



Colonial Infrastructure and Nigeria's Unity: The Case of Obudu District

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines British colonial infrastructure in Nigeria in the context of the nation's unity. It notes that to achieve the primary goals of colonialism, the colonising power needed to establish an enabling environment or infrastructure. These infrastructures included an effective administration, a modern transport system, a portable currency, and modern banking. The colonising power foisted on the people coercive administrative instruments as local authorities were conferred with legislative, judicial, and executive control over communities and also made laws regulating the conduct of affairs in their areas of jurisdiction. The paper highlights how colonial infrastructures have fundamentally enhanced Nigeria's unity. The paper notes that, although the establishment of colonial infrastructure was for economic exploitation, it has aided the unity of Nigeria. It is this observation that justifies the adoption of the political economy approach, which posits that the politics of functional infrastructure is a public concern for private benefit. It is submitted here that functional infrastructure can be effectively utilised to promote harmony, peaceful coexistence, and nation-building. To this end, the research recommends that the Nigerian government should reengineer its policy of infrastructure development if the unity of the country is to be achieved. The paper depends on oral interviews and secondary sources.

Keywords: Infrastructure; Colonialism; Nigeria's Unity; Effective administration.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the nexus between colonial infrastructure and Nigeria's unity. Using the Obudu District experience as a test case to shed light on what was a national trend, it argues that colonial infrastructures strengthened the bonds of unity among the various groups that inhabited the Nigerian landscape during the colonial period. Available evidence suggests that one important episode that irreversibly impacted the unity between the Bette-Bendi and their neighbours during our period of study was the advent of colonial rule, which lasted from about 1900 to 1960. The Bette-Bendi people were brought under colonial rule as a result of activities designed to incorporate various disparate peoples into the Oil Rivers, which eventually came under effective British control in 1891 with the declaration of a protectorate over the area (Imbua, 2015). Claude M. Donald was appointed commissioner and Consul General of the Oil Rivers Protectorate, which later in 1893 and 1899 became the Niger Coast Protectorate and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, respectively (Afaha, 2020).

Thus, from the first decade of the 20th century, the sovereignty of different polities in the Upper Cross River region, including that of the Bette-Bendi people, was seriously eroded by colonial forces and influences. This brought about a new dimension in the historical experience of the people. The mushrooming new order heralded many far-reaching changes that affected different facets of the lives of the people concerned. To a large extent, the colonial period consolidated the sense of oneness among the groups that inhabit the Bette-Bendi area. They treated the people as belonging to the same ethnic group as was evident in the political organization of the time as well as the indiscriminate provision of infrastructure. This enhanced interaction in an unprecedented scale and created a bond of unity between the Bette-Bendi and their neighbours.

The urban revolution, which the colonial rule midwived, enhanced interaction, either creating or consolidating unity among the Bette-Bendi people on the one hand and with their neighbours on the other. Suffice it to say that, although communication between the Bette-Bendi and their neighbours was on a limited scale in the

precolonial era, the colonial authorities wasted no time in expanding and promoting the arteries of communication through the provision of infrastructure. Under colonial rule, Obudu town, which started as both administrative headquarters and residence for the district officers and their staff of clerks, interpreters, policemen, messengers, and prison warders, among others, began to develop and acquire the status of an urban centre (Aniah, 1992). And because many of its dwellers were mostly strangers, they depended on the surrounding rural population for their provisions. Colonial authorities in Obudu town also made use of rural labour to build quarters and maintain their surroundings. Over time, some of the local people began to cluster around the vicinity of the government station to exploit the economic opportunity that was offered; hence, Obudu town became the meeting point for the Bette-Bendi and their neighbours from far and near (Morgan, 1959).

For the benefit of those who are not familiar with the Bette-Bendi ethnicity, the study will proceed with a brief description of the area of study. Bette and Bendi are both the languages and the names of the two related ethnic groups in the Upper Cross River region of Nigeria. They represent two closely related languages: the Bette people of present-day Obudu Local Government Area and the Bendi people in Obanliku Local Government Area, both in northern Cross River State, Nigeria. The nomenclature of Bette and Bendi also identifies and designates their geographical locations. Historically, Bette and Bendi are descendants of Ute and Undi respectively, who were children of a legendary Pater known as Agba.

