

Colonialism and Industrial Development in Benin Province, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines colonialism and the development of industry in Benin Province of Nigeria. It identifies and discusses various aspects of the Benin economy that required the use of simple machines or mechanical instrument in the production processes. In this respect, the paper attempts to examine the purpose of colonial rule and how it largely influenced or impaired industrial development in Benin. The study is descriptive in nature and covers three main areas of the Benin province including Benin Division, Ishan Division and Kukuruku Division which were administrative units created by the British following the occupation of Nigeria. In contemporary time, these divisions formed the core of Edo state in southern Nigeria with its administrative capital in Benin City. The study uses data from primary and secondary sources. The data were analyzed in order to arrive at possible conclusion on the nature of industries inherited at independence.

Keywords: Colonial authorities, Industrial policies, Industries, Processing of raw materials, Benin Province.

Introduction

The conquest and occupation of Benin by the British in February 8, 1897 completely assailed the traditional economy of the people for the benefit of Britain. Thus, British colonial authorities pandered to the economic needs of Britain at the expense of the colonized society. In this regard, Benin was seen not as an industrial base but primarily to respond to the raw materials needs of the British industries in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in continental Europe. So, Benin was first and foremost “expected to supply raw materials to the metropolitan industries

and in return serve as outlets for the manufactures of the industries.”¹ The establishment of manufacturing industry in Benin in this circumstance will most certainly be at variance with the British objective of colony. Justification for this policy was expressed by Lord Lugard, the British official representative in Nigeria, in his *Dual Mandate*, that the tropics (West Africa),

[C]onsist for the most part of regions populated by backward races. Both for this reason and on account of their climate, they offer no inducement for permanent settlement by white races. The backward condition of the people, and their preference for agricultural pursuits, offer the prospect of continued markets for manufactured goods. The tropics produce in abundance a class of raw materials and of food stuffs which cannot be grown in temperate zones (Europe), and are so vital to the needs of civilized man that they have in very truth become essential to civilization.²

Two inferences could be drawn from the statement above. First, the colonial authorities envisaged the fact that she was in West Africa not for permanent settlement as she did in parts of Southern Africa and Australia. As a result, there was no need establishing an enduring manufacturing industry which could outlive colonial administration. This inference is eminently supported by E.D. Morel, another British official who avers that: “Commerce took us (Britain) to West Africa; commerce keeps and will keep us in West Africa. . . The day it ceases to be so, West Africa ceases to be of use to the Empire.”³ Secondly, Lugard and his cohorts sought to promote the so-called theory of ‘comparative advantage’, which consequently condemned Benin, as a colony, to be raw materials producers while Britain was favoured as a producer of industrial and consumer goods.⁴ Bode Onimode argues that if industries were established in the colonies, the outcome would be the sharing of the cheap raw materials, labour and markets, whose control and exploit dominated the British motives for conquest, between the imperial and domestic industries.⁵ In this circumstance, the imperial industries would be in disadvantage situation. For example, the creation of Cotton-Mills in India deprived Lancashire of an enormous market for cheap calico, not only in India but East Africa. In order to avoid this, the British authorities were biased towards trade which negatively affected industrial development and created few employment of labour,⁶ except

for the processing of raw materials for export. As if that was not enough, colonial authorities also took steps to either stunt or stifle the growth of existing ones as well as the skills associated with them.⁷ The ripple effect on the indigenous industries is explained separately by scholars including Njoku and Hodder. First Njoku argues that,

[t]he net result of this was that during the colonial era, Nigerians gradually lost the capacity to produce handicraft items in which they had developed acknowledge expertise, and which could have provided the basis for real industrial growth and development.⁸

Hodder in his view puts it succinctly that the result has been that indigenous cottage industries in many areas became stagnant or derelict and could not form the basis of any substantial increase in industrial production.⁹ Therefore, if any industry was to be established in Benin, it must of necessity be one which would not utilize the same raw material needed for production in the metropolitan state, Britain. Also, the establishment of such industry in Britain, outside Benin, would be economically unviable. In this circumstance, such industry was aimed at facilitating raw materials exploitation at reduced cost. For example, sawmills were erected near Benin City to provide cheap planks (processed timber) for furniture instead of importing it from England. The carpentry workshop that was set up in Lagos made adequate furniture for all government houses, while in the same vein, the exploitation of the limestone deposit near Lokoja for making cement saved the government from the highly inflated prices demanded by the importing firms.¹⁰

