

Social Welfare Strategies in Colonial Lagos

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Abstract

This paper examines a number of social welfare strategies that were introduced in Lagos by the British colonial administrators to arrest the alarming rate of mass poverty in Lagos during the period under review. Essentially, the paper draws heavily on archival data to specifically address colonial policies such as repatriation, rehabilitation, provision of employment opportunities as well as the regulation of the working conditions of poor people in Lagos. The paper submits that these policies were discriminatory and not properly implemented, hence, rather than alleviate poverty, urban unemployment and its attendant social consequences became the order of the day.

Introduction

Poverty is a historical phenomenon and the poor have lived in Africa from pre-colonial period till present day. In pre-colonial Africa, poverty occurred more as a non-monetary phenomenon (Abimbola 1977: 1-4). A typical African began his life through birth into a particular social class and grew to learn the language, skills and vocation of his people or the profession of his parents. Then he became integrated into the processes that ensured his admission or initiation into certain age grades. Wealth was in form of land, chieftaincy titles, livestock, skill and vocation, age, wisdom, spirituality, kingship and membership of royalty, social class, etc. Poverty often existed on an individual level when the individual was not able to assess majority of the above or if his ability to assess them was hindered by either some form of disability, through birth into what was regarded as a degrading social class (Okeke 1986: 9). The reason why some scholars referred to a merrie Africa was because it was difficult to refer to a man who lacked money in pre-colonial Africa as poor because the yardstick for measuring poverty was essentially, and as stated earlier, non-monetary. Though, it has been argued by subaltern theorists that the major causative factor for the incidence of poverty is non-monetary (Smith and Joseph, 1999: 203 – 208), this study is of the view that with the advent of colonialism, poverty became an increasingly monetary occurrence, particularly with the gradual domination of Western monetary exchange system (Bennel, 1982: 127–154).

Indeed, the conventional meaning of poverty is the lack of the basic necessities of life – food, shelter and clothing – in the life of an individual or group. However, the lack of money is the fundamental indicator of poverty. Statistics are generated and used for policy direction and implementation, using the fiscal perception of poverty. This strategy remains basic to the understanding of poverty and the social welfare strategies that are targeted towards alleviating poverty.

The rapid urbanisation of Lagos as a result of the decision of the British colonial administrators to make Lagos the capital of Nigeria brought along with it numerous social problems associated with a new colonial capital. Some of these include, inadequate social infrastructure, massive

rural-urban migration as well as the social costs of the attempts at nascent industrialisation. Understandably, this new system created and entrenched a new form of poverty. The reaction of the colonial regime to these new challenges is the major pre-occupation of this paper.

Colonial Welfare Strategies

Poverty and welfare strategies are historical facts in pre-colonial Lagos. However, these assumed a different dimension with the advent of colonialism. Under this new dispensation, the British colonial officers faced challenges occasioned by accumulated and continuing developments: western education, new monetary exchange, white collar employment, new governance, and new culture and other urban-related social problems. Some of the social welfare strategies employed by the colonial administrators included repatriation, rehabilitation, provision of social services, provision of employment, extra-curricular activities among children, awareness creation and propaganda. These were partly designed to alleviate the conditions of the poor but also to check the impact of their activities, agitations, grievance and nuisance to the newly emerging urban culture.

Repatriation of Paupers

Repatriation expressed the determination of the colonial authorities in Lagos to maintain certain 'approved' urban standards and practices by the inhabitants. Majority of those repatriated were labelled "undesirables" who, the authorities considered a nuisance to the new urban environment. Also included in this category were beggars and prostitutes. This method was firmly resisted by some of the poor and welcomed by others. The poor themselves devised various means and strategy to evade repatriation and in some cases were actually successful (National Archive, Comcol 1, File No. 1493 Vol 4). This paper considers the policy of repatriation as a social welfare strategy because available evidence suggests many repatriates expressed gratitude to the Colony's administration for their repatriation. This was often the case in the event that the individual affected was the one who initiated the repatriation process. Repatriation was costly and the governing authorities who undertook the process were careful to spend within the limits that could be well defended. The process of repatriation involved first, the identification and consideration of the activities of the individual as damaging to the social conduct of the colonial urban centre. Second, a written petition was forwarded to a governing institutional authority, often anonymously. Third, investigations were conducted by the relevant authority to ascertain the allegations. These investigations could stretch into long periods and often involved the collaboration of two or more institutional authorities, one of which was a law enforcement agency. Fourth, the suspect was interrogated by the institutional authority involved. Fifth, fund was sourced and mobilised from relevant government agencies. Sixth, the travel arrangement of the individual was conducted usually in collaboration with the relevant provincial authority in the hinterlands. The point of destination was ascertained and the individual was repatriated.

