

COLONIALISM AND INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF KANO

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Abstract

This paper looks at the impact of colonialism on inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria, using the Kano experience. Before the conquest of Kano in 1903, Kano had already developed into a cosmopolitan city and attracted migrants from other parts of what is presently known as Nigeria, West Africa, North Africa and some part of the Arab world across the Mediterranean Sea. Economic factor was a prime motivation for most migrants who took advantage of the economic fortunes provided by Kano at the time. In other words, there existed interactions among the peoples of the area known as Nigeria today before colonialism. However, decades after independence in 1960, Nigeria still grapples with inter-ethnic conflicts and the task of nation-building. Some scholars have attributed the ethnic divisions, distrust and challenge of attaining nationhood to colonialism. It is against this background that this paper employs primary and secondary sources of historical inquiry in appraising the impact of colonialism on inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria using Kano as a case study. The study concludes that colonialism had negative and positive impacts on inter-ethnic relations in Kano. For example, while the policies of divide and rule and residential segregation stirred ethnic tensions, the development of transportation system linked the south to the north and facilitated inter-ethnic relations among the peoples.

Key Words: Colonialism, Inter-ethnic Relations, Migrants, Nation-building, Nationhood.

Introduction

Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has been grappling with the task of nation-building. Ethnic and regional identity became clogs on the wheel of national cohesion.(Uchendu 196) The spate of inter-ethnic conflict in the country justifies the unending debate on the creation of Nigeria and the impact of colonialism. Although various regimes have made attempts to quell this crisis, the situation continues to deteriorate. This is because the factors that instigate inter-ethnic clashes have remained unchecked. Successive administrations after independence have not been able to address the issues that bred inter-ethnic and

regional confrontations in Nigeria. As a result of this, the creation of the entity 'Nigeria' has become a subject of scholarly debate. Some Nigerians like Obafemi Awolowo, Sir Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and Sir Ahmadu Bello, while faulting colonialism, argue that Nigeria was arbitrarily created. (Audu 605) On the other hand, others like J.F.A Ajayi and E.J. Alagoa, while agreeing that the creation of Nigeria was “fortuitous,” argue that, based on cultural and economic considerations, the political unification of Nigeria cannot be said to be arbitrary. (Ajayi and Alagoa 225) In other words, while some feel that the amalgamation of 1914 that brought 'strange bedfellows' together to make up Nigeria was a mistake, others opined that the 1914 exercise was a mere formalization of the relations that existed between the peoples of Nigeria.

There also exists an argument that, though the people of Nigeria had cordial relations prior to colonial incursion, the colonial government succeeded in sowing the seeds of discord among the people through the principle of divide and rule. (Liman and Adamu 153) It is against this background that an attempt is made to assess the impact of colonialism on inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria. To do this, specific attention is paid to inter-ethnic relations in Kano. Kano is chosen for this study because it represents one of the earliest ethnic melting pots in Nigeria since the pre-colonial period. The nature of relations during pre-colonial period is examined to enable an understanding of the changes and continuities during the colonial period.

Inter-Ethnic Relations in Pre-Colonial Nigeria

Relations among the people that make up Nigeria predates colonialism in Nigeria. The geographical setting of Nigeria made movements and interactions among the peoples inevitable. The ecological variations of the Sudan belt, forest zone and the Middle Belt resulted to interdependence, movement of people and exchange of goods among these zones. The aridity of the Sahara in ancient times compelled people to migrate southwards. (Ajayi and Alagoa 225) In the same vein, due to the fact that the Sudan belt supported the development of settled populations, agriculture and metallurgy, there was a great tendency for people to migrate from the Sudan belt to the forest zone with iron tools. There was also a northward movement from the south. Many states of the Sudan depended on the products from the forest zone and the middle belt for the trans-Saharan trade. (Ajayi and Alagoa 225) Such movements fostered inter-ethnic relations. Furthermore, some southern groups had at different times before the colonial era expanded northward. For instance, the Yoruba had established a substantial 'commercial base' in Kano as early as the 15th Century following the establishment of the Kurmi market. Military hardware which were imported into Old Oyo Empire through Lagos and Badagry from Benin were important articles of trade between Yorubaland and Kano. Other items traded include slaves, cowry shells, flutes, livestock, cloth, leather products, horses etc. (Olaniyi 389).