It was not uncommon therefore to discover that the British encouraged extracting or raw materials processing industries uppermost to the British. Whereas the former was prevalent in the mineral mining areas around the Jos Plateau,¹¹ the latter prevails in Benin province where agricultural and forest wealth was produced.¹² Even at that, they were aimed at turning raw materials (e.g. rubber, palm produce (kernel), cocoa etc), into a fine, manageable output that could be freighted to Europe with ease and at reduced cost. It is in this regard that ginneries for separating the lint from the seed cotton, crackers for breaking kernels, and fermentaries for cocoa seeds were established. This neither transferred industrial technology nor associated skills from

the imperial state to the colonists. In other words, colonial industrial policies were not meant to propel or advance the people along the direction of industrial growth. Hence most of these processing industries were liquidated either at independence or soon after because of the new Nigeria desire to promote real productive sector of the economy.¹³ This prompted M.H.Y. Kaniki to conclude that “the development of the colonized was none of their (British) business. Where there was development in the colonies, it was by and large a by-product of activities intended to promote the interests of the colonizers”.¹⁴

Igbafe in his earlier study examines the nature, structure and impact of British administration in Benin between 1897 and 1938. Though the thrust of his work is on British system of administration, an aspect of it is devoted to the economy of Benin with emphasis on agricultural development.¹⁵ Also, Osagie and Ikponmwoşa in their study on the development of rubber production in colonial Benin discussed extensively the relevance of the Benin rubber production to the industrial nations of Europe, particularly before and during the period of the Second World War.¹⁶ While those studies emphasized colonial agricultural policies on cash crops production, this current study examines colonial perspective on the development of industry in Benin. The study is descriptive in nature, and it is a synthesis of archival records on colonial Benin and secondary data on industries.

Latex-Processing Industry

Rubber was the main cash crop produced in colonial Benin. Prior to the end of the Second World War, the Benin rubber industry was the largest employer of labour in the province and a major source of crude rubber export to Britain from Nigeria.¹⁷ Despite the importance of the Benin rubber to the British, no attempt was made to establish rubber source products manufacturing factory in Benin. The simple reason for this is obvious; the British officers in rubber producing areas were concerned with the collection of crude rubber for export to Britain for the production of imperial industries.¹⁸ Therefore, latex collected from rubber was processed by peasant producers either as lump or sheets before it was sold to agents of European merchants (commonly known as buyers). While rubber sheet requires technical skills and takes time in processing, lump does not and was sold soon after collection. Any tapper who requires quick money prepares lumps. In addition, since

the colonial authorities were unwilling to offer right prices for sheet¹⁹, preparation of lump was preferred by rubber producers. The preparation of lump was easier and cheaper than the processing of sheet.

To process lump, rubber latex was allowed to coagulate in the latex collector placed beneath the rubber trees or collected immediately after tapping when latex has stopped dropping. In either way, the latex was finally collected into a bucket or a big collection container where it was left for few days (at least 3days) to coagulate with the aid of coagulation acid or lime. The coagulated lump was subsequently removed from the container and sold at the nearby sale station as lump. Since the preparation of lump does not involve any technical skill, it was bound to contain impurities such as water, pieces of wood and bark of rubber trees, pebbles and sand. This had the consequence of further lowering the price of lump at the sale station compared to sheet.²⁰ The processing of latex to sheets, on the other hand, was more technical, labour intensive and time consuming. So also it attracted higher prices though the prices offered by the colonial authorities were not commensurate to the labour and time inputs. To process sheets, latex from rubber was collected immediately after tapping and the latex stops dripping completely into the collection material placed.

The latex was collected into the collection bucket from where it is carefully separated from impurities and poured into the flat shaped rectangular containers design for that purpose and left for about 2 days to coagulate with the aid of acid. The rectangular fresh object that emerged is taken mostly by bicycle, to the nearest pressing machine popularly called "roller" in Benin, where it was pressed into a completely flat thin rectangular sheet like biscuit or a piece of towel. While some rich peasant producers could purchase their private hand press, those who could not continue to patronize the paid hand press. Pressed sheets were normally dried for at least three days before it was sold at the sale station. However during the period of the Second World War when rubber was tapped through-out the year including raining season,²¹ at times producers had to kindle fire to dry their sheets because of torrential rain falls. While the colonial authorities encouraged massive production of rubber, they did not consider the establishment of any latex processing factory or rubber based industry.