Rehabilitation and Provision of Employment for Juveniles

This strategy was adopted to turn around the conditions of juveniles that are delinquent and poor (NAI, Comcol I, File No. 2600, *Daily Times* 5 August 1950). This was particularly adopted for indigenes of Lagos or those who had no place in the provinces where they could stay if repatriated. By 1950, the scheme for the welfare of juveniles had become successful. The Colony

Welfare Officer had gone through hundreds of requests in form of correspondences written by and or on behalf of juveniles. The office had the responsibility of conducting investigations into the authenticity or otherwise of claims by juveniles. The office sought and got employment on behalf of the juveniles and also organised for the repatriation of those whose relations were in the provinces. The welfare officer equally stood as referee and guarantor for juveniles who got employment in the colony. The office also arranged with other bodies to pay the school fees of indigent students who needed assistance. This policy also included the provision and administration of hostels for juveniles. They were provided medical assistance and taught how to read and write. In addition, some of them cleaned, cooked, washed, and learnt crafts like broom making and brush making. They gardened, swam and were instructed in religious studies. A social worker was attached to each hostel and such spent long hours individually with the children finding out circumstances that brought them into the hostel (NAI, Comcol I, File No. 2600, *Daily Times*, 5 August 1950).

It should be re-emphasised that a good number of the poor in Lagos from the 1940s to 1950s included juveniles who sought employment. This drew the attention of the governing authorities to the effect that a committee was appointed in 1943 to assess the situation. Between December 1943 and May 1944, the Committee registered 683 boys and 174 girls as eligible for employment. By the end of May 1944, the register of the committee only reflected 414 boys and 124 girls (NAI, Comcol I, File No. 2784). Overall, the total number of juveniles placed for employment under this scheme was 105 boys and 15 girls. This trend continued till 1946 when Bishop Vining and Bishop Taylor presented a report to the Governor of Lagos on July 18, 1946 (NAI Comcol I, File No 2784). The report prompted the colonial administration to consider the establishment of a new committee to handle the responsibilities.

The new committee was named The Advisory Committee on Juvenile Employment and After Care. Its function was to advise on juvenile employment and after care. The existing practice had been that a child entering an infant class at the age of 5 years (which was the lowest age limit) was expected to complete the 8 years of the primary course at age 13. Many did not enter so early until the highest legal age limit for primary school enrolment which was 16 years. As a result, in December each year, a number of children between the ages of 13 and 16 joined the labour market. The colonial administration feared the influx of child labour into Lagos from other provinces and thus issued the Registration (Lagos Township Young Persons) Order No. 51 of 1946 and a Government Circular 20 / 1946 – paragraph 3. These regulations specified that only those children who have attended a bonafide primary school in Lagos and colony (a period of three years was taken as the qualifying period) were without further formalities eligible for what was considered ‘Blue card’ i.e. to be registered at the Lagos employment exchange as juveniles seeking employment.

The juvenile employment exchange was organised as a separate branch of the adult employment exchange. School registers were a major source of documentation for the juvenile exchange and was used as evidence of domicile. For juveniles in secondary schools, the conditions for registration at the employment exchange were far less strict than for primary school leavers. Juveniles in the secondary school category who provided evidence of successful completion of class IV in a secondary school where a government certificate was given in any part of Nigeria and who must be under 24 years were included in the school leavers’ register. As soon as there

were vacancies, they were offered work suitable to their attainments. Those from northern and eastern provinces who desired work in the government service were registered locally within their provinces.

Prosecution and Rehabilitation of Beggars

One of the challenges the colonial administration faced during this period was the need not only to control the influx of crippled beggars into Lagos but also to contain those that were already living in the city (NAI, Comcol 1, File No. 797 / 1 Vol. I). In February 1944, the Lagos Women Welfare Council wrote to the Secretary of the Lagos Town Council about these issues – the fact that the number of these beggars was growing alarmingly, and constituting danger to vehicular traffic (Jones, 1944, NAI, Comcol 1/ 797/1/Vol I.). The reply of the Lagos Town Council was to the effect that the Council itself was at a loss concerning what to do with the beggars. The Council stated in its reply that investigations revealed that some of the beggars lived in the Agege area of the mainland and that they travelled all the way from that area of Lagos to the island to conduct their trade (Martin, 1944, NAI / Comcol I/ 797/ I / Vol I.). Within the same month, the Lagos Town Council proposed to the Commissioner for the Colonies that the proposed repatriation of beggars from the Lagos area would not stop the trend. It therefore, proposed that a welfare agency that would cater for the needs of the beggars should be established.

