

**PROBLEMS OF SUSTAINABLE FOREST
MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA SINCE THE COLONIAL TIMES:
A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**

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Abstract

This paper argued that certain gaps existed between the colonial governments' responses to, and handling of forest management challenges and that of the post-independence governments in Nigeria. It held further that these gaps negatively impacted on the effective forest resources management in the post-independence years. The paper consulted both relevant primary and secondary data. Primary data were retrieved from the National Archives, Ibadan while secondary sources were obtained from relevant existing literature on the problems of forest management in Nigeria. The paper was anchored on the dependency theory approach wherein the African colonial dependencies were adapted to serve the interests of the metropolitan economies in Europe over and above the colonies themselves. It found that forestry and forest reservation, as practised today, was established by the colonial authorities in Nigeria. It further found that the colonial forest services were strictly guided by policies, practices, laws and regulations that combined to ensure the sustainability of the forest resources management. It also uncovered that the Nigerian government, at independence, inherited a well consolidated forest service. It found as well that the Nigerian government, soon after independence, gradually but steadily abandoned many of those factors that had allowed for sustainable forest management in colonial Nigeria. Another finding was that some new challenges emerged in the post-independence period to further menace sustainable forest management. The paper concluded that the threat to the sustainability of forest resources management in Nigeria in the recent times resulted from the failure of the Nigerian governments to harness the factors that enabled sustainable forest management under colonial government and their failure to tackle the new challenges that faced forest management in recent times.

Keywords: Forest, Resources, Sustainable, Colonial, Post-Colonial Nigeria.

Introduction

The apprehension today about the sustainability of forest resources in the face of excessive logging and deforestation without sufficient reforestation was not a new one. That was exactly the same concern that had predisposed the British colonial authorities in Nigeria to introduce modern forestry and constitute government forest reserves to guarantee sustainability. Back in the 1880s and 1890s in the Lagos Colonial territory and its hinterland (i.e. Yorubaland), mahogany was about the only timber species selectively demanded by the European buyers of raw logs (Timber of Yorubaland, 1891). This was due to lack of information on other types of timber available in Nigerian forests as at then.

There was the indiscriminate harvesting of woods as fuel for the charcoal-powered locomotive engines of the newly introduced railways (Crowder, 1976). There was the widespread clearing of forests for the cultivation of cocoa newly introduced to Nigeria about the 1890s. There was also the search for and tapping of wild rubber trees in the forests for sale to the European buyers at the coast (Omosini, 1979). Finally, there was the clearing of new forests annually for the shifting cultivation of other arable crops as practised in the pre-colonial times. All of these factors just identified put so much strain on the forests that made government control imperative. This paper, therefore, traced the history of the efforts of the successive governments (from the colonial to the post-colonial) in managing forest resources in the face of these challenges.

Historical Background to Forestry in Nigeria: Alfred Moloney as Pioneer of Modern Forestry in the Lagos Colony and Protectorate

Alfred Moloney, upon becoming the governor of Lagos Colony and Protectorate in 1886, took certain administrative steps (between 1889 and 1891) that later led to the establishment of modern forestry in the colony (Omosini, 1975). It should be remarked here that before 1886, Nigeria was administered as part of the Gold Coast, with a Lieutenant Governor responsible to Accra. The first step he took as governor to manage forest challenges was the creation of the forestry department in 1889. He also endeavoured to create sufficient awareness in Britain about the abundant availability of numerous species of valuable timber resources in his colonial territory and the profitability of Britain investing in such an enterprise. By the same token, he also hinted at the availability of wild rubber resources in the territory as well as the viability of introducing another variety of rubber from India which was already thriving there. At this period, both timber and coagulate latex (any fluid from tree convertible to rubber) were in high demand in Britain to meet furniture and vulcanising needs respectively.

Moloney had been corresponding with London on the feasibility of forestry and timber trade in Yorubaland as far back as 1884, two years before his appointment as governor of Lagos Colony and Protectorate. He sent correspondence to the Kew Gardens, London in form of feasibility study report emphasizing the fertility of the soil of Yorubaland, not only for arable farming, but also for timber cultivation. He even attached an appendage to the letter on Iroko wood (*Chlorophora Excelsa*) and how it thrived naturally and abundantly in Yorubaland (Timber of Yorubaland, 1891).