However by 1950, the three regions in Nigeria then (northern, eastern and western regions) under indigenous political leaders began

the process of economic sustenance of their respective regions. In western region in which Benin province was part of, the government's interest was on the development of agro-industries. It was in this regard that the Western Region Production Development Board decided to establish latex processing factory along Benin-Agbor road (Ikpoba Hill), Benin City. The factory, which commenced operation in 1955, envisaged the collection of latex for processing from a twenty-five mile radius around Benin,²² as collection centers from where Lorries would convey them to the factory for processing. Though this factory was to process latex for export, it did not however obliterate the preparation of rubber in lump and sheet. Tappers in remote villages far away from Benin City who could not transport their rubber there for processing still prepared their rubber either in lump or processed sheet. However, communities that still engage in rubber tapping presently processed their produce in lump and not sheet. The rubber factory at Ikoba Hill was liquidated after colonial rule, following a slump in the rubber trade in international market.

Palm Oil Extractive Industry: Oil Mills

Similar initiatives were taken by the Western Regional Development Board in the establishment of a pioneer oil mills simultaneously at Abudu and the oil palm research station (O.P.R.S) now NIFOR in 1950, to process palm fruits into palm oil. Though oil palm processing dates back to pre-colonial time, it was basically human labour, crude and essentially, for domestic consumption.²³ However, mills had the advantage of yielding at least 90% of oil from processed palm fruits, hence it was thought by the Board that the working of both mills boost the quantity of palm oil produced for export.²⁴ Unfortunately, the Abudu mill showed no sign of any success because of inadequate palm fruits for processing. On the other hand, however, the O.P.R.S mills opened in November 1950²⁵ showed great value of success and subsequently grown to be a major source of export of oil and fact from Benin in Nigeria.

Dairy Production

Dairy production was one cottage industry whose establishment is purely the initiative of the colonial authorities in Benin. In other words, the production of dairy products was novel and had no base in the

traditional economy of the people. The dairy production was to respond to the basic nutritional (protein) needs of the British officials in the province. So, private production of dairy products was encouraged by the authorities which consequently spurred Mr. G.I. Obaseki to open a dairy in Benin City in 1943. In this regard, Obaseki's dairy was subsidized with a takeoff grant of £100 by the Benin native authorities. It could therefore supply milk at 6d. per pint,²⁶ mainly to the British officers and few affluence and middle class in Benin province whose milk supplies from Europe were severed during the World War II when embargo was placed on importation of essential items including milk. However, while the war lasted, the dairy met local demands for milk and survived, but at the end of the war when importation of essentials was restored, patronage from the Europeans who were the main source of demand ceased, and the dairy liquidated for lack of adequate patronage. This aptly demonstrates the view of this study that industry was encouraged by the colonial authorities only when it responded to their socio-economic and commercial interests in Benin or the imperial country. It was the same reason, for example, that rubber production was encourage till after the war when it was dumped because it lost its usefulness to the British economy when Asian rubber market was re-opened to her.²⁷

Textile Industry

Cloth weaving flourished in pre-colonial Benin and was an aspect of the economy through which artistic ingenuity of the people was demonstrated. Weaving was essentially undertaken by women and cloths of different qualities were woven for different purposes. The quality of woven cloth is attested to by the fact that it was among the articles of trade bought by the early European traders in Benin during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Spinning and weaving was easily one of the most important industries in Benin and other parts of southern Nigeria. It produced varieties of locally woven cloths for different purposes and ceremonies.²⁸ While most girls learnt to spin, at least 75% of the women could weave using the upright or vertical loom as against special male weavers for the Oba called "Owina-N'do" who was in charge of royal costume. The horizontal loom was used for the royal costume.²⁹

