

# 'A bottle of gin is dangled before the nose of the natives': Gin Currency in Colonial Southern Nigeria

Simon Heap

## Background

The trade in imported liquor rose to prominence during the first half of British colonial rule in Southern Nigeria. Not all was drunk, however. Single bottles or whole cases of liquor went from hand to hand through barter transactions. Imported liquor's economic functions complemented its social role, with the supreme examples being its use as a colonial revenue-earner and as a transitional currency.<sup>1</sup> This paper takes up a challenge by Jane Guyer to fellow historians 'to trace out the implications of sudden aggressive surges in particular imports', by examining the economics of the growth of the trade in imported liquor in Southern Nigeria in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>2</sup>

Nigerians had for long time fermented low-alcohol drinks. Liquor consumption mixed concerns on personal, communal and ritual levels throughout the life cycle of many Nigerians: from naming ceremonies, entertaining guests at weddings, chieftaincy instalments and funeral obsequies, to pouring libations to the ancestors. Although with a huge variety of indigenous liquors to consume, Nigerians did not know how to brew lager beer or distil spirits. Their expertise was restricted to tapping palm wine or fermenting grain beers. The Atlantic slave trade, which encouraged the purchase of slaves with rum and whisky, fostered the fashion for imported liquor. Imported drinks did not completely displace local beverages, however: they coexisted, complemented and competed with each other. While there were other items of barter, fiery alcohol seemed to have a premium among the local populace above other goods like beads, cloth, guns and gunpowder. When the slave trade ended, the liquor trade continued, reaching large volumes in the second half of the 19th century. The demand for imported liquor in Nigeria grew to a large extent in tandem with the growth and expansion of British control over the territory from the 1860s onwards. Liquor was the most significant import in terms of volume and value in the British colonies of Lagos, Oil Rivers Protectorate, Niger Coast Protectorate and Southern Nigeria, all of which were eventually integrated into the Southern Provinces of Nigeria in 1914.<sup>3</sup> Imported liquor was banned from sale to the general public in the Northern Provinces because of the large Muslim population there.<sup>4</sup>

A trade is the buying and selling of a commodity, sometimes with money, sometimes by barter. Commodities are theoretically defined by reference to their exchange value, that is, the value they realize in the market, but here money is far from being an inanimate, depersonalized instrument: it contains and transmits the moral qualities of those who transact it. This is particularly so when the commodity to be valued and exchanged is alcohol. But the meaning or value attached to it, like other things that define them as commodities, is not consistent or stable but fluctuates over time and within contexts.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, the Nigerian liquor trade provoked fierce debate: was it advancing development or fashioning an economy based on the economically unproductive consumption of alcohol? The liquor trade was caught between two prevailing colonial perspectives on economic development in Africa: the Darwinian-based notion that Western civilization had a duty to protect Africans from all bad external influences like strong liquor, and the civilize-through-trade concept which sought to modernize Africans by exploiting colonies to their fullest economic potential.

Positive views of the liquor trade claimed its necessity in developing the Nigerian economy. Some admitted that the trade formed a necessary evil, but did not fail to emphasize its role as a transitional currency, promoter of cash-crops-for-export, and a desirable commodity among those with money to spend.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, critics of the liquor trade used the temperance equation to further their cause: drinking alcohol was bad, abstinence was good. The critics included a wide cross-section of Nigerians concerned for their fellow citizens in the face of the liquor deluge, as well as such foreign bodies as the Native Races and Liquor Traffic United Committee (NRLTUC), the Aborigines' Protection Society and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) led by the vociferous Bishop Herbert Tugwell. They believed the imposition of 'a Rum and Gin Civilization' would be 'a hydra that devours the natives', halting useful commerce and hindering economic development.<sup>7</sup> Nigeria would have a purely zero-sum economy, with merchants' profits gained at the expense of the indigenous population. Critics argued for Prohibition and a restructuring of the economy along alcohol-free lines.

Ironically the one group in Nigeria sure of the economic value of the liquor trade was the British colonial administration. The taxing of the imported liquor trade proved a major source of revenue.<sup>8</sup> Liquor custom duties averaged three-quarters of annual revenues in the Niger Coast Protectorate, two-thirds in Lagos and half in Southern Nigeria. The liquor trade seemed ideally suited to being taxed by the government: given the constraints of smuggling bulky, breakable bottles across land or through ocean surf meant products of the trade landed at a small number of southern coastal ports in standard cases of bottles and demijohns which could be counted quickly. The tapping of Nigerians' desire for imported alcohol proved an ideal, cost-efficient method of revenue generation:

It is a very easy and cheap way of raising revenue. A vessel comes into Lagos and deposits 10,000 cases on a wharf... All that the Government has to do is to send down a clerk and have the cases counted, and on each case to charge 5 shillings, which practically means realising £2,500.<sup>9</sup>

Critics naturally condemned this: 'Is it creditable to any Government, and particularly a Christian Government, that

any portion of its revenue, not to speak of the largest, is raised from such a fearfully destructive source?'.<sup>10</sup> But Mary Kingsley, the famous Victorian lady explorer of West-Central Africa, found no objection 'to living on the proceeds of a grog shop'.<sup>11</sup> While the Colonial Office felt uneasy about liquor revenues, to rid itself of it and the opprobrium that went with it from critics would have resulted in 'a complete dislocation of its finances'.<sup>12</sup>

### The liquor-for-produce system

The label of *Fraternity Superior Gin* portrayed a black trader standing on a barrel of palm oil on the left with his glass raised in celebration, and a white maiden standing on a gin case on the right returning the toast. The exchange of Nigerian agricultural produce for European liquor represented one of the central tenets of the liquor trade (Fig. 1). The course of the liquor-for-produce system was as follows: from hulks moored to river banks self-styled 'Palm Oil Ruffians' established their presence on the coastal littoral of Nigeria. They exchanged gin, guns and cloth for rubber, palm oil and palm kernels from inland markets. To facilitate smooth relations with the local chiefs, economic rituals developed, such as *comey* (locally-imposed export duty) and *dashes* (gratuities mainly in the form of liquor). In the 1880s, hulks gave way to permanent land-based trading stations or factories, bringing the producer nearer to the coveted imported goods. The European merchant's Nigerian agents or independent local middlemen took considerable quantities of liquor to the so-called 'native export produce markets', where the local farmers brought their agricultural goods. Farmers did not concern themselves with such esoteric forms of value as world market prices; their incomes depended on how their commodities translated into quantities of gin. After bargaining the rate of exchange, the farmers returned home with their liquor to drink or convert it into social value in the ceremonies associated with new born babies, marriages, chieftaincy installations and funerals. Meanwhile the agents or middlemen returned to the European factory with the produce for export.<sup>13</sup>

This same trading pattern repeated itself over and over again across Southern Nigeria; its visible method of commercial exchange in public places can be seen in the south-western town of Abeokuta. One liquor critic saw hundreds of canoes coming down the Ogun river from Abeokuta to Lagos 'laden with ivory tusks, gold, palm oil and the most precious products of the interior, and returning with nothing but filthy spirits'.<sup>14</sup> Of 250 carriers walking the 2 miles (3.2km) between the Titi gate and Aro on the outskirts of Abeokuta, one-third carried corn and yams, about 20 carried salt, and the

remainder cases of gin and demijohns of rum.<sup>15</sup> Thousands of bottles of gin never even reached the town, but found their way to nearby farming villages. Two hundred women head-loading kernels to market in the morning returned in the evening with gin. Thousands of empty gin bottles were scattered around the town itself, visible proof of liquor's significance to the local economy. Even a local church's pews were made out of empty gin cases.<sup>16</sup>

Between one-third and two-fifths of Southern Nigeria's exports went to purchase imported liquor in the early 20th century (Table 1). But there were wide variations in the ratios of liquor-to-exports: The port of Warri imported spirits worth 17% of its total exports of £261,025 in 1908; that of Brass exported £72,100 of produce and imported £42,200 of liquor and £41,300 of other goods in 1907; and Burutu paid for 75% of its £30,000 of exports in gin.<sup>17</sup> While some farmers changed up to 90% of their produce into gin, some European factories had an unwritten exchange rule of a-half-and-half split between liquor and other items, such as half the palm products at Oron paid for with liquor in 1908.<sup>18</sup>

Yet merchants made little profit from the sale of the liquor itself, simply using it as a bartering commodity to gain the desired local produce which they sold on to others at a profitable rate. Merchants sold spirits below cost price, so keen were they to get their hands on the agricultural produce. Others used liquor to tempt locals to their factories to buy other goods with higher profit margins which caught their eye.

Traders will often try to keep the gin in the background, and display the attractions of their other wares to their Negro customers. But it frequently happens that the latter arrive with the fixed determination to have a certain quantity of spirit whatever else they get, and set themselves to drive as hard a bargain as possible, getting what they want in exchange for the smallest quantity of produce or the least amount of money. That satisfactorily settled, they are less keen about the rest, and may give good value for the prints and trinkets and pots they require to take back with them. Thus the part of the trade associated with spirits is usually the least profitable and consequently the least popular with the importer.<sup>19</sup>

On this last point, while liquor might have been unpopular, it seemed necessary as it was the most sought-after commodity in the colony's markets. Trade in many areas relied on spirits; as one British MP stated in 1916: 'it seems to be the accepted doctrine in Nigeria that it is not possible to have a proper output of palm kernels unless a bottle of gin is dangled before the nose of the natives'.<sup>20</sup> Alcohol provided the incentive to farmers to bring their produce to market: 'Spirits give a kind of stimulus to these people to get rubber and palm oil, and without spirits they would not do anything'.<sup>21</sup> In so doing, the

**Table 1: Spirit imports and agricultural exports, Southern Nigeria, 1906-13 (in £s)**

Year	Spirits volume (gallons)	Spirit declared value	Spirit import duty	Total value of spirit imports	Total agricultural exports (a)	Total spirit imports to agricultural exports (%)
1906	3,321,902	301,738	600,784	902,522	2,292,404	39.37
1907	4,055,204	385,505	806,942	1,192,447	3,089,333	38.60
1908	3,235,669	332,577	691,190	1,023,767	2,709,377	37.79
1909	2,950,111	308,770	639,503	948,273	3,382,930	28.03
1910	4,748,139	456,485	999,823	1,456,308	4,356,460	33.42
1911	4,835,363	440,818	975,557	1,416,375	4,492,494	31.53
1912	4,450,196	440,952	1,013,808	1,454,760	4,667,906	31.17
1913	4,635,273	452,939	1,138,305	1,591,244	5,259,920	30.25

Note: (a) Cocoa, palm products, rubber and timber

Sources: Southern Nigeria Blue Books of Statistics, 1906-13



**Figure 1:** Representation of the liquor-for-produce system  
Source: NRLTUC 1909, *Native Races and the Liquor Traffic*, London, front cover.

liquor trade became entwined in the general health of the economy in the years before the First World War.

After 1914, however, the wartime economy brought overwhelming pressure on firms to change their stance as regards the necessity of liquor to trade in the country. First, Germany, which previously supplied a lot of the liquor and took most of Nigeria's agricultural exports, became an enemy market closed for business.<sup>22</sup> Second, cash-crop producers bucked at the market trend of rising liquor prices for not adequately rewarding them for their war-time production. The barter terms of trade not only failed to turn favourable but actually declined. A lack of shipping cancelled out rising wholesale prices for Nigerian cocoa and palm products in Europe. Yet Miller Brothers reported at the same time 'trade can be carried on without Spirits'.<sup>23</sup> 1917 recorded the best year

for trade at £16,261,000 in value and a record low for spirit imports, indicating that export production was not dependent on imported liquor.<sup>24</sup>

#### Gin currency

Although not confined solely to gin, all transactions with liquor were called 'gin currency'.