Both Bette and Bendi were integral parts of the erstwhile Obudu Local Government Area until August 1991, when the Local Government Area was split into the present day Obudu and Obanliku Local Government Areas. As a result of the split, the Bette remained in Obudu, and the Bendi were moved to Obanliku Local Government Area. As Joseph Ushie et al., (2011) posited, in spite of the split, both Bette and Bendi still maintain their filial, cultural, historical, and linguistic ties. It is against this backdrop that this study examines how colonial infrastructures enhanced the unification of the disparate people in the erstwhile Obudu District in the former Ogoja Province.

2. COLONIAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE UPPER CROSS RIVER REGION, 1909-1960

For administrative convenience, the colonial authorities placed the Bette-Bendi under the same administration. A government station was established at Obudu in 1909 under a Native Administration, and this became the headquarters of a division that comprised several hitherto autonomous polities. Six major heterogeneous clans were established as follows: Bette/Bendi, Ukpe/Alege, Obanliku, Utanga/Becheve, Otugwang in Obudu, and the Irruan clan in the present-day Boki Local Government Area. They were lumped together under the Obudu District Native Administration (ODNA) (Imbua 2002). The first colonial administration in Obudu was established under the control of Captain R.M.D. Fox as Acting District Consul in 1909. Fox was replaced by Osmond Weld in the same year on the order of Lt. Col. Moorhouse (the Colonial Secretary in Charge of the Southern Province), who signed the document for his replacement on behalf of the Colonial Secretary on September 2, 1909. Captain Neil Mair came as District Consul in 1910 and was followed in the same year by Lieut Rowe (Ogar, 2006). Osmond Weld, as District Consul, was popular and respected by the indigenes of Obudu. He was nicknamed "Ikonsul" by the locals, a word that was a corruption of "Consul" although the nickname coincided with the traditional Bette name "Ikonsul" which literally means "the storm is over". Unfortunately, Weld was killed in 1910 by a buffalo at Nyanya while on his way to a neighbouring community in present-day Bekwarra Local Government Area. He was buried in Obudu town, within the premises of the current Local Government Secretariat.

The various colonial agents in Obudu foisted on the people coercive administrative instruments intended to make colonial rule less stressful, less problematic, and less costly. To achieve their aim, Frank Hives, who took over from Weld, established the first native court in Obudu in 1912. It was located at the current site of Saint Joseph's Centre for the Visually Handicapped, along Tsar Road. The court served Obudu and parts of Tiv areas such as Mbaduku and Shangev, which were close to Obudu (Ogar, 2006). The authorities subsequently decentralised the court; hence, another court was established in Ibong in 1915 with

jurisdiction over the Bette, Bendi, Alege, Ukpe, Otugwang, Bobang, Alankwo, and Irruan clans in the present-day Boki Local Government Area. The court system was further decentralised, and this led to the establishment of a court in Irruan in 1921, and in 1923, a sub-court was established in Akorshi for Bendi and Alankwo (Ogar, 2006). The Native Court and Native Administration were charged with the responsibility of maintaining peace, order, and unity in the villages that made up Obudu District (Imbua, 2002). They made laws regulating the conduct of affairs in the area through warrant chiefs (Bikem-Ukoto); notable among them in Obudu Urban were Adugba Ugidi of Abonkib, Ugbong Ikikya of Atiekpe, Akpo Ilia of Bebuawhan, Udie Aniemen of Bebuabong, Ushie Afufu of Bebuagam, and Udama Ubua of Bebuabong (Ogar, 2006). Mike Adie (2015) opined that the warrant chiefs were appointed into the Native Administration to serve as integrative symbols. He also maintained that the system significantly succeeded in pacifying the study area and led to substantial peace and subsequent political control by the British.

The chief instruments of coercion were the colonial army (West African Frontier Force), the police, the judiciary (native courts), and the prison services (Umotong, 2020a). The colonial police in Obudu were notorious for dealing with the local people, and they often forcefully threw those who were recalcitrant into the prison, which they built close to the Obudu Police Station for that purpose. And because of the overwhelming might, the Bette-Bendi people had to live with and make the best use of foreign rule.

Colonial rule also introduced different social transformations that marked a turning point in the social history of the people and fostered a bond of unity among them. For instance, the colonial regime improved the means of transportation and communication in the Bette-Bendi area in the third decade of the 20th century. Prior to the colonial incursion, the transportation system was poor up until the early years of the 20th century. Bush tracts were the main routes for communication, and these did not make for any considerable expansion of trade or impactful social interaction (Umotong, 2020b). But with the establishment of colonial rule, several attempts were made to improve the modes of transportation and communication in the protectorate of southern Nigeria. Steps were taken to

improve waterways, build harbours, and construct railways and motor roads. In the Bette-Bendi area, several roads were either constructed or improved upon as culverts and bridges were constructed to ease communication (Ishamali, 2023). The first paved road in Bendi was the Obudu-Bisu-Bendi court road, totaling twelve miles (approximately 18 kilometers), constructed in 1930 to link up with the court in Obudu. According to the report, other roads constructed during the same period included: the main road connecting Obudu station with Ogoja; the Obanliku Court House-Bansara Road, which is 59 miles (approximately 95 kilometers); the Bendi-Ikom road; the road from the government station in Obudu to Katsina-Ala; and the bridge constructed over the Ayia River.

