

“SHUN THE MASTER, EMBRACE HIS ENEMY”: THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE IMAGE OF JAPAN AMONG SOME IGBO COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

One of the existing notions on the issue of colonialism is that the colonial subjects were in total support of their colonial masters' war efforts during the Second World War. This is far from the truth. Despite the propaganda in British colonies about the inferiority of Japanese goods, most of the societies in our study area found them good and stuck to them. Many legacies exist that stand as testimonies to the rejection of the British and the Allied powers in Igbo land and the support for Japan during the war. For instance, the road leading to the Native Authority Office in Enugu-Ezike was changed to Japan Road, in sympathy for Japan in 1945. In Umuagama, Umuida, Agubeje and in some other villages in the Enugu-Ezike area of Igboland, there are settlements named after Japan. Recently, Nnewi and Aba - the commercial nerve centre of Igboland - have been dubbed "the Japan of Africa". It is equally evident that trade relations between the Igbo and the Japanese increased during and after the war. The British colonial officials could not dissuade the subjects through their mercantilist colonial policies to shun goods from outside the British Empire. This begs the questions: what was responsible for this resilience on the part of the colonial subjects? What lessons could all the parties draw from their roles; and how would such lessons help in promoting healthy relations among the players?

Keywords: World War, Japanese's Goods, Issues of Colonialism

INTRODUCTION

Historical Glimpses

The traditional rivalry between the West and Asia is old that no one can say when it began with some high level of precision. In the first century B.C, the Roman scholar Varro wrote that "all the natural world is divided into earth and air, as all the earth is divided into Asia and Europe"¹. Even Herodotus asked the question "what it was that divided Europe from Asia and why two peoples who were, in many respects, quite similar should have conceived such enduring hatreds for each other"². Herodotus wrote in the fifth century B.C. The hatred between the two groups came to the fore in Africa during the colonial era. One of the major contentions between the two sides was the struggle to gain a market in Africa where they would sell their products. The West resorted to cheap propaganda to edge Asians out of business. The latter remark was so pronounced in Nigeria with respect to British-Japanese relations. The Igbo of Nigeria found in West Africa saw this unfolding drama between the two powers as a "game" to watch closely. During the colonial era, Nigeria to which the Igbo belong was colonized by Britain. It was also during the colonial period that the Second World War took place. Prior to this period, the British and its Western neighbours had canvassed the view among their colonial subjects that "goods made in Japan were a synonym for merchandise guaranteed to break down or disintegrate shortly

after purchase”³ and branded “occupied”. In 1932, which coincided with the height of the Great Depression, the Africa Trade Section of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce lamented that;

The problem of Japanese competition in cotton, artificial silk and other goods in the West African market called for the closest possible attention during the year...The far-reaching effect of this threat to the normal trading activities of the colonies needs no emphasis, and necessitated approaches to H.M. Government on several occasions⁴.

One of the approaches came in 1933 from merchants of Manchester that were interested in West Africa. They demanded that a legal mechanism be put in place to end “the large-scale dumping of Japanese goods in West Africa, especially in Nigeria and the Gold Coast”⁵. The British resorted to the imposition of discriminatory tariffs on Japanese goods that competed with theirs’. In spite of the restrictions, those that found their way into the colonies had a ready market. This puts a big question mark on the British propaganda which claims that Japanese goods were substandard and fake. What was more, in 1934, the Africa Trade Section of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce considered the “effective check against the inroads of Japanese competition the most significant feature of the year”⁶.