Trade spirits, especially gin are not used merely for drinking, but are in some parts of the country employed as a substitute for currency and large quantities are stored as accumulated wealth. In the more backward parts of the country British coin is regarded with suspicion by the natives and either does not pass current at all or only passes at a depreciated rate. The people are still in the barter stage, and for various reasons gin furnishes the most convenient standard of value.<sup>25</sup>

What did gin currency look like? While there were small, medium and large demijohns, jars, tins, wooden casks, puncheons, pipes and barrels, bottles came in a multitude of shapes and sizes. In the example of bottles, this could lead to fraud as they gave consumers little clear appreciation of the actual volume of liquor being purchased. Commonplace hazards included false bottoms and thick glass, increasing the weight of a case but not its liquid volume. Other sharp bottle practices included long necks containing nothing more than air or darkly coloured glass to obscure the level of its liquid contents. Extra thick wicker baskets made the volume of the demijohn appear larger than it actually was. Some merchants felt genuinely appalled by the sheer variety of their stock, but others used it as an excuse to defraud their customers.<sup>26</sup> The issue came to a head in 1905 when people in Western Province refused to pay the usual price of 9 pence for a bottle of gin, 'the contents of which they found had been reduced to a Minimum'.<sup>27</sup> But merchants themselves saw the disastrous effect of such practices on their collective reputation and responded to official calls for a prompt and satisfactory solution. After consultation with the Lagos Chamber of Commerce, the Southern Nigeria government passed a comprehensive law listing the size and weight of bottles, small, medium and large demijohns, jars, tins, wooden casks, puncheons, pipes and barrels, and the volume of liquor they were to contain. The contents of every spirit case had to be legibly and indelibly marked on the outside, while every demijohn had to have its contents stamped on a tin tag or lead seal attached to its neck.<sup>28</sup>

Liquor could only be imported into Nigeria under trade marks, a colonial commercial invention requiring traders to register the brands of alcoholic beverages on the market. Trademark owners had sole use, with others banned from copying the original design and wording. Liquor bottle labels reveals sophisticated selling: 'some traders have adopted for their liquor brands tribal names, and attractive labels bearing these names appear on the liquor bottles', inferring that such recognizable features would help the generally illiterate population to distinguish one brand from another.<sup>29</sup> Some illiterate Igbo men went to market with *Peters* tattooed on their arms to get that particular brand of gin in exchange for their goods, while the list of winning medals at international spirit competitions on some labels, which looked like a series of coins to the uninitiated, made it easier for some customers to ask for 'coin gin'.<sup>30</sup> Images of dinosaurs, kangaroos, mermaids, and penguins featured on some labels, but the majority of cases appropriated images and names familiar to customers, including drums and drummers, *Black Prince* and *Canoe* gin as well as *Hyena*, *Grasshopper* and *Three Matchetes* beer.<sup>31</sup>

To critics, gin currency was 'one of the most important, and one of the most deplorable aspects' of the whole liquor trade, symptomatic of the enormous hold alcohol had on a significant part of the Nigerian population.<sup>32</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, condemned the 'current coin' of Lagos and Southern Nigeria in 1905: the liquor bottle.<sup>33</sup> His missionaries had trouble adjusting to the need to have the hated gin with them when they went shopping, as Tugwell exaggeratedly described in 1909:

In some parts of the Delta it is not possible to purchase food unless you are prepared to pay for it in gin. Archdeacon Dennis, when

travelling through the country, could not get a fowl because the people insisted on a bottle of gin in payment, and I have been frequently refused in the same way. At Agberi, we opened a station when the Niger Company retired, but we had to withdraw the man there because the people would not sell him food unless he produced gin in exchange.... Again among the canoe-men the very first thing they ask you when you start on a journey is for an instalment of their payment in gin.<sup>34</sup>

Christian missionaries at Atari petitioned their headquarters to allow them to use gin 'otherwise they would starve'.<sup>35</sup> Trade spirits surfaced in all sorts of transactional situations. It was legal to pay wages in spirits throughout the Niger Territories until May 1887; two murderers from Aba were paid for their services with gin, while it was strongly rumoured that the trading firm of Swanzy's would buy its rubber from Ibadan with imported spirits.<sup>36</sup> An Onitsha town crier summoned the waterside people to meet on the following day to elect a chief, proclaiming that non-attendees would be fined one case of gin.<sup>37</sup>

Several reasons account for the use of gin currency as an integral part of the Southern Nigerian economy. First, gin was a useful transitional currency. While liquor bottles were fragile and prone to breakage, they did not deteriorate over time unlike more delicate articles like cloth and tobacco. Its transport was less cumbersome than bulky, heavy cowries and brass rods. Second, every case of liquor could be conveniently divided into smaller units of its 12 constituent bottles for commercial transactions. Even when the British tried to monetize the economy, they found their 12 pence to 1 shilling merely paralleled what was already in place: 12 bottles to one case. Third, and paradoxically, the government's ban on *manilla* imports in 1902, the depreciation of brass rods, and the high degree of local suspicion of sterling notes and coins boosted the use of the alternative currency in gin. Opobo Chief Cookey Gam equated money with gin because of the prohibition on *manillas* and copper wires but not gin.<sup>38</sup>

Fourth, once enough people accepted gin as currency the process led to increased liquor imports, which in turn accentuated the process across the economy: 'the convenience and popularity of gin as a means of exchange with the native races have undoubtedly encouraged the traders to stimulate the gin traffic'.<sup>39</sup> Gin could be kept for economic and social purposes. Because agricultural produce consisted of perishable commodities, it was difficult to store as wealth and so it was converted into forms that could be stored, such as land, slaves, or alcohol. A person's wealth was not reckoned merely by the amount of cash he possessed. 'Stored gin is like banked wealth', said the visiting Liquor Trade Committee, who were handed a photograph of a big stack of gin bottles outside a house; though the bottles were empty, they nevertheless had economic and social value, signifying the abode of a person of high status, 'a big man'.<sup>40</sup> In another example, 1,400 bottles were piled up next to a chief's house – this was a sign of his importance.<sup>41</sup> Also, bottle-covered graves were not an indication of the cause of death, but symbolic of the wealth of the deceased.<sup>42</sup>

Fifth, as the bottles passed from hand to hand, the storage of gin as currency did not completely check consumption because they were frequently opened for drinking a mouthful of the contents and then refilled with water. As liquor import duty rose, merchants faced two alternatives: watering down their stock or hiking prices. Sometimes middlemen diluted, or

‘washed’, the liquor, sometimes the retailers, and occasionally both.<sup>43</sup>

No matter who carried out the practice the object remained the same: to defraud the customer and make extra profit. Tin foil capsules commonly found on the spout of liquor bottles could be removed, while Abiraba blacksmiths made corkscrews.<sup>44</sup> Sealing wax stoppers proved only slightly more troublesome:

The bottles are opened by the native trader by means of two nails or two pieces of flat bamboo inserted on each side of the cork, which is thus gently removed. About a gill of spirit is removed and its place supplied with water. The cork is then replaced. It is held in the fire for a moment till the wax is heated and is then dipped in the sawdust, and appears intact.<sup>45</sup>

Dilution led to spirits sold at the coast having a stronger alcoholic content than those sold in the hinterland; the last people in the line of transmission ‘simply buy water’.<sup>46</sup> Some gin was as weak as to be unsalable at Onitsha market even when offered at 2 pence a bottle.<sup>47</sup> But it was John Holt’s experience that any kind of bottle tampering led to selling difficulties, forcing retailers to accept a much lower price than otherwise or face a fight with customers over adulteration.<sup>48</sup> Yet while dilution took place, and so depreciated the gin currency, this offset its tendency to appreciate in value whenever the government increased the customs duty.

Gin currency was even found at the heart of the colonialist’s legal system in the payment of court fines in one area, as a trader told Bishop Tugwell:

I recently imported £1,000 in sovereigns, hoping thereby to establish a specie basis for trade in place of the gin basis currency... . But at present, the Government accepts fines paid in gin. And thus the Government not only recognizes the principle of a gin currency, but helps to maintain and establish it.<sup>49</sup>

Struck by this statement, Tugwell questioned the local District Commissioner who confirmed that payments of fines came in the form of gin bottles and cases. Given the colonialists’ and merchants’ mutual need to monetize the economy in the interests of their commercial activity, Tugwell thought the situation financially and morally corrupt. The government categorically denied it as ‘absolutely untrue’, however, and the *Lagos Weekly Record* newspaper described Tugwell’s story as ‘dubious and curious... impossible’.<sup>50</sup> But Tugwell handed the Colonial Office a copy of his diary entry for 22 January 1908 confirming his side of the incident.<sup>51</sup>

Unhappy at what they considered a slur on their rule in Southern Nigeria, the colonial government instituted a thorough investigation, but instead found information substantiating Tugwell’s story. While the presiding judge did not fine in gin, at six Native Courts in Brass District – Amassoma, Ekow, Nembe, Ogbayan, Sabagreia and Twon – 90% of court fines were paid in gin currency. Litigants deposited gin as security for a court payment, being converted into cash by the court clerk at the rate of 10 shillings per case before being written up in the court’s ledger. With the market price of gin a couple of shillings higher, the clerk made a personal profit on the transaction. A modified payment of fines in gin then developed a further twist to court business. Merchants attended courts armed with a supply of cash; when a litigant had to pay a fine he went to one of these traders and converted his gin into cash at the requisite 10 shillings a case.

So instead of the clerk selling the gin to the trader, the litigant sold to the trader directly. On government discovery of the practice of payment of court fines in gin in June 1908 – contrary to Southern Nigeria Rule number two of 1901 – it was stopped.<sup>52</sup> Yet even after the 1908 ban, litigants still paid their fines with money raised from converting their bank account of gin cases into cash.<sup>53</sup>

The unseemly practices of these Native Courts and the events surrounding the discovery of their illegal ways embarrassed the colonial government as the courts were initially the most visible sign of British authority in many rural areas. When these courts were established the people of the area were ignorant of cash currencies so payments in gin had to be accepted otherwise the courts would have had to close:

Gin is, and has been for the last 50 or 60 years, the native equivalent of money. The case, or bottle, of gin is the recognised unit of value in all commercial transactions between natives, and in cases where gin has been accepted in payment of fines, it has been accepted as the native’s only form of cash... . If a native is asked the value of any article he will always reply quoting the amount of gin he values it at... any sudden reversal [of this custom] would dislocate the trade of the entire district, and seriously complicate the administrative work of the district.<sup>54</sup>

All six Native Courts in the Brass District started by receiving fees and fines in gin. Elsewhere in Nigeria, two witnesses from Onitsha and Abeokuta described the identical court process of Brass District’s paying in gin.<sup>55</sup> A vicar at Modakeke also revealed that gin and rum were the chief means of paying fines.<sup>56</sup>

The African Association’s Brass Agent Donovan, who had spent many years in the port, declared Tugwell’s statement given by the unnamed merchant ‘all bunkum’. Yet it emerged that Donovan had been associated with a protest against the Native Courts on the grounds that the firms were being undersold by the courts, the latter taking gin at 10 shillings while the factory price was 15 shillings per case in cash. Eventually the mystery of the nameless Brass trader was solved: Acting Agent Maysmore of the Brass Trading Company, whose import of only £750 of specie during his nine month’s tenure was treated as collaborative evidence on the matter.<sup>57</sup>

As to the unnamed political officer who confirmed Maysmore’s views on the payments of fines in gin, Tugwell had misremembered the place of the conversation. It was Acting District Commissioner Leigh-Lye at Bonny. Back in 1905, Leigh-Lye had even invited a Scottish doctor friend of his to accompany him on his round of the Native Courts, giving him the job of checking that gin bottles collected as fines had not been watered down.<sup>58</sup> Why Leigh-Lye had not enforced the law reveals the weak nature of early colonial rule in this part of Nigeria because of ‘the rapid change of officers and the manifold duties, both executive and judicial, imposed on these officers’.<sup>59</sup> Further confirmation came from a prisoner in Calabar jail, John Epe, a former court clerk at Brass, languishing there while he served a five-year sentence for embezzling 50 cases of gin paid as court fines.<sup>60</sup> Surely a colonial official must have been on the bench when sentencing Epe to jail, and so known of the existence of the payment of fines in gin, yet it appears that nobody outside the ranks of missionaries and Nigerians themselves knew the true state of affairs in the native courts.

