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"May it Please Your Honor": Letters of Petition as Historical Evidence in an African Colonial Context

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**“MAY IT PLEASE YOUR HONOR”:
LETTERS OF PETITION AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE
IN AN AFRICAN COLONIAL CONTEXT**

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I humbly lay my reputation on your verdict, and beg that your acute interest to help your subjects in this time of conflict mark you [as] an asset and real factor, helpful figure whose merciful eye would reflect upon my case which stands me a subject of compassion.—*Odili Ezeoke to the Authority Controlling Food Supply, Aba, 9 July 1943.*

I

Historians have relied on a variety of sources to analyze Africa's encounter with Europe and response to colonialism. Several scholars, who have published in the Heinemann African Social History Series, have relied on oral accounts to add an indigenous perspective to the history of colonialism in Africa. African history nevertheless suffers from a lack of other sources, such as diaries, journals, and personal narratives, which can enrich the historical narrative. Letters of petitions provide one of the very few opportunities to locate African men and women's voices as they confronted the new political, economic, judicial and social system that emerged in the colonial context. Petitions were widely used by every class of the African population in the colonial period and can help to re-evaluate African-European interactions and dialogues in a colonial context. Their existence challenges the notion of colonial authorities as a hegemonic force in the making of colonized societies in light of new

forms of evidence that redefine this encounter. Petitions were used by individuals as well as groups as a means to seek remedy for grievance for a number of types of actions, ranging from taxation, court cases and a variety of other issues. Yet, African petitions despite the important functions they performed as means of negotiating African-European relations have not been significantly explored as a tool for understanding interactions within colonial settings or fully integrated into the colonial historiography.

This paper presents some preliminary conclusions drawn from an ongoing project which aims to collect and collate letters of petitions in colonial Nigeria as primary source for historians and other scholars. The goal is to show the potential use of petitions as a foundation for gauging African reactions and responses to colonialism focusing on the petitions that emerged during the Second World War in colonial Eastern Nigeria. The paper is based on the collection of petitions located at the National Archives of Nigeria at Enugu written by people living in the rural and urban areas in colonial Eastern Nigeria during the Second World War. Mainly addressed to District Officers in Colonial Eastern Nigeria from within the region, they reflect the concerns of individuals and groups as they relate to the crisis engendered by the Second World War and the policies and controls imposed by officials to bolster the British war effort.¹

The Eastern Region was one of the most important centers of palm oil production in the colonial period. The region was also an important source of foodstuffs, particularly *gari* (processed cassava flour), which had become an important staple in the region and a major item of trade between the region and the Northern Region of Nigeria. *Gari*, among other foodstuffs like yams, was also important in feeding the army during the war. The region was also characterized by significant out-migration in the colonial period, which accounts for the significant trade in staple foodstuffs between the region and Igbo migrant communities in northern Nigeria. In addition, from the late

¹Most of the petitions were addressed to the District Officer for Aba District J.V. Dewhurst. Aba was a very important railway hub in the Eastern Region and served many in the Aba Division and surrounding districts. Aba was also a very important commercial and cosmopolitan city and the headquarters of the district.

1920s onwards this area witnessed major political agitations that were deeply rooted in the agrarian economy. So the link between the rural economy and forms of political consciousness deeply rooted in previous economic depressions, had existed before the depression caused by the Second World War. These unique conditions presented peculiar challenges to the population in the Eastern Region as well as to the colonial authority during the war. However, they also provide an opportunity to assess how local historical contexts informed the unique path taken by local farmers and traders.² Hence, petitions relating to the war overwhelmingly concerned food control and the restrictions placed on local trade.

This is a long term project conceived in 2006 while I was working on my book *The Land Has Changed: History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria*. Significant effort has been devoted to this project. I have already explored Nigerian archives in Ibadan, Calabar, and Enugu and the National Archive (Public Records Office) in London. I have collected over 3000 petitions dealing with a variety of issues. My research reveals that letters of petition provide an unexpected opportunity for reassessing local and indigenous responses to colonialism and provide scholars alternative and additional sources of information for exploring and understanding the colonial society, more specifically, African agency in the making of colonial society.

Oral testimonies and other forms of documentation suggest that African responses to colonialism represent a larger complex of economic and political relationships, tensions and grievances that were also championed by the African population. With this temper as a foil, how did petition writing thrive? Who was engaged? What did people petition about? How did colonial officials perceive these petitions? And what impact did they have on policy?

²I have dealt with these issues in detail in Chima J. Korieh, *The Land Has Changed, History, Society and Gender in Colonial Eastern Nigeria* (Calgary, 2010).