Moloney's ultimate objective was to persuade Britain to give its support and approval to his proposal to commence timber trade in Yorubaland and to organise forestry to ensure a permanent supply of the commodities in this trade. The word 'Yorubaland' above referred to Lagos Colony and Protectorate which was the nucleus of what later became Nigeria. He was, himself, persuaded that once his home government became convinced about the feasibility and profitability of such a commercial venture, his dream of forestry and timber trade in the Lagos Colony would come true (Omosini, 1975). As a follow up on his earlier memorandum to London on the rich forest of Yorubaland, he sent a dispatch again to the Royal Gardens, Kew, in 1890. The purpose of that dispatch was to persuade the Director of the Royal Gardens to accept his proposal and assist, with his good offices, in convincing relevant parties in Britain that were capable of making the proposal to sail through. If that happened, he had hoped, it would lead to the commencement of timber trade in the Lagos Colony and Protectorate as well as the introduction of forestry laws to secure such trade on a permanent basis.

In his bid to further convince the colonial office in London, through the Royal Gardens, Kew, Moloney attached to his letter, a circular which he had issued in the Lagos Colony and Protectorate on the feasibility of timber trade. In it he had drawn attention to the timber of Yorubaland, which he described as valuable and requested the samples of these timbers be secured, examined and reported upon by experts in Britain for their feasibility and marketability. He also gave information on the availability of a large number of varieties of such timbers in the immediate hinterland of the Lagos Colony and the grand network of inland waterways to aid their evacuation. He informed further that all that was needed for a thriving commerce in these timbers to commence in Europe was the acquisition of a more complete knowledge of their commercial values and the best condition for shipping them to Europe. Modern forestry and forest reservation that resulted from the awareness creation served to commodify the forests and their resources which were natural resources not conceived as such by the indigenous people (Segall, 2006).

Forest Management in Nigeria under Colonial Rule, 1900-1960

The pioneering efforts of Alfred Moloney did pay off shortly after he had left the Lagos Colony and Protectorate on transfer. The British colonial office in London soon began to show more favourable dispositions towards the establishment of modern forest management system in their Nigerian colonial dependency. Forestry Department was created in the country in 1889 (Unwin, 1918). After much bilateral engagements and dialogues between the Colonial Governor and African Chiefs (in this case, the Olubadan-and-Council) the first forest reserve in Nigeria, Mamu Forest Reserve, Ibadan, was created in 1899 (Forestry Ordinance of Nigeria, 1916). The following year, 1900, the second forest reserve, Olokemeji Forest Reserve, Abeokuta was created. From this time forward, forest reserves were created in many places across Nigeria by the colonial governments. Once these reserves were created, the immediate concern of the colonial administrators consisted in adopting the best possible strategies for managing these reserves sustainably. Some of the methods adopted to manage the colonial forest services were discussed in this section.

Once a few forest reserves were constituted in the Lagos Colony and Protectorate, the colonial government came up with methods and techniques which, in their view, would assure the sustainability of both the forest reserves and the numerous resources that they harboured. Even though many of these forests already had large stocks of assorted indigenous timber resources before they were reserved, the sheer rate of annual timber harvesting warranted planned methods of regeneration. There were two ways to this namely, natural regeneration and artificial regeneration. Natural regeneration consisted in allowing the forest trees to regrow by themselves over many years after the cutting of the trees. This method obviously could not match the rate of annual harvest by mostly expatriate timber extraction companies to whom the governments gave annual harvesting concessions in exchange for the payment of royalties.

The second type of regeneration was known as artificial regeneration. This referred to the different ways of manually replanting the clear-felled spaces inside the forest reserves with indigenous and exotic tree seedlings. The indigenous trees were those already growing wildly by themselves before the coming of the Europeans. The exotic species, on the other hand, were those mostly fast-growing timber species introduced from other countries into Nigerian forests by the colonial government. The purpose of these new species was to increase the number of merchantable timbers in European wood markets. The chief goal of the colonial

government was to establish a steady source of timber to meet the furniture needs of Europe. To this end, raw logs of assorted timber were regularly exported from Lagos and well-maintained forest reserves were needed to help assure uninterrupted supplies of these essential commodities.

The government forestry departments played leading roles in forest management and regeneration. They maintained constant tree nursery beds from where tree seedlings were given to timber contractors to replace the mature timbers they felled. It was so organised that only trees of the same species replaced each other. An Iroko tree seedling could not replace Obeche and so on. This was a regeneration policy aimed at preventing species extinction of any given timber type. Also, by putting the responsibility of replanting harvested forest trees on the timber contractors, the colonial administrators were able to lighten the burdens of doing it on the various forestry departments. The departments only needed to provide the appropriate seedlings and monitor the correct planting of same.

