

The Royal Niger Company (RNC) and the Making of Modern Nigeria, 1879-1899

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Abstract: The paper examines the complex historical processes that culminated in the founding of modern Nigeria since the 19th century on the backdrop of primary and secondary data of historical research. These events were the abolition of the slave trade and the introduction and promotion of legitimate trade and commerce by Christian missionaries and imperial companies. This was in the era of the new imperialism, which was characterised by trade monopoly and imperial contestations amongst European trading companies and merchants. The competing commercial companies were later chartered to act on behalf of their imperial governments in acquired territories and to acquire more territories for them where possible. It was primarily due to the industrial revolution which started in Britain and created the need for raw materials, which were considered readily available in Africa to feed their home industries. It argues that the resultant enhanced contacts between the British and the peoples of the Nigerian area, facilitated by these consequential historical developments, holds the key to understanding the formation of Nigeria in 1914. The reason being that the British utilised the agency of the Royal Niger Company (RNC) to establish her influence and conditions necessary for the eventual colonisation of Nigeria. The study contends that, Goldie's chartered RNC not only acquired and rule territories on behalf of the Crown and secured British imperial interest in the area now called Nigeria, but also made it possible for the British to shrug off intense rivalry from their arch rivals, the French and Germans. To this

end, it argued that Fredrick Lord Lugard's amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, only built on the foundation which Goldie and his company, the RNC, had already laid.

Key Words: Royal Niger Company, Modern Nigeria, Company Rule, Monopoly, Imperialism

Introduction

No one is likely to dispute the fact that the spread of the industrial revolution from Great Britain to Western Europe and the United States of America (U.S.A) in the 19th century, decisively changed the course of world history. In the first place, it accounted for the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which dominated Africa's relations with Europe for over 400 years. Secondly, it necessitated the introduction of 'legitimate trade' in agricultural produce to feed European industries at home and also sparked off intense rivalry amongst imperial European trading companies over secured sources and supply of raw materials and market for surplus finished goods. Industrialisation increased the penetration of Europeans into the interior of Africa and set industrialised nations on the path to progress that was unparalleled in human history. The political, economic and social features of African societies were in the process transformed to serve the needs of European capitalism. Thus, Modern Nigeria is beyond reasonable doubt the result of British imperialism in Africa. The Buccaneering trading companies of the 19th century were the precursors to the far-reaching global expansion by imperial European powers. In Nigeria, the activities of the British trading company, the RNC, were profound and unarguably laid the foundation of modern Nigeria. The company made remarkable impact in Nigeria and other colonised territories in West Africa, chiefly due to the strategic role of its leader, George Taubman Goldie, and the charter it received from the British government in 1886. It left behind an indelible footprint, which cannot be extricated from the evolution of modern Nigeria in 1914.

It is eminently illustrative to note that the expansion of European trading companies into Africa were aided and guided by the activities of European travellers such as the well-known Heinrich Barth, whose travel into the Nigeria area between 1850 and 1869, left behind plethora of reports about the interior and resource potential of the area. The succeeding period, between 1870 and 1899, when European companies ruled much of Africa, changed the narratives. Unlike the Consuls of the period of Consular rule, the commercial companies were not required to provide reports of the details of their activities to the colonial government and their head offices, whose main objectives were the returns on their investment on the coast of West Africa. Thus, the European trading firms on the Niger and Benue Rivers operated with much secrecy. As a result of this secrecy, details of their activities, necessary for historical reconstruction and analyses, are in short supply. The dearth of records in the historiography of company rule in West Africa has continued to limit historians' ability to fully grasp their operations. The worst of all was the leader of the Royal Nigeria Company (RNC), Sir George Taubman Goldie. His life and commercial activities were characterised by an air of secrecy. Goldie is said to have destroyed vital records of the RNC's operations in West Africa before the outbreak of the First World War. Similarly, company staff were also required to sign an undertaking, which forbade them from disseminating information regarding the activities of the company. Furthermore, Goldie's family members were reportedly cautioned against writing any biography about him and his activities with the RNC (Laker, 1960).

