

## SHELL BP, COLONIAL RULE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF OWERRI CITY, 1902-1961

**Edward Dabere Opara**

Department of History and International Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: ed.opara@unizik.edu.ng

eddyopara1@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to examine the impacts of Shell BP and the colonial administration on the development of the city of Owerri during between 1902 and 1961. The study looks at the evolution and development of Owerri City, now the capital of Imo State, Nigeria. The town has grown from a farmstead to a modern city. The evolution of the sprawling urban centre was rather slow during the period under study. The slow pace was not unconnected with the low level of economic activities that characterized the town. Owerri is landlocked, yet it was left as a forgotten backyard town during the colonial rule by British officials, this remained unchanged for so long. Other neighboring towns like Aba, Umuahia and Port Harcourt, were preferred to Owerri, railway lines passed through these cities which, boosted commerce and development, sidetracking Owerri. However, the coming of Shell D'Arcy to Owerri in 1946, for oil prospecting and exploration encouraged the colonial administration to pay more attention to Owerri, thus, some level of development was recorded. The method adopted was historical narrative. It was approached thematically and analytically, with the use of oral interviews and written sources. The efforts of Shell BP and the Colonial Administration from the study, show some positive developments which this paper tries to highlight. It concludes that Shell's exit from Owerri was seen as a blessing by a majority of the people of Owerri.*

**Keywords:** Owerri; Development; Shell D'Arcy; British Administration; Oil.

### **Introduction**

Urbanization has increased substantial infrastructural facilities like transportation facilities, educational and medical institutions in the Owerri urban, thus, converting agricultural land to urban land use meant for infrastructural development, and industrial, residential, or commercial uses. Before the advent of the British colonial administration in Owerri in 1902, the area referred to as Owerri was mainly comprised of an enclave of five villages namely - Umuororonjo, Amawom, Umuonyeche, Umuodu and Umuoyima, collectively known as Owerri Nchi Ise. This changed immediately after the British colonial administration came, with the designation of Owerri as a District headquarters. Under the British colonial administration the area referred to as Owerri spread from being only the enclave of the traditional indigenes of Owerri Nchi-ise to include the modern-day Owerri Municipal, Owerri North, and Owerri West. Owerri capital territory presently consists of 4 local governments; Owerri Municipal, Owerri North, Owerri West and part of Mbaitoli. The Owerri area under the colonial administration extended as far as to Oguta and Owerri-nta areas. Owerri town, the capital of Imo state, Southeastern Nigeria, is located at the intersection of roads from Aba, Onitsha, Port Harcourt, and Umuahia. It is the chief trade centre of locally produced food items like, yams, cassava (manioc), corn (maize), and palm products for a region of modified rainforest that also yields rubber for export.

Several studies have been written on Owerri but none of them appears to dwell on the impact made on the development of Owerri by Shell and the Colonial Administration. A detailed

account of the administration of Owerri under colonial rule has been given in G.I. Nwaka.<sup>1</sup> Nwaka concentrated on the aspect of the Colonial system of administration and development in Owerri as a District Headquarters, but the activities of Shell BP was not discussed. How the British army conquered and subjugated Owerri and its environs that led to a formal establishment of colonial administration were also discussed in Orji.<sup>2</sup> Orji highlighted the British conquest of Owerri and its environs, which led to the formal establishment of colonial administration in Owerri, from where administrative control over parts of now Abia, Rivers, and Cross River states was extended and remained for sometime under Owerri. Orji was not particularly concerned about the Owerri City development. F.K Ekechi, examined aspects of especially the District Officer, Douglas in Owerri and some of his exploits and high-handedness.<sup>3</sup> Ekechi was more interested in the personality of Douglas as a no-nonsense and inconsiderate administrator, whose reign of terror remained indelible in the minds of the people of Owerri District. Ekechi discussed about road construction in Owerri District under Douglas, especially the mode and means he used that got the people of the area complaining. However, the exclusive development of Owerri and Shell BP's activities were not the concern. Population indices are a factor in the determination of urban growth, therefore the highlights of population growth of Owerri under colonial rule viz-a-viz the period after in World Population Review of 2023, has gone to explain the comparative rate of urban growth in Owerri of the period under review.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the population indices helps to analyze the growth rate in terms of the population in Owerri during the period under study, which reiterate that there was actual development, though it was only particular with human population and not in other infrastructural developments. The coming of Shell BP to Owerri and their efforts at oil prospecting and exploration in the area is highlighted in P. Steyn<sup>5</sup>, which shows that the granting of land concession to Shell D'Arcy in Owerri area by the colonial administration led to their first-ever successful exploring and drilling of oil well at Iho Town in the northeast of Owerri, though it was found to be dry. Steyn did not discuss the developmental strides of Shell D'Arcy in Owerri, but only Shell's oil prospecting and drilling activities in Owerri. Therefore, this work intends to establish that the cooperation and joint efforts of Shell BP and British colonial administration was instrumental to the development of Owerri City during the period under study. It highlights particularly other aspect of infrastructural development not covered by the reviewed literatures to fill in the missing gaps.