However during the colonial period industrial policy somewhat stunted or stifle the existence of the textile or weaving industry. The reason was simple; if colonies serve as markets for the sales of imperial

industrial products, the existence of parallel manufacturing industries therein would be counterproductive, contrary to the objective of colonization. The India experience earlier stated has shown that the existence of cotton mill or weaving industry in colonies will not only deprive the Lancashire textile industry of cheap cotton fibre or lint, but also markets for mass produced cheap cloths. Therefore, any existing weaving industry in the colony must be discouraged in order to realize the primary purpose of colonialism. First, the colonial authorities flooded the markets in Benin province with mass produced, duty free, cheap European textiles, some of which were second handed. Second, inflated excise duty was imposed on locally produced textile to discourage demand for them. The duty regime prompted Lugard to argue that,

[t]he attempt to suppress local industries (including textile) by excise duties or otherwise is, on the other hand a short-sighted policy, unjust to the people for whose development we have assumed responsibility. . .³⁰

This reproach was too little and too late, as Benin province began to witness regular importation of cheap European textiles at the detriment of the local textile industry. The trade in European textiles expanded to the extent that before independence it became the highest revenue earner for Britain in her trade from Nigeria.³¹ In this regard, the colonial industrial policy became ‘mercantile’ as Nigeria became an expanding market where textiles of different kinds were dumped at will³² which hindered local production of textile.

Also, a paradigm shift in the economic activities of women, especially from the period of the war, seemed to have finally nailed the coffin of textile industry in the province. As some women took to cash crop (especially kernels) processing and some others engaged in long distance trade made possible by transport revolution,³³ local production of textiles was abandoned. The industry went into extinction without any visible sign of existence. It could be argued therefore that the cloth weaving industry died in Benin simply because of the British official policies which discouraged the existence of any parallel local industry. The same anti-local textile policies were implemented in Ishan division, also known for high quality textiles in Benin province. Although textile products from local weavers in Ishan were bought and exported to

Britain during the war,³⁴ this was halted immediately the war ended when Britain's textile industries resumed full production.

However, a post-war attempt was made by the colonial authorities to revive weaving activities in order to overcome the scarcity of textile materials experienced in the province. This led to the establishment of a textile training centre at Auchi (Kukuruku Division) in 1948, where men were to be trained on local weaving. Those trained were expected to establish their local looms for producing good quality cloth for local consumption. Thus,

[t]extile training centre at Auchi began to take pupils on 1st August and was officially opened by the Governor on 20th September. It suffered from teething troubles which have now been largely overcome, it remains to be seen whether the trained weavers will stick to the looms and be economically successful.³⁵

The difficulty inherent in the centre was that strange, as men and not women, were admitted to be trained as weavers. The centre was bound to fail because in most traditional Nigerian societies, cloth weaving was by women not men. It was not surprising therefore that those men trained at the centre did not establish their looms as expected. Another hiccup that confronted the center is that it was ill-timed at least to the people of the province. By 1940s, desires for western education was spreading across different parts of the province and peasant farmers who had realized fortunes from cash crops production preferred sending their male children to schools than to Auchi to learn weaving. It became an open secret that many parents preferred to send their children to school that offers opportunity to become school teacher, Book keeper, Clerk, messengers etc, in colonial administration or trading firms, rather than a cloth weaver. The centre became unattractive and did not achieve significant success. Consequently,

[t]he senior district officer, Kukuruku Division reports disappointing results at the Auchi Textile Centre, which has little effect on the standard of local weaving... and does not seem to provide training which encourages many of the pupils (boys) to set up in business when they leave.³⁶

Finally the double standard attitude of the British did not help the success of the textile Centre. Though men trained at the centre were

expected to set up their local loom for the production of textiles for domestic market, the colonial authorities did not stop the importation of cheap textiles into province. Thus, with regular importation from Europe, local weaving of cloth completely disappeared in the larger society.