Nevertheless, the RNC left behind its company's minutes book, which covered only the period 1882-1889 and a handful of letters archived in the Foreign Office Records, bordering on its application to the British government to be chartered and the responses it got in return. In addition to this, there are also the pioneering works of John E. Flint and P.T. Bauer, which focused more on the RNC's administrative and diplomatic activities under the Royal Charter before its dissolution in 1899. On the backdrop of the

aforementioned evidences and other related source materials, the present study focuses on the activities of the RNC and the role of Goldie in the founding of Nigeria in 1914.

The New Imperialism and the Era of Company Rule in Nigeria

The gradual decline in British technological advantage and hegemonic powers, occasioned by the rapid rise of a politically stable and united Germany under Otto Von Bismark, who was at the centre of European diplomacy and the unhealthy rivalry that ensued, marked the genesis of the new imperialism. Relative peace and stability was achieved in Europe as a result of the imperialist convoke of 1884/1885, popularly known as the Berlin Conference, which Bismark summoned. Territories in Africa were peacefully divided in piecemeal and areas of jurisdictions were well defined and agreed upon, except for Rivers Niger and Congo, which were to be international waters for free trade and navigation by all nations (Orr, 1911).

This period, in world history, witnessed phenomenal expansion of industrialised nations throughout the world. Imperialism, the ideology of the industrialised nations, though as old as mankind, witnessed tremendous transformation in practice, such that it was christened the new imperialism, to distinguish it from the old variety of imperialism before the 19th century. But before we examine the differences between the varieties of imperialism in historical perspective, it is instructive to note that the meaning of the construct 'new imperialism has been surrounded by storms of controversies. This is due to divergent views relating to its origins, causes, characteristics and dynamics since the 19th century. Simply put, the term imperialism means the economic, political, social and military domination of weak countries by strong and the most advanced countries of the world. However, liberal scholars such as Joseph Schumpeter and Hannah Arendt have argued that imperialism is simply the desire for expansion for the sake of it or fun of it (Cited in Bauer, 1954). Akin to their position, other scholars have described imperialism as a natural instinct (Gallagher, J. & Ronald, R., 1953), given the fact that humans by nature seek to dominate each other in one form or the other. It is important to note that

the attempts by these scholars to divorce imperialism from domination and exploitation is spurious in the light of historical facts. These views are a façade and only seek to justify imperialism, which has led to the domination and exploitation of millions of people across the globe and in all periods of human history.

The basis for the understanding of imperialism in academic circles is traceable to the pioneering study of J.S. Mill and that of Karl Marx, which enunciated how over-accumulation and over-production leads to imperial expansion (Mill, 1848; 1982:73; Brewer, 1990). In the Marxist school of thought, imperialism is understood as a general system of economic domination, with direct occupation being possible at a particular stage. Hobson's scholarly work on accumulation theory of imperialism built on these scholarly works. According to Hobson (1902; 1978:11), imperialism is the result of both nationalism and capitalism and an aggressive state policy geared towards "territorial and industrial aggrandizement", which transformed varied national rivalry into the cut-throat struggle of competing empires. What is worth noting from Hobson perspective is the fact that the goal of imperialism at all its stages of development, is influence, which transcends national boundaries and aimed at bringing about glory and wealth to its practitioners. These goals could be seen in all imperialist adventures; both in the old and in the new imperialism.

The concept old imperialism is used to describe the period of economic domination and empire building from the 16th century to the early 19th century. During this period, European nations explored the world, discovered trade routes in the Far East and established settlements in the Americas and in Southeast Asia. Trading posts were also set up on the coast of Africa and China (Williams, 1988). But European foothold on Africa was minimal because they had to work very closely with traditional rulers on the continent to ensure their economic interests were protected. Thus, European powers had minimal influence during the period of the old imperialism. The new imperialism began in the 1870's and is thought to be the product of what is generally known as the "Second

Industrial Revolution” which spanned through 1870 and 1914. The period witnessed increased application of science and technology to industrial activities and spurred economic growth. For instance, shipbuilding and transportation were revolutionized due to tremendous improvement in steel production. Furthermore, improvement in railroad development, internal combustion engine and generation of electrical power enhanced the industrial economies of Europe and created the need for them to seek sustainable and strategic avenues of expansion across the globe (Callinicos, 2002). Hence, the new imperialism was the product of the industrial revolution, which afforded industrialized European powers greater power and influence in international politics.