Based on the above consideration, Britain enacted Ordinance 8 of 1934 and Orders-in Council 38 and 40 of 1934. These laws were made to restrict Japanese export of grays, bleached, printed, dyed, coloured, velveteen and artificial silk to specific quantities. Thus, for the quota period of May 17 to December 31, 1934, only 1,524,503 squares yards of Japanese textiles were permitted to be imported into Nigeria as against 15,581,833 square yards imported in 1933⁷. The quota was to increase in the subsequent years. For instance, in 1935, the figure rose to 2,430,000 but was to rise to 2,455,000 square yards in 1936 and 1937⁸. For a people that price freedom highly like the Igbo to be denied freedom of choice was an affront on their sensibilities. The denial was made worse by the economic conditions of the time as all these were happening during the Great Depression. What was worse, the British did not only deny their colonial subjects the chances of buying what they could at will, they went as far as stifling their local industries and economy. For instance, the attempt by the Native Administration to introduce Palm Kernel-Cracking machines did not go down well with Igbo women. They reasoned that the introduction of the machines was measures designed by the colonial masters to allow them buy directly from the men who own the oil palm trees and its fruits. This, if implemented meant a reduction in the income of women who normally kept back the un-cracked kernel to themselves as a compensation for the labour they put in during the processing of the palm oil. That there was stiff opposition to the introduction of the machine can be attested to by the evidence from the Arochukwu area in Igboland, where it was reported that as at August, 1931, only one kernel cracker was in use and for demonstration purposes⁹. Igbo opposition to the introduction of machines used in the processing of oil palm products was not limited to Kernel Crackers. They were equally opposed to the introduction of Oil Palm Presses. The opposition from the people was made manifest in Udi and Nsukka Divisions. In these two Divisions, they rejected buying and using the presses until 1936. Even at that, in Nsukka Division, no sales were recorded with respect to oil presses in 1937 even when the colonial authorities carried out demonstrations aimed at encouraging their use¹⁰.

Any event that is not placed in context is easily misunderstood and interpreted wrongly. To understand, why the people were opposed to these machines, there is need for us to investigate their notions about the end products of the machines and the ones they produced without the use of machines. First, with respect to palm oil, the people observed that the presses have a lot of oil

left in the fluffs after each exercise of extracting the oil from the palm nuts. Secondly, the quality of the oil that came through the press was lower than the locally produced ones. As people that palm oil features prominently in their daily diet, they insisted on good quality oil. To give credence to this claim of quality, Gloria Chuku observed that during the period “Nsukka oil commanded a high price from local middle men and at Ogurugu produce buying centers because of its high quality”¹¹. For the colonial officials, what they wanted was oil palm oil; the quality notwithstanding as it does not conform to their diet but was demanded for industrial use. The machine encouraged the production of low quality oil apart from other shortcomings and was detested. It was under this climate of divergent interests that the Igbo found themselves during the Second World War as events during the war proved.

Igbo-British Relations during the War and Igbo Sympathy for Japan

The Second World War began on September 1, 1939 with the German invasion of Poland and on September 3 of the same year, when Britain and France became uncomfortable with German continental expansion declared war on Germany. Britain caught fever following the fall and eventual surrender of France to German forces on June 22, 1940. What was worse, the document of surrender was signed in the same railroad car in which Germany had signed the armistice ending the World War I¹². The venue of the surrender document tended to portray the Germans as being on a retaliatory mission. Soon, the Germans turned their attention to Britain. In August 1940, under a mission code named “Operation Sea Lion” German forces resorted to daily bombing of England’s southern coast for upwards of a month. As if the bombing at the coast was not enough, Germans launched the *Blitzkrieg* on September 7, 1940. Under the Blitz, the Germans bombed London for 57 nights in a row and then intermittently till the May of 1941. While the game of territorial expansion was going on in Europe, in Asia the same was obtained. Japan was taking a tool on China where *ab initio*, the Western World had entrenched commercial interests dating back to the opium trade years.

The United States that preached neutrality soon joined the war fearing that Hitler would eliminate all democracies especially because the Nazi and the Soviets signed a nonaggression pact in 1939. In 1940, the United States banned the sale of war materials to Japan who had advanced into French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies. Then in 1941, the United States Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act. The Act allowed the States to sell or lend war materials to any nation whose defense is of strategic importance to her. Claiming to be the arsenal of democracy by supplying arms to those fighting for freedom, America sought to buy the sympathy of many nations for the Allied powers. America and Britain, in 1941 through the Atlantic Charter struck at the very fundamental anger of most colonized states. For Churchill and Roosevelt to say that all the peoples of the earth are free to choose the form of government under which they will live, it presupposes that they were not imperialists and had no intentions of ruling another state against the will of that state.