This study is organized in a thematic approach with historical narrative. The themes include the introduction with literature review; Geographical Location and origin of Owerri; Colonial administration of Owerri; The Royal Dutch Shell in Nigeria; Shell D'Arcy in Owerri, 1946-1961; Shell D'Arcy and the Development of Owerri; Summary and Conclusion; and Endnotes.

### **Geographical Location and Origin of Owerri**

Owerri is the capital of Imo State, South East of Nigeria, which was created on February 3; 1976 as part of the state creation exercise in Nigeria. The state was carved out of the former East-Central State. Owerri serves as the hub of commercial and industrial activity in the state and is set in the heart of Igboland, it is also the state's largest city. It has an area of 104 square km in area, with a current projected population of 983,352 million.<sup>6</sup> in 2023. The population estimate and projection came from the latest revision of the UN World Urbanization Prospects, this represent the urban agglomeration of Owerri, which typically includes its population in addition to adjacent suburban areas. Owerri consists of three Local Government Areas namely Owerri Municipal, Owerri North and Owerri West. It is bordered by the Otamiri River to the east and the Nworie River to the south. The weather is average of 29°C, Wind W at 8 km/h, and 81% Humidity. The area code is 083.<sup>7</sup> The evolution of Owerri could be broadly divided into three phases. Phase one dates back to about the 14th century (700 years ago) when Owerri

was founded to the end of the civil war in 1970.<sup>8</sup> From 1970, the Second Phase of evolution began till Imo State creation. The third phase was marked from the creation of Imo State, which brought Owerri into sharp development focus as a state capital. On the 15th of December 1996 Owerri city attained municipal status. However, the scope of this work is limited to the first phase in the historical development of Owerri.

Historically, the indigenes of Owerri Nchi-ise trace their ancestry to a man called Ekwem Arugo. Oral history has it that a certain man named Ekwema founded Owerri. He was said to have fled from Uratta in the present Owerri North Local Government Area following a family feud over the sharing of the funeral cow of their father, Ndumoha. The escapee Ekwem finally arrived at a hill top called Ugwu Ekwema and settled there. He was in the middle of a thick rainforest infested with lions, leopards, pythons and other dangerous wild animals. That was where Owerri originated. The original settlers were famers, cultivating local subsistence crops.<sup>9</sup> How a one family settlement attracted other settlers and expanded is a long story. Eze Eke Onunwa 1690 - 1735 was the first king of Owerri Nchi-ise. But suffice it to say that Owerri grew from obscurity until the end of the civil war in 1970, when it began to attract more attention from the government.

### **Colonial Administration of Owerri, 1902-1960**

Many events in history culminated in the founding of Owerri as the seat of colonial government in 1902. These events included the conquest of Owerri by the colonial army, and the establishment of a military garrison in Owerri in 1902 under the command of Major Henry L. Gallway, who had returned from a military expedition to Arochukwu. It was in the same year that fourteen military constables were placed in Owerri to start a police command there. This was intended to maintain British presence in the area, not only as a conquered area, but as a semi-administrative unit, waiting to be formally declared a full administrative centre.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Owerri was official declared the capital territory in May 1902. The Consul-General, Sir Ralph Moore, in according with the Order-in-council, visited Owerri and proclaimed it a district headquarters and appointed Harold Monday Douglas, who was formerly at Akwete, the District Commissioner (DC) of Owerri District. In 1912, Owerri was made the headquarters of Owerri Province, which included parts of modern Imo, Abia, Rivers and Bayelsa States under J.D. Maxwell as the leader. The old Division covered an area of about 1,085 square miles and was bounded on the north by the Okigwe Division, on the east by the Bende and Aba Division, on the south-west by the Ahoada Division, and the north-west by the Orlu Division, on the east was also the Imo River.<sup>11</sup> The geographical expression of Owerri was altered in 1964 to include the county council area of Ikeduru, Mbaise, Mabitoli, Ngor Okpala, Ohaji, Oratta, Owerri, and Oguta Urban County areas. However, in 1999, Owerri Division was still made up of the areas of Aboh Mbaise, Ahiazu Mbaise, Ezinihite Mbaise, Ikeduru, Mbaitoli, Ngor Okpala, Oguta, Ohaji/Egbema, Owerri North, Owerri West and Owerri Municipal. The core Owerri area was later divided into three local government areas. These included; Owerri North, Owerri West and Owerri Municipal.<sup>12</sup>

The advent of the British saw the anglicizing of Owerre to Owerri but pronounced as though it was spelt Owere. All the neighboring towns (communities) of Owerri were founded and existed centuries or decades before Owerri came into existence. The change of name from Owere to Owerri was in 1893 by the British, who took full control of Owerri on 11 May 1902 and inaugurated a Native Council and Court for the town and its neighborhood whose first Clerk was a Sierra Leonean called Isaiah Yellow.<sup>13</sup> As part of the then ongoing military expedition of the British to overrun Igboland and bring it to total subjugation, a small military garrison, a military administrative post for the Owerri district area was established in that same year of