Such measures, it was considered, would rehabilitate those who were genuinely incapacitated physically (Wright 1944, NAI Comcol I/ 797 / 1/ Vol. I). The Council noted that some of the beggars were professionals who would resist moves to rehabilitate them but that such strategy should nevertheless proceed in spite of this setback. The Council therefore decided to engage the police to arrest those who pretended to be beggars. The police were urged to house and feed them, and then examine them as to their physical fitness to earn a livelihood. Prescribed courses for treatment were made for those in need of it, while permanent provision was to be made for those who were found to be incapacitated permanently (Wright 1944, NAI Comcol I/ 797 / 1/ Vol. I). According to the investigations of the Town Council, beggars have died living properties behind for their offspring. What was of great concern to the Secretary of the Lagos Town Council was the fund that would be involved in the upkeep of the beggars in a camp. He noted that majority of the beggars were northerners who came to Lagos to beg. For this reason, he considered that the tax payers in Lagos should not be held responsible for the upkeep of those who were not resident in Lagos (Martin 1944, NAI /Comcol/ I 797/I / Vol I).

A further option of the prosecution of beggars was considered and was administered to discourage intending beggars from continuing the trade. The police noted that the option of prosecution would help to an extent but suggested that a home for beggars be established. The police noted that their investigations reveal that such homes were operational in Mali, and that the fear of being incarcerated in such homes kept the beggars in Mali in check (Hook 1944). The police also noted that though they had a vote for the repatriation of beggars and other destitute, but that the establishment of a beggars' home would be less expensive in the long run. In July 1944, the Lagos Town Council suggested to the Commissioner for the colonies that a clear demarcation be made between destitute beggars and professional beggars. With reference to the criminal code in use at the time, the Lagos Town Council was willing to prosecute only

professional beggars. Actually, many of the professional beggars made enough money to afford daily transport in and out of the Lagos by lorry (Secretary, Lagos Town Council, 1944).

Eventually, the Lagos Town Council and the Colony's Welfare Officer administered a census of beggars in Lagos in 1943 (Colony Welfare Officer 1944, NAI Comcol I / 797 / Vol. II.) The census revealed that there were 153 beggars in Lagos. The result of the survey was also assessed with the conclusion that the beggars could be broadly divided into two classes: those who begged because it was the easiest way of making a livelihood and those who begged because it was the easiest way of subsistence. The Colony's Commissioner suggested that in a bid to solve the problem, three approaches should be followed – establishment of a vocational training school, establishment of a welfare home and repatriation (ComCol 1944, NAI Comcol / 797 / I / Vol. II.). The first approach was considered for crippled children who could be trained in rope making, basket work, mat making, cigar making, fish net making, etc. The second option was considered for beggars who were old, who had been residents of Lagos for many years, and who had no means of supporting themselves and so took to begging in order to do so. Also considered along this line were those who grew blind in old age. The third option was considered for beggars whose physical defects were not so serious as to prevent them from earning a living. Those in this category included those considered as professional beggars mainly from the northern parts of Nigeria.

By October 1944 steps were taken towards the three options by the Department of Medical Services, the office of the Commissioner of Police and the Lagos Town Council. A rehabilitation centre was constructed for the treatment and training of crippled children. Accommodation was also considered for the purpose of the care of the children (NAI, Comcol I / 7907 / I / Vol II.). Additionally, the office of the superintendent of police for the Lagos colony began the process of persecuting adult beggars and the application for repatriation orders against those who were not natives of Lagos. In the case of the persistent begging of those who were residents of Lagos, these cases were referred to the Lagos Town Council. (Acting Commissioner of Police 1944, NAI, Comcol I / 797 / I / Vol II) The Lagos Town Council was unanimous in its direction concerning beggars. It particularly instructed the police commissioner to undertake and maintain the campaign of persecution of beggars who were not indigenes of Lagos and that after persecution such beggars should be repatriated. The Council further instructed the Commissioner of Police that repatriated beggars should be photographed and their records kept for another round of prosecution in the event of default (NAI, Comcol I / 797 / I / Vol. I.).

Concerning beggars of Lagos origin, the Council followed up on the further expansion of the rehabilitation centre to serve as an avenue to equip them with skills that would enable them fend for themselves despite their physical disability. The Town Council requested the police department to give the matter considerable attention over a long time frame to discourage those in the provinces from travelling to Lagos to beg (NAI, Comcol I / 797 / I / Vol. I.). The Council also sought government support towards the upkeep of the inmates of the rehabilitation centre situated at Igbobi in mainland Lagos.

Enactment and Administration of Ordinance for Ex-Service Men

Ex-service men emerged as members of the sub-group of the new class of the poor in Lagos and faced very grave conditions after returning from the Second World War. The colonial

administration responded mainly through the implementation of the Ex-service Men Ordinance of 1945 (NAI, Comcol I, File No. 2807 / S I). By the Ordinance, government established vocational training centres and industrial rehabilitation centres for disabled ex-service men who needed training to undertake employment or work on their own. Facilities and other requirements required for the training of these men was also provided in such centres and the expenses incurred by the Governor-in-council in the process of establishing and maintenance of such centres were defrayed out of the general revenue of Nigeria. Through the Ordinance, an Advisory Council was established and charged with the duty to advise and assist the Commissioner of Labour in matters relating to the employment or training of ex-service men.

