

# ***THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES***

## **Protest against Forced Labour in Niger Province of Nigeria, 1907 – 1912: The Role of Reverend J. D. Aitken and Bishop Tugwell**

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### **Abstract:**

*In the period between 1900 and 1960, Nigeria was under British colonial rule. The policy of forced labour was introduced in order to meet the colonial demands for labour on the railway construction sites. In Niger Province, thousands of villagers were recruited as forced labourers to work on the railway construction sites under severe exploitative and inhuman conditions. This forced some Christian missionaries such as Reverend J. D. Aitken and Bishop Tugwell to cry out against this extremely tortuous and oppressive treatment of forced labourers. In spite of denials by colonial officials, information from both colonial sources and informants confirmed the allegations of widespread exploitation of forced labourers on the railway construction sites in the Niger Province of Nigeria.*

### **1. Introduction**

It will be recalled that by 1900, most parts of Nigeria had come under British colonial rule. One of the policies introduced was that of forced labour to work on the mines and railway construction sites. In Niger Province of Nigeria, thousands of villagers were recruited as forced labourers to work on the Baro-Kano railways between 1908 and 1912. Indeed, it was estimated that by the time the work on the Baro – Kano railway ended in 1912, about 251,443 labourers had been recruited from the Niger Province (NAK, Min Prof 39/1912). However, during the construction of the railway lines, the conditions of the forced labourers became a subject of concern to some Christian Missionaries such as Reverend Aitken and Bishop Tugwell. It will therefore be interesting to find out the concerns expressed by both of them and the reactions of the colonial authorities. Indeed, this is the focus of this paper.

In the light of above, we begin by examining the reasons for the construction of railways in Nigeria generally. Next, we focus on how forced labour was recruited and the conditions of such labour on the railway construction sites. Thirdly, the concerns over conditions of forced labour expressed by Reverend Aitken and Bishop Tugwell will be examined including the reactions of the colonial authorities. Finally, the paper concludes.

### **2. The Construction of Railways in Nigeria**

In March 1896, the British began the construction of railways from Lagos in Nigeria. By 1900, the construction had reached Ibadan and later Ilorin in the North (Iyela; 1987). However, although Lagos was now linked by railway with the North, Lord Lugard in his annual report of 1900, began to argue for the immediate necessity for a railway line from the Niger banks to Kano. On the advantage to be derived from it, Lugard argued that it would greatly promote the development of trade; ease the conveyance of produce from the interior down to the coast; and facilitate communication and rapid transportation of troops and supplies.

In his annual report of 1902, therefore, Lugard drew the attention of the British Colonial office to the immediate need for a railway to replace the human portage as a means of communication into the interior which was not only costly, but unsatisfactory. After some investigations (Orr; 1965:185), the British Government ordered the construction of a line from Baro on the Niger to Kano and secondly, the Lagos Extension to link the former (Orr; *ibid*). The construction of both covered the period 1907 to 1912. However, this was immediately followed by the construction of the Eastern railway from 1913 to 1927 (Ode; 1981: 170)

### **3. Recruitment and Conditions of Forced Labourers**

Most of the labour required for carrying out the railway projects was organised by the village Heads. Whenever the District officers needed labour, they informed the village Heads in the area concerned. The village Heads, in turn, ordered their subjects to assemble for a meeting during which they were informed of the demands made by the District Officer. All those who were forcibly selected by their village Heads to work on the projects must arrive at the base camp not later than the date and time specified by the District officer (Oral Interview; Sunday, 1985). At the camp itself, workers were not given the opportunity of having even a little rest even after the long journeys from their respective villages. Instead, they were ordered, immediately on arrival, to construct their huts. On

their first mornings in the camps, these villagers were ordered out of their beds as early as 6.00 a.m. to be shown the work which they were expected to carry out. Subsequently, it became the responsibility of each village Head to organise the workers in their groups to perform the work already assigned which, regardless of the degree of the heat of the sun or the rains, they had to work on. Moreover, in order to ensure that the workers carried out the work assigned to them with despatch, the colonialist over-seers went round every project site carrying whips to compel the labourers to work harder. In addition to this form of oppression into which the workers were subjected, they were not allowed any break from work.