1902. Thus, the urban growth of modern Owerri began after the first colonial District Officer of Owerri District and a Commander of the British Frontier Force, Harold Monday Douglas was appointed by the British Consul-General, Sir Ralph Moore on 11 May 1902, whom a major hub of the city was named after.<sup>14</sup> The British Colonial Government afterwards made Owerri a Divisional Headquarters and later a Provincial headquarter. To create a more conducive environment in Owerri for the smooth operation of the British officials, the construction of a government station was started by the Divisional officials and the troops of the Aro Field Force. With a combination of forced and voluntary labor, the bungalows of Europeans, as well as the barracks and quarters of soldiers and the junior African staff of the Divisional administration were erected up, though haphazardly on the eastern side of the Nwaorie river. Furthermore, a government prison, a government school and other makeshift installations of the Divisional administration were very gradually expanded. Colonel Gallway, the Political Officer with the expeditionary forces, is said to have paid '£60 or £90' to Chief Njemanze for the land occupied by the government.<sup>15</sup>

The initial colonial conception of the size and functions of Owerri was reported to be very limited, the priority as was the general practice and pattern of the colonizers, which was to build a small European Reservation, and have it safely segregated from the areas where the local people and the African Staff lived. Thus, the European quarters were relatively well constructed, with streets lined with fruit trees and shrubs, and separated from the rest of the town by a wide-open space used for tennis courts and a golf-course. After the Amalgamation of 1914, Owerri was elevated to the status of a Provincial Headquarters because it was centrally located in the Districts of the Province, and because it provided enough room for the immediate and probable needs of the colonial administration, coupled with the serenity and hospitality of the indigenous people of Owerri area.<sup>16</sup> In line with the British colonial economic policy, the Provincial administration of Owerri did not create the enabling economic base that the town needed to grow and develop, despite its nominal prestige as a headquarter. Its local township administration was a sham because of the extreme emphasis that the colonial regime placed on the policy of Indirect Rule, which provided for the governing of the people through local chiefs and traditional institutions. Of course this policy conflicted with the requirements of modern urban government, and retarded the development of effective institutions for urban planning, development and management. The Townships Ordinance of 1917 made Owerri a Third-Class Township, still, the town remained virtually unadministered except as part of the rural neighborhood of the District.<sup>17</sup>

The shine for development was taken further away from Owerri when the single-track eastern arm of the Nigerian railway was constructed in 1914/16 from Port Harcourt through Aba and Umuahia to the coal mines at Enugu, Sidetracking Owerri that was supposed to be equally considered as the prestigious administrative center. However, this neglect might not be far from the fact that Owerri was naturally landlocked, and probably because there were no raw material sources in Owerri to tap from and evacuate. Again, the growth of the town was inhibited by the counter-attractions of the new port and railway terminus of Port Harcourt, as well as by the commercial attractions of the rail-side towns of Aba and Umuahia. In addition to the disadvantages that confronted Owerri town towards its expected development during this period was that its two major rivers, Otamiri and Nworie could not compete with the river ports of Oguta and Owerri-nta, where much of the import and export trade of the Owerri area was conducted in the early colonial period.<sup>18</sup> Despite official pressure, unlike was the case in most other towns of Owerri status, like Port Harcourt, Aba, Onitsha, Enugu, etc, that quartered European trading firms, the case of Owerri was remarkably different, none of the foreign firms agreed to establish branch depots at Owerri because to them it was not a commercial



proposition to do so. They preferred to trade at the Oguta and Owerri-nta rivers, where local produce gathered from the hinterland markets was easily and cheaply floated in rafts down the river to the Delta ports of Degema and Abonemma.<sup>19</sup>

It was reported that between 1915 and 1927, several unattended but realizable proposals from British officials were made to improve the physical structure of Owerri, with the view to encourage private enterprises and commercial activities in the area. A report had it that it was first planned that the government station be moved up the hill to Orji on the Owerri-Okigwi road, or to the area west of the Nwaorie River, where the New Owerri City is now situated.<sup>20</sup> However, it was also reported that these proposals were discouraged by the poor prospects of trade and the presence of high-quality commercial activities, especially after a plan to construct a branch railway line from Aba through Owerri to Onitsha fell to materialize in the mid-1920s, which troubled the Resident for Owerri Province, J. Watt, who in anger sought to “remove the Provincial Headquarters altogether to Port Harcourt, or to any of the rail side towns where there was more trade and a larger European population. Port Harcourt, he argued, “is in the administrative capital of Owerri in everything except Native Administration and the fact that the Resident does not live there.”<sup>21</sup>