The river systems also engendered movements and inter-group relations among the

peoples of Nigeria. The connectivity of the waterways essentially ensured that the peoples could access one another as they provided routes that linked north and south. People moved largely on the Niger-Benue waterway, creeks and lagoons. There were also local routes that connected markets. Prior to the development of airways, highways and railways, river systems were major means of transportation, communication and trade. Three kingdoms thrived on the banks of the Niger and Benue. (Ajayi and Alagoa 229) They are the Jukun Empire, the Igala and the Nupe kingdoms. Most of the Benue valley fell under the Jukun kingdom which had influence over large parts of northern Nigeria. The areas around the confluence of the Niger and Benue was under the influence of the Igala kingdom. The kingdom's trading activities extended southwards; reaching Aboh and Onya at the tip of the Niger Delta. The Nupe kingdom, which was above the confluence of the Niger-Benue, controlled the rivers Niger and Kaduna. (Ajayi and Alagoa 229).

Inter-ethnic relations during the pre-colonial period enhanced the development of markets. The growth and expansion of trade attracted migrant traders from far and near. This resulted to the development of markets and migrant settlements in some communities. For example, the migrant Hausa, Nupe, Igbirra and Jukuns played remarkable roles in the development of markets in Tivland. (Uji 215) In the same vein, the trading relations between the Igbo and their Ibibio neighbours resulted to the settlement of a large number of the Ibibio in Aro. (Akpan 79) Similarly, Ehinmore avers that, the boost in agricultural productions on the western fringe of the Niger Delta as a result of the abolition of slave trade from 1840s to 1850s enhanced labour mobility. (Omolere 372) This gave rise to mutual socio-economic relationship between peoples from far and near. He further argues that this development resulted in great commercial expansions of multilingual settlements which brought about the development of market towns like "Atijere, Agerige, Ode, Makon, Mahin, Ugbo, Oghoye, etc. as periodic market centres from the 1830s". (Omolere 372).

Trade relations among the Nigerian peoples brought the people in contact with one another. This enhanced the acculturation process as the way of life of a people diffused gradually into the other. For example, it became common for groups to borrow the political institutions and titles of their neighbours. Some northern parts of Igboland particularly the Nsukka areas like Enugu Ezike, Unadu, Amala, Itchi, Nkpologwu among others adopted the titles of the Igala Kingdom, (Oguagha 50) the Idoma took on the titles of the Jukun and Igala people, the Oba of Benin held investiture ceremonies in Benin for the Urhobo, Isoko and other communities of today's Edo and Delta states. In the same vein, the Tiv adopted the *Tor U Gbande* (Drum Chief) from the Jukun and also held their investiture ceremonies in Wukari. (Erim 59).

The Origin and Formation of Migrant Ethnic Communities in Kano

As stated earlier, Kano had developed into a metropolitan city long before the colonial incursion into the area. It is believed to have been founded between A.D. 1000 and 1200

during which centralized political authority developed. (Osaghae 26) There are also claims that in the early times, only groups or settlement complexes existed in the area from which Kano developed. For instance, the Lambu settlement complex, the Dala-Gwauron Dutse-Magwam settlement complex and the Fangwai-Santolo settlement complex. (Liman and Adamu 144) Kano developed and expanded from the settlement around Dala Hill. According to the Kano chronicle, Dala, the first settler, built a house on Dala Hill. (Adamu 45) Although Dala may not in actual fact be the first to settle in the area, he played a pivotal role in the development of Kano as a result of his coming, choice of residence and his religious activities. With time, the settlement expanded, the area experienced influx of migrants from different areas. Kano, therefore, became a state as a synthesis of diverse peoples and ways of life. This was expressed by Usman thus:

Kanawa, the citizens of the sovereign kingdom of the Kasar Kano, were not a racio-ethnic entity. In fact, the key historical process of their formation in the second millennium is the migration into, and within, the area that came to be known as the Kasar Kano people of diverse origin, from all over Northern and Western Africa, who came to be absorbed, assimilated and incorporated as the citizens of the Kasar Kano. (145)

Ancient Kano was prominent for its city wall. In spite of the crude means of production particularly when compared to today's technology, with its concomitant low output, a walled city of world repute was built in Kano prior to colonial incursion. (Yakasai) The first phase of the Kano city wall was started in the 11th century during the reign of Sarkin Kano Gajimasu and was completed during the reign of Sarkin Kano Jusa in the 12th century. From this period to the 17th century, there were series of expansions of the city walls due to the influx of migrants resulting from the increasing importance of Kano as a commercial centre. Although urbanisation was confined to the wall city, there existed village settlements around the wall. For example, Fagge was situated outside the wall and was said to have been in existence by 1740. It was said to be an entrepot, where trade Caravans disembarked before middlemen took the imported goods to the Kurmi market. This explains why Fagge has been a cosmopolitan settlement for as long as could be remembered. (Liman and Adamu 152).