An ex-service man was not registered if he unreasonably refused or failed to attend a vocational or industrial rehabilitation centres, if he was not 'ordinarily' resident in Nigeria, or if there was probability that the disablement was likely to continue for six months or more from the date of the entry of the name in the register, or if he was habitually of bad character (NAI, Comcol I, File No. 2807 / S I). Ex-service men were also required to apply to the Commissioner of Labour for inclusion of their names in the register. The application was screened by the Commissioner and approved. If there were special cases, the Commissioner referred the matter to the Advisory Council which then decided on the applications (Ex-Service Men Ordinance 1945, NAI, Comcol I, File No. 2807 / S I).

Able bodied ex-service men were also required to register through written applications approved by the Commissioner of Labour, with the same conditions for registration or deregistration as that of disabled ex-service men. Employers of ex-service men included government departments, all public authorities and all native authorities. These institutions were required to have in their employment not less than ten ex-service men "*or such number as may be specified from time to time either generally or in respect of any particular occupation, trade industry or undertaking, by an order made by the Commissioner of Labour*" (NAI, Comcol I, File No. 2807 / S I).

Regulation of the Service Conditions of Domestic Servants

Moreover, among the new poor in colonial Lagos were domestic servants. They were among the few sub groups which agitated, through the Domestic Servants Union, for better welfare from their employers. Government's reaction to the agitations was to the effect that it considered the services provided by the Union's members as unorganised and difficult to classify (NAI Comcol I, File No. 248/S 156). Eventually, a wage regime for domestic servants was put in place. The regime considered appropriate measures on hours of work, arrangements when employer is on leave, vacation, sick leave and medical attention and shelter. In spite of these recommendations, the Commissioner of the Colony in Lagos considered that the standard of efficiency of domestic servants was low in comparison with servants in Europe and that their qualification and performance should be monitored and reviewed to allow for commensurable income earned. Additionally, the Commissioner of the Colony was of the opinion that the recommendation of the Board was not comprehensive enough to discourage the exploitation of the services of domestic servants by unscrupulous employers. The Commissioner felt seriously that the opportunities available for unscrupulous employers to exploit domestic servants can only be reduced greatly if government employs the services of inspectors to monitor the conditions of services of domestic servants. He also decided that the monitoring should include conditions of

service for domestic servants of both European and non European employers. The recommendations of the Committee were implemented and monitored occasionally.

Inspection and Monitoring of Service Conditions of Daily Paid Labour

In 1935, questions regarding the working conditions of labourers in British territories in Africa arose during debates in the British Parliament (NAI, Comcol I, File No. 1097). The Lagos Colony generated particular interest and was considered necessary to monitor the conditions under which labour was employed in factories and other related establishments in Lagos. In addition, government began to consider the need for regular inspection of places of employment. The Home government was worried that Labour Departments in some British territories had been abolished; and for that reason, the possible worsening of working conditions. The decision to implement this policy of labour inspection was indeed a follow up to the request made by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Government of Nigeria in August 1930 to review the working conditions of labour as it concerns hours of work, rates of pay, conditions of contract, housing conditions, health medicals and the considerations of provisions which might contribute to the social welfare of labour in the Lagos colony and the provinces. The interest of the British Government was not necessarily to directly improve the conditions of work of the labourers but to protect Britain's interest in issues concerning international Labour Law (NAI, Comcol I, File No. 1097).

Conclusion

In spite of these afore-mentioned social welfare strategies in colonial Lagos, it suffices to state that facts from archival sources suggest that there was an intensification of poverty towards the end of colonial rule. Indeed, a consideration of the numerous requests for assistance made by poor people in Lagos to the Commissioner for the Lagos Colony between 1930 and 1960 reveal a progressively growing incidence of poverty among ex-service men, juveniles, women, beggars, paupers and so on. Ordinarily, our conclusion should be to reveal with specific data the incidence of poverty alleviation and social welfare strategies using the poor in the period covered as a case study. However, this kind of historical empiricism is not feasible because of the non-demographic representation of the poor in colonial Lagos, the non-availability of a statistical yardstick to assess the living standards of the poor, the non-determination of a poverty line and the non-availability of a poverty profile that can lead to conclusions that are empirically well grounded. Interestingly, (Okoh, 1997: 225-229) has shown that policies or conclusions on poverty alleviation are difficult to determine because they are dependent on poverty measurement mechanisms, many of which are controversial due to the drawbacks associated with various models. Thus, the conclusion that can be reached is that the colonial regime made serious attempts to address the high incidence of urban poverty in colonial Lagos but that these policies did not achieve the desired results.

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