When the old Bonny Consulate was dismantled in 1927 and set up as the new Residency in Port Harcourt, the Resident at Owerri moved to Port Harcourt at the end of World War 11, leaving Owerri in a state of despair and compounded its problem of development, with no more effective organized plan towards its development.<sup>22</sup> However, the administrative and planning reforms of the post-war period did not fare better or reverse the declining fortunes of the town, still, the efforts made by J. D. Tetlow, a Ghanian who did the first planning of Owerri, was the first qualified West African architect, who worked with a team of British town planners in Nigeria after World War 11, was remarkable. Tetlow prepared elaborate schemes in 1946/47 for the restructuring of Owerri to give it a face lift and also improve its services. Unfortunately, too, very little came out of his proposals, it only achieved mere construction of the road that still bears his name. Other notable figures worthy of mention apart from Douglas, the then District Officer of Owerri Division named after Douglas Road; and J.D Tetlow, a Ghanian who did the first planning of Owerri named after Tetlow Road; there were also H.F.P Wetheral, the District Officer who arranged for and brought in Mr Tetlow for the planning and design of Owerri, named after Wetheral Road; Mann Royce, a British and one time District Officer of Owerri, who later became an Anglican Bishop of Owerri, was named after Royce Road.<sup>23</sup>

Owerri’s official position was further relegated with more attention now given to Tetlow's plan for Umuahia since Umuahia became the Headquarters of a reconstituted Owerri Province in 1947. The dilapidating situation Owerri found itself under the British colonial administration prompted Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Mr. Onubogu to raise questions in the Central Legislative Council in Lagos and the Eastern House of Assembly in the late 1940s and early 1950s about the deteriorating conditions in Owerri; but the colonial government was firm that Owerri town would not develop as a municipality. Rather, the official arrangement was that a sub-Native Authority be formed to look after the affairs of Owerri, pending the introduction of local government and the formation of an "Urban District Council for Owerri in 1954.<sup>24</sup> However, due to lack of interest on the part of the British colonial officials, neither the sub-Native Authority nor the Owerri Urban District Council proved competent to handle the technical aspects of planning and urban management, instead the interest of the town was subordinated to those of the rural components of the Oratta County Council to which Owerri belonged. Added to the above was the decentralization of the structure of Provincial administration in the

later colonial period which helped to undermine considerably the administrative importance of Owerri.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of urban growth, Owerri had a stunted growth, especially when juxtaposed to its competing towns within the province. Thus, its population in 1953 was 14,602 when compared to 14,761 for Oguta, 57,789 for Aba and Umuahia was 12, 259 at that time. It is worthy noting that the coming of Shell D'Archy to Owerri in 1951, in the course of their unsuccessful attempt at oil exploration and prospecting reflected in the increase of population in Owerri town. The population demography showed that from 1951 till 1961 when Shell operated and left Owerri, there was gradual but steady upward progression in population growth from 12,466 to 27,487, representing an average growth rate of 8.22%.<sup>26</sup> Other landmark developments during this period in terms of public institutions and services included the prominent Assumpta Roman Catholic Cathedral edifice and the Douglas House- a prefabricated wooden house floating on metal pipe, that served as the colonial administrative building which now has been replaced with a modern building, it also served as the seat of government in Owerri from the inception of British colonial rule. The Owerri Military Hospital was later named African Hospital which thereafter was renamed General Hospital and today is the Federal Medical Center. Government School Owerri was founded in 1906 and added the secondary wing now Government Secondary School Owerri in 1935 and moved the Primary School to Wetheral Road Owerri as Owerri Township School in 1952.<sup>27</sup>

Owerri had many other important streets, areas and indelible structures for which it was recognized. Prominent among these was the Control Post. This area got its name and relevance following the exigencies of World War II, which occurred in far away Europe. Interestingly, during the war, which began on 3rd September, 1939, the British nationals resident in Owerri, were vulnerable and to ensure their security and safety, a security control post was established at the point where Port Harcourt Road, Onitsha Road and Aba Road project into Owerri. The security control post was manned by some police officers who regulated and checked the movement of persons in, and out of Owerri. The Assumpta Cathedral- an important religious edifice was later built upon the very spot where the police control post formerly stood.<sup>28</sup> The area onomatopically called "Ama Tabataba" was a popular part of Owerri, which received its name from the sound of guns that the Colonial Army used during shooting practice. This was because the place was a forested part of Owerri and therefore used as a colonial shooting range, where colonial army officers had their practice. The area embraced the whole of Works Road, part of Okigwe Road and the Shell Camp Area.<sup>29</sup> It was adjacent to where Imo State University was later built. Another land mark area was Ama J.K. It covered the area where Aba-Owerri-Onitsha Road joined with Owerri-Okigwe Road. The place was named after the initials of John Kamalu Osuji of Amawom village of Owerri, whose efforts partly brought about the establishment of the Catholic Church in Owerri. This area was also popular because it was here that the first school, the Government school in Owerri founded in 1906, was cited. Other indigenes of Owerri whose outstanding contributions to the development of Owerri, as memorials got streets named after them. These included Ekeonunwa, Onumonu and Njemanze. These streets and roads have remained indelible land marks in the city of Owerri.<sup>30</sup> Trade and business in goods and services also expanded along the major street shops, notably Douglas and Okigwe Roads. Ancillary commercial activities and services such as banking, printing, motor repairs, and bread-making kept pace with the modest growth of the town. The standard of living in the town during the period was equally modest, while the standard of housing and services is of mixed scenario but generally poor, ranging from modern flats and bungalows, with reasonably adequate facilities, to the huddle of huts and shacks in the overcrowded and insanitary high-density areas around the native town.