By 1851, Kano was organized into about 74 quarters headed by the *Mai Unguwa* who was answerable to the Emir. These quarters which made up Kano city were separated into two; *birni* and *waje*. The *birni* which was also known as the 'holy', traditional or walled city was exclusively inhabited by Kano indigenes and other Hausa while non-indigenes lived in the *waje*. (Osaghae 27).

Mabogunje opines that Kano's growth and fame can be attributed to the vegetation of the area; grassland area with agricultural endowment, the relative peace and stability the area is

known for and the participation of the western Sudan in a world-wide commercial activity in the medieval period. (Qtd. In Liman and Adamu 147) While trade accounted for the rise of Kano city, Islam was responsible for education and social propriety in the area. (Mustapha) Islam largely influenced the socio-political organization of Kano and this influenced other non-indigene settlers. Trade and industry also contributed greatly to the development of Kano. Osaghae posits that:

The development of Kano was greatly enhanced by its being a major trading post in the trans-Saharan trade which connected it with the North African, Western and Central Sudanese groups. This trade not only brought Islam, but also 'foreigners' to the city. Kano was attractive to foreigners because, in addition to its being a major trading post, it was a famous industrial centre. The main productive activities carried out there included dyeing, weaving, embroidery, iron mining, skin tanning and ornamental leather work. (26)

Until colonial invasion, the Kurmi market was the most developed commercial centre in Kano. It was also an international market for the trans-Saharan trade. The market in addition to its commercial relevance, also served as a centre for dissemination of political, religious and cultural ideas. (Bako 162) The administrative centre had always been the Emir's palace. The Dala Hill was the religious centre before the penetration of Islam to the area. (Liman and Adamu 147)

One of the earliest migrants to settle in Kano were the Wangarawa. They came to Kano during the reign of Sarki Yaji (1349 – 1385). (Shehu and Bako 30) The Nupe and Yoruba peoples were also attracted to Kano for trade in order to take advantage of Kano's strategic position as an *entrepot* in the famous Trans-Saharan Trade. The Nupe who migrated to Kano settled in Kano city and towns like Kura, Rano, Bebeji, Tudun Nupawa among others. The Nupe migrants in Kano were traders, artisans and craftsmen. They went about their businesses peacefully and had cordial relations with their hosts. (Wada 534) The Yoruba migrants from Kwara, who were believed to have moved into Kano over five hundred years ago, founded the Unguwar Ayagi. (Shehu and Bako 31) However, the 19th Century witnessed the influx of Yoruba migrants to Kano as a result of the policy of Emir Ibrahim Dabo which encouraged the migration of other ethnic groups into Kano. The stability witnessed in the Sokoto Caliphate during this period was also a factor that facilitated the migration of the Yoruba to Kano. (Wada 534) It is important to note that the coming of the Yoruba to Kano helped to link the area to the booming markets of southern Nigeria. (Wada 535) The Yoruba had cordial relations with the Kanawa host and lived together within the city walls. (Olaniyi 390) In the same vein, the Kanuri who migrated from Kukawa to Kano also founded Zangon Bare Bari and Malanganari settlements and had cordial relations with their host. (Shehu and Bako 31) The 19th Century leadership of Kano not only encouraged other ethnic groups to migrate into Kano, but also encouraged

them to settle within the city walls. This fostered acculturation and assimilation of migrant groups. For instance, the Yoruba, the Nupe, the Kanuri and even the Arabs became assimilated into the Kano society. Religion (Islam) made it easier for these groups to be assimilated into the Kano Society. They inter-married and had other socio-cultural relations with the Hausa and Fulani natives. (Hassan)

Impact of Colonialism on Inter-ethnic Relations in Kano

Following the conquest of Kano in February 1903, Kano fell under the control of colonial administration. (Audu and Osuala 41) The policies of the colonial administration as we shall see resulted to changes and continuities in inter-ethnic relations in Kano. The primary objectives of the colonial government were political domination and economic exploitation of the area. (Rodney 117-208) Consequently, the colonial government implemented economic policies that facilitated exploitation. These policies which include the development of transportation systems, communication systems and development of the trade in cash crops like groundnuts and cotton opened the floodgate of migration to Kano. The railway linking the north to the south got to Kano on 28th March 1911 and the railway of southern Nigeria and railway of northern Nigeria were amalgamated on 3rd October, 1912. (Madugu 217) The railway from Port Harcourt to Kano was completed in 1926. Road networks were also constructed to serve as feeders to the railway lines. (Osaghae 30) These developments propelled the coming of some foreign companies to Kano and this consequently became an impetus for some migrants who sought to benefit from the job provided by these companies. J. Shehu and A. Bako succinctly put it thus:

With the opening of the rail line, several large European (and non-European) companies moved to Kano with rapidity. By the end of 1913 – that was only one year after the opening of the rail head, there were over 18 imperialist trading companies in Kano and number increased to 33 in 1918... (34)

On the settlement pattern, the colonial administration accentuated the existing structure. Hence, there were little alterations in the existing settlement pattern. However, the colonial administration modified the arrangements of wards in Kano city and by 1930 the wards were said to be 16. What used to be known as the “districts” (*fuskoki*) were created in 1932 – *fuskar gabas*, *fuskar kudu*, and *fuskar yamma* – and later in 1935, the famous *Ayaga* (separatist movement) paved way for the re-division of the existing wards into smaller units. (Liman and Adamu 153) Migrants or newcomers in Kano were restricted from staying in the walled city during the colonial period. They were confined to living in urban areas which were under British control and not under the Emirs.

In 1903, a residential area was established for the colonial administrators. This was cited in and around the Emir's farmhouse residence in Nassarawa. The colonial government was

given authority for permanent residential development following the Cantonment proclamation No. 28 of 1904, which gave rights to the High Commissioner to proclaim a Cantonment under a cantonment magistrate or a Government station under a Provincial Resident. (Liman and Adamu 158) Therefore, a cantonment was created at Geiza, later renamed Bompai in 1904 as a residential area for officials of the colonial administration. Colonial residential development in Bompai expanded more than that in Nassarawa until 1906 when the memorandum on “Government Stations”, which spelt out planning standards for the development of European Residential Areas. This propelled the development of the Nassarawa residential area for permanent residence. This became the seat of colonial administration in Kano. (Liman and Adamu 158)

Following the influx of migrants into Kano occasioned by the completion of the railway line in 1911 and the inclusion of Kano in the railway operations that linked the southern and northern protectorates, the Sabon Gari settlement was created in 1913 for migrants who were non-Europeans and non-indigenes of northern Nigeria. (Maier 11) The following year (1914), Tudun Wada was equally created for migrants who were natives of northern Nigeria but not from Kano. It was initially created for such northern Nigerian natives in the colonial army. Both Sabon Gari and Tudun Wada settlements are outside the city walls. Equally settled outside the city wall were the Lebanese and Syrians. They were settled in 1915 in *Fagge-ta-kudu* in an area that was later known as the “Lebanese Quarters”. Gwagwarwa (Brigade) was also created as a settlement for the natives in the colonial force around 1945. (Liman and Adamu 159)

Urban Kano (city and township) was restructured into three different districts: Kano City, Township and Waje during the close of the colonial administration. The Kano City district encompassed the populace of the walled city. Township was basically the European Residential Area later known as Nassarawa and Bompai Government Residential Areas (GRAs). The Waje district encompassed Fagge, Sabon Gari, Tudun Wada and Gwagwarwa. Although Fagge is relatively an older settlement outside the city wall and predates colonialism in Kano, Sabon Gari, Gwagwarwa, and Tudun Wada are mostly occupied by new migrants from southern and northern Nigeria respectively. (Paden 8) One of the reasons for the creation of the Sabon Gari settlement was to avert the infiltration of missionaries in the walled city. (Auwal) This was in order to contain the threat by the Christian missionaries who sought to penetrate the north having successfully proselytized the south. (Osaghae 30; Maier 11) Initially, the Yoruba were the most populated migrant group in Sabon Gari. Out of the 2,000 residents of the area in 1921, 1,478 were Yoruba. (Usman 166) This was the case largely because of Islam which was a uniting factor among the Yoruba and their Kano host. The Yoruba who already had cordial relations with the people of Kano prior to colonial incursion, found it easy to adapt in the area. However, by 1943, the Igbo population surpassed that of the Yoruba and Hausa in Sabon Gari. The table below shows the ethnic and national composition of Sabon Gari in 1943:

Table 1.0. Ethnic and National Groups in Sabon Gari, Kano, 1943

Ethnic Group	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	Total	%
Igbo	1181	744	834	646	3,405	37.71
Yoruba	670	627	447	305	2,049	22.69
Hausa	536	805	246	225	1,812	20.06
Gold Coast	145	72	64	57	338	3.74
Nupe	81	127	37	31	276	3.05
Benin	97	76	31	29	233	2.58
Urhobo	61	55	32	21	169	1.87
Fulani	100	65	2	3	170	1.88
Sierra Leone	68	38	19	23	148	1.63
Arab	48	74	6	6	134	1.48
Efik	57	27	12	10	106	1.17
Togoland	25	17	8	6	56	0.62
Itsekiri	16	24	4	9	53	0.58
Cameroon	23	18	3	-	44	0.48
Brass	2	8	1	-	11	0.12
Bonny	4	3	1	-	7	0.07
Ijo	3	3	1	-	7	0.07
West India	3	1	-	-	4	0.04
Dahomey	3	-	-	-	3	0.03
Liberia	1	1	-	-	2	0.02
Congo	1	-	-	-	1	0.01
Syria	1	-	-	-	1	0.01
Total	3,126	2,785	1,747	1,371	9,029	100

Source: NAK Kano Local Authority, 115. Adopted from E.T. Eyeh “History of Igbo Enterprises in Kano, Nigeria, 1960–2007”, PhD Thesis, University of Nigeria Nsukka, 2015)

It is worthy to note however that, even though the colonial authority allowed the people of Kano freedom to use their land as obtainable under the indigenous system, the colonial administration possessed absolute control over the land. They imposed land tax on the people and enforced the allocation of land to migrants for settlements and commercial purposes. (Jemirade 115) A new law was made in 1912 prohibiting non-Muslims from residing in the walled city. Another law that also prohibited marriages between Muslims and non-Muslims was also enacted. (Osaghae 31) This compelled most southern migrants to return home for marriage and consequently punctuated the level of relations between the southerners and the Kano people. These laws were aimed at achieving two objectives. Firstly, they were aimed at conserving Kano for Islam. Secondly, they were enforced to isolate the southerners who already nursed nationalist ideas and activities targeted at dispelling the colonial authority. It was intended to prevent such ideas from permeating to the northerners. This also informed the relocation of non-indigene northerners from Sabon Gari to Tudun Wada in 1914. (Osaghae 31)

Unfortunately, this segregation influenced inter-ethnic relations in Kano negatively. Southern groups like the Yoruba, Igbo, Efik etc. were perceived as strangers as they were quartered in a strangers' settlement – Sabon Gari. Other northerners who were not of Kano origin were also made to live outside the walled city in Tudun Wada. This meant that these migrants were not under the jurisdiction of the Emir as these settlements which were outside the walled city were under the British jurisdiction. (Shehu and Bako 36) This residential segregation was a major deviation from the precolonial practice. Not even Islam unified the migrant ethnic groups to the indigenous people during the colonial era as was the practice during the precolonial period. For instance, the Yoruba and other ethnic groups who hitherto colonialism were assimilated into the indigenous society were confined to Sabon Gari and Tudun Wada settlements irrespective of their religion. (Babatunde)

Regardless of the residential segregation, the ethnic groups in Kano interacted relatively well. Even though hostilities ensued from time to time, they also had cordial relations fostered by trade, ethnic associations and their leaders. (Agbalusi) Prominent among these ethnic associations were the Igbo Community Association which was an umbrella body for other Igbo town unions, (Osaghae 79) the Yoruba Central Welfare Association (Shehu and Bako 36) among others.

Conclusion

Inter-ethnic relations predates colonialism in Nigeria. Interdependence among the peoples of the area made interactions inevitable. Colonialism in Nigeria, as seen in Kano, like a two-faced coin bequeathed positive and negative impacts on inter-ethnic relations. For instance, while the policies of divide and rule and residential segregation stimulated ethnic tensions, (Maier 11) the development of transportation system linked the south to the north and

facilitated inter-ethnic relations among the peoples. This was seen in the influx of southern migrants to Kano in the 1920s following the completion of the Lagos – Kano and Port Harcourt – Kano railway lines. Kano became an ethnic melting pot and a miniature of Nigeria. In spite of the residential segregation, there was interaction among the ethnic groups as contact through other forums cannot be ruled out. One of such places were the markets. Trade remained an avenue for interactions among the ethnic groups. The Sabon Gari market which was established in 1918 and intended to serve non-indigenes and the southerners particularly, expanded and from the 1920s was serving “not only the interests of Sabon Gari communities but also Bompai, the European Trading Area, Syrian quarter and even Fagge, which is outside the township. Before the end of the colonial era the market was equally serving people within the Kano city walls.” (Bako 163) Also important were the ethnic associations formed by the migrant ethnic groups in Kano. These associations helped in maintaining cordial relations with the host community and other ethnic groups. Hence, colonialism had its good and evils. Nonetheless, it is not a justifiable alibi for ethnic and regional divisions that has crippled Nigeria.

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