### Monetization and the decline of gin currency

There were growing calls from anti-liquor trade critics to end the 'mischievous practice' of gin currency.<sup>61</sup> Monetizing the Nigerian economy faced enormous problems, however. Colonial coinage faced a deeply suspicious public, farmers unwilling to swap their produce backed by hard work for pieces of paper and circles of metal denoting a certain value backed by alien rule. This was further compounded by the fact that incomes were relatively low and small value purchases commonplace. Coins were too high in value and too scarce in circulation to serve as an extensively functioning currency, 'a form of cash utterly unsuited to the needs, modes of life and habits of the local population.'<sup>62</sup> Unlike gin, cowries or *manillas*, large values of coins and notes did not form big bulks when put together, and therefore were not seen by Nigerians as an impressive form of currency to hold. Others did not imbue the coins with monetary value, regarding them as only suitable raw materials for ornamental jewellery. Coins were all too easily lost or stolen. Paper notes suffered from the heat and humidity of the climate and destruction from fire, insects and rodents. The shilling notes were small and made of thin paper, very inconvenient for locals without purses or pockets. Stories about people being palmed off with telegraph envelopes as they were the same colour as 1 shilling notes made the mainly illiterate population doubly wary of any paper currency. When the West African Currency Board introduced coins with a palm tree motif, locals thought the government was about to nationalize their palm trees (Fig. 2).<sup>63</sup>

The colonial government nevertheless pressed ahead with monetization. Nickel-bronze pennies and aluminium ones worth 1/10 of a penny were introduced in the hope of finding favour.<sup>64</sup> Colonial officers explained the advantages of a coin currency to the population, while the government endeavoured to supply an adequate amount of coin to the market to 'win its way by degrees.'<sup>65</sup> For example, along the Cross River, in the face of competition from gin, brass and copper rods, 'British currency is gradually spreading throughout the country.'<sup>66</sup> Even Brass, the heart of the gin currency economy, saw a rise in specie and a decline in imported spirits. On the whole, the first decade of the 20th century witnessed a certain degree of success in the switch away from transitional currencies; several of them began to have their circulation severely circumscribed. This change, however, did not occur at the same time; as late as 1912, 'an astonishing variety of currencies were still in use': *manillas*, cowries, iron rods and wires, salt, copper and brass rods, cloth, tobacco, palm oil and gin.<sup>67</sup> Yet by that time, Southern Nigeria had imported £8 million of specie and as the use of the cash currency extended transitional currencies retreated.



Figure 2 One-shilling and 2-shilling coins, British West Africa, 1916 and 1924

It was the First World War and the consequent dearth of trade spirits imported during those four years that firmly and irrevocably moved the country towards a cash economy: 'in some ports trade spirits have lost their place as a staple'.<sup>68</sup> There was good reason for believing that 'the produce trade in the native markets could be carried on without trade spirits'.<sup>69</sup> Taken together, 1916 and 1917 saw £1,939,844 of more specie imported than exported from Nigeria and cash had taken the place of spirits in the way of a reserve – 'possibly it may also mean that Chiefs are beginning to hoard their wealth in coin instead of in gin!'<sup>70</sup> Just before the war's end, the British Colonial Secretary expressed the wish that,

the bartering of spirits for Native produce is one of the most objectionable forms of that trade, and it will certainly be a satisfactory result of the war if this should cease and not be revived on the return of peace.<sup>71</sup>

In fact, the combined effects of the war and the 1919 ban on trade spirits made gin difficult to function as a currency in its few remaining enclaves.<sup>72</sup> What happened to it then is not difficult to guess: it was drunk.

However, this was not quite the end of the story of gin currency in Nigeria, as it could be argued that the post-war economic slump was to a certain degree worsened by the loss of this convenient medium of exchange:

Ninety per cent of Commerce's post-war problems are due to the grandmotherly legislation that would make it a crime for a native to have a bottle of gin inside his house, and to use it for the purchase of a boxful of yams or cassava!<sup>73</sup>

Remnants of gin currency remained. Gin was used for the hire of canoes at Ikom in the 1920s.<sup>74</sup> Gin was still used in paying marriage dowries, which one newspaper labelled 'a farce'.<sup>75</sup> Presenting gin as part of the annual present of a tenant to his landlord was common in Oyo in 1936.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, such practices (which continue to this day) are isolated relics of the gin currency age.

### Conclusions

From the macro-scale of a colony's budgetary finances based on shiploads of liquor to the micro-scale of a farmer exchanging his agricultural wares for a bottle of spirits, imported alcohol had significant economic importance in the colonial economy of Southern Nigeria from 1860 until the First World War.

Situationally defined, but also constantly renegotiated, imported alcohol had innumerable fluid cultural and economic contexts. In terms of the latter, the liquor trade provoked questions over the ultimate goal of colonial economics. Critics of the liquor trade saw it as commercially unsound, socially destructive and morally indefensible: 'It is not the Union Jack which would be regarded as most characteristic of the advance of British rule, but the little green boxes well known as gin cases, and the demijohns of rum'.<sup>77</sup> Yet the swapping of bottles of liquor for items in the market was a common-place occurrence and for many years the fortunes of both the liquor trade and the general economy became increasingly interdependent. It was only during the First World War that the absolute necessity of alcohol as a catalyst for commerce were tested to the full and found to be lacking solid foundations in economics. Business fortunes could be 'achieved without the aid of the trade gin and rum accessory, which is alleged to be

the *sine qua non* of trade in West Africa<sup>7,78</sup>

The discovery of such a malpractice as paying court fines in gin indicated the strong attraction of some Southern Nigerians for their gin currency, even in the face of colonial efforts to get them into a monetary economy. Critics of the liquor trade continued to use the scandal – the most ‘glaring abuse of the liquor traffic’ – to remind their audience of the colonial government’s shame over the practice of exacting fines in gin.<sup>79</sup>

The only acceptable form of currency to the colonialists was the one they were used to in Britain, and so a system of British-backed pounds, shillings and pence became the specie of Nigeria. A huge effort to monetize the economy was made, and eventually overcame all the other currencies previously in circulation in Nigeria. Although continuing in its myriad social roles, gin currency followed previously useful transitional currencies like cowries and *manillas* into liquidation.

## Notes

- 1 This paper is based on: Heap, S., 2005. “A bottle of gin is dangled before the nose of the natives”: The economic uses of imported liquor in Southern Nigeria, 1860–1920’, *African Economic History* 33, 69–85. We are happy to acknowledge the permission granted by the editors of that journal to reproduce it here, with major additions and revisions.
- 2 Guyer 1995, 89.
- 3 Heap 1995.
- 4 Heap 1998.
- 5 Bloch and Parry 1991, 8; Long 1992, 152.
- 6 Heap 1995.
- 7 *Lagos Observer* 1886, 2; *Lagos Observer* 1897, 2.
- 8 Heap 1996; Heap 2002.
- 9 *Lagos Weekly Record* 1911.
- 10 *Lagos Echo* 1894.
- 11 Kingsley 1898, 546.
- 12 National Archives (NA), London, Colonial Office (CO) 444/3, Minute by R. L. Antrobus, Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies, Britain, 3 November 1899.
- 13 Heap 1995.
- 14 Benson 1889.
- 15 *Niger and Yoruba Notes* 1897, 52.
- 16 *Lagos Standard* 1895.
- 17 Colonial Office 1909b, 375.
- 18 Colonial Office 1909b, 24, 32, 55.
- 19 *West Africa* 1902.
- 20 Cavendish-Bentinck 1916.
- 21 Colonial Office 1909b, 47.
- 22 Osuntokun 1979.
- 23 National Archives, Ibadan (NAI), Chief Secretary’s Office (CSO) 20/4/NC.169/16, A.A. Cowan, Miller Brothers, Lagos, to Sir F.D. Lugard, Governor-General, Lagos, Nigeria, 7 October 1916.
- 24 NA, CO 583/67, Lugard, *Address to the Nigerian Council*, 28 December 1917, 5.
- 25 NA, CO 520/66, D.E. Price, District Commissioner, Brass, *Report*, 4 August 1908, 2–3, in Egerton to Crewe, 26 September 1908.
- 26 NAI, CSO 1/1/50, Birtwistle, Commercial Intelligence Officer, Lagos, to F.H. Derriman, Acting Colonial Secretary, Lagos, 16 March 1905; *Lagos Weekly Record* 1906.
- 27 *Lagos Weekly Record* 1905.
- 28 *Lagos Standard* 1905; Southern Nigeria Ordinance no. 10 of 1906.
- 29 Blackburn 1921, 26.
- 30 I am grateful to Dmitri van den Bersselaar of the University of Liverpool for this latter point.
- 31 Heap 1995.
- 32 NRLTUC 1910, 34.
- 33 Davidson 1905.
- 34 Colonial Office 1909b, 24.
- 35 Colonial Office 1909b, 386.
- 36 Royal Niger Company Regulation no. 20 of 1887; Colonial Office 1909b, 224; *Lagos Weekly Record* 1895.
- 37 Colonial Office 1909a, 16; Colonial Office 1909b, 392.
- 38 Colonial Office 1909b, 312.

- 39 MacDonal 1916, 91.
- 40 Colonial Office 1909a.
- 41 Colonial Office 1909b, 301.
- 42 Ambler 1987, 14–15.
- 43 Waller 1887, 8; Colonial Office 1909b, 57.
- 44 Colonial Office 1909b, 33, 78, 421.
- 45 Colonial Office 1909b, 78; Heap 1999.
- 46 Colonial Office 1909b, 311.
- 47 Colonial Office 1909b, 410.
- 48 NA, CO 147/147, John Holt & Co. to J. Chamberlain, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Britain, 20 July 1899.
- 49 NRLTUC 1908, 5.
- 50 NA, CO 520/62, Sir W. Egerton, Governor, Southern Nigeria, to Lord Crewe, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Britain, 25 June 1908; *Lagos Weekly Record*, 1908.
- 51 NA, CO 520/63, Bishop H. Tugwell, CMS Bishop of Western Equatorial Africa Tugwell to Strachey, 25 July 1908.
- 52 NA, CO 520/66, H.S. Gladstone, Acting District Commissioner, Brass, to J.J. Thorburn, Colonial Secretary, Southern Nigeria, 1 September 1908.
- 53 Colonial Office 1909b, 75.
- 54 NA, CO 520/66, Price, *Report*, 4 August 1908, p.1–3, in Egerton to Crewe, 26 September 1908.
- 55 NA, CO 520/87, Reverend Sidney Smith, in *Humble Memorial of the NRLTUC* to Crewe, 7 April 1909, p.21; PRO, CO 520/87, Reverend J.J. Olumide, in *Humble Memorial*, 30.
- 56 NA, CO 520/87, Reverend E.A. Kayode, in *Humble Memorial*, p.30.
- 57 NA, CO 520/66, Gladstone to Thorburn, 1 September 1908.
- 58 NA, CO 520/77, Thorburn to Crewe, 2 January 1909.
- 59 Colonial Office 1909a, 8.
- 60 Papers of Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury, Lambeth Palace Library, vol. 232, p.84–85, Tugwell to Davidson, 12 March 1909.
- 61 *Nigerian Daily Times* 1926.
- 62 NA, CO 657/19, Governor Clifford’s *Address*, 26 February 1923, 23.
- 63 Mwangi 2002, 39.
- 64 Ekundare 1973, 187–192.
- 65 NA, CO 520/55, Elgin to L.H. Nott, Secretary, NRLTUC, 15 April 1908.
- 66 NA, CO 520/62, Egerton to Crewe, 6 July 1908.
- 67 Johannson 1967, 48.
- 68 *Nigeria Customs* 1916, 7.
- 69 *Nigeria Annual Report* 1916, 7.
- 70 NA, CO 583/67, Lugard, *Address to the Nigerian Council*, 28 December 1917, 4.
- 71 NA, CO 583/67, W.H. Long, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Britain, to Lugard, Governor-General, Nigeria, 10 October 1918.
- 72 *Convention relating to the Liquor Traffic in Africa and Protocol* 1919.
- 73 *Nigerian Daily Times* 1926.
- 74 National Commission for Museums and Monuments 1996, 59.
- 75 *West African Star* 1936.
- 76 NAI, Oyo Provincial Office [OYOPROF] 2/3/C.204, J.M. Simpson, Acting District Officer, Oyo, to H.L. Ward-Price, Senior Resident, Oyo Province, 7 September 1936.
- 77 *Niger and Yoruba Notes* 1894, 8.
- 78 *Niger and Yoruba Notes* 1911, 197.
- 79 MacDonal, 1916, 93.