II

Like all parts of Africa, Nigerian societies underwent significant transformations in politics, economy, and society during colonial rule. The transformations that occurred were the result of several factors including the establishment of colonial administrative and judicial institutions and the intervention of official agencies into the local economy. While different facets of colonial and post-colonial studies have generated new theories, they have also generated an attenuated discourse that is yet to fully consider the role of local populations in the making of colonial societies. The flourishing of post-colonial studies is a good reason for a continued appraisal of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. African colonial studies in particular have tended to neglect how women and men interrogated European discourses and strategies and acted as a significant internal force that helped shape the colonial encounter. Social movements, as forms of collective action and a common means of expressing economic and political needs in societies, characterized the second half of British imperialism in Nigeria. Peasant resistances, petitions and supplications provide considerable qualitative information on peasants as historical actors. A major characteristic of the peasant protests during the colonial period was their marked domination by subtle form of protest. These less institutionalized forms of protest or what James Scott calls “everyday forms of resistance,”³ and the forms of consciousness that gave rise to them, as Michel Foucault has drawn attention to, offer an important opportunity to measure the effects of colonial policies, how colonized peoples responded to them, and why they were the preferred mode of addressing concerns.

The dominant narrative of Africa’s encounter with colonialism has often been presented as an explosion of African hatred of imperial domination and European rule. Such mega-narratives of Africa’s colonial experience have not fully accounted for other forms of resistance, conflict, and change that characterized African-European relations. The complexity was characterized by individual and group ini-

³See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

tatives in seeking specific goals, the gendered experience of the relationship between Africans and the colonial state, the actions, initiatives, and temperament of specific officials, and the link between colonialism and the resource endowment of affected areas. As Kent G. Lightfoot argues in the case of Native American encounter with European missionaries and merchants in the California frontier: “Any perspective that attempts to understand the diverse outcomes of colonial encounters must take into account not only the native viewpoint—the natives’ cultural values, practices, families, tribal organization, and histories—but also the nature of the dominance hierarchies and colonial contexts that engaged them.”⁴ The responses of ordinary Africans to, and their relationship with, the state deserve greater attention and the current project contributes to this agenda.

III

Historical events of the colonial period come alive through the correspondences of ordinary people addressed to colonial officials—a means increasingly employed from the 1930s as form of public expression and protest. From the early twentieth century, the African population used petitions as a means of self assertion and for challenging the colonial authority. Correspondence took on a greater significance as western education spread in the early twentieth century. Petitioners petitioned for a variety of issues. Some appealed to colonial authorities to intervene in purely personal matters concerning them and other subjects. For example, on 21 September 1933, Chiefs and Heads of some families in Opobo Town petitioned G.H. Findlay, Senior Resident for Calabar, asking for special concessions in order to improve the conditions of their agricultural estates.⁵ In their petition, they stated:

By virtue of your political disposition as an officer who has merited the confidence of the people of this Province, and, one of the eminent promoters of native industry with wide and varied experience, you would

⁴Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 2004).

⁵Nigeria National Archive, Enugu (hereafter NAE), CADIST 3/1/220; No C 36/33.

pathetically feel the situation—the incapacity of Heads of families depending upon the free labour basis as in former days without adequate provision for recruited labor and various responsibilities concomitant thereto. This, petitioners pray to infer, is the result of the introduction of the Poll Tax.⁶

Sarah E. Basse of Calabar wrote to the District Officer for Calabar on 23 February 1948 asking for government's assistance. Sarah presented herself as an indigent widow without any form of support after the death of her husband who was a teacher. Sarah who said she was married in the Apostolic Church in 1940 explained in her supplication:

I have no parents and my husband had no parents for Yebu⁷ [...]. I should like to go there but there is no money. I do not know the way to get my two children and [...] the relatives of my late husband do not do anything to that effect, they neglected everything and my cry is nothing to them. So Sir I honestly beg you to help me in this poor state of mine. [...] I believe you will sympathize with me.⁸

David Asuquo, of Calabar, petitioned the Governor of the Eastern Region on 21 August 1959, praying the Governor to exercise his “prerogative of mercy in granting me a free pardon in respect of my sentence of two years imprisonment following a conviction for manslaughter.”⁹ In his petition, he pleaded: “My extreme youthfulness at the time of the incident. I was barely eighteen years at the time and more or less impulsive by nature. I was at this time smarting under a sense of injustice and I confess that I acted foolishly at a time when my reasoning was off its true balance.”¹⁰

The above examples show that petitions had become a popular means of addressing concerns to the colonial authority. Petitions paint a vivid picture of daily life, of the practical realities of living under colonial control, and of how people dealt with these situations.

⁶NAE, CADIST 3/1/220; No C 36/33.

⁷“For Yebu” means “in Yebu.”

⁸NAE, CADIST 3/3/650; No CAD 783.