In Nigeria, the Atlantic Charter was viewed as a welcome development but understood as a mere cheap political statement meant to win the war. Among the Igbo, many questions raged. For instance, they asked why they should be involved in a war that does not concern them directly if actually they were regarded as one of those people that should determine the type of government they should have¹³. This question was even more pressing as Britain whose leader was a major signatory to the charter made several legislations that portrayed it as expansionist, exploitative and totally indifferent to the welfare of the people. As a very mobile people, living

in the largest rural community in West Africa, and mainly traders, the people abhorred the 1939 Nigerian Defense Motor Transport Regulation. The said regulation placed restriction on the use of commercial vehicles for passenger services. To worsen the transport situation in Igboland during the War, the British in 1944 reduced the amount of petrol allocated to Igboland. In 1943, the Igbo got 417,000 gallons of petrol. This was to drop to 375,300- a shortfall of 41,700 gallons¹⁴. Even as they limited trade through the restriction of movement of vehicles, the British in 1943 introduced the Food Control Order which restricted trade in domestic products between districts, provinces and regions. Unfortunately, they never considered the prices of the domestic goods during the war. For instance, the price of palm oil fell from 3s a tin to 6d while that of a puncheon fell from £30 to £6/12s¹⁵. During the war, palm kernel production suffered, not minding that the people were encouraged to produce more under the “win the War” scheme. In 1942, long bags replaced tubs as units of measure for palm kernel. To worsen the matter, the bags were not weighed. Under the old trading arrangement, 10 empty gin cases filled with kernel stood for a tub but from 1942, 12 empty gin cases stood for a tub. So painful were these measures that kernel dealers petitioned, arguing that:

If we as tax payers cannot make money from our legitimate business of producing raw materials, it means that there will be nothing in our hands to pay the tax to keep the Native Administration and government officials¹⁶.

Enugu Ezike is located in the oil palm belt of Nigeria and the people depended heavily on oil palm production. Palm oil, palm kernel and the local liquor (palm wine) were chief products. With the legislation hampering the take-home benefits of the farmers, in terms of the prices of palm oil and palm kernel, the production of gin was made illegal and punishable under the British colonial law. Palm wine is in great demand then because of the ginneries¹⁷ and with their outlaw, there was glut.

Apart from the inconsistencies in the price of palm produce, the British also interfered in the production and consumption of cassava, a major staple food for the Igbo. The demand for starch used for the up keep of military uniforms led to the massive exportation of cassava. The emphasis on export led to increase in the prices of cassava products and scarcity of food. For instance, in June, 1943, 2 cups of gari sold for 1d against 10 to 15 cups for 1d prior to government interference¹⁸.

It was in response to these inhuman dispositions of the British that the Enugu-Ezike people embraced Japan to deride the British. To understand why they took differently to British policy during the war, it is pertinent that we investigate what the economy of this community was and to a large extent is like. Enugu-Ezike is known for the production of quality palm oil, kernel and most importantly, palm wine and trading. These economic practices had become redundant because of the British colonial government injunctions on what to be produced and how much it should be sold. However, the more agonizing thing, is the determination by a trading partner – what to buy and from who. For the local people, all *white men* are the same. The distinction of British, French, German, and Japanese among others, were beyond comprehension. This distinction became apparent as the trade competition intensified and goods brought by these people became their identity.

Whatever was the problem between these foreigners, the local people could not understand. The *Lagos Weekly Record* in her editorial wondered:

Why this fear of foreign competition and what need this artificial prop of a preference duty? Certainly we natives of West Africa will want to get the best price for our produce and any particular branch of our industry whose product does not enjoy a free market will either be neglected or will die. If the native only knows he is not getting the best price for his palm kernels he will abandon the industry and England either does without palm kernels...¹⁹.