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# Manillas, Money and the Cost of Legitimacy in the mid-20th Century: A Royal Account in Eastern Nigeria

Jane I. Guyer

## Introduction

My analysis and discussion here are devoted to the detailed account book of a Nigerian chief that surfaced as I was searching the archive of G.I. Jones, formerly of the British Colonial Service in Eastern Nigeria and then of the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge University. It is 89 pages long and purports to cover the ten years between 1944 and 1954. It is not itself dated, but was probably given to Jones during his commissioned study of chieftaincy in Eastern Nigeria in 1956.

The interweaving of value and price, of calculation and record-keeping, and of currencies and their deployment in the legitimation of authority for the African past is such a difficult nexus to enter, and so crucial for any understanding of trade and governance that even the most mysterious and perhaps eccentric of sources demands study for the glimpses it may offer. I have argued elsewhere that monetary transactions appear to have been precise enough, and the sources voluminous enough, to create a model of a cultural system in Atlantic Africa. But on finances and leadership, secrecy prevails. Felix Iroko worked on cowries in Dahomey, looking at counting and hoarding;<sup>1</sup> Law has looked at the dilemmas of financial administration in Dahomey;<sup>2</sup> Karin Barber has recently drawn on oral sources to imagine how equivalences were fixed in Eastern Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> But the place of explicit numeration and accounting seems intermittent, giving way in the sources to symbolic moments of powerful value-configuration. Iroko describes a kind of cowrie longhouse in Dahomey, decorated conspicuously. But the sources offer no sense of what the contents really were, how much and how grouped they were for storage, how they were accessed and deployed, and so on. Law extrapolates from the logic of cowry values to the dilemmas of attempting to control a cowry economy in a multiple-currency region. But the argument remains an extrapolation: very important, but supported by limited enough direct evidence that Law expresses his conclusions cautiously. Barber's imaginative leap to the value-anchoring of sacrificial actions in Eastern Nigeria is based on linking the literary and religious sources to clues in the political and historical sources. But it takes that leap, and powerful circumstantial contextualization, to fix her inspired inference in our minds. Possibly all accounting reverts to symbolic frames, as Carruthers and Espeland argue for the 'purism' of Western double-entry book-keeping, with its focus on the moral, as well as economic, value-anchor of 'the bottom line'.<sup>4</sup> But the capacity of the account and the symbolic value configuration to be mutually translatable is centrally at issue, especially in economies where accounts were not kept in written form. People surely shifted back and forth in highly skillful ways that created both the pragmatic and symbolic workability of power.

As far as I know there is no systematic study of African mnemonics with respect to monetary transactions and accumulations over time and in place, even though exchanges were mediated by currencies for centuries and precise calendars did exist.<sup>5</sup> Praise poetry focuses on wealth accumulation as a process and a performance,<sup>6</sup> but not as a calculation or a record. Shipton has argued that money was never indexed to time in Africa, in the manner assumed by concepts of credit, interest and account.<sup>7</sup> And yet there are presumably written accounts in Arabic, Amharic and possibly other written languages, with respect to affairs of state and religious institutions and there are tantalizing indications of numerical systems in non-literate traditions that applied to money alone.<sup>8</sup> Possibly there have been oral poetic forms that acted as monetary mnemonics, analogous to the plastic forms that Roberts and Roberts have shown for Luba historical memory.<sup>9</sup>

The dilemma for scholarship is enormous: to have to assume and infer some mode of accounting in order to posit ordered monetary processes, or else to face an ignorance with respect to direct evidence that may be very difficult to mitigate. If the latter, we may imply – by simply leaving a large gap here – that in much of Africa the 'function' of money as 'unit of account' (in the strict sense of account, relative to a temporal rhythm of some sort) was not practised or recognized. If not, we need a way of teasing something out of the evidence that we are still able to generate. If so, then we might give some concentrated attention to whether, and in what sense, such a situation would encourage critique of the very concept of account, in general and in other places.

So glimpses need to be opened up further, not only for insights into monetary practices themselves but also into the methods scholars might use to do justice to the full cultural complexity of African monies. We cannot assume, by default of any alternatives, that frameworks of monetary management are 'rational' or 'administrative' in a narrow western sense, even in the west itself. African philosopher Paulin Hountondji's recent collection *Rationality: Singular or Plural?*<sup>10</sup> is a challenge to those of us working on monies, number, mnemonics and records, just as it is to philosophers of causation, agency, language and the public sphere. Do we expect equivalence in transactions, stability in payments, balance in summations and regular temporal benchmarks in accounting? If we cannot be confident of any of these conceptual foundations, should analysis just assume them? Is impersonality a defining characteristic of monetary transactions, and if so, what do we do with an account that personalizes, rather than typifies, every transaction, as my source here does?

My paper is only a foray into such questions. The topic is vast, whereas my source here is a single document. If

accounting frames constitute a general technique, their rubrics should be shared and general, whereas the longer I have studied the case presented here the more eccentric it seems. After the original presentation of the paper I was able to read the Stephen Jaja and Opobo files in the Nigerian National Archives at Ibadan and to incorporate these contextual sources into my understanding. Difficult and partial though my discussion must be of the larger issues of accounting, grappling with this one source from the colonial period has confirmed my conviction of the importance of monetary record-keeping in African history, even if the sources are so limited. This account straddles the modernization of tradition, so it indicates the African dilemma of defining what such a modern tradition of public finance should be: the categories it should comprise, the detail of the reporting, the summation in a balance. It is clearly patterned after colonial practice, in the lay-out of the pages, the punctiliousness of the record (down to the last penny) and the categories of income and expenditure. But the itemization reveals a massive network of ‘traditional’ and personalized commitments. The way in which it constitutes an argument for a certain kind of modern African rule has become the main theme of the paper.

The paper has four parts. First is a description of the document itself, as a simple historiographical exercise. The following two parts concern high profile historical events of colonial rule related to money and value, and trace their path through the document but are not centre-stage in it. One is the topic I had initially hoped could be addressed from it, namely the co-existence of *manillas* and colonial money in Eastern Nigerian communities over the era of the famous *manilla* withdrawal of 1948.<sup>11</sup> The other is the payments made in the famous reparation/compensation case and the subsidy case won by the Opobo against the British government in the 1940s on the basis of documents they – but not their British co-signers – had preserved from 1890, before the imposition of colonial rule.<sup>12</sup> Finally, I discuss the analysis of such locally organized records for the study of the history of money in Africa, and particularly of modes, purposes and standards of accounting in the legitimation of rule.

### I. The document

In the autumn of 2000, while working on the personal papers of former colonial officer and then Cambridge anthropologist G.I. Jones in the archives of the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge, for the chapter on Igbo and Ibibio ranking and money for my book, *Marginal Gains*,<sup>13</sup> I came across an 89-page, single spaced, carbon-copy typescript, stamped with the royal seal of Opobo and signed longhand by Chief Stephen U. Jaja. It is entitled as follows, in an exactly constructed inverted pyramidal style that I discovered later he used for many of his formal letters and petitions:

GENERAL ACCOUNT OF INCOME AND EXPENDITURE  
OF OPOBO ROYAL HOUSE (1944–1954) BY  
CHIEF STEPHEN UGBORGU JAJA,  
HEAD OF OPOBO ROYAL  
HOUSE, AND THE PRE  
JAJA III OF  
OPOBO.

The years of Jaja’s accounts covered the years of the *manilla* campaign in the Igbo and Ibibio areas of Eastern Nigeria, which was the last and most organized effort by a colonial government to withdraw ‘indigenous currencies’ from circulation and replace them with colonial money. It was a massive, original and controversial undertaking, so I hoped that any and all sources would illuminate one aspect or another of the monetary dynamics. The Opobo tradition did emphasize the place of chieftaincy in control of the *manilla* supply. For example, in 1946 S.U. Jaja claimed that the *Atorni manilla* had been commissioned by the original King Jaja, founder of Opobo, from the firm of S. Alfred and Co. of 5 Huntly Road, Elms Park, Liverpool, that he held a patent to it, and that it should be held in consideration if indeed its status as legal tender would be abolished. ‘The *Atorni manilla* is the last vestige of Opobo’s greatness...’<sup>14</sup>

To my surprise, the campaign did not figure in Jaja’s accounts. *Manillas* and colonial pounds do both figure, but not any of the mechanics of the withdrawal and replacement. The chiefship did not seem, by this time and in this account, to be at the anchoring apex of a money-*manilla* and social rank valuation system, nor of a centralized money management organization. Even if *manillas* had still figured in general social life at the beginning of the period he covers, S.U. Jaja’s interest in preserving their history in this document seems entirely tied up with their role in the status of chieftaincy rather than the mediation of daily purchases (see below).

The entries include rather, dozens of ceremonial expenses: the cost of doing such things as making an inventory of the royal house’s firearms, repairing boat docks, providing send-offs to British officials, receiving visitors such as Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe (a leader of the independence movement) and ferrying witnesses to court for land cases; and the purchase of publications (the *Nigerian Gazette*, the *Manchester Weekly Guardian*, *Time Magazine* and various handbooks from the CMS bookshop in Lagos). Many outlays are also explained at length, from the sums paid to named laborers to clear up rubbish to the itemized cost of festivals, oracular divinations and court cases.

These entries and their organization are all in the nature of what might be considered affairs of state, under a sovereignty model of chiefs and people. They are denominated in the pounds, shillings and pence of the British colonial economy, except for a few entries recorded in *manillas* (of which more below). The following summary constitutes the introduction to the detailed breakdown of the expenditures. Reporting it in complete form conveys the total amounts at issue and the large difference that is presented between income and expenditure, for potential comparative purposes with other administrative accounts. We can already suspect that one point of the account was to convey the structural deficit situation of chiefs, when faced with the kinds of expenditures that supported their claims to legitimate rule.