⁹NAE, CADIST 3/1/220; No C 36/33.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

As Andrew Verner has argued in his examination of peasants' petitions during the Russian Revolution: "Instead of simply looking at the petitions as another, if unusual, set of documents, by which peasant thoughts and desires are transparently revealed," [they should be treated as an] "integral part of the complex negotiations among as well as between the peasants and the outside" [and their contents regarded as the] "results of strategic choices made by their authors in the context of their surroundings."¹¹

IV

Surveying recent literature on the Second World War reveals few references to African perspectives on the war. Our histories of the Second World War are incomplete without comprehensive analysis of African participation and engagement. Besides we can learn about how Africans perceived the war and draw from their experiences important details about the impact of the war on their lives. Richard E. Osborne's *World War II in Colonial Africa* provides a broad and sweeping survey of all aspects of the Second World War in Africa, but it lacks an in-depth analysis of the impact of the war on Africans. In Nigeria, Britain sought and received the commitment of its citizens to support the war effort. Across the country, communities mobilized to support the war effort. They contributed financial support both directly and indirectly. They supplied soldiers in a variety of capacities and they provided resources, including food items for the troops. A *West African Pilot* editorial reflected the popular sentiment among Africans when it said: "We are in the midst of the most destructive war the world has yet seen and it is the duty of every citizen of this country, as it is of every liberty-loving soul in every part of the world, to bear the greatest sacrifice ungrudgingly and contribute his maximum in every way possible, little or great to bring the success of the Allied forces nearer."¹² The African population answered this call by making the sacrifices described below.

¹¹Andrew Verner, "Discursive Strategies in the 1905 Revolution: Peasant Petitions from Vladimir Province," *Russian Review* 54 (1995), 65-90.

¹²*West African Pilot*, 12 February 1942.

The biggest problem faced by the colonial administration was how to curb the rising cost of living that became pronounced in the early years of the war. The war created labor shortages, low levels of import and export, shortages of food items, and higher prices for imported products such as sugar and for locally produced food items, such as rice, yams, cassava, and salt. As the war raged in Europe, local colonial officials struggled with two interrelated problems: how to support the British war effort and how to ensure adequate food supplies for both the African and European population. With access to Asian markets cut off, African commodities assumed great importance during the war. Britain tried to increase tin mining production in Nigeria to offset losses in the Far East. Economic control by Europeans became more stringent than ever before. Both urban and rural dwellers experienced shortages of essential food items. The problem was exacerbated partly by the restrictions on imports, but most importantly by shipping difficulties resulting from German attacks on merchant ships at sea which affected imported food items such as rice, salt, and dairy products.¹³ The short supply of imported items increased the value of locally produced rice and *gari*, which had become an important staple for the urban population.¹⁴ The demand for local food imposed a heavy burden on the peasantry. The low level of production in some parts of the country created scarcity and high prices for foodstuffs. For example, the price of a 90-lb. bag of *gari* increased from four shillings in the beginning of July 1943 to

¹³See for example, Akanmu Adebayo, "The Fulani, Dairy Resources, and Colonial Animal Products Development Programs," in: Toyin Falola (ed.), *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century* (Durham NC, 2002), 201-24; Toyin Falola, "'Salt is Gold': The Management of Salt Scarcity in Nigeria during World War II," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 26 (1992), 417.

¹⁴On the increased importance of cassava as a staple, see for example, S.A. Agboola, "Introduction and Spread of Cassava in Western Nigeria," *Nigeria Journal of Economic and Social Studies* 10 (1968): 369-85; Phoebe V. Ottenberg, "The Changing Economic Position of Women Among the Afikpo Ibo," in: William R. Bascom, and Melvin J. Herskovits (eds.), *Continuity and Change in African Cultures* (Chicago, 1956), 205-23; Don C. Ohadike, "The Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19 and the Spread of Cassava in the Lower Nigeria: A Case Study in Historical Linkages," *Journal of African History* 22 (1981), 379-91; Don C. Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People* (Athens OH, 1994), 198-207; Olukoju, Ayodeji, "The Cost of Living in Lagos 1914-1945," in: David M. Anderson, and Richard Rathbone (ed.), *Africa's Urban Past* (Oxford, 2000), 126-43.

Control of local foodstuffs in Abakaliki Division

Articles	Quantity	Pre-war price	Quantity	Present price	Quantity	Controlled price
Yams: Sept–	12 large	1/–	6 large	1/–	9 large	1/–
March	15 medium	1/–	10 medium	1/–	12 medium	1/–
April–August	30 small	1/–	20 small	1/–	17 small	1/–
	6 large	1/–	3–4 large	1/–	5 large	1/–
	15 medium	1/–	8–9 medium	1/–	9 medium	1/–
Rice (local)	24	1/–	8 cups	1/–	10 cups	1/–
Garri	12	1d	6 cups	1d	8 cups	1d
Egg (hen)	4	1d	2	1d	4	1d
Egg (duck)	2	1d	2	1d	2	1d
Pepper	2 cig. cups	1d	1 cig. cup	1d	2 cig. cups	1d
Plantain	10	½d	6	½d	8	½d
Banana (ripe)	12	½d	8	½d	12	½d
Oranges	10	½d	5	½d	6	½d
Okro	40 capsules	½d	15	½d	20	½d
Cassava	large basket	3d	large basket	6d	large basket	5d
Coco yam	8	1d	8	1d	8	1d
Groundnuts	24 cups	1d	4 cups	1d	6 cups	1d
Palm oil	1 bottle	6d	1 bottle	9d	1 bottle	8d
Palm wine	calabash	2d	calabash	3d–4d	calabash	2d
Ideal milk	6 oz tin	4d	6 oz tin	8d	6 oz tin	6d

Source: NAE, CALPROF, 3/1/2329, District Officer Abakiliki, 9 November 1942.

