

THE NEWSPAPER PRESS AND LABOUR AGITATIONS IN NIGERIA, 1938-1960

Being a Research Proposal for Ph.D. Qualifying Examination

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A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF NATIONALIST STRUGGLES, LABOUR AGITATIONS
AND NEWSPAPER PRESS, (1938-1960).

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: A Historical Analysis of Nationalist Struggles, Labour Agitations and Newspaper Press, (1938-1960)
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This study provided an overview of the form of relationship that existed between Nigerian press, labour unions and the nationalist from 1938 to 1960. It analyzed how changes in socio-economic and political systems affected labour agitations and the roles of the press in Nigeria. It also examined the patterns of the nationalist struggles, the nature of the press activism, labour agitations and their involvement in the decolonization process in Nigeria. The study evaluated the effects of government tactics, politics and actions on the press, labour unions and the nationalists. It discussed the response of the Nigerian Press and labour unions and the nationalists to the government policies. This was with a view to showing the forms of labour agitations, newspaper activism and nationalist struggles in Nigeria from 1938-1960.

The study employed both primary and secondary sources of data. The major primary sources comprised, newspapers particularly those with national coverage between 1938 and 1960; archival documents such as Colonial Office (CO) papers, reports, letters and memoirs of labour departments, government gazettes, intelligence reports and pamphlets. These materials were collected from public archives in Nigeria, London and the United States of America. The

secondary sources included journal articles, books, projects and theses, and the Internet. The data obtained were subjected to critical historical analysis.

This study challenged the nationalist narrative of labour agitations during the colonial period in Nigeria. This was achieved by unbundling and rethinking nationalist historiography of Nigeria. By employing the instances of nationalist struggle, labour agitation and newspaper activism, the study found that methodological problems in the reconstruction of African history cannot be divorced from the adoption and adaptation of foreign models that were hardly neatly fitted into the reality of African situations. The study found that labour agitations during the colonial period were both an independent and interlinked events with the nationalist struggles. It was discovered that the goals of labour agitations only shifted from the economic survival of the workers alone to the economic and political liberation of the country when the nationalists exploited the labour crisis of the period. It was found that there existed, reciprocal relationships, sometimes mutually beneficial or convergent and sometimes conflicting or divergent, between the press and the labour unions. These patterns of relationship were determined by the political and economic interests as well as the ethnic background of the publishers of newspapers. The study also found that radical nationalism in the post-war Nigeria was inspired by the writings, speeches and personality of Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe whose disposition contributed to the collapse of radical nationalism of the period as exemplified in the government crackdown on the Zikist Movement.

The study concluded that labour agitations during the period of decolonisation were geared towards securing better pay and improving the welfare of the workers. Whereas these agitations were caused by socio-economic changes of the depression and the war years, the

agitations later shifted from being economic survival of the workers to the economic and political liberation of Nigeria.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background and Overview

The post-World War II history of Africa was marked by the growth of African agitations against colonial policies and increase in intensity of nationalist movements. Besides the fact that major imperial powers, Britain and France, came out of the Great War economically weakened and politically atrophied,¹ there were other compelling factors that rendered the colonial rule old fashioned. The publication of the Atlantic Charter, a freedom clause signed by the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill and the President of the United States, Frank D. Roosevelt, which proclaimed “the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live”,² the declaration of universal human rights by the United Nations in 1948, coupled with the war-time propaganda of “freedom for all”, spurred previously uncoordinated nationalist groups into action. The experience and idea of freedom acquired by the ex-service men who had served in the European battle front in Burma, North or East Africa became useful instruments of demystifying the idea of European racial superiority. External stimuli also came from the Diaspora. The radical Garveyite Movement, the Du Bois intellectual protest, the pan-African congresses and the solidarity protests by African students abroad, such as WASU, became the germs on which nationalist movements in the continent were built.³

¹ Basil Davidson, *Modern Africa, A Social and Political History* (London and New York: Longman, 1994, Third Edition) p.65.

² James Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Benin City and Cityhuset: Broburg & Wistrom, 1986), pp.232-233.