British economic policies were challenged by Africans who felt that trade within the colonies should be free from restrictions. Here, the Africans failed to realize that the British were on their soil purely for economic reasons, not matter their pretence otherwise²⁰. These restrictions by the British made the local people unable to sell their products in the open market and brought hatred to their colonial masters. However, there was British propaganda that if the West African colonies realized that the restrictions were made for the benefit of the British Empire, to which they were proud to belong, they would willingly accept it²¹. One wonders how the payment of low prices for palm oil and palm kernel will benefit the colonial peoples when such low prices could only affect the prices of finished goods in Britain. In other words, British citizens at home enjoyed low prices of margarine 'to the benefit of Africans?'

Enter the Japanese

From the 1930s, the British colonial officials became highly interested in the in-roads made by Japanese textile materials among the colonial peoples and therefore strengthened their discriminatory tariffs on their products. Manchester textile merchants were no longer comfortable with the tariffs but were interested in the total abrogation of international trade agreements in West Africa as that was the only solution to the survival of British textile industry. The Japanese textile industries have taken the base of trade in colonial West Africa; trade which was built by the labours and capital of Britain²².

The Depression and the trade restrictions had brought about poor prices for the local farmers who after the payment of colonial taxes, had little left to buy foreign manufactures. Thus, the entrance of the Japanese in the West Africa trade made the local people hve a sigh of relief. The Japanese goods were cheap and therefore affordable by the colonial people. Then the British began the campaign of calumny about these goods. *West Africa* reported 1934 of the British:

We cannot blame them (the local people) for buying the cheap Japanese and Russian goods now offered on such an immense scale...they cannot afford quality stuff, and suppliers of cheap (and shoddy) textiles are thriving on depression in much the same way as the multiple tailors in this country²³. (our brackets).

This was one of those campaigns against Japanese and Russian goods. However, the buyer determines what products to buy and for how much. If the British goods were of high quality but expensive, and the people because of poor income resorted to cheap products; what was the problem of the British? They have been ripping the people and now there was a way out of the British economic exploitation as provided by Japan. Among the Igbo, Japanese textile materials were called 'occupied' during the Second World War, perhaps introducing Japan as an occupied territory of the Allied Forces, but more importantly for denigration.

As stated earlier in this paper, the British tightened their restrictions in the period 1933 – 37, not only on Japanese textile materials but also on other goods from Japan including galvanized iron sheets, cement, paint, and varnish among others through the various colonial Ordinances²⁴. The ordinances were meant to stifle the importation of Japanese goods which have the potentiality of

'stealing' the local market from the British given the way and manner the people were craving for them. An Enugu Ezike trader during the period, Omale Ugwu, explained the situation thus:

As a textile merchant, we used to buy British textiles until the entrance of the Japanese textiles. The Japanese textiles knocked-out the British-made ones as the demand fell sharply. I was able to sell about four bales of Japanese materials without finishing a bale of British material. The Japanese textile makes for quick turnover and big gain while the British materials continued to sleep with you. It was all about the price; forget the high quality campaign of their products by the British²⁵.

The above expression appears to be in tandem with the fear expressed by Lord Salisbury about foreign competition.

Some countries in which we once had a monopoly of supply have become more or less independent of us, in others the strain is caused by competition of foreign traders, who contrive to draw to themselves no small share of business which we have been in the habit of considering our own.²⁶

The British themselves knew that business was no longer as usual for them in tropical Africa as the people did not heed whatever propaganda they brought against products from Japan and Russia but was concerned about their purchasing power. In as much as they were citizens of the British Empire, they thought they have the right to patronize products that gave them maximum utility. The so-called cheap products from Japan appeared to compliment the hard economic conditions of the people, given the poor returns from their agricultural produce occasioned on them partly by British policies during the war as earlier on stated.

Bearing in mind the aversive economic legislations made by the British during the war and their effect on the local farmers, most traders in Enugu Ezike resorted to selling goods that met the demands of the local populace – goods from Japan. By the end of 1944, the road that is today called “Japan Road” witnessed unprecedented commercial activities. Incidentally, most of the products sold in the area were made in Japan. Following this phenomenon, the road previously known as “Nsukka Road” linked the District Office of the British Resident at Nsukka with the Native Administration in Enugu Ezike. The defeat of Japan and her allies in 1945 sent shocking waves to the traders who by then had specialized in the sale of Japanese products. Reasoning that the defeat of Japan might deny them further access to their articles of trade, they thought that it would translate to obliterating the memory of what happened in the area during the war. To keep the memory alive, the traders nicknamed this business area, Japan Road.