seven shillings by the end of the month.¹⁵ The opportunity offered by the increase in the value of local food products was irresistible to the local population. In eastern Nigeria, many flocked to cash in on the *gari* trade which was in high demand by the southern population in the Northern Provinces, the army and the mining population. As the food problem in Nigeria became more apparent, the Nigerian press criticized the colonial authority for its failure to curb inflation and for its pursuit of an unbalanced agricultural policy.¹⁶

The demands of the war forced the British to restructure the local economy to ensure that Africans produced the necessary commodities to support the British war effort. The British mounted a vigorous propaganda information campaign, pointing out the importance of producing more food and export produce such as palm oil and rubber to support the war effort. The government initiated an unprecedented level of mobilization and introduced new regulations and laws to effectively control peasant production. The new forms of control—or what John Iliffe calls “new colonialism”—was marked by direct intervention in the local economy.¹⁷ In the words of Basil Davidson, the pressure brought on the local peasantry in the form of forced and selective production of crops and marketing reforms “upset rural sta-

¹⁵NAE, ABADIST, 14/1/873, File No 1646 “Gari Control,” District Officer, Aba, to Secretary, Northern Provinces, 29 July 1943.

¹⁶O.U. Esse, “The Second World War and Resource Management in Eastern Nigeria, 1939-1945,” MA thesis, University of Nigeria (1997), 148.

¹⁷John Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979), 436. For British economic policy in Africa during the war, see for example, David Killingray and Richard Rathbone (eds.) *Africa and the Second World War* (Basingstoke, 1986). In the case of Nigeria, most of the early literature focused on the impact of the war on nationalism, as well as local contributions of personnel to the war effort. See, for example, F.A.S. Clark, “The Development of the West African Forces in the Second World War,” *Army Quarterly* (1947), 58-72; Michael Crowder, “The Second World War: Prelude to Decolonization in Africa,” in: Jacob F. Ade Ajayi, and Michael Crowder (ed.), *History of West Africa, II* (London, 1974); Trevor R. Kerslake, *Time and the Hour: Nigeria, East Africa, and the Second World War* (London, 1997); G.O. Olusanya, *The Second World War and Politics in Nigeria, 1939-1953* (London, 1973).

bility.”¹⁸ According to David Anderson and David Throup, this period marked an “important transition in British attitude to Africa.”¹⁹

The colonial government introduced measures to curb rising cost and scarcity. The management of the war economy began with the implementation of the Nigeria Defense Regulation of 1939, which conferred extra powers on different colonial departments and created new ones to deal with the crisis of the Second World War. Beginning in September 1939, the department of agriculture concentrated its effort on achieving increased food production. The frantic urgency of the food production drive contrasted with the *laissez-faire* pace of pre-war agricultural planning. This led to the creation of a marketing department in November 1939 and a Supplies Department in 1942 to organize food supplies for both the army and the mines and to ensure that the government had ample reserves of food.

The colonial government’s control of local food supply was achieved through the imposition of price controls on locally produced goods and restriction on where local producers and traders could sell their products. The Native Food Controller was authorized to fix the prices of food items in the market. This imposition was resented by peasants as well as by local traders.²⁰ Many petitioned colonial authorities. On 1 July 1942, for example, rice and bean traders in the city of Onitsha petitioned the Resident for Onitsha Province against police enforcement of prices control in the market. In a carefully detailed estimate, the traders calculated the losses incurred as a result of price control.²¹ An Onitsha gari trader and twenty others petitioned the District Officer for Onitsha on 17 July 1942 requesting a reconsideration of the policy.²² The buying of *gari*

¹⁸Basil Davidson, *Modern Africa: A Social and Political History* (London 1994), 63.

¹⁹David M. Anderson, and David Throup, “Africans and Agricultural Production in Colonial Kenya: The Myth of the War as a Watershed,” *Journal of African History* 26 (1985), 327. I have addressed aspects of the impact of the war on Nigerian urban population. See Chima J. Korie, “Urban Food Supply and Vulnerability in Nigeria during the Second World War,” in: Toyin Falola, and Steven J. Salm (ed.), *Nigerian Cities* (Trenton NJ, 2003), 127-52.

²⁰Esse, “The Second World War,” 170.

²¹NAE, EP OPC 122, Vol. vii, ONDIST 13/1/2, “Food Control,” Onitsha Rice and Gari Traders to Resident Onitsha Province, 1 July 1942.