The construction of these roads and bridges by the British administration was to facilitate the evacuation of the resources of the area, as the roads were incidental by-products of British exploitation. In spite of it, the roads were useful as they bridged the existing gaps between the different Bette-Bendi communities and provided links on a wide scale in the region. David Imbua (2002) posits that the colonial road network served to promote interaction between the Bendi and their neighbours and that it was a positive signal to a glorious future. Some of the already existing footpaths were opened up to link areas of economic interest, which were either farms or market centres. According to Simon Ogar (2006), "prior to the advent of the bicycle in about the year 1918/1919, movement of persons and goods within and without Obudu territory was by foot with goods carried on the head" (p. 112). The situation, however, changed in 1947 as the roads were improved and the first ever motor car was driven through the road that passed through Atiekpe village (Bette area) via Mbaduku to Mbakwe to Banyongo to Nyanya by the Ayia River bridge near Otugwang and from there to Bansara in Ogoja Local Government Area (Ogar, 2006).

The point to note in Ogar's account of the winding nature of the road network is that the entire stretch links market centres. For instance, Atiekpe village is located in Obudu Urban, which is the location of Katube Market, and Mbaduku is the location of Tsar Market in the present-day Vandeikya Local Government Area of Benue State. The Ayia Bridge was also constructed to link Katube Market to Otugwang Market and onward to

Bekwarra, Ogoja, and Yala Markets. These earth-surfaced roads were upgraded to the status of asphalted roads in the post-independence period. For instance, a contract for the construction of a road to Obudu Cattle Ranch was awarded to an Italian firm of civil engineers known as Michelletti and Dolcino in 1950. Actual construction work on the road, which had been surveyed in 1950, started in 1951. In 1953, the road was constructed to the bottom of the hill. The road ultimately reached the top of the main plateau in 1955 (Anyia, 1973). And to upgrade and asphalt the existing roads, the road linking Obudu, Bendi, Boki, and Ikom, and the road linking Obudu, Sankwala, Utanga, Amana, and Obudu Cattle Ranch were given on contract to a French road construction firm, SGEN Ltd, in 1975, and the work was completed in 1983 (Abeke Beshel, Oral Interview: 11-06-2014). Also, the road linking Obudu, Otugwang, Bekwarra, and Ogoja was contracted to Strabag Construction Company Ltd. in the late 1980s. Thus, Obudu was linked up by roads to other parts of the Upper Cross River region and beyond by the mid-20th century. In the same vein, the road linking Obudu, Tsar, and Vandeikya to other parts of Benue State and beyond was given out on contract to Tilly Gyado Construction Company Ltd. within the same period (Ishamali, 2017).

However, the Upper Cross River region did not have the benefit of rail transport as there was no railway line in the area. The only alternative to road transport that was available to the people was the river at Bansara, which could only carry light vessels because of its shallowness. Traders from the Bette area and other parts of the Upper Cross River region conveyed their wares to the river bank for onward movement to Ikom and Calabar. Traders from the Upper Cross River region traded with the Tiv and other traders from the northern part of the country who brought their wares to Katsina-Ala via the River Benue, which was navigable all year round (Akpanke, Beshihembeze, Oral Interview: 18-08-2022). Improved transportation and communication facilities promoted intermingling and thus enhanced unity in the area. Since the 1920s, when the first motor road was constructed in Ogoja Province to link Enugu and Abakaliki by the Provincial Native Administrations, communication and unity have continued to expand. A one-time Secretary to the Cross River State Government, Emmanuel Monjok (1988), noted that "an adequate, reliable, well-

integrated, and efficient system of transportation in any country not only facilitates productive economic activities, it also unifies and integrates various regions or states within a country and various local government areas and communities within the state" (p. 2).

