internal and external aggression, while maintaining pan-ethnic and trans-ethnic harmony in their relative exclusion from the trading systems across the Atlantic and Sahara. Thus, with relative peace gained from the ability of the groups to militarily cooperate in defense of the region against the Jihadists who made their last attempt to invade the area in the closing decades of the 19th century, food surpluses abounded. Such surpluses finding no market outlets large enough to absorb them outside the region where channeled into a series of festivals and ceremonies² after using a substantial part of it to build up buffer stocks and trade locally. This from our findings is the acid test of the agricultural system that was self-sufficient i. e. the ability to accumulate and retain food surpluses. It was common to accumulate and hold *acca* surpluses for between seven and twenty years³. This practice of building stocks of food buffers in the region created food security which acted as fall back provisions for the people in the face of disaster such as crop failure and fire outbreak.

III. COLONIAL CONQUEST

At the eve of its colonization, the Jos Tin fields had an agricultural economy that was sectorally integrated and intact and equipped with inbuilt security safe guards that where good to last for some seasons.

The harmony of this agricultural system would face its fiercest challenge as it entered the 20th century which turned out to be the dispensation of trouble and disintegration. The colonial conquest of the Jos Plateau which brought this dispensation was specifically predicated on the desire of the colonial state to create a conducive environment for exploiting the enormous Tin deposits of the area.

Tin was first spotted by the Niger Company during their trading activities along the Benue River. By 1902, after the creation of the Bauchi province, the British were set to find the exact location of this Tin. The initial assumption put the location of this tin in the Bauchi area which only turned out to have tin of a lower grade around Ririwe Delma. Therefore in 1902, CL Temple, the first Resident of Bauchi province and col. H. W. Laws, the second mining Engineer in the Jos Plateau Tin mines, after G. Nicolas was deployed to explore the Tin deposits, visited the Plateau but were both repelled by the people. These confirmed stories of possible resistance the British would face when they confronted the Jos Plateau. Both men were clearly not welcomed as the people lined up battle ready to ward off any attempt to take their land⁴.

It should be known that at this point in time, just within the limits of vivid memories of attacks on the region by Islamic Jihadists, the mood and collective psychology of the people must have been one heavily tinged with suspicion of strangers sighted around their territory. War to incorporate this area into the

protectorate of Northern Nigeria under Bauchi province was clearly just a matter of time. This was more so as the people refused to accept and welcome unannounced visitors to their territory.

They also refused to pay taxes which were completely alien to them. All these with the killing of a British emissary in Shere brought the first military expedition in which a total of sixty five people were killed in Jengre and a whooping one hundred and thirty in Shere.

This gave some breathing space to the colonialist to quickly move in the first prospecting team backed by twenty five soldiers and six hundred head carries into the rich Delimi valley in the crucial month of May 1903. The immediate impact of this move and intimidating presence of the prospecting team was the disruption of agricultural activities in the valley as the farmers there fled to the mountains.

The quantum of mining capital waiting to be rushed into the Tin fields, the disruption of prospecting work by the local population in the Bukuru and Gyel areas added to the desperation to open up the entire Jos Plateau massif. This would shorten the traveling distance from Keffi and Loko from where materials were moved over land to the Tin fields after dropping them by boat on the Benue river. All of these set the stage for the bloody wars that were waged against the people between 1904 and 1907. The military detachment of the colonial State stationed in Nafata, Bauchi and Pankshin were used in pounding what was then called the Bukuru District in about five different expeditions that pushed the peasants into the hills for refuge. This began the systematic depletion of food reserves and the destruction of the mechanism in the agricultural economy to create food security. This is because as farming activities were greatly tempered with, families in the area were forced to fall back on their food reserves.

It will seem as if the conquest of the Bukuru district which was the core of the Jos Tin fields was conducted in the goriest manner in the whole of colonial Nigeria. This probably explains why the colonial state itself was astonished by the excesses with which the war was conducted by the colonial officers in the District. Thus, William Wallace, then the high commissioner of the Northern Provinces had to remove Howard, the Resident of Bauchi Province from office for the massive killing of the people during the conquest of the Bukuru District. Wallace did not mince words on the matter (may be to assuage a bad conscience) when he said in unequivocal terms "that it was only in Howard's Bauchi that such whole sale killing of the people was going on"⁶.