²²In their petition, the traders noted that the recommended price of ten shillings per bag of *gari* was below the estimated delivery price of 12/- per bag from Aba, where

by government agents at a price determined by the government directly threatened the income of women, who controlled the production and sale of the product.²³ In Owerri Province and Bende Division in 1944, women protested against the colonial government's attempt to control the price of *gari*, the most important staple in the area. Similarly, women in many parts of Aba Division protested the restrictions on *gari* export and the fixing of *gari* prices.²⁴ Similar protests were recorded in other parts of eastern Nigeria. In October 1944, for instance, a government agent came to Ikot Ekpene market and purchased *gari* at the government-imposed price. The action of the government was seen by the women as an attempt to take over their cassava farms. This was followed by mass demonstrations by women armed with cassava sticks and leaves at Nto Edino, Ikot Abia, Odoro Ikot, and Mbuso—all Ibibio areas near Ikot Ekpene.²⁵

The food crisis in some parts of Nigeria due to the war compelled some District Officers to regulate the export of food items such as yams, coco-yams and *gari* from one part of the region to another. District officials invoked the Nigeria General Defense Regulations (Law No 75 of 1941), which came into effect during the war. In June 1945, for example, the Acting District Officer for Ikom Division issued a memo prohibiting the export of certain food items from the district, specifying that, "no person shall export yams and coco-yams from the Ikom Division except under permit from the District Officer."²⁶ The restriction affected some farmers in Abakaliki Division, who could not buy seed yams in the market because of the restrictions. The Resident for Ogoja Province also prohibited the export of yams from that province in June 1945. Buyers were required to

Onitsha trader buy their goods. NAE, EP OPC 122, Vol. vii, ONDIST 13/1/2, "Dominic Ezenwa and 20 others," representing *gari* market traders to Resident Onitsha Province, 17 July 1942.

²³Nina Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965* (Berkeley, 1982), 103.

²⁴NAE, File No 1646 Vol. IV, ABADIST 14/1/875, "Gari Control," Omuna Native Court to The District Officer Aba, November 1944.

²⁵NAE, File No 1646 Vol. IV, ABADIST 14/1/875.

²⁶NAE, AIDIST 2/1/433, File No IK: 401/18 "Food Control," The Acting District Officer Ikom to the District Officer Abakaliki, 18 June 1945.

obtain a permit from the District Officer in Afikpo.²⁷ Similarly, Dermot O'Connor, the Resident for Awgu Division, restricted the transportation of yams outside his division.²⁸ The Resident for Onitsha Province issued an order restricting the export of *gari* and yams from the Udi Division "except under permit signed by competent authority."²⁹ Perhaps the most important consequences of these restrictions were the disruption of pre-war food security arrangements that supported the urban population as well as several rural communities.

In September 1944, H.L.M. Butcher, who had become the District Officer for Aba, introduced even more radical measures. In a memo to Native Councils and Courts Clerks, he directed that all *gari* permits granted to middlemen and traders be cancelled with effect from 1 September. Butcher was not happy that traders had not adhered to the conditions of the permit issued to them. Some traders engaged in sharp practices and had induced the Railway staff to send up far more than they were allowed.³⁰ He blamed African agents of Aba traders in the North for "grossly excessive prices" in the north and scarcity in the Aba Division. In its place, he proposed that Mr. Bleasby, a European, and manager of Gibbons Transport Aba, acts as the government's agent for buying *gari* at designated centers in the District and arrange for its distribution to Native Administrations in the Northern Provinces. He further proposed to set up a committee of middlemen and producers who would have the power to fix the price of *gari* to ensure that *gari* would be "plentiful and cheap"³¹ locally. Similar action had been taken in Calabar where African traders were forced to supply *gari* to Mr. Nicholas, another European. The local

²⁷NAE, AIDIST 2/1/433, File No OG: 2920/140, "Food Control," P.M. Riley, Resident Ogoja Province to District Officers.

²⁸NAE, AIDIST 2/1/433, "Food Control."

²⁹NAE, AIDIST 2/1/433, "Nigerian General Defense Regulation Order: Gari and Yams," Resident, Onitsha Province to District Officers and other Competent Authorities, 16 May 1945. For cassava restrictions, see also, NAE, AID 2/1/433 OG: 2513/1265 "Nigeria General Defense Regulations Order," P.M. Riley, Resident Ogoja Province to District Officers, 26 June 1945.

³⁰NAE, ABADIST 14/1/875, File No 1646 Vol. IV, "Gari Control," H.L.M. Butcher to The Councils and Court Clerks, Aba Division, 2 September 1944.

³¹Ibid.

population was visibly distressed by the restrictions, low price of produce, the food crisis, the British management of the local production system, and the insecurity that these engendered. Many used petitions to appeal to colonial authorities regarding their conditions. They objected to several regulations and restrictions imposed by the British on Africans as part of the war measures. The personal—and often intimate—petitions of Africans paint a unique portrait of a rough-and-tumble time and enable us to hear their voices and reaction to the war-time policies.

For the African population, the war economy was not only the site of hardship and despair, but it also was a time of opportunity and entrepreneurship that expanded as the scarcity of imported food items provided opportunities for the expansion of locally produced foods. By 1942, rural farmers and traders were cashing in on the increased demands for local foodstuff in the northern region. Large quantities of yams, cocoyams, coconut and maize were being transported to the north for sale. The colonial administration imposed strict restrictions on the movement of food items, such as yams, cocoyams and *gari* within the Eastern Region. District officials, alarmed by the quantity of food items moving out of the region, began to implement restrictions in order to stave off crisis within their districts.