#### Summary of Income (p. 2):

A. Egwanga New Market Rental (3 yrs)	£66-0-0
B. War Canoe Compensation	£369-5-5
C. Account deposited in U.A.C. Ltd.	£518-0-0
D. Arrears of Subsidy	£512-10-0
E. Bonus from Subsidy Houses	£115-0-0
Total	£1,580-15-5

**Expenditure (22 categories re-compiled for brevity):**

A. Rituals of State	£806-7-11
B. Running a royal household	£780-0-0
C. House debts	£257-17-9
D. Repairs and Demolitions	£54-9-8
E. Councils and Conferences	£154-16-6
F. Disputes and Lawsuits	£514-11-4
G. Funerals, care of Jaja's sepulcher	£53-16-0
H. Deposit in UAC	£229-4-0
H. Receptions (for colonial officers)	£80-12-5
I. Miscellaneous	£208-5-7
Total	£3,120-2-1

The functioning of an indirect rule kind of governance model was explicitly at stake at the time the account was written. Faced with the question of how to bring chieftaincy into a national state and local government system of governance the British commissioned a study in 1956 whose terms of references were:

to enquire into the position, status and influence of chiefs and Natural Rulers in the Eastern Region, and to make recommendation as to the necessity or otherwise of legislation regulating their appointment, recognition and deposition.<sup>15</sup>

The study was undertaken by G.I. Jones, in whose papers we find the Jaja accounts. Jones's final report notes that, in fact, no-one was interested in any of the topics defined by the terms of reference, so:

the enquiry therefore was directed primarily to determining the part played by chiefs and Natural Rulers in their traditional systems of government and the part which people wished them to play in the contemporary system.<sup>16</sup>

Nothing could illustrate everything a chief does, and justify it better, than an account ... if such records existed. S.U. Jaja may have been attempting to supply such an inventory of responsibilities and their financial implications.

The oddest circumstance of the account however – which is not explicitly referred to in it – is that its author, Chief Stephen Ugborgu Jaja, was not the head of King Jaja's House at the time he wrote the accounts, as the title and signature imply. He was deposed by his own House in 1949, half way through the period covered by the account. After a long drawn out process of appeal, the British upheld a dispensation that the Opobo chiefs were chosen by their Houses and not in any way, or at any stage, by the government. And in fact, when we look closely at the entries, most of the records only refer to 1944 to 1948, when he certainly held the position of Chief of King Jaja House. In financial terms, this would double any inference of *per annum* costs of chieftaincy we might be tempted to make by dividing the summaries by ten. He appears to be validating his account by claiming it to be current at the time of writing, even at the cost of under-estimating the total monetary costs. Why? Having read his deposition file in the Nigerian National Archives,<sup>17</sup> I am now inclined to see this chieftaincy account as a kind of pretension or policy document, whose argument – the way that legitimacy and money become mutually referential – I elaborate in the final section. The topics I originally hoped to document as 'history' are better seen in light of the account as a rhetorical device, as indeed Carruthers and Espeland have argued all accounts to be.<sup>18</sup> So Parts 2 and 3 use history to identify enduring principles of money and legitimacy, rather than to establish the past *per se*.

**2. Traces of the *manilla* economy**

I had hoped to find evidence of the famous transition from *manillas* to pounds that was mandated and managed by the British in 1948. While these Opobo accounts do show a pervasively monetized imagination about social and ritual life, as Latham argues for the Cross River in the 19th century,<sup>19</sup> this particular record gives only glimpses into the domains where two currencies – 'traditional' and 'modern', *manillas* and pounds sterling – were options as means of payment. *Manillas* figure primarily in ritual contexts, which may validate legitimacy claims, but we can still search there for modes of calculation from the past that might still be operative.

There are nine entries where *manillas* were either mandated or could substitute for colonial money in transactions, but equally there are many places where one might have expected 'traditional' payments where none are mentioned. The main category I expected as the destination for *manillas* was funerals. Chief Jaja had to contribute substantially to the funerals of close or indigent royal family members over an undated period. There were 53 cases (pp. 77–79), each named and Jaja's gifts are itemized, for a total cost of £44-2-4. All the payments are enumerated in colonial money. I quote some entries because they also give a flavour of the style of the document as a whole. The basis for the obligation is described; the components of the transactions are precise in type, quality and amount; and the recipients and their locations are denoted by name. From fieldwork elsewhere in Nigeria, I suggest that these entries are close to the particularism by which memories are retained in oral mnemonics. As formal records, written in English, they have a performative quality, as if to announce an age-old indigenous capacity for accounts that surpassed British expectations of Nigerians and even British projections of their own form of rule. We cannot know for sure, so the reader is presented with evidence that they may reinterpret.

By far the most expensive funeral contribution, at £6-11-0, was for the death of Queen Shuba Jaja:

2. Queen Shuba Jaja (p. 77):

(a) Part payment for the cost of a coffin bought for the burial of this Queen (£3-10-0); Drink to coffin makers (3/-); (b) Funeral gifts: Cash (£1); one fathom white baft (4/-); one fathom Real India (7/-); drink (12/-); provisions to paddlers, Chiefs and Elders who went with the Head of the Royal House to Ozu-efre Ville for the interment (15/-)... £6-11-0

Other funeral entries suggest many directions that the sociological imagination could go, but again, no *manillas*:

3. Oto Jaja (indigent but serviceable)... £2-8-0

11. The murder of Godfrey Bibama:

Fares to and from Egwanga-Opobo in respect of this murder and cost of provisions given to the following Police Constables and others whenever they came to Opobo Town in connection with the murder: (a) Corporal Jonas Ebozue; (b) P.C. Franklin Ikwujieagu; (c) Joseph Onyeannum; (d) P.C. Caleb Umunna; (e) P.C. Godfrey Onodi; (f) P.C. Asuquuo Essien; (g) L.C. Nathan Motianya; (h) P.C. Chukwuemeka Okafor; (i) P.C. Joseph Igwu and others assessed at ... £5-10-0

30. Four men and three women of Opukalama. £1-8-0

The occasions when *manillas* are mentioned are few and interesting enough to quote all the entries.

A. At the installation of the King (Opooboo) of Opobo:

(a) The accession gift to the Dappa-na-Amakris. (p. 16):

As ordained by the divinities through the oracles, that Opooboo should 'first of all give an offering in kind to the manes of his maternal ancestors before ascending the throne. That the said gift should consist of (1) one white cock; (2) one piece white baf; (3) one piece Real India; (4) one bottle of strong drink; (5) one bottle of sweet drink; (6) a saucer of bitter kola; (7) a small piece of edible chalk; (8) seven times seven *manillas* – all in a wicker tray (an 'egele').

(b) The gala dinner (p. 22):

Custom further ordains that, whereas, the gala vigil ('sodi') with the gala dinner is sacred to God Almighty, it should willy-nilly be kept at the expense of every newly created chief, every successor, and every new ruler; and that if any chief prefer to give the equivalent of the state banquet in money, forty-eight thousand *manillas* (48,000) which is at present £600, must invariably be paid to Asimini – a legal name under which the national assembly can sue and be sued.

(c) The concluding ceremony (p. 25):

Cost of the concluding ceremony – the ceremony of elevating *ekre* – on the evening of the 8th day: one cock (6/-); yams, plantains [*sic*], oil, pepper, salt, wood, drinkables, etc. (9/4); four times four *manillas* (2/8)... £0-18-0

(d) *Ekre* name (p. 26) [paraphrased]:

In accordance with native custom and tradition, every traditional ruler and every chief must have an *ekre* name... dubbed by the Ancient Order of *Ekre* Players... When Pre was dubbed with this *ekre* name on 31 December 1944, the following traditional expenses were defrayed (itemized in price): One bottle Dry Gin, Two jars of Tombo, One bottle of lemonade, Three eggs, Bitter Kolas, Cayenne pepper, One cock, a small piece of edible chalk, seven times seven *manillas* (0-8-2)

B. Other festivals

(a) Fongu (1944) (p. 29):

For the concluding ceremony – the ceremony of elevating Owu-akwa, when no pantomimes are produced, four times four *manillas* £0-2-8

(b) New Year (p. 30):

For the ceremony of bringing down the Owu Drum (Owu-akwa) and Masks, seven times seven *manillas* £0-8-2

C. Leopard killed at Umu-ogo in 1945. Over a page of history is given here to thank the inhabitants of a distant area (pp. 58–59) for:

their patriotism and loyalty to the Opobo House; [for disposing of] the carcass of the leopard according to custom; [bringing the head and claws] to Opuwariku in state, [the chiefs were to receive]: 16 *manillas* (£0-2-8), one fathom Real India Madrass (£0-9-0), and One Bottle of White Horse Whisky (£0-9-8) £1-9-8

D. Sweeping of King Jaja's sepulchre (p. 80). This had to be done half-yearly. It included:

Traditional gift to the caregiver and the keepers of the royal sepulchre (seven times seven *manillas*) £0-8-2

E. Childbed gifts (p. 86):

In order to legitimize the birth of a child, as a lawful member of a House of Chiefdom, it is an invariable custom of the Royal House to give each woman who comes to childbed of either a male or a female child, 20 *manillas* and some yams. Spent in respect of this custom £3-10-0

The sum total of *manilla* expenditures for all these purposes would be very low. The gesture is obviously token by this time, and equally obviously indexed to arts and life founded in tradition and continuity with practices of the past.

The number a man was allowed to keep after 1948 was 200, so the level of use indicated here is far below what could have been sustained with all remaining *manillas* in circulation. Only one entry – the gala dinner – truly presents *manillas* as an alternative mode of payment but perhaps because this event happened before the withdrawal campaign of 1948. After it, nothing of this magnitude could have been supported easily by the remnants of the great collections. So if *manillas* had specific uses by this time, they were already acting as tokens and only in one case – care of the sepulchre – were they the only form of payment mentioned. Jones himself suggests that Opobo was more an entrepot for *manillas* than a *manilla* economy, so the practices retained may already have been symbolic for a long time, along with the symbols of royal authority photographed for S.O. Jaja's book (photographs of *Short Manilla Tree and Long Manilla Tree*).<sup>20</sup> The deposition papers in the Nigerian National archives would strengthen this interpretation. The *manilla* and its insignia were claims to sovereignty in Opobo, and no longer a working monetary system by this time.

More intriguing for monetary history is the mode of calculation in S.U. Jaja's accounts. In all but the childbirth case, *manillas* are counted in multiples: 4 x 4 and 7 x 7. It is known from Jones that every river in the Delta had its own mode of reckoning,<sup>21</sup> and from many other sources that higher numbers in monetary calculation might go in multiples rather than additions. In *Marginal Gains* (chapt. 3), I suggested that a mathematics of multiples rather than incremental additions offered a logic of flexibility in the face of fluctuation. Each unit (or composite) of four or seven can be slightly augmented or diminished in specific instances, while maintaining the name that pronounces and announces itself as a stable value: four or seven as a concept rather than a number. Standard western numeration practice of Incremental addition and subtraction cannot perform the feat of

providing more rather than fewer tropic points [that] allow greater room for recomposition of the material transaction without changing the nominal agreement.<sup>22</sup>

It is confirmatory for me to see multiplication around tropic numbers appear in this much later context, where *manillas* have really become tokens rather than currency. G.I Jones's account of *comey* – a form of customs paid by European merchants to the Delta chiefs – also implies the primacy of composites over its units, in that calculation was by capacity per boat rather than the units of the cargo added incrementally, as defined according to western accounting techniques and market orientations. It was not the actual number of slaves or puncheons of oil transported in a particular vessel that was calculated to get at the *comey*, but the boat itself as a unit of account.<sup>23</sup> The unit of value was already both a unit and a composite. Verran's study of Yoruba number makes a similar point.<sup>24</sup> Numerical techniques would seem to be one of the most neglected topics in the study of West African trade, but if evidence of such apparently minor and 'quaint' usages could be assembled and combined with field research it is perhaps not too late to bring into larger comparative view what was surely one of the great skills of Eastern Nigerian commerce and governance. In the case of Opobo, in what sense was the 'control' of *manillas* a control of origins (as in the patent in Liverpool, referred to above), a control of distribution (as in the

payments indicated in the account), and/or a control of calculation modes? The specific points at which Africa's legitimate rulers exercised their control on value and circulation, a distinct form other sources of power such as the right to control life and death, cannot simply be assumed from a comparative record from elsewhere. We have a small step here in the knowledge that a) the King of Opobo commissioned the minting of *manillas* in England, b) the *manilla* was a symbol of power, c) key rituals had to be mediated in *manillas*; and d) there were calculative formulae. About the deployment of calculation, prices and circulation, taxation, market control and other daily functions of money, we learn much less.