Disappearance of food security

The colonial wars of conquest in the Bukuru District which even by the standards of its conquerors involved substantial "war crimes" for which a whole Resident was removed from office could be regarded as the beginning of a sustained ruination of the agricultural infrastructure under study. The process began with the evaporation of food surpluses accumulated over the years as already said and more fundamentally, the disruption of the mechanism and therefore the ability to reaccumulate and rebuild the surpluses in the face of fierce battles. These food surpluses were used in executing the wars of resistance which lasted for not less than five years. From what we hope to establish in the course of this paper is the fact that the age old practice of accumulating food surpluses as a form of investment and retention of wealth in the agriculture economy was permanently lost for the period covered by this study.

The Diversion of Agricultural Labour

As anticipated, the colonial wars of conquest opened up the Bukuru District after breaking the peoples' resistance. By 1908, the British had established a firmer grip on the area which set the stage for the mobilization of the people to create the colonial infrastructure needed to be put in place so as to facilitate the exploitation of the Tin deposits of the District.

But winning the battles fought between 1903 and 1907 did not automatically mean winning the co-operation of the people in building the colonial economy. Because of the nature of the people's resistance to colonialism, the British had to conquer some of the communities twice⁷. It was, therefore, going to be difficult to get the co-operation of the people without the use of force and institutional coercion.

This, the British started doing by creating salaried offices for village and ward heads ostensibly to create a collaborating class from amongst the people for the purpose of coercing labour. It was therefore these salaried traditional rulers of the people that the British collaborated with to conscript labour from amongst the people for the execution of colonial projects.

After much prospecting work by mining Engineers in the Tin fields, the colonial state designated the Bukuru District as the primary labour catchment area for the mining industry it was developing. This eventually turned out to be the biggest force that diverted peasant labour from agriculture. Eager to mobilize this much needed labour by the mining companies, the Nigerian Chambers of Mining attempted to persuade the colonial state to adopt the South African model of labour mobilization. The colonial state refused to grant this request settling rather for a gradual process of converting the people of the catchment area into part mines labourers. The long term approach was to develop a stable unskilled labour for the Tin mines using the institutional framework of taxation which was administered in a deliberately structured manner that forced the people to the mines. Thus the people of the Primary catchment area were yoked with a higher tax burden than their peers from their neighborhood.¹⁰ Within the ambit of this tax system, it was impracticable for the peasants to use agriculture as an anchor to meet its demands. This left the people with no choice but to a beckoning mining industry at their doorsteps, as alternative. The dictates of the Second World War, demands of the war effort and the loss of Malaya to Japan, made the British to set a new agenda for the Jos Plateau Tin mines now their biggest source of tin. This new agenda included the re-introduction of forced labour, used in the early days of the colonial state. However with the entrenchment of the colonial state and its institutions of control, it was easier to do that, this time around. The chiefs and ward heads were called to a meeting with colonial officers where they were told to mobilize their subjects for mines work as their contribution to the war effort¹¹. However, the colonial records show that the people had by this time become a regularized labour reserve for the tin mines that needed no force to make them work there. In fact, it had pathetically become common at this time for family heads to mobilize their families to the mines instead of working their farms. This included children and pregnant women which was illegal even by colonial legal standards to make them work in the mines. Thus, at a point in this period over 5000 Berom families were found working in the mines at the same time.¹² It was also generally found out that over 70% the population of the catchment area was already regularized as mines workers. The thinking and argument by many of these people was that just a day's work in the mines was enough to purchase food that will last a long time. This salary bogey was however just a smoke screen. The harsh realities were a different thing.

This ugly development fitted in well with the colonial paradigm of designating the Bukuru District, now Jos Division, as the labour catchment area for the tin mines. This paradigm envisaged the cost benefits analysis of using the people of the division in getting cheaper labour for the tin mines in view of the extra cost of accommodating and feeding labourers from outside the Division. Thus by the fact that even children and pregnant women were seen working freely in the tin mines, the damage to agricultural labour could not be mistaken. Families were now depending on mines labour to raise not only tax monies but also monies to buy food in order to make up for the discrepancies in their food economy.