Petitions gave African men and women opportunity to address the intervention in the rural economy and to express their sufferings during the war. Those who were denied permits or access to rail *gari* to Northern Nigerian towns following the imposition of restrictions by the colonial government sought remedy. On 8 July 1943, V.N. Nwabufo, for example, petitioned the British District Officer in Aba, Eastern Nigeria. To seek justice, he wrote:

I cannot imagine the reasons why names [of] the traders in Garri railing to the North as myself was listed in the role of traders to continue and my name was deleted; the memory of your obedient servant jumped into a cog, and suspected an intrigue on the whole situation to parties that your worship set at affairs of recommending the [...] Garri traders [...] That your servant had no other business than the railing of Garri to the North, and had no other knowledge of trade than the railing of Garri to the north [...] Your servant had left a boy in the north, one at Kano, and another in

Zaria, and I wonder how those boys will live in that strange land; Under the foregoing, your servant in duty bound, as a protected person, for justice sake, livelihood ever pray.³²

Reacting to the impact of food restrictions on the income of his family another petitioner A. Jamola, had written the same District Officer on 21 July 1943:

You could therefore imagine our suffering, Sir, during this period for which I am restricted from exporting *gari* to the north especially when the small profit accruing from the trade is being exhausted. [He assured the District Officer:] Sir, that I do appreciate your point of view in this rather difficult question, but at the same time I would very respectfully and humbly ask that in addition to your viewing the matter from the official stand-point, you may consider the lives of a family which may perish as a result of the measures which have been taken to restrict the *gari* trade.³³

Jamola's petition leaves little doubt about the growing dissatisfaction and distress among Africans about colonial intervention and policies at these hard times. Such petitions reflect the seemingly paradoxical connection between British colonial policies and the impact on the African population. These letters and petitions offer fascinating insights into the crisis faced by African traders, farmers, and the urban population and the daily anguish of people as they attempted to deal with the disruptions of their economic life.

Petitions ranged from simple pleas in simple language to epistles more sophisticated in both style and expression that often embodied languages of human rights and European notions of right and liberty. Most of such sophisticated petitions were written by well-educated professional petition writers who often used technical and bombastic language and rhetoric meant to impress on the European officials that they understood their rights and those of their clients as protected people under British law, even though they were not British citizens but merely members of the colony. Most of these petitions garnered what has been identified in another context as a "rhetoric of humility

³²NAE, Abadist 14/1/872, File No 1646, "Gari: Control of."

³³NAE, Abadist 14/1/872, File No 1646, "Gari: Control of."

and disavowal”³⁴ and prayed the colonial officials as benefactors to act to protect or save them. Their pleas also used moral reasoning and appeal in seeking redress. A. Ademola, a local trader in Aba, spoke his mind on the irrationality of neglecting the impact of food control on the lives of African families: “[...] you may consider the lives of a family which may perish as a result of the measures which have been taken to restrict the *gari* trade,” he wrote to the District Officer. On 11 July 1943, a local trader in Aba in Owerri Province of colonial Nigeria, O.O. Muoma, wrote a petition to the British District Officer. In his petition titled “Injustice: *Gari* Railing to the North,” he told the District Officer that his name was deleted from the list of traders who had been permitted by the government to export *gari* to northern Nigeria towns. Muoma considered this development “abnormal” and an “injustice.” Cutting him out of the *gari* trade deprived him of his livelihood and threatened the lives and subsistence of his two sons, who lived in the northern city of Kano. Another trader, J.O. Okorocho, who had railed 209 bags of *gari* to northern Nigeria in 1942, wrote to the District Officer for Aba District, protesting the allocation a meager quota of ten bags. J.O. Okorocho wrote: “My quota [ten bags], is too poor considering my intensive trade last year.” Mr. Eze, who had been a long-time yam trader, wrote to the District Officer for Aba for permission to transport yams to Kano and Jos in Northern Nigeria. In this petition he wrote:

I humbly beg to state that on absent of the previous knowledge, that yams shall be under permit, I t[a]ke the liberty to ask your worship to grant me a special permit to rail out those baskets I have already got at the Station. [...] Therefore I humbly crave for your mercy consideration and attend to this matter immediately by granting me the permit as requested otherwise my said food stuff will rot due to long stay in the shed.³⁵

These petitions/supplifications to colonial officials show the problems, thoughts, and emotions of ordinary people towards the restrictions

³⁴Susan Zaeske cited in Shelly Rosenblum “Review of Susan Zaeske ‘Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women’s Political Identity,’ *Canadian Review of American Studies* 36 (2006), 119.

³⁵NAE, ABADIST 14/1/875.

imposed upon them by British colonial authorities particularly during the Second World War.