It was a critical stage in the development of capitalism that saw European powers dominate the continents of Africa and Asia, through the direct use of superior military force, to annex and to carve out spheres of economic influence. Each European power rushed to acquire overseas territories in order to prevent others from acquiring them. Consequently, capitalism became inherently competitive and prone to conflict. This is due to the unhealthy rivalry it engendered among European powers, who were anxious and desperate to secure control over foreign territories and their resources. In view of the foregoing, Young (2001) has opined that the new imperialism was the product of global power politics and was accompanied by increased rivalry and militarization, especially with the belated entry of the U.S.A., Germany and later Japan as imperial powers toward the end of the 19th century. There is a consensus among scholars that the mutual economic antagonism the period of the new imperialism brought about amongst these contending powers, was the major cause of the First World War and the humanitarian catastrophe that followed (Lenin 1916; Luxemburg, 1951; Bukharin, 1929).

Therefore, the new imperialism began in earnest in the 1870’s and reached its end in 1914 when the First World War broke out. It also describes the political and economic philosophy vigorously pursued by the industrialized nations of Europe after the slave trade was abolished. The main goal of the policy was the control of the economy of Africa

and those of other parts of the world. The key players of the period were France, Britain, Germany, Belgium, Italy and the US. According to Walter Rodney (1972), the new imperialism was a phase in the development of capitalism that led to the imposition of all round hegemony – economic, political, cultural and military on nations which were too weak to resist European countries, Japanese and American penetration and domination. It succeeded in partitioning the world into exploiters and the exploited, dominated and the overlords, policy makers and dependent partners. The new imperialism was thus predicated on the exploitation of the resources of nations by those who could and saw industrialised nations go into Africa and other parts of the world in the late 19th century for the control of their economies and the globalisation of capitalism. The ideology was furthered by the well documented findings of European explorers, which raised enthusiasm among European trading companies as well as the timely discovery of quinine in 1820 as cure for malaria, which had before the time rendered the tropics “the white man’s grave”(Dobson, 2001).

Fieldhouse (1961) has observed that European preference for overseas trade was predicated on the fact that wages paid to labourers abroad were far lower than what was obtainable in Europe. This made the maximisation of profit at lower cost in overseas territories a great advantage. For Lenin (1916), the new imperialism was an attempt by European imperialist to impose trade monopoly on non-industrialised nations as opposed to the doctrine of free market economy which negates it. The goal of the trade monopoly of the era was to enable all merchants and companies of imperial European countries to carve a niche for themselves and to guarantee constant investment and reinvestment, so that surplus profit and value can be created in the overall interest of their respective motherland. It was for instance recorded that the period saw exponential increase in Britain’s foreign investment and profits (Wengraf, 2018). It is instructive to note that, the philosophy of the period, and its attendant benefits, made colonial conquest and colonisation inevitable in furtherance of capitalist expansion.

It was against this background that company rule by European merchants and companies started in West Africa and Nigeria in particular in the late 19th century. Their objective was the surplus maximisation of profit through the exploitation of the human and natural resources of the locals and the establishment of markets for their excess manufactured goods. This was in order to further the development of their countries and to strengthen their grip on overseas territories. It has been argued that the period of chartered company rule in British Empire was informed by the need to work out a compromise between establishing effective administration in accordance with the Berlin Acts and the hesitancy of the British to commit its resources towards the expansion of its imperial empire into the interior of Africa (Gardner, 2012). British administrators later agreed that to run their empires devoid of taxpayer's money would require the delegation of imperial power and authority to private companies and their agents. This, by implication, meant the outsourcing of imperial rule to chartered companies, which were expected to boost economic development in the motherland, through job creation and payment of taxes to British government. Hence, the British policy which required her overseas territories to be self-sustaining and to finance themselves at no cost on her citizens, explains why company rule preceded formal colonial takeover at the turn of the 20th century. The new imperialism is widely believed to have laid the foundation of Africa's underdevelopment and its continued dependence on the developed nations of the world. The reason is not far-fetched; it hijacked and reversed Africa's economic, socio-cultural, political and technological development. Related to this is the fact that, it reduced the continent and its people to dependent partners in the international capitalist system.