Also, the colonial government, in conjunction with the missionaries, established some rudiments of health and educational services. Ab initio, health services were meant to cater for the needs of the Europeans. During this period, both the Ogoja and Obudu areas had only one medical officer, but there were dispensaries in different parts of the province to serve the needs of the indigenes of such areas. The first dispensary in Obudu was built in 1920 to immunise people from different parts of the province against yaws, measles, and tuberculosis (Agim, 1980). And in 1940 and 1950, dispensaries were built in Sankwala and Bendi, respectively, to attend to minor medical cases, while difficult medical cases were referred to Ogoja (Akande, Benjamin; Oral Interview, 20-08-2022). Although the establishment of health facilities was based on the realisation by the Europeans that some minimum maintenance of workers' health was an economic investment, the health centres and the concomitant search for cures for various sicknesses took people beyond the borders of their communities, and this promoted friendship and good neighbourliness.

In a similar development, schools were established, and these schools became cohesive and integrative centres. The unifying character of the school was evident in the different ethnic composition of the pupils enrolled. The land on which these institutions were built was provided by the people, and they also provided labour for the building projects. Prior to 1930, the provision of this service rested almost entirely with the missions. Writing about the first attempt at providing education for the people of Obudu, Ogar (2006) maintains that:

It was not until 1922 that two Reverend Missionaries of the Roman Catholic order- Rev. Fr Eugene Gratz (a German) and Fr. Millet (a French Holy Ghost Father) ventured into the hinterland of Obudu for the purpose of bringing European education to the people as well as

spreading the word of God. Bishop Joseph Shanahan was among them... They started work on a primary school building, which at completion became St. Charles School, Obudu (p. 59).

After this, the number of schools continued to grow, especially when the government began to intervene in education. Students' enrollment in these schools was drawn from different parts of the Upper Cross River region. This way, students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds were integrated as the students and workers in these schools who came from different locations lived among the indigenous people of the area. The first set of students to be enrolled were one hundred and sixty-six, among whom were John Upan Odey, Justin Damachi, Fidelis Akpagu, and Joseph Agba, among others, who later worked with the Europeans as school teachers. They became administrators after Nigeria's independence. The first headmaster of St. Charles Primary School was an Igbo from Nnewi in Anambra State known as Mr. Edward Oranusi (Ogar, 2006).

The above infrastructures were combined to facilitate the realisation of the degree of unity that existed in the region during the period under review. According to J.A. Andorbe, the school had a unifying influence as it enhanced the fusion of people from different villages and ethnic groups (Adie, 2015). There was increased enrollment in the school, and this brought about the establishment of new ones. For instance, St. Peter's Primary School in Bendi was established to serve the villages of Bendi, the then Obanliku Clan, Beebo, Kutiang, and Kubong Bette, among others (Imbua, et al., 2021). The first teacher at the school in Bendi was Mr. Andrew Agim from Okambi (Obudu), who was later replaced with Mr. Agaba Joseph Agba from Ukwel-Obudu (Obudu). They formed themselves into peer groups, and they became united by friendship ties, which went a long way towards consolidating the bond of unity among future political groups in the region.

Also, Native Authority and Community Schools were established in the 1950s. At independence, the number of schools rose to eighty-four primary schools and one Teachers' Training College in Obudu. The Teacher Training College was converted to a secondary school in 1963, with an initial intake of fifty students. The impact of western education on the unity and development of the area

can be better appreciated when one realises that the products of missionary education have impacted both the area of study and Nigeria at large. Some of the most famous include: Dr. Joseph Wayas, the first senate president of Nigeria from 1979 to 1983; Professor Ukandi Godwin Damachi, one-time Dean of the Faculty of Business Administration, University of Lagos, with several publications to his credit, including *Social Change and Economic Development in Nigeria*. He was a member, chairman, or consultant to several government organisations dealing with labour issues, such as the Nigerian Employers Consultative Association, the Michael Imoudu National Institute of Labour Studies, and many federal government and labour panels, among others. There was also John Upan Odey, an administrator in the then-eastern regional government, among others. The salient point to note here is that both Christianity and western education were forces of unity as people from different ethnic backgrounds were integrated into a worshipping community whose members shared whatever they had in common, irrespective of ethnicity. Religion promoted the bond of unity and brotherliness among the people on a scale that would have been otherwise difficult among disparate people. David Imbua (2002) posits that, in many respects, the church complemented the other institutions, such as the school and dispensary, in the unification of the various groups in our region of study. And there is no question whatsoever that the social activities that were being promoted by the agents of the colonial administration tended to unify the people.