### The Royal Dutch Shell in Nigeria

The Royal Dutch Shell was officially formed in 1907, it is an integrated energy company that seeks to reinforce its position as a leader in the oil and gas industry, and it aims to meet the world's growing demand for energy in ways that are economically, environmentally, and socially responsible. The Subsidiary, Shell has its headquarters in The Hague and the Netherlands, while the parent company of the Shell group is Royal Dutch Shell plc, which was incorporated in England and Wales. In 1936, The Royal Dutch/Shell Group founded Shell D'Arcy, the first Shell Company in Nigeria.<sup>31</sup> The Anglo-Saxon Petroleum, according to Steyn, was renamed by Shell Overseas Exploration Company on the official license in 1937. The exploration eventually resulted in a large commercial oil discovery in the Niger Delta area. Thus, in the year 1936, the Royal Dutch/Shell Group founded Shell D'Arcy, the first Shell company in Nigeria and by November 1938, Shell D'Arcy was granted an Exploration license to prospect for oil throughout Nigeria.<sup>32</sup> Shell has been active in Nigeria since 1937, and its companies and investments have played a pioneering role in onshore, shallow, and deep-water oil exploration and production. Shell has also been at the forefront of gas development, producing and delivering gas to domestic consumers and export markets for over 85 years in Nigeria and the largest footprint of all the international oil and gas companies operating in the country. It should be noted that after the Second World War that ended in 1945, Shell D'Arcy 1947 resumed exploration under a new name as the Shell-British Petroleum Company (Shell BP). The company name in Nigeria changed from Royal Dutch Shell plc to Shell plc in January 2022.

Shell companies operating in Nigeria include, the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited (SPDC) is the largest Shell company in Nigeria and produced the country's first commercial oil exports in 1958. SPDC is the operator of a joint venture (the SPDC JV) between the government-owned Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) , now privatized, 55% share), SPDC (30%), Total E&P Nigeria Ltd (10%) and the ENI subsidiary Agip Oil Company Limited (5%). It is focused on onshore and shallow water oil and gas production in the Niger Delta. Shell Nigeria Exploration and Production Company (SNEPCO) operates the Bonga field, Nigeria's first deepwater oil discovery. The Bonga facility can produce more than 200,000 barrels per day of oil and 150 MM standard cubic feet of gas per day. <sup>33</sup> Shell Nigeria Gas (SNG) as an international oil and gas company set up a gas distribution company in Nigeria to supply industry customers. Nigeria LNG (NLNG) is a joint venture incorporated in 1989 to produce LNG and natural gas liquids for export. It was Nigeria's first LNG project. Shell holds a 25.6% share, together with NNPC (49%), Total (15%) and ENI (10.4%).<sup>34</sup>

Table showing some of Shell BP Social and Economic contributions in Nigeria

Year	City/Town	Community Projects: Road, Electricity, Education, Health, Bore- hole water	Education	Youth empowerment
2010-2017	Rivers State		Cradle-career scholarship, 480, and later 268 students	
Since 2006	Niger Delta States	Five-year community project of any choice		

Since 2006	Niger Delta Area	Increase access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy sources for off-grid low-income households		small- to medium-sized businesses for communities and individuals
2017	Niger Delta Area	Investments that included solar home system provider Lumos and the country's leading electricity mini-grid company Green Village Electricity.		
Before 2017	Niger Delta Area	It also signed a three-year partnership with the US Africa Development Foundation to match their grant funding with debt financing for up to 30 Nigerian off-grid energy providers.		
2013-2017		\$23 billion: economic contribution from the SPDC JV partners to the Nigerian government.		
2017		\$1.1 billion: Shell share of royalties and corporate taxes paid to the Nigerian government. (SPDC \$0.4 billion; SNEPCo \$0.7 billion).		
2017		94%: Shell companies in Nigeria contracts awarded to Nigerian companies.		
2017		\$0.76 billion: Shell companies in Nigeria spend on contracts awarded to Nigerian companies.		
2017		95%: employees of Shell companies in Nigeria are Nigerian citizens.		



2017		\$109.9 million: SPDC JV and SNEPCo contribution to Niger Delta Development Commission. (Shell share \$40.2 million).		
2017		\$60.2 million SPDC JV, SNEPCo and Shell Nigeria Gas direct spending on social investment projects. (Shell share \$19.2 million).		
Since 2007		\$228 million disbursed by the SPDC JV to GMoU clusters for financing of development projects and programmes.		
2011		8,192 (secondary) and 5,034 (university) SPDC JV and SNEPCo educational grants awarded.		
Since 2003		6,780 Niger Delta youth trained in enterprise development and management and 3,493 provided with business start-up grants.		