The Consequential Activities of the Royal Niger Company's on the Niger and Delta

Prior to the formation of the RNC, Nigeria had already become one of the spheres of Britain's commercial influence and dominance (Hopkins, 1973). This was against the background of the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the beginning of its

successor, the “legitimate trade”. The construct legitimate trade was probably intended to show a transition from the inhumane slave trade to the fairly acceptable trade in agricultural produce. But the fact of the matter is that, it only continued the regime of domination and exploitation of the people. Therefore, there was nothing legitimate about the trade because it was illegitimately carried out against the thoughts and wishes of the people. For instance, the fundamental economic question of what to produce, how to produce, when to produce and for whom to produce were all determined by European powers.

Historically speaking, there is a relationship between the abolition of slave trade and the Christian missionary activities in West Africa. Evangelicals in Europe and in the U.S. played pivotal roles in the abolition of the slave trade and its enforcement in the coast of West Africa by the British Royal Naval Squadron. Their conspicuous and consequential role was informed by their realization of the fact that it was impracticable to preach the Christian faith side by side the inhumane and unchristian activities of the slave traders. Their perspective was based on their moral conviction that, only an end to the illicit trade in humans could give them a clear conscience and moral grounds to preach the gospel, which supports the equality of all races. Christian missions in West Africa not only gained momentum after the founding of Liberia in 1822 and Sierra Leone in 1791 as ex –slave settlements, it also gave impetus to the “legitimate commerce”, as new crops were introduced and cash crops production was promoted by the Christian missionaries (Gertzel, 1962). The primary objective of their involvement in cash crops production was to take the minds of indigenous rulers and merchants off the lucrative trade in humans, which they had become too accustomed to. It was also meant to dissuade the peoples of West Africa from trading in slaves with Portugal and Spain, which continued the illicit business, even after it was abolished by the British parliament in the first decade of the 19th century.

It is instructive to note that, the rise to eminence of chartered mercantilist companies during the 1880's as vanguards of the new imperialism, provided the much-needed fillip to the "legitimate trade and commerce" as well as the longstanding imperial ambition of European powers. In short, they became indispensable agencies through which Africa was effectively transformed to serve European commercial and imperial interest. Similarly, they played a major role in European territorial annexations. In the process, they secured sources of raw materials as well as markets for their respective nations (Nadel & Curtis, 1969). The most important of the companies in West Africa was the RNC. The historicity of the company dates back to 1879 when four trading companies on the Niger merged together under the name United African Company (UAC) to harmonize British commercial interest on the Niger and enable them act together against rival companies. The first of the companies in the merger was the West African Company limited, which was registered in 1862 (Baker, 1960).

The company changed its name to National African Company (NAC) Ltd in 1882, and had become the largest European trading firm in West Africa by 1884. Consequently, its territorial dominance in comparison with other European trading companies was conspicuous even before the start of the Berlin Conference in 1884. It became the RNC in 1886, after it was chartered as a means to the realisation of a cheap method of exercising British imperial rule in West Africa (Baker, 1996). Its chartered status was a turning point in the history and development of the company. The acquisition of the charter gave the RNC the Royal seal of authority to represent British commercial presence and to project the crown's imperial interest on the Niger and Delta areas. The navigational expertise and experience of the company's staff in the hitherto inaccessible River Niger was one of the major reasons its request for a charter was granted. This was in view of the fact that several attempts by the British government to navigate and access the hinterlands in the 1830's proved abortive (Keazor, 2014). Thus, the granting of the Charter, which the RNC badly needed to legitimise its operations under international law of the time, was partly

due to its traders' courage, determination and resilience, which contributed in making the River Niger accessible. These developments had great consequences for the political and economic future of the West African sub-region and Nigeria in particular.