IV. RUINATION OF AGRICULTURAL LAND

The tragedy of peasant agriculture in the Jos Plateau Tin fields did not stop at the depletion of food reserves and the inability to recreate the mechanism of restoring it and the diversion of their labour to tin mines. There was also the issue of contention over their land which orchestrated a large scale process of ruination in the context of the mining industry.

The 1899 Crown Land Act technically transferred the "ownership" of land in the protectorate of Northern Nigeria to the British colonialists. This was the basis on which mining leases were issued to mining companies in the Tin fields. The arrangement allowed the peasant farmers to continue farming on the leases until when the mining companies were going to work on them at which time the peasant farmers were forced to vacate the leases to make way for mining activities even if their crops were still growing¹³. Knowing that this was going to be provocative, the British made arrangements for diffusing any possible resistance by leaving their military bases in Nafata, Bauchi and Pankshin intact in addition to a police force that was put in place in the mines fields.

Before the mid 1920s much of tin mining even though doing minimal destruction to land, disrupted agriculture along the river valleys. This was because at this time, tin deposits were largely found on the surface and sub soils of the Tin fields and were won by the use of shovels and diggers and by the deployment of electric monitors driven by generators. Hydraulic elevators and bucket dredges were also used which all put together were nothing compared with the massive destruction of land occasioned by the use of later mining equipment moved into the area after the establishment of the Nigeria Electricity Company (NESCO) in 1925 when their first station in Kwall started supplying electricity. Their second station in Kura Falls was commissioned in 1929. It was with this development that heavy earth moving equipment began to move into the Tin fields such as the dreadful monigan drag lines. The rate of land destruction by this new mining technology increased by more than 50%.

It was therefore this new paraphernalia of mining technology from the late 1920's that moved land destruction from the river valleys to the up-land. This in addition to the changes occasioned by the second World war which produced the Amalgamated Tins Mines of Nigeria (ATMN) in 1939, the largest Tin Mining company in the world, introduced deep shaft methods of mining that involved the movement of heavy earth materials from deep down, to as far down as between 30 and 70 feet. By this time over 50% of tin mining activities was done using this method. The idea of how much land was destroyed by the Tin mining industry began to emerge through an aerial survey in 1972. The survey gave a staggering figure of 172 square miles.

The destruction of Iron working technology.

The Jos Plateau is a part and parcel of the Nok culture area which makes it one of the areas that developed iron working technology in the period of Nigeria's pre-history. This age old technology was responsible for supplying agricultural implements, hunting and military hardware. As already pointed, these included hoes, spears and arrow heads. The colonialists completely destroyed the production lines of this industry by importing iron pieces from Britain. It is on record that the smelting industry was swept away completely by this process in the year 1932.¹⁵

The destruction of the Pre-colonial political and cultural superstructure.

The holding power of the pre-colonial agricultural system in the Tin fields, as already shown, was a pantheon provided by its political and cultural superstructure which was communal. It was an agriculture driven society in all its ramifications. The conquest and colonization of the people and the subsequent imposition of the mining industry over their agricultural economy destroyed this superstructure. With over 70% of the population of the people engaged in the Tin mining industry and with young people practicing and learning the vices of prostitution, gambling, drinking beer, taking cigarettes with reckless abandon and fragrant disregard for traditional authority, the foundations of the old agricultural society were definitely in ruins.

V. CONCLUSION

We tried in this paper to demonstrate how the imposition of colonial domination in the specific way it was done over the Jos Plateau Tin fields especially in the Jos Division had by the Second World War forced the agricultural infrastructure of the area to tear apart and disintegrate. The most vivid expression of this ugly development was twofold. Firstly, the chronic food shortages it occasioned forced many peasants in abysmal conditions to resort to eating Dusa which is the chaffy part of food grains hitherto known only as animal fodder.¹⁶

The second expression was in the development of the practice of land borrowing by the most affected farmers from Zawan, Gyel and Bukuru areas. They borrowed mostly from the Irigwe.¹⁷ Others voluntarily migrated from the area either into the Zaria province or to the southern Division of Plateau Province.

The colonial state itself, in the 1940's, while attempting to free more land for mining purpose tried to move Berom peasants from the inner core of the Tin fields to the Jema'a plains. This plan was frustrated mostly by the Berom Progressive Union (BPU), a political consciousness group that sprang up partly as a result of deprivations the Berom nation suffered under colonial domination.

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