Sources: <https://reports.shell.com/sustainability-report/2017/managing-operations/our-activities-in-nigeria.html>, “Our activities in Nigeria”.  
 See also, [www.shell.com.ng](http://www.shell.com.ng)

### Shell D’arcy in Owerri, 1946-1961

Shell Exploration and Seismic surveying began in Eastern Nigeria, and Enugu became the seat of a temporary headquarters for the company. The colonial government granted Shell Company land concession in the areas they proposed to carry out prospecting and exploration activities, and the company began exploration in places such as Nsukka, Okigwe-Afikpo, Port-Harcourt, Benin City, Cross River and Forcados.<sup>35</sup> After World War 11, Shell/D’Arcy resumed its Nigerian operations in 1946 owing to the difficulty of obtaining suitable staff and equipment in the immediate aftermath of the war. Their initial exploratory work showed that the most favorable oil-yielding structures lay in Eastern Nigeria, where they started work in 1946 in the Owerri, Okigwi and Umuahia regions. Two large camps were developed on Crown Land at Owerri and Okigwe after the war, which were connected with exploration sites by helicopters. The Owerri camp, in particular, expanded very quickly and developed into the operational headquarters of Shell/D’Arcy and remained so until the headquarters were moved to Port Harcourt in 1961.<sup>36</sup> It was reported that while the emerging oil industry did not make it onto the colonial government’s official development agenda, Shell/D’Arcy did receive greater

support from the Nigerian colonial government than any oil company had in the pre-1945 period. This support found expression in the charging of very low fees for temporary occupation licenses such as the initial £1 per annum fee charged for the leasing of 175,000 square yards on Crown Land in Okigwe in 1948 (which increased to £5 per acre in 1949) and in making available more land in Owerri for the company as its operations expanded. Thus, Shell-BP intensified its search for oil in the Eastern Delta of Nigeria in 1947, conducting an extensive gravity survey of southern Nigeria from 1948 to the early 1950s. Its geophysical activities were successful through an expansive coverage of the Niger Delta by aerial photography in 1951. The latter was made possible through a further land concession by the British Colonial government, whereby Owerri in eastern Nigeria was added.<sup>37</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Shell/D'Arcy's exploration work after 1946 focused initially on the Owerri, Okigwe, and Umuahia regions which were already densely populated and where Azikiwe and the NCNC enjoyed strong support by that time. Consequently, when the Ikeduru people rose in opposition to the joint venture's exploration party headed by a Mr. H.S. Marchant in late 1948, Azikiwe's paper the West African Pilot was quick to publicize this opposition and lend strong support to the Ikeduru people in several editorials. The Ikeduru people firmly rejected governmental claims to the rights over all minerals on their land, and refused to grant permission to the government or any company to mine these minerals. They therefore requested the colonial government to order both the Owerri District Officer and Shell/D'Arcy 'to stop meddling with their inalienable mineral rights'<sup>38</sup> Opposition also spread to other parts of the region, in February 1949 the Shell/D'Arcy exploration party clashed with the local community in Orodo which led to the summoning of the Umuahia police by the Owerri District Officer to protect it. This act was strongly condemned by the West African Pilot who wrote that the District Officer should have sided with the people and not the joint venture.<sup>39</sup> However, The British colonial authority had always wanted peace and unity in Nigeria, particularly to protect their commercial interest in oil, and to secure Shell BP's oil investment. Their oil prospecting concessions were situated, inter alia, in the Orlu, Okigwe, Owerri and Bende Divisions of the Owerri Province, It conducted extensive gravity surveys in their concession between April 1948 and May 1953, and aerial photographic surveys between 1951 and 1954. In 1951 the joint venture drilled its first deep exploration well at Iho, near Owerri, which turned out to be a dry well. Between 1951 and 1956 it drilled eighteen exploration, appraisal and development wells.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, unknown to many, oil which is today the bedrock of the Nigerian economy was first discovered in the Iho Dimeze community in Ikeduru Local Government of Imo state. For this, the oil company established its operational base in Owerri popularly known as Shell Camp Owerri. Although Shell later abandoned the oil well in Iho and left Owerri in 1961 for Oloibiri in Rivers state where it found oil in large commercial quantities earlier in 1958.

### **Shell D'Arcy and the Development of Owerri**

Development is the capacity for self-sustaining growth, an increased capacity to produce ties with the prevailing relations of production.<sup>41</sup> Also development is a process of qualitative change and quantitative growth of the social and economic reality that we can call either society or economy.<sup>42</sup> Good thing, in recent years, development programming has been focused on the overriding issues of equity and equality in the distribution of the gains from development efforts. These include access to land and water resources, agricultural inputs and services, including extension and research facilities, and participatory development strategies to tackle rural poverty, with social equity and civil participation viewed as essential to well-rounded socio-economic development.<sup>43</sup> This relatively new orientation has produced concepts such as 'people-oriented development', 'participatory development' and 'sustainable human