Another effective forest regeneration method was the Taungya farming system. The Taungya system was a form of government-community partnership in forest regeneration (Hellermann, 2007). It was an arrangement whereby the government allocated portions or open spaces inside forest reserves, from where timber had just been harvested, to farmers upon request. Such applicants were expected to plant only food crops on such farmlands in addition to forest tree seedlings allocated to them by the forestry departments. The goal was that the farmers should enjoy farming on such fertile lands for the estimated space of five to six years during which the canopies of the planted trees would have covered enough to discourage further farming. Once this happened, such farmers were expected to apply for fresh clear-felled space inside the reserve for a repeat of the above process. The Taungya farming system did benefit the people and the government in two different ways. It helped the government to ensure timely regeneration of the forest reserves without bearing the costs of doing so. It also helped to provide steady portions of fertile arable lands to farmers where they could grow food crops on a rotational basis.

The use of the forest action plan was about the most effective method that helped the Nigerian colonial government to manage their forest reserves sustainably (Obinta, 2016). The forest action plan was a document prepared annually by the forestry department strictly according to which all timber harvesting would be undertaken in a given forest reserve. It was an offence to carry out any form of harvest of trees without recourse to this document. This document stipulated the size and girth of trees that could be cut, the replanting of the exact tree seedlings to replace the ones felled as well as the annual allowable cut.

The annual allowable cut was the number of timbers that could possibly be cut from a given forest reserve beyond which any further harvest was considered an offence. With the forest action plan, it was possible to undertake purposive harvesting (Amgbasim, 2012). Purposive harvesting was a method of clearing a large portion of already mature forest timber at once so as to make allowance for replanting of new ones. This type of large scale replanting was also known as plantation forestry and was considered necessary to make up for the high rate of annual timber harvesting (Roche, 1977). Strict observance the above measures in the management of their forest reserves was the secret of success of the Nigerian colonial forest services.

Forest; Management in Colonial and Post-colonial Nigeria Compared

Tracing the missing link in sound and sustainable forest management in Nigeria would warrant

a comparative discussion of the forest management objectives and policy thrusts of the colonial forest service and that of the Post-colonial government. To begin with, the overriding colonial forest policy was that no forest management plan would ever work without first bringing the affected forest under reservation. The colonial authorities took this position based on their conclusion that the traditional land tenure system of shifting cultivation and annual burning of forests for cultivation was inimical to sustainable forest conservation. This was the philosophy behind the colonial forest conservation policy of reserving, at least, twenty-five per cent of the total land areas in Nigeria as forest reserves. This reservation benchmark was, however, not achieved as at 1960. Only about ten per cent of the forests were reserved at independence. The findings of this paper included that whereas nearly all the forest reserves in Nigeria were constituted and managed by the colonial administration, the post-colonial government only managed these reserves (Olatubosun, 2009).

The colonial government adopted a dual forest management system whereby the government managed forest reserves at the provincial level while the Native Administration managed their own forests at the local level. This came from their belief in shared forest management with the land owners (Wyatt-Smith, 1996). This enabled the indigenous land owners to participate in forest governance and the benefit-sharing. This dual management style was abolished by the Nigerian government shortly after independence. This made them forfeit the benefits of government-people participatory forest management (Elliot, 2002). In the same vein, colonial authorities recognised indigenous land ownership of the reserved forest lands and paid the owners royalties annually. Post-colonial government, on the contrary, abrogated the indigenous ownership of forest lands and also ceased to pay them annual forest royalties (Azeez et al, 2011). It vested the land ownership on the respective state governors on behalf of the people.

Moreover, the colonial government managed their forests with carefully designed working plans that spelt out annual forest exploitation scheme that balance exploitation against regeneration. Forest departments in post-independence period had neglected the use of working plans in the management of their reserves. A study found that even as at 2011, the various forest departments had no working or management plans to manage the forests with (Fayenuwo et al, 2011). It also found that even the almost obsolete forestry policies and laws were only on paper and were rarely applied or enforced. The forest reserves were, therefore, at the mercy of forest poachers and other illegal forest users.