Usually, the duration of work days expected of every village work group was specified by the district officer. After this was met, the groups were released to be replaced by other groups. Before they were replaced, they were paid wages which, according to an informant (Oral Interview, Sunday, 1985), was very meagre and as low as 6s 6d weekly. Such were the terrible conditions of labour on the railway construction sites in Nigeria, in general and Niger Province in particular. In reaction, some Christian missionaries in Niger Province, found it necessary to cry out against these extremely tortuous and oppressive treatment of forced labourers.

#### **4. Protests by Rev. Aitken against Exploitation of Forced Labour**

In 1908 (NAK, Minprof 252/1908), one Reverend J. D. Aitken, who was the superintendent of the Mokwa District Northern Nigeria Mission wrote many letters to the Resident of Niger Province based at Bida. In these letters, he condemned the European supervisors and the African recruiters for extortion and exploitation of the labourers on the Lagos Extension which passed through the District in which he was stationed. Other revealing charges made by Reverend Aitken against the European supervisors included request for virgins to be supplied to them, that fowls were requisitioned and not paid for, and that "harsh and unjust treatment was being meted out to the Chiefs in connection with the provision of labour for the railways." (Ibid)

#### **5. Reactions to the Protest by Colonial Authorities**

However, at a meeting of the Local Executive Committee of the Church Missionary Society in Lokoja, the Reverend Aitken was not only pressurised by his Missionary colleagues to withdraw the charge, but he was also humiliated by transferring him out of Northern Nigeria (Ibid). No attempt was made by Reverend Aitken's colleagues to cross check the basis of his allegations. It was even more surprising that in defending the crimes perpetuated against the peasants and to which Rev. Aitken had referred, the Resident of Niger Province argued that:

I am of the opinion that our responsibility ends in seeing that the individual is paid. If he likes to pay his village or District Chief 3d per week probably for some services rendered... it is certainly no concern of Mr. Aitken's and I even doubt the wisdom of the political officer stopping this gift (Ibid).

However, in spite of the obvious attempts by the Resident and his missionary colleagues to cover up the allegations made by Rev. Aitken, some of them were confirmed by the political officer in charge of Mokwa District. He, for example, admitted that the African agents were in the habit of exploiting the labourers, although he failed to say anything on the allegations that the European supervisor exploited the labourers and on the issue of their demands for virgins and chickens (Mason, 1978:64)

To further confirm the allegation of extortion of African labour on the railway projects, one Mallam Isagi, an agent of the Nakorji who was in charge of recruiting labour in the village of Wagbe, "took six pounds from one gang of labourers as they returned home (Mason, Ibid:64). Another agent of the Nakourji (title holder of the town of Etsu Gaie) "owned to having taken various presents and gowns from several Yeti Villages (Mason, ibid: 64). Again another recruiting agent of the Benu, one Mallam Ibrahim, confessed that he extorted 12 shillings from a Bete village (Mason, ibid: 64).

#### **6. Protest by Bishop Tugwell against Exploitation of Forced Labour**

Apart from the documented protest by the Reverend Aitken, there was another instance of documented protest by the well – known Bishop Tugwell (NAK, SNP 6/592/1900), the Representative of the Church Missionary Society in Nigeria. Tugwell's protest was over the conditions of the employment and treatment of labour gangs at Baro. Bishop Tugwell, who visited Baro in 1909, complained to Mr. Wallace, the Acting Governor of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria, about the ill-treatment of African workers by their European overseers and African foremen. He specifically documented four serious allegations (Ibid).

Firstly, that from investigations which he had carried out, he discovered that most of the labourers did not volunteer their services on the railway, but were forced by the local chiefs to render their services.

Secondly, that although the labourers were normally paid six pence a day, they did not actually receive the amount since, a large part of their earning went to the men, who forcibly recruited them to work on the railway.

Thirdly, Bishop Tugwell alleged that the labourers were expected to work on the railway for eight or nine hours at a stretch under conditions which were positively revolting. Furthermore, he alleged that after rain, the labourers were called to carry rails weighing one third of a ton through mud and slush over the men's ankles. Many of the labourers were therefore injured and some very seriously and that, to the best of his knowledge, none of those who were injured received any compensation. Moreover, Bishop Tugwell made the startling revelation that labourers worked in gangs from 6.00 a.m. till 3.00 p.m. with one hour's rest and from 3.00 p.m. till midnight without any rest!