development. Thus, socioeconomic development could be defined as a process of quantitative, qualitative and structural changes that are the results of actions of subjects taken within a social (economic) practice.<sup>44</sup> Shell BP's activities in Owerri under the period of study were primarily exploitative in line with their collaborative folks, the colonial administrators through the obnoxious policy of colonial economics. They appeared to be in haste for economic gains, hence they were reluctant to push in funds for a longer time in oil prospecting and exploration in the Owerri area. The interest of Shell BP was to alienate the locals from their land as quickly as possible for selfish interest without really thinking of how to alleviate or ameliorate the landowners' socio-economic conditions. Greed and impatient on the part of Shell coupled with the people's mistrust and suspicion against them, led to the reported friction and serious clash that eventually saw Shell leaving Owerri in 1961, hastily as soon as oil in commercial quantity was discovered in Olobiri, Niger Delta Area. The initial hostility they experienced at the Owerri area made them unwilling to return for further exploration as will be expected, since the prospects of finding oil in a desired quantity in the future were there.

However, the brief instinct that Shell BP had in Owerri saw them develop the area they occupied as their headquarters, the popular Shell Camp area in Owerri town, which has maintained the peculiar serenity of a European quarter to date. Despite the momentary urban growth occasioned by Shell's presence in Owerri, the people generally felt their leaving Owerri has become a blessing in disguise and continue to wish that they should not return, especially in the light of the heavy insecurity and environmental degradation being witnessed in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The multinational as known agents of Imperialism have generated and perpetuated intractable problems of mass poverty, stifling foreign domination, savage exploitation, open starvation, debilitating disease, pervasive illiteracy, widening inequality, irrational waste, cultural degradation and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. Also, a gradual persistent decline in agricultural production has led these oil-producing areas to frustrated expectations, dashed ambitions and unprecedented restiveness.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the brief sojourn Shell had in Owerri, its impact on education was remarkable. The Bishop Shanahan College (BSC), Orlu established in 1949 was opened with an initial intake of 150 students at the Old *Shell Camp in Owerri*. The students were divided into five main subject groups, English, History, French, Mathematics and Geography. Shell BP Oil Company camp then at Owerri during its early exploration work in Southern Nigeria had its many expatriate staff play cricket with the Bishop Shanahan College (BSC) team on weekends. It is worth noting that the school was the only ready source of junior and middle-level technicians for Shell BP in those years. The pioneer students of BSC took the University of Cambridge General Certificate of Education in 1953, and the 1954 to 1955 sets took the University of Oxford General Certificate of Education with 100% success. Subsequently, the students took the West African Examination Council examinations, all to the encouraging influence of the Shell Company that had very cordial link with the school. This saw a majority of the BSC students aspiring and succeeding in gaining admission to study in oversea British higher schools and universities as a result of Shell linkage. BSC was one of the leading prestigious schools in the then Eastern Nigeria based on its quality of education and moral values, just like the other schools, Government College Owerri, Christ the King College Onitsha, Stella Maris College Port Harcourt, and Holy Ghost College Owerri.<sup>46</sup>

The buildings at the old Shell BP camp, Owerri, after the company left to Port Harcourt was acquired by the Government, and reconditioned to provide accommodation to government officials. Its staff bungalows and tarred roads in spite of its industrial nature is the most exotic area in Owerri then and even now. Although the *Shell B.P.* left its *camp* at *Owerri* long ago,

the *camp* became the nucleus upon which the first institution of Higher learning in the State sprang up, the now Alvan Ikoku Federal University College of Education *Owerri*. The buildings at the Shell Camp Quarters were converted to use by the higher institution. The first ever built and operated modest airfield in Owerri was constructed by Shell Company, which provided easy transport system and smooth operation for the company and its staff.

### Summary and Conclusion

The entry of Shell D'Arcy Exploration Company into the search for oil across the entire Nigeria colony in 1937 marked a watershed in the history of oil and gas resources in Nigeria and the Niger Delta region in particular. Thus, crude oil came to be the life-blood of the Nigerian economy. The Anglo-Saxon Petroleum was renamed by Shell Overseas Exploration Company on the official license in 1937. The exploration which eventually started first in the Owerri area later resulted in a large commercial oil discovery in the Niger Delta area. Seismic surveying began in Eastern Nigeria, and Enugu became the seat of a temporary headquarters for the company and was later moved to Owerri, which the company considered more convenient. The issue of the land concession granted to Shell by the colonial government caused disaffection among the people of the Owerri area, of note were the clashes that involved the Ikeduru and Orodo people against Shell Company. However, despite the short stay of Shell Company in Owerri they laid the foundation for the growth and development of Owerri Town, especially in the areas of infrastructural development, technical education and employment opportunities for the people. This resulted in the rural-urban migration phenomenon, the influx of people into Owerri who came searching for jobs and a better life. The popular Shell Camp quarters were built to accommodate Shell staff, which later became useful in the establishment of the now Alvan Ikoku Federal University College of Education. Shell Company also built an airfield, the first ever at Owerri which they operated from. The unsuccessful location of oil in commercial quantity in Owerri forced the company out to establish its headquarters in Port Harcourt, especially with the discovery of oil at Olobiri in commercial quantity, now in Bayelsa state. The relocation has been argued whether it is a blessing or curse, but majority of opinion from Owerri indigenes has maintained that it is a blessing in disguise with the current experience in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, which Owerri would also have been grappling with to contain.