³ Ehiedu E. G. Iweribor, “Trends and Patterns in African nationalism,” in Toyin Falola (ed.), *The End of Colonial Rule: Nationalism and Decolonization* (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), pp. 11-14.

But at home, the strength of the nationalist struggles was determined by the availability of effective channels of expressing African dissatisfactions against colonial rule. Hence, protests, disobedience, newspapers and violence (in the extreme case) became the potent tools of expression of the nationalist movements. The seeds of nationalist movements in Nigeria were therefore planted on the fertility of newspaper press in the cities, particularly Lagos, and timely coincidence of protests by the labour unions.

As institutions with common features, both the press and labour unions have continued to feature prominently in the socio-economic and political debates in Nigeria. Both institutions were the most important mobilization and recruitment grounds of the Nigerian activists during the colonial and the post-colonial periods. In the post-colonial period; they initiated, mobilized, collaborated and effectively acted as the catalysts of social, economic and political changes in Nigeria. While the roles of labour unions in the protection of the rights of their members cannot be ignored, their function as the bulwark against the tyranny of the government and the ruling class cannot be overemphasized. Like labour unions, the press has played the crucial roles of watchdog and the vanguard of human rights.

Significantly, the apparent mutual philosophy and ideology, and sameness of purpose of the two institutions have largely produced effective and commendable results. But in spite of their human rights activism, both the press and the labour unions have remained potent tools of political manipulation and ideological *manoeuvre*, sectional and ethnic jingoism and insulation of the bourgeois and the ruling classes as well as the *external estate* (the key foreign commercial

interests, the ex-colonial power and other powers which have strategic and economic interests in Nigeria) in the society.⁴

The colonial historiography of Africa tends to treat without caveat, labour protests and newspaper activism in the colonial period as part of linearity of a broader nationalist struggle. While the activities of the newspaper press can be viewed as part of the linearity, those of labour unions cannot be colligated without qualification. The tone and tempo of African nationalism which after the Second World War assumed a more radical stance and leaned towards African independence did not change the demands of Nigerian labour unions, even in the postcolonial period, for increase wages, better working conditions and welfare of their members. Thus, a “super-narrative” history of nationalist struggle that views economic improvements of members of labour unions as secondary and while independence struggle as primary, muddles or subsumes it within the broader history of the nationalist movements; it interprets the involvement of few radical labour unionists in partisan politics as the politicization of labour unions. Such interpretation often neglects the primary focus of labour agitations, which was usually socio-economic, for political demands which were usually coincidental and secondary.⁵ Not surprisingly, a super-narrative history emphasizes discriminations, exploitation and injustice against Nigerians within the colonial context but ignores similar features or contradictions in African societies. It denies the existence of classes in Africa or tries to peg African societies on the European models without considering the peculiarities in the former and the historical

⁴ Robin Cohen, *Labour and Politics in Nigeria, 1945-1971* (Heinemann, 1974).

⁵ By super-narrative I mean a superfluous narration that exaggerates or muddles up independent events into a single superimposed event. This is further explained later.

dynamics of the latter.⁶ Significantly, a “rethinking” and re-examination of colonial history of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular are very important.

⁶ For instance, the exploitation of African labour in the tin mines in Jos and the Government Colliery coal mine in Enugu for instance could be objectively interpreted if the social and economic antecedents of the areas are considered. In the case of Enugu, the socio-economic structure of the Igbo society had gravitated towards veneration the of achievements of individuals and material wealth before the British conquest of Igboland. The adoption of forced labour by the British administration in the construction projects in Igboland up till about 1914 had hardly found collaboration in the elders but in the *Ogaranya* class, individuals distinguished by their affluence and material opulence. The Ogarayan were characteristically exploitative. They became the labour recruiters for the mines. Together with their agents, exploited the labour and extorted the wages of the workers. See Carolyn Brown, *“We were All Slaves” African Miners, Culture and Resistance at the Enugu Government Colliery* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2003); Carolyn A. Brown, “The Dialectics of Colonial Labour Control: Class Struggle in the Nigerian Coal Industry, 1914-1949” *Journal of Asia and African Studies*, XXIII, 1-2 (1988).

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