Fourthly, Tugwell, alleged that although workers who sustained injuries were not paid compensation, it was also true that "while carrying ... heavy loads, if a man slacks or slips, he is most cruelly beaten by those who are his overseers..." Whilst if a man escapes from Baro and runs to his village, he is sent back by his overlord possibly after further beating. Tugwell concluded his protest by saying that it was difficult to distinguish such a system (i.e. the condition to which the labourers were subjected) from slavery and that,

as one looked on the scene, one questioned whether any slaves in the days which are passed endured harder conditions and that the natives speak of those men as the “white man’s slaves.”

Bishop Tugwell claimed that he was not accusing anyone of the malpractices, but, that all he wanted Governor Wallace to do was to investigate his allegations and to improve the conditions of the labourers working on the railway.

### 7. Reactions to the Protest by the Colonial Authorities

Although Governor Wallace initially denied the allegations made by Bishop Tugwell, he nevertheless ordered an enquiry to be held at Baro. Some of the witnesses were Mr. Eaglesome, the Director of Railways, Northern Nigeria; Mr. Higgins, Surveyor of Works; Mr. Graham, the Paymaster; L. Taylor, the Assistant Accountant; Dr. Chartres; the Senior Medical Officer; and Captain Osborne, the District Superintendent of Police. Some Africans, including the son of the Emir of Lapai; Cousin of the Emir of Agaye; and the son of the Yerima of Bida, also testified.

As a result of the inquiry, Mr. Eaglesome confirmed some of the allegations of Bishop Tugwell against the Protectorate Administration. For example, Mr. Eaglesome admitted that, sometime in 1908, some European foremen from South Africa and even some Africans, were found guilty of ill-treating the labourers. Mr. Eaglesome also admitted that he did dismiss a South African foreman for allegedly beating labourers under him.

However, the report of Resident Goldsmith of Niger Province also went a long way to confirm many of Bishop Tugwell’s allegations. He admitted that the labourers that were recruited by the political staff were not voluntary and that it was sometimes necessary to use force in order to keep work going. He further confirmed that Village Heads usually threatened or pressurised the villagers to meet the demands of the political officers and that a certain amount of ill-treatment of the labourers were bound to occur at times since, foremen from various parts of the world were employed to control large number of labourers.

Again, Bishop Tugwell’s allegation of workers not receiving their full weekly pay was confirmed by Mr. Gordon Graham, whose testimony showed that, there had been instances when some of the village Heads had demanded some portion of the wages of the labourers. Also, Tugwell’s allegations that if a man escapes from Baro and ran to his village, he was sent back by his overlord, possibly, after further beating, was indirectly confirmed by the Nakorji of the town of Etsu Gaie, who admitted that “I have only known one or two cases of men, who actually, ran away from the work. They were always sent back” (Mason, opcit: 64).

Finally, as if to support the allegations of Bishop Tugwell, the Annual Report of Niger Province, for the final quarter of 1909, had this to say:

The supply of labour for the railway has given opportunities to native staff subordinate to practice a system of extortion on willing recruits. Native agent would go to villages and give an order in the name of the District Chief for so much labour to be supplied, but, it would appear, from certain cases tried in the provincial court, that these agents were quite prepared to accept cash equivalent as a substitute for an unwilling recruit (NAK, SNP 7/10 1106/1910).

It is not only the colonial sources that confirmed Tugwell’s allegations. They were also confirmed by most of my informants (Oral interview, Nama Yala, Sunday Shehu and Sumaila Ango, 1985) who recalled that the conditions of labourers who were forced to work on the railway construction sites was simply terrible. The informants further revealed that labourers, were paid meagre wages and forced to work for almost the entire day with a break of only one hour. This, they did regardless of whether there was rain or heavy sunshine. Such was the terrible and tortuous condition of labourers on the railway construction sites that there also began to be spontaneous and widespread reactions from the people of Niger Province against the system of forced labour.

### 8. Conclusion

In this paper, it was pointed out that the British colonial authorities introduced forced labour on the railway construction sites in Niger Province of Nigeria in the period 1907 – 1912. Christian Missionaries such as Reverend Aitken and Bishop Tugwell protested against the exploitation and inhuman treatment of forced labourers on the railway construction sites. In spite of the denials by colonial officials, it was confirmed by colonial and oral sources that there was widespread exploitation of forced labour

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