Urban towns such as Aba and Onitsha were not spared the agony and hardship of the war. In a petition to the Resident of the Owerri Province, for example, the Gari Traders Association in city of Aba expressed dissatisfaction with the quota system imposed by the British District Officer. The association wrote that colonial controls “will annihilate the *gari* trade, and undoubtedly impoverish the average trader involved and render life ‘not worth living.’”³⁶ As “free citizens of the Empire,” the association argued, “we have a right to live, and this right we pray for an amendment to the method or system of control of the railment of the commodity as advanced by the District Officer for Aba.”³⁷ The Aba Community League, an organization representing various community associations and unions, also wrote to the District Officer on 12 August 1942 on the negative effects of food restrictions on the residents of the town. Indeed, an editorial in *The West African Pilot* of 5 June 1942 noted that “black marketers” were benefiting from the restrictions while “the people suffered.” On 2 August 2 1941, the Aba Community League wrote the District Officer for Aba regarding the food crisis facing the city. The letter told the story of the alleged real life situation of the inhabitants of the town.

I am directed to bring to your notice the very grave danger of famine which is threatening this township consequent upon the present restriction of the railment of *gari* to the North which has led to the adversely affected traders seeking other avenues of business and have tapped the scanty resources of the township of yams, plantains, cocoyams, corn and other articles of food [...] Time was when these lines of foodstuffs came into the local market from Onitsha, Itu and other places which in addition to local resources barely met the requirements of the township.³⁸

³⁶NAE, ABADIST, 14/1/873, File No 1646 “A Resolution,” Gari Traders association Aba to the Resident, Owerri Province, 29 July 1943.

³⁷NAE, ABADIST, 14/1/873.

³⁸The League represented a majority of unions, ethnic groups and communities in Aba Township. See NAE, ABADIST 1/26/958. File No 668. “Foodstuffs: yams, plantains, cocoyam, etc requested prohibition of railment or exportation of in future,” Honorary Secretary Aba Community League to The District Officer Aba, 2 August 1943.

In August 1943, the secretary of Aba Community League wrote to the District Officer, Aba, regarding what he described as “unauthorized markets outside the township.”³⁹ It seems that large-scale traders suffered mostly from the restrictions. Small-scale traders, in contrast, may have survived on the available opportunities offered by the local market. In a resolution passed at Aba on 23 August 1944, the Association of Gari Traders noted that their activities as traders were contributing “towards the defeat of Hitlerism and all that it stands for in order that Democracy will rule the world and all forms of man’s inhumanity to man be wiped off the face of the earth,” and described the colonial government’s restrictions as “definite discrimination against the Africans.”⁴⁰

Hidden as well as glaring in these letters and petitions, however, are the visible ideas of racial difference and the inscribed privilege of the colonial institution. The language and conceptual ideas expressed in these letters also reflect the subjugated and subordinate position of the African population. Many were prudent in their use of language and written to elicit sympathy. Yet other were intent on drawing the attention of British officials to the larger philosophical ideals of democracy, equity, fair play—concepts upon which the colonial project was imposed in the first place. Such expressions of a deep understanding of the contradictions of colonialism cogently highlight the fact that the African population was well aware of these contradictions. Many found colonial control and restrictions a major contradiction: although colonial officials were attempting to stabilize an economy disrupted by an European war, they could not understand how officials were disrupting the attempt by local people to engage in activities they thought were contributing to the war effort as well as providing them avenue to survive the economic crisis that came with the war.

³⁹NAE, ABADIST 1/26/958. File No 668 “Unauthorized Markets Outside the Township,” Secretary Aba Community League to District Officer Aba, 2 August 1943.

⁴⁰NAE ABADIST 14/1/874.

V

The petitions and letters are interpretative of a number of issues that dominated the colonial period. Because these letters place the colonized population at the centre and view them as historical actors with pliable cultures and communities, they provide a more accurate and powerful understanding of the processes of colonization, its impacts on particular groups and communities, its role in social and economic change, and how local societies fit into our understanding of the larger political economy of imperialism and global political economy of the twentieth century and the major event that defined it including the depression, the Second World War, and nationalism and decolonization in Africa.

Letters of petition as political activity can be gleaned from the keen interest which colonial officials developed in their content and context.⁴¹ The genre is important for understanding colonial encounters, the development of infra-politics, and the self-assertion, and the intellectual background to decolonization. Indeed, the interwar years, characterized by the Great Depression, African assertion and a disquieted public space, prompted nervous colonial regimes to fight against “real and imaginary rebellion.”⁴² Rumors were rife and set both the rulers and the ruled on edge. Officials in different districts paid attention and coordinated their activities in the interest of the empire, although local officials made attempt to protect the interest of their own district.

On the African side, many letters of petitions were written by professional petition writers in behalf of clients, thus they were also the expressions, view, and perspectives of those who wrote them. Professional petitions writers, most of which had some professional training, used the petitions of their clients to challenge the ideological underpinnings of colonialisms. These indirect attacks on the colonial state with regards to the contradictions of colonialism were often

⁴¹James Daybell sees letters as playing important role in “political” activity or expression of interest in politics by women early modern England. See *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* (Oxford, 2006), 4.

⁴²Personal communication with Ogbu Kalu, 12 May 2007.

beyond the scope mandated by clients. Others with some level of education wrote their own petitions, often in their own hands. Although often written to attract sympathy, many were intimate expressions of individual conditions but also showed a clear understanding of the larger context that gave rise to the conditions. Overall, the ability of Africans to write or to hire professional letter writers gave local people the ability and opportunity to speak back to power. It gave local people not only the opportunity to speak about their concerns but to establish dialogue with colonial powers—a dialogue that received some level of respect because it fitted into the familiar structure or of European habits of expression. These letters and petitions of an often lowly class of peasants and traders defied the perceived social and political order of the colonial era.