### 3. Of subsidies and reparations

Taken together, the sources may also provide a 'reverse side' of the history of the tradition/modernity picture, namely a window into the long-term acumen in 'modern' techniques of power that underwrite Opobo history, back to the career of the original King Jaja: 'The African Merchant Prince', whose photograph in high white collar and tie appears as the frontispiece to the book of documents compiled by S.O. Jaja.<sup>25</sup> And also of his successors: the chiefs who insisted on rights *vis-à-vis* Britain that had been committed to written agreements at several dates in the 19th century, which in all likelihood the British had never intended to keep. Even in the depth of World War II, they were forced, or persuaded, to honour this age-old debt. This section of the paper highlights the fact that Opobo was diligently inserted into merchant and colonial systems throughout its history, and shows the traces of their early seizing of western political and economic contractual negotiation.

The most important and contentious itemized payment in money that appears in the S.U. Jaja account as £369-5-5, or about 25% of total income, was for the value of war canoes, guns and munitions that had been confiscated in 1892. The entire history and documentation of the case has been compiled by historian S.O. Jaja. At the time of confiscation, there was a clause in the agreements that promised a given cash equivalent if the items were not returned, no sooner than 30 and no later than 50 years from the signing. In 1939, 47 years later, the Opobo chiefs brought a formal case against the British government for compensation. After four years searching for documents, and long correspondences between Opobo, Lagos and Whitehall, the compensation was paid to the Opobo chiefs in 1944 and 1945. Stephen U. Jaja of King Jaja House is recorded in S.O. Jaja's account to have received exactly the same amount, £369.5.5, as is recorded in S.U. Jaja's account on 27 January 1945. His share was approximately 1/28 of the £11,420 paid to the 28 chiefly houses. The chiefs of three other houses pursued another small element of the claim – a money deposit as security in 1889 – until 1952. The documentary history put together by Dr. S.O. Jaja is an astonishingly detailed source in itself, and it also provides testimony to the Opobo diligence and determination to pursue their case in full legal form, and sometimes in archaic English language, by a strict preservation of sources over more than 50 years.<sup>26</sup>

'Subsidy', as another category of Jaja's income, was the term used for payments to chiefs, originally – in this area at any rate – as replacement for the customs duty (*comey*) they had earned under the trade system of the pre-colonial years, when they

were independent political entities with the power of taxation. According to Jones, Opobo's subsidy started out at £500, which was later reduced to £399.<sup>27</sup> But the subsidy was 'distributed between various chiefs at the whim of the colonial government'.<sup>28</sup> It never sufficed for the kind of expense that S.U. Jaja itemizes. One might see here, then, the origin of Jaja's huge deficit and unsustainable sources of income. The deficit would be even higher if all 10 years of 'Emoluments and Domestic Expenses' were included. In fact, the costs of personal householding – at £120 p.a. for 1944 and 1945, and £180 for 1946 through 1948 – are only summarized for those five years: the five years when S.U. Jaja was head of his house. If counted for the whole period, £180 p.a. they would have added another £900 to the shortfall of just over £1,500 (50%). (Of course we do not have accounts from his personal sources, so we must assume that Jaja considers this to be separate from official commitments.)

Clearly the Opobo had benefited enormously from adopting diligence in colonial-style record-keeping, letter writing and recourse to western lawyers, which I think may partly account for the style and substance of S.U. Jaja's accounts and his extraordinarily detailed formal letters to colonial officials. By the time the British finally confirmed his deposition by the family, S.U. Jaja had driven them distraction by his legalistic letters to them. Modern legalism, however, came as easily to the Opobo as reference to 'time immemorial' and the *manilla* economy. Indeed, they are historically intertwined.

We turn now to an interpretation of the nature of these accounts.

### 4. An account of the cost of sovereign powers

To indicate the style of the account, the following are some examples of where narratives of legitimacy and finance are brought together. The reader's attention is drawn to the mix of a) detailed explanation and naming of traditions, or allusion to them, b) emphatic statement of the compulsory nature and level of payments to ensure various kinds of action, and c) the connection of these customary transactions to the efficacy, not only of tradition, but of colonial law and administration themselves.

Extract 1: The Installation of the *Pre*, (or king) (p. 22)

Custom further ordains that, whereas, the gala vigil ('sodi') with its gala dinner is sacred to God Almighty, it should willy-nilly be kept at the expense of every newly created chief, every successor and every new ruler; and that if any chief prefer to give the equivalent of the state banquet in money, forty-eight thousand manillas (48,000) which is at present £600, must invariably be paid to Asimini - a legal name under which the national assembly can sue and be sued.

Extract 2: The Harvest Festivals (*Bru-ama-iwo*) for 1945 through 1948 (pp. 44–47). After two and a half pages of description of the performances, and naming of the participants, the following are exemplary of the nine items listed:

3. When the bringing of the yams and corn was delayed, Matthew Tatari Jaja and Frank Egecha Jaja were also delegated to go to Chief Yobe in order to hasten him to dispatch the yams and corns. Tobacco (10/-) and another sum of one Pound (£1/3/0) were once more sent to him to defray the initial expenses, if the first sum was not sufficient. £1-13-0
4. Paid Benedict for the hire of his small canoe. £0-2-0

Extract 3: On the Subsidy Suit (p. 75)

Item viii under expenditure heading P, Disputes and Law Cases. Opobo Comey Subsidy Case: Suit nos. MO/52/46, C/17/48, C/32/48, P/7/49. It includes 15 numbered elements, of which the following are exemplary:

9. Travelling expenses to and fro Ikot Ekpen for the Hearing of Subsidy Suit No. MO/52/46 which was struck off on 3 May 1948, and for the Hearing of Egwanga Land Case: Suit no. C/12/45, on Tuesday, 14 May 1948, have been stated in Head P, Item vii, paragraph 8... (cost from para 8) £4-17-6

10. When Chief Effiom John Eyamba and other Chiefs of Calabar who were subpoenaed by the Subsidised Chiefs of Opobo as their witnesses in the Subsidy Suit paid official visit to the Royal Palace, their entertainment was assessed at £3-17-1

The style differs little from his letters appealing his deposition as chief of the House of Jaja, which depend on a similar mastery of the technologies of record-keeping and the rhetoric of appeal, which are also similar to the correspondence over reparations.<sup>29</sup> For example, a closely argued and precedent-documented two-page, single-spaced letter from 4 November 1946 starts: 'May it please your Worship, The humble petition of your most obedient servant most respectfully sheweth that... ', and signs off: 'And your humble petitioner, as in duty bound, will ever pray to remain, Sir, Your Worship's Most Obedient Servant.' S.U. Jaja knew perfectly well how to produce British-style documents. He recorded every detail, indulged in legalistic hair-splitting and flowery obsequiousness, using to the full the administrative style of numbering points and prefacing arguments with a page of 'whereas' clauses, and constantly referring to the British 'high sense of justice, refined nature, and acts of humanity',<sup>30</sup> in a manner that bordered on parody and ultimately maddened the British authorities.

Such a royal financial account was not required by the authorities. Chiefs were not paid an official state salary during the period covered, and so were not accountable to the government for their use of funds. Indeed the British moved away from a Warrant Chief system in 1929 towards a Native Authority system of local government and finance over the decades from 1931 to 1954.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, however, the document follows the logic of western accounting in many ways, as if it were a financial report to a validating power. There are categories of expenditure, itemized entries, columns of monetary amounts, subtotals and totals. A negative balance is strongly implicit, showing that the responsibilities of chieftaincy surpassed income by a very large margin.

Unless this account is a kind of 'folly' produced by an obsessive and very gifted mind, its purpose tends towards clearly defining the otherwise ambiguous intersection of the personal and the official in a manner that preserves the claims of 'tradition' to sovereign powers of self-determination, such as those that prevailed in the reparations case. S.U. Jaja's personal income, for example from plantations, is not mentioned at all. The cost of running a royal household is simply summarized as £780: exactly 25% of total expenditure. It appears as 'Estimate for 1944 (and each year to 1948) with the strictest economy', shifting only from £120 p.a. to £180 p.a. in 1946 (p. 81). Very little appears with respect to public social investments, such as education and health, which would come under the evolving Native Authority system.<sup>32</sup> A massive amount of the expenditure is about the self-legitimation and reproduction of

the position, the House and legal frameworks for resource control and self-validation.

Eastern Nigerians of the time would be aware of shifting colonial ideas and practices with respect to all the powers and functions of differing governance structures at the local level, so the public or popular functions of chiefs would be in question. The old modernism based on sovereignty claims and indirect rule were giving way to a new modernism of representative bodies financing education and local financial management. In fact, the younger generation in Opobo was very angry when their chiefs won reparations in 1944 then wasted them on their own interests rather than building a secondary school.<sup>33</sup> In both the account and his appeal against deposition, S.U. Jaja was using legal and administrative expertise that had succeeded so dramatically in the reparations case. He consistently supported the consolidation of tradition in a manner that ended up being extremely annoying to all other parties – political opposition within his House, the educated youth of Opobo and the colonial government – at least in part by virtue of its surpassing sophistication in the mastery of procedure and profound conviction about rituals of office. By 1954 his vision would seem delusional or obsessive. Even so, we learn something about money and records that I have not seen elsewhere: an itemized cost-accounting of the maintenance of a kind of traditional authority that is endorsed by the historian S.O. Jaja as an 'experiment' in independence that is simultaneously African and modern.

Throughout the account there is striking reference to customs handed down from 'time immemorial', even though the Opobo polity was only founded in 1870, by a former slave turned king, who struck off with his followers from their original polity of Bonny. In keeping with their notion of an African economy and sovereignty,<sup>34</sup> Opobo leaders co-constructed a tradition and a modernity that one sees materialized in the activities and expenditures described in these accounts. The repetition of terms implying obligation to tradition – 'willy-nilly', 'from time immemorial' – punctuates the minutely retailed list of 'pounds, shillings and pence' like a choral refrain.

### Conclusions

As in many 'inventions of tradition', S.U. Jaja brought book-keeping to chieftaincy: as a voluntary contribution and persuasive argument. His system contains only traces of old calculative modes, and then for apparently strategic reasons. Its originality lies in the punctilious instantiation of categories invented quite recently, brought forward and probably also elaborated in the present. His account belongs with the record of the reparations suit as an example of a localized African effort to appropriate and develop a modernity after its own model, combining – perfectly logically if idiosyncratically – techniques that neither he nor others could ever bring into balance. In fact, by this time the cost of chieftaincy may have been a quantity that no-one else wanted even to know about, especially in terms that suggested the technical possibility of its assimilability into a colonial accounting mode. So we remain with questions: Was S.U. Jaja making a plea for recognition of the cost of legitimate chiefly rule? Or was he exemplifying a capacity for African modernity? Or perhaps he was parodying colonial accounting, producing (for example) a

precise account of how much it cost him to organize ceremonial receptions and send-offs for colonial officers – (£80 sterling, not a mean amount)? I suspect that he was showing, in excruciating detail, the absolute unworkability of British colonial aspirations to create mixed forms of rule by applying colonial accounting methods to the cost of an African legitimacy. Perhaps his relentless persistence, beyond his time in office, in pursuit of Weberian-style bureaucratic rationality, is what persuaded the final colonial commentator on his deposition appeal case to define him as ‘off his head’. This still leaves me with my original question of how a *manilla* accounting of chieftaincy might have worked in the past, but by way of a trajectory through the creative confrontations that have occurred along the way to the systems we now choose to define as ‘modern’.