More importantly, the colonial forestry departments were actively and directly involved in the regeneration of exploited forest reserves. They carried out researches on scientific forest management as well as develop and manage nurseries from where forest tree seedlings were distributed for regeneration purposes. This aspect of colonial forest management was found to be seriously lacking in the post-independence forestry departments. The ready excuse had been a shortage of staff.

However, this study found a lack of political will by the government to manage the forests sustainably to be more responsible. The emphasis was more on maximising revenue from the forests and minimising expenditure on same (Olaseni et al, 2004). What was more, the monies realised from the forest reserves were not made available to the forestry department but lodged in the state coffers from where it was deployed to also serve other purposes with only meagre sums left to manage the forests.

This inability of the post-independence forest departments to function effectively was accounted for by the fact that they were not adequately empowered by governments to perform

optimally. Under the colonial forest service, the forestry department was completely autonomous with the Chief Conservator of Forests as its national manager answerable only to the Head of State. The department was fully in charge of its revenue and expenditure. However, in the post-colonial Nigerian forest management, forestry department was never autonomous. It was, for a very long time subsumed under the Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources. It was only recently reassigned under the Ministry of Environment. In either case, chief conservator or director of forests (as the officer was recently designated) was answerable to the minister of either agriculture or environment. The autonomy needed for effective administration was, therefore, denied to a sector as important as forestry and natural resources. There was, nevertheless, an exception of Ogun State where there was an autonomous Ministry of Forestry.

This inadequate empowerment of the Forestry Department, both administratively and in its fiscal operations were among the causal factors for its noticeable low performance after independence. The heavy deforestation that this poorly controlled logging gave rise to put the wildlife at risk (Lewis, 2009). It also threatened the entire forest ecosystem in the remaining forests in the country (Morris, 2010). Furthermore, the loss of forest cover equally occasioned the disappearance of many non-timber forest products that fetched much revenue in the past (Oriola: 2009, 13). There was also the challenge of overreliance on fuel wood by the rural poor as their major source of energy with its harmful effects on sustainable forest management (Enger and Smith: 2013, 9).

The study, finally, uncovered an entirely new challenge to the management of the forest reserves that was unknown during the colonial period. This had to do with armed security challenges in the forest reserves. Forest marauders were found to be very desperate and often illegally armed with dangerous firearms while inside the reserves. The forest guards, who were neither trained to use firearms nor equipped with same, were expected to arrest these armed forest thieves and bring them to town for prosecution. The forest poachers also mostly outnumbered the forest guards who were sometimes numbered from one to four covering a forest beat (Vassan, 2002).

The various state governments in Nigeria, as at present, have had no answer to the armed security challenge in the reserves. Many forest administrators often advised the unarmed forest guards under their respective areas to observe their personal safety precautions while in the jungles with these dangerous timber dealers. Forestry officers in the Ogun State Ministry of Forestry, for instance, usually applied for and obtained armed police escorts whenever they had reasons to inspect their forest reserves. This made the forest policing system to be seriously impotent and often predisposed the forest guards to accept bribe offers from timber contractors and look away from their forest crimes. Failure to address this important matter impacted negatively on forest management given the central roles of the forest guards as the watchmen over forest resources (Vassan, 2002). This caused the government to lose revenue and made taking accurate forest inventory almost impossible.

Conclusion

This paper had examined and discussed the subject of forest resources management in Nigeria beginning from the colonial times. It found that the present concern for the sustainability of forest resources was very similar to the worry of the colonial authorities that led to the conservation of forest reserves in the early colonial period. It equally uncovered that colonial forest managers operated an inclusive dual forest management system which incorporated the local people in it while the post-independence government did not. It also found that colonial

forest managers acknowledged indigenous land titles and paid landlords annual forest royalties while post-independence government abolished royalty payment and vested all powers related to lands on the governors of the respective states.

The paper further discovered that such colonial forest management techniques as the use of forest action plans, provision of tree seedlings, departmental supervision of forest regeneration and Taungya planting were either not applied or very poorly applied. It found that Nigerian government, after independence, concentrated more on forest revenue generation and less on regeneration of cleared forests. It found, finally, that Nigerian government, after independence, did not respond promptly and appropriately to the armed security challenges threatening the protection of forest resources. It concluded that the threat to the sustainability of forest resources management in Nigeria in the recent times resulted, in part, from the failure or inability of the Nigerian governments to adequately harness the factors that collectively enabled sustainable forest management under the colonial government as well as their failure to tackle the new armed security challenge that faced forest management in recent times.

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