SOUTHERN NIGERIA
IN TRANSITION
1885–1906
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Theory and Practice in a Colonial Protectorate

BY

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PREFACE

The politico-territorial unit originally designated the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria was in time absorbed into what is known today as Nigeria. The emergence of Nigeria was due to two amalgamations which occurred in 1906 and 1914. A reversal of this process leaves Nigeria a country composed of semi-autonomous regions. The portion of Nigeria covered by this study—the territory which was historically Southern Nigeria—embraces the Mid-West State and Eastern Nigeria. Its outline was more or less clear when Britain in 1885 successfully secured international recognition of her ‘freedom of action’ on the Lower Niger and in the Oil Rivers.

Non-Nigerian writers are wont to refer to the inhabitants of the territory as ‘a mere conglomeration of groups whose former associations with one another were, at best, artificial’. This view completely ignores the cultural and other unities which were quite pervasive. Contact with Europe was at first confined to the coast, and except for the ancient kingdom of Benin, the European agents who were destined to become rulers knew little or nothing about the Ibo and Ibibio who occupied the hinterland. They knew even less about the political institutions of these groups.

This study of Southern Nigeria in transition therefore begins by attempting to analyse the structure of an indigenous society, without becoming involved in the intricate problems of academic anthropology. The simple analysis helps to explain not only the ineptitude with which British agents applied the so-called policy of protection but also the disruption of indigenous institutions which inevitably resulted from British occupation and rule. The long period from 1849 to 1884 during which Britain imperceptibly entrenched herself in the politics of the coast forms a natural starting point of the modern history of Southern Nigeria. As a result of the Berlin West African Conference of 1884–5, the British position was internationally recognised.

The next phase of British policy has often been described as a
‘paper protectorate’. Legally and morally, the internal sovereignty of the coast city-states was apparently safeguarded. It required the intelligence and tenacity of King Jaja to expose the hypocrisy which shrouded the theory of the colonial protectorate. The curtain was drawn and the policy of avowedly overthowing indigenous independence was inaugurated.

It was easy enough for Britain to pave the way for occupying the Nigerian coast by treaties of protection with the merchant princes of the coast city-states. The hinterland was to be a different proposition. No blandishments could overcome the sturdy independence of the Binis, the Ibo and the Ibibio. British agents had therefore to adopt the paradoxical policy of extending British ‘protection’ by means of military expeditions. The process was indeed one of conquest and makes nonsense of the term ‘protectorate’.

In one sense, however, the idea of protection persisted. The land and the forest resources of the territory were preserved to their owners, in spite of the importunities of alien speculators and concession-mongers. This policy may or may not have been the product of justice and fair-play on the part of the British rulers. The density of the population; the passionate attachment of the people to the land; the climate; and the expediency of avoiding provocative measures were all important factors. British rule unleashed forces which almost completely transformed the social and economic life of the peoples of Southern Nigeria. The resulting pattern of politics and economics is analysed up to 1906 when the territory was merged with Lagos and Yorubaland.

The material for this study comes principally from two sources, local and documentary. The documents are available at the Public Record Office, London, the British Foreign Office Research Library, and the British Museum. Exhaustive use has been made of the Intelligence Reports deposited in the National Archives, Ibadan. All the sources used are of course acknowledged in the appropriate places.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A.D.C.  Assistant District Commissioner
Asst.  Assistant
Calprof  Calabar Province Archives
Capt.  Captain
C.-in-C.  Commander-in-Chief
C.O.  Colonial Office
Col.  Colonel
C.M.S.  Church Missionary Society
C.S.O.  Chief Secretary's Office (Nigeria)
D.C.  District Commissioner
F.O.  Foreign Office
F.O.C.P.  Foreign Office Confidential Prints
H.B.M.  His/Her Britannic Majesty
H.M.  His/Her Majesty
H.M.S.  His/Her Majesty's Ships
H.M.S.O.  His/Her Majesty's Stationery Office
J.A.S.  Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society
J.H.S.N.  Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria
Lt.  Lieutenant
Parl. Pap.  Parliamentary Papers
W.C.A.  West Coast of Africa.

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