## Notes

- 1 Iroko 1987.
- 2 Law 1995.
- 3 Barber 2007.
- 4 Carruthers and Espeland 1991.
- 5 See McCaskie 1980.
- 6 See Barber 1995.
- 7 Shipton 1991.
- 8 See Guyer 2004, ch. 4.
- 9 Roberts and Roberts 1996.
- 10 Hountondji 2007, title translated by the author.
- 11 The reasons for demonetization of manillas and cowries were partly to do with the disruptive effects of a seasonally fluctuating exchange rate between colonial and local currencies, and especially in the food economy, which could severely affect the purchasing power of civil servants’ salaries (Naanen 1993). Not all European merchants were in favour however, and there was an entire system of local expertise in money management that stood to lose mightily (see Ofonagoro 1976; Gregory 1996), not to mention the losses of those holding caches of wealth in cowries which, unlike *manillas*, were not redeemed in colonial currency (Guyer 2004). Another interest in the retention of ‘indigenous currencies’ was the ritual complex, whose importance was acknowledged by permission being given for each manilla holder to retain 200 for use in funerals and other celebrations. Over 32 million *manillas* were collected and redeemed, from a population in the Calabar Provinces of about one-and-a-half million people, at something close to the going exchange rate of four to the shilling (United African Company 1949; Amogu 1952).
- 12 S.O. Jaja 1991
- 13 Guyer 2004.
- 14 Letter of S.U. Jaja to the Senior District Officer, 4 November 1946. NNA: V/8A, V/9A no. 38322/s.467.
- 15 Jones Papers, Box A3.
- 16 Jones Papers, Box A3.
- 17 Nigerian National Archives V/8A, V/9A No 38322/s.467
- 18 Carruthers and Espeland 1991.
- 19 Latham 1971.
- 20 Jaja 1991.
- 21 Jones 1958, 51.
- 22 Guyer 2004, 58.
- 23 Jones 1962, 94.
- 24 Verran 2001.
- 25 S.O. Jaja 1991.
- 26 S.O. Jaja 1991.
- 27 Jones 1962, 95.
- 28 Jones 1962, 187.
- 29 See S.O. Jaja 1991.
- 30 Letter of 5 July 1947.

- 31 Noah 1987.
- 32 See Noah 1987.
- 33 See S.O. Jaja 1991, quoting articles in the *Eastern Nigerian Guardian*.
- 34 See S.O. Jaja 1991.

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# Money and Mercantilism in Nigerian Historical Plays: A Womanist Reading

Foluke Ogunleye

## Drama and money in Nigeria: an abiding relationship

The geographical space known as Nigeria has used diverse types of monetary systems over a long period of time. Spanish dollars were used until 11 May, 1880 when they were demonetized, and British coins, and a few foreign gold and silver coins, were made legal tender. In 1958, MacGregor Laird issued token coins in Nigeria. Throughout the period when Nigeria remained a British colony, the British pound sterling (GBP) was used in Nigeria. When preparations for Nigerian independence began in 1959, the Nigerian pound (NGP) was issued. It continued in circulation until January 1, 1973, when the *naira* was introduced, and notes were issued for 50 *kobo*, 1, 5 and 10 *naira*.

However, before 1973 there had been an earlier change of currency during the 6 July, 1967–13 January, 1970 civil war. This was done in order to ensure that Biafran supplies of pre-war Nigerian currency were rendered useless. This forced Biafra to introduce its own currency and coins, the Biafran pound (BIAP), designed to be at par with the Nigerian pound. It became worthless after Biafra was reincorporated into Nigeria. In 1984, the Buhari/Idiagbon administration withdrew all the *naira* notes in circulation and reissued them in new colours. This was because it was felt that too much *naira* was circulating within and outside the country and it was impossible for the Central Bank to really monitor the circulation. The withdrawal and re-issue were therefore designed to instil sanity into the monetary system. Many other denominations of the *naira* notes have been issued since 1973: 20 *naira* notes were issued in 1976, 50 *naira* in 1991, 100 *naira* in 1999, 200 *naira* in 2000, 500 *naira* in 2001 and 1,000 *naira* in 2005. In 2007, new versions of the 5 to 50 *naira* banknotes were issued.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years the relationship between drama and ‘money’ in Nigeria has been consolidated through frequent interaction. For instance, every time the currency is changed dramatists would be called upon to take part in the sensitization and acclimatization process. Many Nigerians are illiterates and it would be necessary to explain the new currency to them so that they could understand and be able to use it without being cheated by fraudsters and counterfeiters. Dramatists would produce short skits to be performed through different media – radio, television, stage, ‘guerrilla’ theatre etc. One of the veterans of the Nigerian theatre, Oyin Adejobi has this to say:

For one thing, I regard actors as practical journalists because there may be some issues of public importance which the government wants to publicise but which people may not care to read about. And of course many people cannot read in our society. Through special plays we can publicize such issues and interest the people in them ...<sup>2</sup>

In 1973, another seasoned dramatist, Moses Olaiya Adejumo designed a series of plays to introduce the *naira* notes to people. The plays would generally end with a refrain which served as a mnemonic device for the mastery of the *naira*:

*Hafu kobo eepini, kobo kan ni kobo kan, ogorun kobo naira kan, naira meji, poun kan.*<sup>3</sup>

Translation: Half a *kobo* is equivalent to halfpenny, 1 *kobo* is equal to 1 penny, 100 *kobo* is equal to 1 *naira*, 2 *naira* is the equivalent of 1 pound.<sup>4</sup>

Similar dramatizations to promote the new Ghana *cedi* also took place in the Ghanaian media in 2007. The Bank of Ghana provided information to the Ghanaian populace through radio, television, print and internet about notes, coins and security features, assurances that people would not lose their money and that the value of the old currency and the new was the same.<sup>5</sup> Adejumo’s plays and the refrain helped the Nigerian masses to master the intricacies of the new *naira* currency. This kind of drama has continued in Nigeria. The latest currency change has also spawned some short skits; the following is a paraphrase of a television skit,<sup>6</sup> which endeavors to help the re-introduction of coins into the monetary system:

(A motorcyclist has just bought petrol and is being given change by the petrol attendant. The attendant gives the change in notes and turns away.)

Motorcyclist: Please give me my change

Petrol Attendant: I don’t have change

Motorcyclist: I know coins have been introduced into the system now, so give me my change.

Petrol Attendant: My brother, what do you want to do with coins? They will be too heavy for your pocket.

Motorcyclist: The new coins are very light and convenient to carry, so give me my change sharp sharp.

(The petrol attendant gives him his change)

The examples given above fall within the contemporary period, but we shall also look at examples from historical plays. Historical drama is an invaluable vehicle of documentation; it serves as a mirror of the society or the age in which the drama is set. Historical drama can be described as a form of drama which reflects or re-presents historical proceedings. Since time immemorial writers have combined fiction and history in creative works. We can describe the history play as:

that which reconstructs a personage, a series of events, a movement, or the spirit of a past age and pays the debt of serious scholarship to the facts of the age being re-created.<sup>7</sup>

When a dramatist makes conscientious use of historical facts, displaying real comprehension of history and historic periods, the dramatist can then be described as a historian.

Akinwunmi Isola’s plays, *Efunsetan Aniwura* and *Madam Tinubu*, fall into the category of historical drama, treating as they do the stories of the eponymous heroines. *Efunsetan Aniwura* was the second Iyalode (queen of women) of Ibadan and she died on 30 June, 1874. *Efunroye Tinubu* was the first Iyalode of Egbaland and she died in 1887. These two plays have as subjects two rich women of their era. These women became rich as a result of their mercantile activities. This paper

examines how they became rich, what positions in society their riches obtained for them, what they used their money for, what opportunities they had as a result of their riches and finally, how society reacted to their riches.

In concluding this paper, we will provide an insight into the attitude of 19th-century Yoruba people to money. We must admit that these plays are not verbatim historical documents. Scholars have noted two major approaches to history by theatre artists and scholars. These approaches are: the nationalistic approach, which explores the past for the purpose of displaying its grandeur, glory and richness of its cultural heritage, and the critical approach, which probes into the past for the purpose of making our historical experience and cultural heritage positively relevant to the present and future.<sup>8</sup>

Akinwunmi Isola admits taking artistic liberty with historical facts in writing his historical plays. According to Ogundeji, he skillfully selects and modifies historical materials, retaining some, leaving some out, reshaping others and also adding new ones.<sup>9</sup> Akinwunmi Isola himself states:

... some playwrights of historical drama are not loyal to strict historical details. ... [the playwright,] like his counterparts in other literatures, is not a historian. He is an interpreter of history. His interpretation may be subjective and the reasons of the subjective stand vary from writer to writer.<sup>10</sup>

There are many reasons necessitating an alternative source of documenting history. Today, in Nigeria, most people who know about the eponymous heroines of the plays, *Efunsetan Aniwura* (1962) and *Madam Tinubu* (1998), obtained their knowledge either from Akinwunmi Isola's plays or the films made from them. Over 14,000 people watched the stage performance of *Efunsetan Aniwura* in 1981 at the Liberty Stadium in Ibadan when it was staged. Also, the play has been produced on television, film, long-playing record, and as photoplay magazine. These make the play available to a very large audience. *Madam Tinubu* has also been performed on stage on many occasions. It has been performed twice as the convocation play at the Obafemi Awolowo University.

### **Efunsetan Aniwura**

Understanding of Efunsetan's riches and influence can be garnered from her praise chant:

Efunsetan, Iyalode  
 One who has horses and rides them not.  
 The child who walks in a graceful fashion.  
 Adekemi Ogunrin!  
 The great hefty woman who adorns her legs with beads  
 Whose possessions surpass those of the Aare  
 Owner of several puny slaves in the farm.  
 Owner of many giant slaves in the market.  
 One who has bullets and gunpowder,  
 Who has gunpowder as well as guns.  
 And spends money like a conjurer.  
 The Iyalode who instills fear into her equals.  
 The rich never give their money to the poor.  
 The Iyalode never gives her wrappers to the lazy.<sup>11</sup>

It ought to be noted that Efunsetan was a product of her socio-political milieu. She grew up in times of wars. Automatically, she began and centered her trade on war supplies and slave trafficking. In traditional Yoruba society, the administrative structure encompasses the system of chieftdom, among others. At the head is the paramount ruler, supported by various chiefs who are in touch with people at the grassroots.

In Ibadan, the largest city in West Africa, the interests of women are protected by the existence and activities of the office of the Iyalode.<sup>12</sup> This office, according to Johnson:

is a title bestowed upon the most distinguished lady in the town. She has also her lieutenants Otun, Osi, Ekerin, etc., as any of the other principal chiefs of the town. Some of these Iyalodes command a force of powerful warriors, and have a voice in the council of the chiefs. Through the Iyalode, the women of the town can make their voices heard in municipal and other affairs.<sup>13</sup>

This is a rarity in the patriarchal Yoruba society, but this phenomenon shows that the womenfolk are not entirely muzzled, as one would believe. Women in Yoruba land from time immemorial have always had an important role to play and a strong voice in the affairs of the Yoruba society.