### Endnotes

1. Geoffrey I. Nwaka, "Owerri: Development of a Nigerian State Capital", *Third World Planning Review* 2 (2), 1980, 235.
2. Emmanuel A.C. Orji, *Owerri in the Twentieth Century 1901-1999*, (Owerri: Carsers, 1999), 51.
3. Felix k Ekechi, *Portrait of a Colonizer: H. M Douglas in Colonial Nigeria, 1897-1920*, (1983),
4. Owerri Population Data Urban Area, 2023 – World Population Review, <https://www.owerripopulationdata>, Accessed June 25, 2023.
5. Phia Steyn, 'Oil Exploration in the Colonia Nigeria C, 1903-58', *Journal of Imperial Commonwealth History*, 37 (2), 2009, 249-289.
6. Owerri Population Data Urban Area, 2023 – World Population Review, Accessed June 25, 2023, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/owerripopulation>.
7. "Owerri", <https://peakvisor.com/poi/owerripopulation.html>, Accessed June 25, 2023.
8. 15 Things To Know About Owerri, Accessed June 28, 2023, <https://web.facebook.com/QuickFactsng/photos/a.1948649905357856/1956755281213985/>.
9. Raymond Onyemobi, Politician, c73, Owerri, May 27, 2023.

10. Emmanuel A.C Orji, *Owerri in The Twentieth Century 1901-1999* (Owerri: Carsers, 1999) 48.
11. Emmanuel A.C. Orji, *Owerri*, .....51.
12. Imo State Tourist and Travel Directory, 1, (2), 1996, 47.
13. 15 Ikechukwu Umunna, Civil Servant, c58, Owerri, May 23, 2023.
14. 15 Donald Njemanze, Teacher, c52, Owerri, April 28, 2023.
15. Geoffrey I. Nwaka, "Owerri: Development of a Nigerian State Capital".....235-6.
16. Okereke Nwosu, Trader, c70, Owerri, May 27, 2023.
17. Bob Njemanze, Public Servant, c66, Owerri, May 10, 2023.
18. Jonathan Nwachukwu, Priest, c55, Nekede, April 29, 2023.
19. Eze Emmanuel E. Njemanze, "The Historical Perspective", by His Majesty Ozuruigbo Of Owerri (Unpublished, 2000 )
20. Eze Emmanuel E. Njemanze, .....
21. Ebere Anyasike, Entrepreneur, c58, Emekuku, August 30, 2023.
22. Bob Njemanze,.....
23. Raymond Onyemobi,.....
24. Onyewuchi Osuji, Principal, c62, Egbu, August 30, 2023.
25. Amanze Njoku-Obi, Business, c70, Emekuku, August 30, 2023.
26. Owerri Population Data Urban Area,..... 2023.
27. 15 Things To Know....., 2023
28. Zebulon Onyeagoro, Retired Banker, 72, Umuejechi, Nekede, May 29, 2023.
29. Emeka Opara, Retired Civil Servant, 65, Umuejechi, Nekede, April 14, 2023.
30. Okereke Nwosu, Educationist, c66, Umuoyima, Owerri, May 27, 2023.
31. Yusuf A Raji, Samuel T Abejide, "Shell D'Arcy Exploration & the Discovery of oil as Important Foreign Exchange Earnings in ijawland of Niger Delta, c. 1940s-1970", *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review (OMAN Chapter) Vol. 2, No.11; June 2013*, 23-24.
32. Phia Steyn, 'Oil Exploration in the Colonia Nigeria.....32.
33. <https://www.shell.com.ng>, Shell Global, Accessed June 29, 2023.
34. <https://www.shell.com.ng>,.....
35. S. O. Aghalino, *Crude Oil Business in the Western Niger Delta* (Enugu: Rhyce Kerex Publishers, 2009), 30-45.
36. Phia Steyn, .....
37. Yusuf A Raji, Samuel T Abejide, "Shell D'Arcy Exploration,.....
38. Phia Steyn,.....
39. Phia Steyn,.....
40. Phia Steyn,.....32.
41. Nigeria Defense Academy, "Defense Studies", Journal of the Nigerian Defense Academy, Vol. 9-10, 1999, 75.
42. J. Drewnowski, "Social and Economic Factors in Development", UNRISD, Report No. 3, Geneva, Feb., 1966, 73.
43. John Blewitt, *Understanding Sustainable Development* (Routledge: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 250.
44. Eduardo B. Baltazar, Manuel R.P Vazquez, Minerva A. Ibarra, *Socio-Environmental Regimes and Local Visions, Tran disciplinary Experience in Latin America* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 62.
45. Edward Opara, Multilateral Corporations and Neocolonialism in Africa, an Unpublished PhD Term Paper, 2023.
46. Thomas O. C Ndubizu, *Thomas and Not Jacob: A Story of Grit and Good Happenstance*, United States: Xlibris LLC, 2014, 18-25.