Pottery

This was another important cottage industry among women in pre-colonial Benin. Earthenware of different shapes, sizes and of high qualities were produced prior to contact with the Europeans. The beauty and quality of Benin pots and ceramics is attested to in eulogistic terms by the British officials who patronized them to adorn their homes and offices. According to the British official report,

[m]any of the traditional shapes make excellent pots and bowls for horticultures, and others are admirable as flower-vases.... Such uses may become of increasing importance as urbanization proceeds.³⁷

Therefore, attempt was made as early as 1903 by the authorities to blend the indigenous and European methods of pottery. To actualize this project, a British potter was brought in from England to establish a pottery training centre in Ibadan³⁸ where men from traditional pottery centers in southern Nigerian, including Benin province, were to be trained as potters. The main objective is to introduce improved methods and quality of production. It was expected that those trained will set up their own wood-fired kiln to produce good quality pots and ceramics for local demands. This was a laudable objective no doubt, but like the Auchu textile centre, the wrong sex----- (male) was targeted for training. Pottery is women activities, so the training of men at Ibadan pottery center could not in any way impact positively on the industry. While assessing the effort of the British potter who established the centre, the magazine *Nigeria*, captured succinctly in 1934 thus:

Unfortunately he only taught the art to men. After he left in 1912 his work was not carried on, and the knowledge he brought never came to the women. It is quite contrary to native customs for pottery work to be done by men.³⁹

The experiment failed and did not achieve the desired objective. As a result, the traditional method of production by women continued while the importation of iron pot and mass produced of glaze ceramics could not displace its activities. Both the local and imported pots and

ceramics continue to supplement each other as cooking utensils and vase for decoration of homes. What could be termed period of boom for indigenous potters occurred during the war when its attendant effect halted the importation of iron pots and glaze ceramics from Europe. Potters consequently responded to the increase in local demand for clay pots with increased production. But at the end of the war, the authorities flooded the Nigerian markets with steel pot and plastic ceramics which subsequently reduced the value of locally produced pot and ceramics, and their demand.

However, by 1950 the Western Regional Government somehow recognized the value of the local pottery industry and made attempt to revive its production in the region as a whole. In this regard, Mr. M.A. Cardew, Pottery officer, embarked on a thorough tour of Benin province where he was impressed by the quality of local ceramics produced and the Koalin discovered in the Kukuruku division that was yet to be exploited. He therefore recommended the establishment of pottery training and experimental centre in Benin City for training of potters in the province.⁴⁰ But while Carder was entitled to his own view, his employer, the Department of Commerce and Industry had a different view and intension altogether, which mostly represented the view and interest of colonial industrialists and merchants. In the final report signed by the Director, Department of Commerce and Industry it was stated inter alia:

A wholesale transformation of the Nigerian native pottery industry is considered to be neither practicable nor desirable... It is likely that new technical methods taught will be adopted only by a small fringe of the women potters.... Native pottery represents the Bronze Age or "Archaic" stage in the evolution of ceramics. The work is almost entirely in the hands of women. In present day West African society, pot-making brings a small independent income to the wife, but the value of the products is not sufficient to attract the men...⁴¹

In this respect, Cardew's recommendation was never implemented since it did not in any way interests the authorities, industrialists and merchants, but the local people. The importation of various sizes of iron pots, fibre and rubber ceramics continued to flood the market, though they could not obliterate the demand for local clay pots which aptly fitted for special cases of elaborate ceremonial vessels, rituals

and sacrifices. The production of clay pots is done today only in few places around Oka near Benin City and Iguiye near Ekiadolor etc, simply because of poor patronage.

In a similar vein, local blacksmithing also suffered a setback with the regular importation of steel and iron materials by the colonial authorities. The smithery industry which would have propelled Nigeria towards industrial growth was stunted throughout colonial period. What remains of the smithery industry in Benin today is only a vestigial trace in the production of simple agricultural implements including hoes, tripod-stand for cooking (*egue* and *abakpa, agaga*), and spear, spectres of royal authorities (*ada* and *eben*) among others, in Igun which lack import substitution.⁴²

Soap Making

Soap making is another aspect of cottage industry that was adversely affected by the colonial industrial policies in Benin. Soap production, like cloth weaving, was popular among pre-colonial Benin women. The quality of soap produced was well praised by early European visitors to Benin.⁴³ During the colonial period, colonial authorities and merchants flooded Nigeria's markets with imported soaps and detergent which gradually relegated the relevance of locally produced soap. Imported soaps were produced in tablet while detergents were wrapped or packaged with both containing deodorant which subdue or prevent unpleasant smells when used. This made imported soap and detergent attractive and preferable to locally produced soap. The trade in imported soap had a boom in Benin especially during the period of the war when rubber became widely produced. To eliminate the stink of rubber quite obvious on every producer or tapers, imported soap and detergents were regularly purchased for bathing and washing of cloths respectively at the detriment of the locally produced soap.