After the Second World War, many towns in Igboland began to assume the name Japan. Most of these towns were known for their ingenuity in the manufacture of local products that competed favorably with imported ones – a replication of the Japanese ingenuity during the war. Such towns as Aba and Nnewi and the Coal Camp at Enugu, have been dubbed the “Japan of Africa”. The reason is not far-fetched as they are capable of fabricating any machine tool on request. Today, however, machines and electronics made in Japan are taken to be of high quality – what a change! Could it be that the Japanese drive to manufacture their ‘fake’ products irrespective of the campaign of calumny by the British made them perfect their technology? If it were so, the reason for the poor industrial take-off of Africa may have been due to the stifling ordinances by the colonial government targeted at the local industries.

CONCLUSION

Mercantilism propelled colonialism. The *Pall Mall Gazette* as cited by Uzoigwe affirmed the business intentions of colonialism thus:

(We have not) gone to the equatorial regions for religious or humanitarian motives. Missionaries and philanthropists, indeed, complain sometimes that their work is hampered by Downing Street regulations. Still less have we sought out the African in order to endow him with the vices (and virtues) of western civilization. The fact is that when what has been done through pure love of adventure and the pride of power has been eliminated, the dominant force which has taken us to equatorial Africa is the desire to trade. We are in the tropical countries for our own advantage, and only incidentally for the good of the African.²⁷

There was no gainsaying, the whole pretences of the British territorial acquisition in tropical Africa was economic. With rising industrialization in Britain, the demands for markets became a top priority among captains of industries and the British government.

For instance, Frederick Greenwood observed that,

New markets! New markets!, is the constant cry of our captains of industries and merchant princes and it is well that to them the ear of government should willingly incline. It ought to do so, and it does. By new markets, he meant primarily those regions yet un-acquired by any European power such as Western China, tropical Africa and Tibet²⁸.

Desirous to make enormous gains to help them execute the war, the British economic legislations did not go down well with the Igbo. Since survival was paramount to both parties during the war, the Igbo embraced the Japanese style of production that emphasized the fulfilling of immediate demand. For the Japanese, the production process was a learning process that emphasized continued improvement of its products. This Japanese approach, was denied the Igbo by the British through reduction in the prices of their local products and discouraging of local industries. One scholar observed that,

Not only were the British authorities and firms unwilling to establish modern factories in Nigeria, they even took steps to de-industrialize the indigenous economy by killing or at best stunting existing industries and the skills associated with them. The net result of this was that during the colonial era, Nigerians gradually lost the capacity to produce handicraft items in which they had developed acknowledged expertise, and which could have provided the basis for real industrial growth and development.²⁹

The Igbo from the era of the chartered companies had studied the British economic policies and were eager to find alternative. This alternative was provided by the entrance of Japan, then, a developing nation, into the Igbo economy and it came in the form of a general apathy toward “Made in England” goods and the embrace of “Made in Japan”. The disregard for the local economy by the British and the unhealthy economic environment as exemplified by the experiences in the Agbaja areas of Igboland with respect to coal mining, further aggravated the hatred the Igbo had for the British. In the coal industry, the Agbaja people were made to cede ten square miles of their land. The purpose was to build a railway leading to the coal mines. A compensation of £200 was paid for what has been described “one of the greatest land swindling acts recorded in the history of West Africa”³⁰. From the latter episode, other Igbo communities became apprehensive of colonial economic policies and detested them in whatever form and by whatever means. It does appear that the result of the intelligence reports sponsored by the British

colonial authorities in Igboland and elsewhere did not reflect the true picture of the societies studied. Until both parties – the colonists and the colonized – recognize and appreciate their differences, suspicion and hatred will hold sway. This might have been the case in Igboland.

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