Efunsetan Aniwura became the second Iyalode (leader of all the women) of Ibadan around the 1860s. She was very rich – she had ‘hundreds of slaves on her farms, with many others at home’.<sup>14</sup> She was involved in trading with Europeans – taking goods from the hinterland to the coast and bringing imported goods, especially arms and ammunition back to the hinterland. Consequently, she was a force to be reckoned with both economically and politically. According to Bolanle Awe:

she was noted for extending credit facilities to the warriors whom she gave guns and ammunition when they were going on military expedition.<sup>15</sup>

On their return, she would receive payment in slaves brought from the war, which she would in turn take to the coast for sale. Another way in which she contributed to the political consolidation of the state was through fielding her band of warriors in any expedition embarked upon by the paramount ruler, Aare Latosa. These warriors, about 100 in number, were mainly her slaves, and like other warrior chiefs, she supplied them with guns and ammunition, food, clothing, etc. Latosa was a troublemaker, and he soon became jealous of Efunsetan's riches and political clout. Efunsetan's political woes arose from her participation in the war effort. Aare Latosa and his chiefs were becoming tardy in the payment of debts owed Efunsetan. She therefore stopped extending credit facilities to them. When Aare Latosa set out for another war in 1874, she refused to give her usual support. After returning from the battlefield, Latosa brought three trumped-up charges against Efunsetan:

1. that she did not accompany him to war;
2. that she never sent him supplies during the campaign;
3. that she did not come in person to meet him outside the town wall to congratulate him on his safe return.

Based on these flimsy charges, he deposed Efunsetan on 1 May 1874, replacing her with her Otun (First Lieutenant). Her Otun was blackmailed into taking the title with the threat that refusal to do so would earn her expulsion from the town and that she would only be allowed to take just one suit of apparel. Being a woman of very great means, she had to oblige. Despite the fact that Efunsetan paid all the fines imposed upon her, and through costly gifts sought the goodwill of prominent chiefs seeking to use them as emissaries to request forgiveness from the Aare, these were all in vain.<sup>16</sup>

### **Madam Tinubu**

The playwright, Akinwunmi Isola wrote in the preface:

My concern here is to interpret those facts of history in a way to draw relevant economic and political conclusions for contemporary education.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, Efunroye Tinibu left her imprint on the economic and political sands of her time. According to Samuel Johnson, Efunroye Tinubu was an active adversary of the British colonial government, who was banished by the government from Lagos to her native Abeokuta in the 19th century. She was a former slave trader who, once she realized the differences between domestic slaving and the inhumane treatment of slaves in Europe and the Americas, became an active opponent to all slave trade. Madam Tinubu became the first Iyalode or 'the queen of the ladies' of Egbaland. The Iyalode is a member of the traditional council and she protects the interest of womenfolk in the city. She was able to build a small financial empire through trading in arms and salt. She is currently considered an important figure in Nigerian history due to her political significance as a strong female leader.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Indices of Efunroye Tinubu's riches and consequent influence as presented in the play**

In the play, we see the character of Madam Tinubu as very influential. Her servants are shown to move freely between towns and villages, buying up agricultural and other products for her without fear of molestation.<sup>19</sup> On a particular shopping expedition her servants returned with 250 tins of red palm oil and 501 bags of cotton, and this was one of their bad days.<sup>20</sup> At one point she had over £500 in deposits from foreign merchants who were doing business with her.<sup>21</sup> One of her foreign associates Mr Birdlake describes her thus: 'she is the most effective trade middleman along the western coast of Africa'.<sup>22</sup>

As a result of her riches and political influence, some people became jealous of her and began to look for ways to bring her business down. For example, a white man, Mr. Sandman, sponsored some Lagosians to become Tinubu's adversaries in trade. Her political weight ensured that King Dosumu relied heavily on her wise advice. In order to stop this, Consul Campbell had to surreptitiously cause a crack to develop in the relationship between the two, so that he would be able to manipulate King Dosumu to cede Lagos to the British.<sup>23</sup> She had powerful friends, both black and white. For example, one of her servants reports:

At Ibadan, but for the help of your good friend, Madam Efunsetan, the Iyalode, we would not have got much to buy. When she heard of our trouble with our rivals, she sent her servants to buy all the oil and cotton available in every market around.<sup>24</sup>

Also, the foreign merchants were ready to support her with the full force of their influence and military might and were ready to put at her disposal their ships, fighting men, etc. in her fight with King Dosumu and his cronies. It was not possible for King Dosumu to cede Lagos to the British until she was exiled to Abeokuta. She died in 1887.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Relevance of Akinwumi Isola's plays to the contemporary period**

Akinwumi Isola reflects his 'fictional' freedom in his plays, *Efunsetan Aniwura* (1962) and *Madam Tinubu* (1998). He does this by going beyond mere historical documentation, accomplishing a reconstruction of historical facts with his own artistic interpretation. The plays are not verbatim factual narrations, but they provide insights into the period within which they are situated and the periods within which they were written. The plays reflect contemporaneity through an

engraftment of salient socio-political and socio-economic issues within their thematic construct. *Efunsetan Aniwura* reflects the pre-independence economic terrain in Nigeria and how it affected early post-colonial economy. During the period in question, Nigeria was heavily dependent on agriculture. Slaves were also used as cheap labour to obtain agricultural produce. The British, like other newcomers to the slave trade, formed national trading companies. The first such effective English enterprise was the Company of the Royal Adventurers, chartered in 1660 and succeeded in 1672 by the Royal African Company. These companies built and maintained the forts considered essential to hold stocks of slaves and trade goods. The slave trade was one of the major causes of the devastating internecine strife in southern Nigeria during the three centuries to the mid-1800s (Country Studies Program). These wars and their effects have been documented in Isola's *Efunsetan Aniwura*. *Madam Tinubu* also reflects the activities of the trading companies as well as Britain's usurpation of the power of coastal chiefs, gradually paving the way for colonialism.

More importantly, a study of Nigeria's economic history reveals that whereas Nigeria was an agricultural force to be reckoned with during its early post-colonial days, in the decade up to 1983, her agricultural output declined 1.9% and exports fell 7.9%. Nigeria's economy from the 1970s became dependent on petroleum, which accounted for 87% of export receipts and 77% of the federal government's current revenue in 1988. After the short-lived oil boom, GNP per capita per year decreased 4.8% from 1980 to 1987, which led in 1989 to Nigeria's classification by the World Bank as a low-income country (based on 1987 data) for the first time since the annual World Development Report was instituted in 1978. In 1989 the World Bank also declared Nigeria poor enough to be eligible (along with countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Chad, and Mali) for concessional aid from an affiliate, the International Development Association (IDA) (Country Studies Program).

The two plays under study show the general lopsidedness in the wealth distribution in the Nigerian society. There are slave owners who have more than enough money, and slaves who live in abject penury and are totally at the mercy of their owners. We also see a 'middle-class' that curry the favour of the upper class in order to make ends meet. The plays thereby effectively reveal the economic stratification inherent in capitalistic societies. The end of the oil boom also resulted in endemic corruption within the Nigerian nation. Isola's *Madam Tinubu* was written and published during this period. It is therefore not surprising that intrigues within the play are structured around money and political influences.

The changing attitude in the issue of gender sensitivity is also revealed in the two plays. The earlier play, *Efunsetan Aniwura* reveals the male reluctance to ascribe positive value to womenfolk. The play downplays the positive attributes of the heroine, Efunsetan, such as hard work, her ability to build a thriving financial empire, her possession of an army that provided military support for the internecine wars fought by the Ibadan people. Disproportionately, her negative attributes are exaggerated. She is presented as a wicked slave mistress, arrogant and insubordinate to constituted authority. This is because during this period it was an aberration to have a woman towering above the males in the Yoruba society.

However, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, gender equality became the norm in Yoruba society. It is therefore not surprising to note that Isola presents his Madam Tinubu as an empowered heroine, who is able to make an indelible impact upon her society.

Despite Isola's 'fictional' freedom in writing the plays, he still maintains an historical consciousness, which guides him in writing the plays. For instance, he never undermines the greatness of the Yoruba race; rather, he glorifies its heroes and exalts mythical and historical achievements of the Yoruba in both plays. He never lost sight of the fact that the Yoruba culture must be upheld at all times.

### Conclusion

The two women of our discourse lived within the same timeframe. They were distinguished women traders whose business acumen had given them undisputed influence not only in the world of commerce, but also in the political and social life of the country. In agreement with these two sayings: 'Money answereth all things' and 'Money speaks', success in business and commitment to a sense of nationhood enabled them to take an active part in the defense and expansion of Ibadan and Lagos. In Ibadan today, a statue erected at one of the ring roads in Ibadan has been named after Efunsetan, the second Iyalode of Ibadan. Tinubu Square on Lagos Island (previously Independence Square) is named after Madam Tinubu.

These two women today serve as beacons of hope to African women, encouraging them to strive to become successful in business. They also serve as proof that women can excel in all areas of endeavor, given the right opportunities. However, the patriarchal system that destroyed these two heroines show that the goodwill of men is not usually extended to women who are richer and more powerful than them. This is a negative attitude that needs to be dealt with through resocialization.

From the two plays we learn that there were a lot of trading activities going on between Europeans and Africans during the historical period covered by the plays. We also have a record of the kinds of trade goods that were in existence in the 19th century. We see Madam Tinubu trading in palm oil and cotton. We also see samples of the currency that was in circulation. For instance, pennies and pounds are mentioned.<sup>26</sup> Efunsetan Aniwura's praise chant is also illuminating. Trade materials mentioned in the chant include horses, beads, slaves, bullets, gunpowder, guns and wrappers. Trading in these goods made her so rich that her 'possessions surpass those of the Aare'<sup>27</sup>, the paramount ruler who was supposed to be the richest and most influential person in the society. This implies that her mercantile activities were more profitable than the Aare's war-mongering activities.

Apparently 19th-century Yoruba people revered money, and they felt that it could open all doors. However, they were not ready to tolerate excessive wealth in the hands of women. It is however obvious that in the contemporary period, within which the plays were written, women are no longer vilified for daring to be rich. Efunsetan Aniwura is forgiven for being rich, but she had to be branded as a wicked woman in order to be killed off. Madam Tinubu on the other hand is presented as a positive role model – rich, politically conscious, kind and an activist; the tone of the play about her is laudatory. This reveals

the changing times – society is becoming gender conscious and the sky is the limit for women that possess the right qualities. The plays have succeeded in displaying the grandeur, glory and richness of the Yoruba heritage. At the same time they have stimulated deep thoughts about attitudes, both historical and contemporary, and they have also encouraged formation of positive attitudes towards possession and administration of wealth. Hopefully the messages of these plays will serve as ammunition in the battle for moral rearmament, which is currently being fought to turn Nigeria around from a self-destructive voyage propelled by corruption and an inordinate quest for wealth.

### Notes

- 1 Central Bank of Nigeria Website.
- 2 As cited in Jeyifo 1984, 116.
- 3 As relayed on Western Nigeria Television, Ibadan.
- 4 Translation by the author.
- 5 Bank of Ghana Website.
- 6 As relayed on Nigerian television Authority Network.
- 7 Langner 1960, 238.
- 8 Rotimi 2003, 90.
- 9 Ogundeji, nd., 3–4.
- 10 Akinwunmi Isola 1981, 403.
- 11 Awe 2001, 65.
- 12 Johnson 1921, 77.
- 13 Johnson 1921, 77.
- 14 Awe 2001, 65.
- 15 Awe 2001, 74.
- 16 Johnson 1921, 391.
- 17 Isola 1998, vii.
- 18 Johnson 1921, 391.
- 19 Isola 1998, 3.
- 20 Isola 1998, 4.
- 21 Isola 1998, 69.
- 22 Isola 1998, 69.
- 23 Isola 1998, vii) and Falola, 33.
- 24 Isola 1998, 5.
- 25 Isola 1998, vii and Falola, 33.
- 26 Isola 1998, 5, 69.
- 27 Awe 2001, 65.

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