In addition, as the number of the educated elite that took up appointments (white collar jobs) with the colonial administration increased, so also the use of imported soap and detergent assumed a proportionate popularity in consumption.⁴⁴ Since the 'white collar shirts' and trousers (popular outfits for colonial employees) and other imported textiles could not ideally be washed with the locally produced soap, foreign soap and detergents became prominent for their washing. The colonial authorities did not encourage the development of local soap

production to the standard where it could compete with the foreign imported. So, the demand for local soap decreased rapidly and production declined into an unviable cottage industry, while many of the women initially engaged in it took to palm kernel production for export. Soap production consequently became unpopular while production was limited to very few remote villages.

Bronze Casting

Benin is famous for the bronze craft. Before the contact with Europe, series of works were produced that depicted the history of the people and their monarchy. This is one particular pre-colonial industry that survived in its original form in spite of the repressive industrial policies of the colonialist towards the colony. The survival of this industry is chiefly due to the fact that there was no substitute for its products from Europe. The bronze works produced in Benin bears eloquent testimony to the artistic excellence and culture of the people. This is attested to by early European visitors to “Benin that though the process of production appeared crude (lost wax), many of the castings, are fine, spirited works better in so many ways than that existing at that time in Europe and quite different to that seen elsewhere.”⁴⁵ They are not just works of aesthetics, they tell time and history. This made the industry unique in Benin

The absence of any perfect substitute from Europe ensured that the products of Benin bronze works are demanded both at home and abroad. British officials and merchants in different parts of Nigeria purchased Benin bronze works to adorn their homes and offices, and for shipment to Europe for sales. While the works attracted wide range of demands, the colonial authorities did nothing either to improve its technique of production or productive capacity. The traditional method of production (lost wax) which the British met at colonization operated throughout the period of British rule and after.⁴⁶ Although captain Gruning and Mr. Oliver, both officials of the Cranmor Ethnographical Museum London, visited bronze casters in Igun, Benin City, in July 1935,⁴⁷ their visit was merely to obtain information as to its origin and significance, and not for the purpose of improving its traditional skills. Igun is famous for this craft and practitioners realize fortunes from the sales of bronze and ivory which have wide range of local and foreign demands. In contrast to bronze casting, palm wine processing became

moribund due to the peoples pre-occupation in cash crops production. The few palm trees that were tapped during and after colonial period were done by the Igbo migrant tapers from east.

Conclusion

The study found that the British colonial authorities in Benin did not formulate any deliberate policy intended at promoting industrialization or advancing the existing traditional crafts or cottage industries. To the colonialists, it was not secret that colonies were to supply raw materials for the metropolitan industries as well as market for the sales of its manufactured. Therefore, every other interest in the colony was subordinated to that of the metropolis. In most cases, what emerged is service oriented or subsidiary trade which is a reflection of the impact of colonial industrial policies in Benin and other part of Nigeria. Consequently, colonial Benin reflected large number of trade such as repairers of cars, motorcycles, bicycles and radio, battery chargers, vulcanizers, welders, shoe repairers and sanders makers (both from leather and tyres), painters and plumbers etc.

However, processing industries were of necessity consciously encouraged by the British to change raw materials into a fine and light shape that would ease transportation and reduce freightage to Europe. There was no deliberate policy to stimulate real productive industry that could outlive colonial rule in Benin. Therefore, whatever industry that survived colonial rule other than raw material processing ones, it was for the simple reason that the product of such industry had no substitute from Britain or continental Europe. This was the situation that was on ground at the attainment of independence in 1960 and Nigeria remained purely an agrarian (mono) economy with most of its foreign earnings derived from exports of cash crops.

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- 38 Ibadan is a city to the North-west word of Benin and renowned centre for pottery products prior to colonial rule, see Ibid.
- 39 This is cited in NAI, BP. 2797: Pottery Development, Benin Province, pp. 27-28
- 40 NAI, Annual Report, 1950, p.49, Also see, NAI, BP, Pottery Development, p.58
- 41 Ibid., pp.24-25

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- 43 P.A. Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria* Vol. 2, London: Oxford University Press, 1926, p. 920.
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