These correspondences, often a form of public expression allowed by colonial officials not only offer fresh insight into the precarious nature of life under colonialism, they reveal the extraordinary steps to confront colonial rule and the crisis at different historical times. Petitions exemplify the way African peoples negotiated the varied policies and practices of colonialism and offer glimpses into the implications, effects, and results of local people's confrontation with different colonial agencies in their attempt to impose effective control over colonial societies. We can read these letters as strategies and tactics employed to negotiate the power structures designed to subjugate and control the African population for the greater good of the empire.

Petitioners generally regarded the District Office as a final arbiter in settling disputes between rivals or approached him to seek redress from lower judicial and administrative authority. Intervention by District Officials became a means of actualizing hegemonic control but also intervening in customary laws. While petitions were not always an instrument of social change, officials listened, replied to some petitions, and ignored other. Yet, petitions and supplications sometimes influenced policy because they often revealed that local people had a deep understanding of the ideas, ideals, and the democratic values of European society and its variance with the actions,

attitudes and policies of imperial European and men on the spot in Africa.

Petitions offer an opportunity to examine ways in which colonial officials used language, imagery, and European epistemology to legitimize relations of inequality with Africans; the strategic alliances with European trading and colonizing powers as a means of controlling the African population; and the ways in which both groups collaborated to transform African societies. Most colonial officials valued the letters, perceiving them as a way to gauge public opinion and sentiment. Their letters display emotional reactions to the Depression—despair, cynicism, and anger—and attitudes toward colonial intervention in the production and marketing of produce. With the failure of other forms of resistance, letters and petition-writing became a powerful weapon in the struggle by Africans against the colonial state and structures.

Viewed from the perspectives of the African population, the policies implemented during the war were part of the larger framework of colonialism and the attempt by both local colonial officials as well as the colonial office to protect the home front while maintaining the colonial stranglehold. These policies in fact, far from protecting the local population, functioned to victimize and exploit the local population. The policies quarantined local traders and farmers, ruined lives, and destabilized the local economy—indeed they ran counter to the British idea and ideal of free trade. Yet embedded in these letters were elements of resistance, a counter discourse in the form of individual and group experiences (often couched in language that would elicit sympathy or deep understanding of the contradictions inherent in colonial discourses) and strategies adopted by Africans to undermine colonial regulations. Thus, these petitions were counter hegemonic narratives of colonial restrictions and power.

Letters of petition often blurred the boundaries between public and private spheres. They often contain intimate, informal details that can be read as life stories or autobiographical accounts of the men and women who wrote as much as the society. They are central to understanding the complexities faced by colonial officials as much as African in the context of the depression, in the context of war, and in

the context of new institutions and instruments of state control such as taxation and the colonial courts.

Across much of colonial Africa individuals carved out uniquely African paths—sometimes narrow and sometimes wide-ranging—through the colonial encounter. These letters show African challenges to colonial policies, African interaction with colonial institutions, and attempts by colonial officials to take African perspectives into account in formulating and shaping strategies. But most of all they open a window into an African society's encounter with imperialism and the opportunity to read these individual actors and their role as a negotiated encounter with colonialism rather than the African acceptance of imperialism as hegemonic force. Thus, petitions serve to deconstruct the colonial state and question an uncritical acceptance of the hegemonic framework often employed to describe the power and authority of the colonial state.

Who drafted the petitions? Apparently, they were written by a broad range of educated people: school children, village teachers, and government employees, especially court-clerks who subverted their employees because they distinguished between themselves and the "white man's work." Some of the court clerks earned extra income through the moonlighting job of petition writing. This brings me to the fact that a cadre of professional letter writers emerged. In the rivalry within the profession, they honed an art. Some may consider their vocabulary bombastic, having a tendency to exaggerate and indeed developing a stylized vocabulary of protest. Did they express the voices and feelings of the victims or used the occasion to parade their own literary genius? Questions pile on questions because this research is interesting, tantalizing and full of promise.

VI

Overall, African petitions were not a piece of propaganda. They offer several perspectives into African lives and put the reader in direct contact with the victims of colonial control, evoking a feeling of what it was like to live through the era. Yet we can read beyond African voices in these letters and petitions. They offer a lens

through which we can understand the broader attempt by colonial administrators to control the colonized through the restriction of movements and surveillance, extraction of resources, and other means. The overall effect of these letters and petitions is that they put people in the colonial context and provide individuals with diverse life-stories and points of view from the gaze of Africans. Yet, petitions by Africans evidence counter hegemonic discourse that highlights the extent to which the interpretation of Western colonization of Africa remained a contested or unsettled terrain. Thus the greatest strength of historical analyses that takes African perspective into account is that it centralizes African agencies in the making of colonial societies while presenting opportunity for examining the distinctively different ways groups of Africans—urban and rural—shaped colonial outcomes.

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