Another colonial infrastructure that enhanced the unity of the area of study was the introduction of a uniform currency. The colonial authorities introduced a new currency to replace the different currencies that were in circulation in different parts of the country. In the eastern province of which the Bette-Bendi area is a part, there was no generally accepted currency as exchange was initially carried out through barter. However, during the later part of the 19th century, some currencies were introduced. These included manilas, brass rods, copper rods, copper wires, cowries, strips of cloth, salt, etc., and each of these currencies had its own area of dominance and acceptability (Njoku, 2001).

Colonial currency promoted economic

expansion into the hinterland by forging new alliances with the inhabitants for the purpose of procuring produce. This led to the emergence of trade zones. For instance, the Bette people that resided within the vicinity of the Obudu urban area went as far inland as Kutiang, Ukorshie, Ibong, Bebuabie, Alege/Bobang, Ukpe, and Utugwang to procure palm produce and groundnuts. They did not allow the foreign traders access to such areas, as Obudu Urban was the only gateway to such hinterland locations. Also, the Bendi people saw Beebo and Basang areas as their trade zones, which prevented traders from other zones from having access. They procured palm oil and other produce from the hinterland communities and sold it to European traders in Obudu urban for onward movement to the warehouses in Bansara and Katsina Ala. Contact between the different villages increased with the growth in trade, and this enhanced coexistence and unity among members of the different communities.

Another development that created a bond of unity among the Bette-Bendi people was the introduction of taxation in Obudu in 1928 by P.M. Riley after an assessment of taxable adults in 1927 (Adie, 2015). The people became united either in protest against the unjust taxation or came together to work and raise currency to pay the taxes. These taxes were paid in the new British currency. Therefore, every household either turned to wage employment or produced cash crops to sell and earn the British coin to enable them to pay their taxes. Therefore, economic development in the Bette-Bendi area became integrative, as was the case with the desire and unity of the people to produce cash crops, which were a huge economic incentive. The itinerant middlemen in the Bette-Bendi area were united as they travelled in groups and on foot for security reasons to Bansara or Katsina-Ala with their wares on their heads.

Apart from bringing far-reaching economic changes to the Bette-Bendi area, colonial infrastructure also brought social innovations. In effect, infrastructures facilitated different levels of contact, which led to socio-political borrowing and cross-cultural contacts. Increased intergroup contacts brought about inter-ethnic marriages and a modification of the original physical population. This meant that children were born by parents who were not from the same ethnic group. For instance,

Adie Andor of Bebuagam village in Obudu got married to a female trader known as Ugenyi Ikeh from Begiagba village in Bendi, and the marriage was blessed with many children. Also, Ashue from Kakum village got married to Ngozi from Imo State. In this case, the children from such marriages belong to two ethnic groups, and this enhanced unity as relationships were created across borders.

The impact of colonial infrastructure is also noticeable on the language of the Bette-Bendi people. The different languages spoken by the people that inhabit the Bette-Bendi area are mutually intelligible as speakers of Bette language understand Bendi, Bekwarra, Boki, Bisu, Otugwang, Bobang, Ukpe just to mention a few. Over the years, contact with other cultures brought about some changes in the languages as words borrowing became noticeable. Bette-Bendi language that is spoken today is slightly different from how it was spoken before colonial incursion with their colonial infrastructure which brought about increased contact with other language groups. Some words have been lifted from other contact groups and have become part of the Bette-Bendi lexicon. Some of these words were used to fill lexical gaps in Bette-Bendi language for new trade goods that were previously unknown to them. For instance, the Hausa language became a vital cosmopolitan language for trade and social interaction and this is evident in the Bette-Bendi lexicon to this day as could be seen in the names of items such as *Aliga* for shirt, *Uwando* for trousers, *Ukwudi* for money, *Ugbuwu* for jute-bag to mention a few.

3. CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion points to the fact that although the motivation for colonial infrastructure was economic, it nevertheless promoted interaction, cooperation, intermingling, unity and development in the area. For instance, during the colonial period, the activities of the Christian missionaries created a sense of brotherhood among the Bette-Bendi people which strengthened the bonds of unity among them and the different ethnic groups. Also, the building of infrastructures such as health centres, schools, roads and improvement in means of communication equally bonded the people. The schools that were established brought children from

the neighbourhood and beyond together, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Obudu town, which emerged and assumed the status of a metropolis, served the interests of the Bette-Bendi people during the colonial period and attracted people from different communities in the district. Obudu town became a centre of unity because of the provision of functional, effective, and efficient infrastructure by the colonial authorities. To this end, the research recommends that the Nigerian government should reengineer its policy of infrastructure development if the unity of the country is to be achieved.

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