The charter granted to the RNC in 1886, after its intentions satisfied the Queen in Council, effectively marked the genesis of company rule in Nigeria. The charter forbade any form of monopoly and differential treatment under article 14 of the charter (Affairs of the Oil Rivers Protectorate and Niger Territories, 1893). The reason being that the imposition of monopoly was initially considered inimical to international trade. The company was also cautioned against disregarding the customs, traditions and religions of the people where it was licensed to operate. Interference could only be legitimate in the case of slavery, which had been abolished and expected to be enforced by the RNC. The company was however authorised to impose duties and charges for administrative purposes. This was in addition to their mandate of representing British presence, influence and the enforcement of treaty rights and the 'administration of justice' (Affairs of the Oil Rivers Protectorate and Niger Territories, 1893). The company was denied the right to impose trade monopoly in its delegated areas of jurisdiction because it was meant to comply with the Berlin acts, which provided for freedom of navigation on the Niger and Congo for all European powers. The restraint on the company was not without a caveat. For instance, under Article 18 of the Charter, the Secretary of State for Colonies could object the company's rule over territories surrounded by controversies but power to revoke the Charter was the exclusive right of the Queen in Council (Lupton, 1985). It was also mandated to account for its revenue from duties and expenditure for the sake of transparency. The company was cautioned in the light of its conflicting jurisdiction, which created tensions at home and abroad, and divided policy makers into protagonists and antagonists.

These conditions proved to be very challenging to George Goldie who strongly believed monopoly was in the best interest of his company and that of Britain, given the

stiff competitions emanating from the French and the Germans, who also had their imperial eyes fixated on Nigeria. To this end, he creatively and systematically manoeuvred his way out of the terms and conditions of the treaty and imposed monopoly on the Niger River. For instance, he amalgamated the three largest British firms operating on the Niger-Benue into a whole in order to counter French and German interests in the Nigerian area. The companies he amalgamated were Holland Jacques and Company, Brothers, and James Pinnock to create the United African Company (Flint, 1960). He also went as far as incorporating three major French companies in 1884, making his company by far the largest on the Niger (Flint, 1960). Equally important to Goldie was the need to contain the hostilities of the Niger Delta middlemen, who were considered a threat to individual companies. Goldie achieved his imperial objectives through a highhanded approach that relied so much on the imposition of fees, regulations and administrative measures that effectively dislodged the French and the Germans, who repeatedly opposed the actions of the company, because it violated the Berlin acts which gave all European nations the right to freedom of navigation and their attempt at internationalisation of trade on the Niger River.

Furthermore, the RNC introduced horrendous tariffs on imports and exports at Akassa, which was the company's base on the Delta. In addition to this, merchants and their companies were made to pay either before accessing the Niger or at exit point. A study by Falola and Heaton (2008) has shown that foreign traders were required to pay £100 for a license, in addition to £100 if they were to trade in alcohol. In furtherance of its strategy aimed at frustrating firms able to challenge its dominance, it imposed import duties on ammunitions and alcohol, which amounted to about 100 percent increase (Falola & Heathon, 2008). Thus, making importation of these goods only profitable to the RNC. In response to the RNC's unilateral and provocative change of trade status quo on the Niger and Delta regions, the German government protested in 1890 and Major Claude Macdonald was asked to study the protest letters and report to the British parliament.

While European traders were in the process compensated, African traders were not (Letter from the chamber to the Most Honourable, the Marquis Salisbury, K.G, 1892). The unfair treatment irked local traders, who felt their business interest was being undermined, in what appeared to be an apparent attempt by the company to change the hitherto trade status quo and to impose monopoly that served only its interest and that of the imperial British government. Undoubtedly, Goldie's RNC became a source of great concern and anxiety to local traders on the Niger and Delta areas.

Colonial records show that the chiefs and kings of the Niger Basin protested the company's purchase and incorporation of companies belonging to other European countries. Their grievance was based on the fact that Goldie's decision made the RNC their sole trading partner. The Oil Rivers District consequently applied to the British government requesting to be chartered in order to challenge the privileged position enjoyed by the RNC. The imperial government rejected their application and suggestions by some officers of the colonial department that it should be made a colony connected to Lagos or separately on the grounds that, the West African territories acquired by the British with great effort and finances were meant to be opened to all British traders (Affairs of the Oil Rivers Protectorate and Niger Territories, 1893). This imperial objective would have been threatened if the Oil River District was chartered.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the local traders were very much aware of the dangers of monopoly and wanted to put an end to it. Losing their sovereignty was another issue of grave concern. The reasons are not far-fetched; they wanted free trade, given the comparative advantage it conferred on them. On the contrary, the RNC's trade monopoly only posed eminent threat to their social standing and major source of income. They equally felt they would also suffer the same fate in their trade with the RNC, which was determined to edge them out after it successfully extinguished other European companies, with the exception of only the African Association based in Liverpool and the anti-liquor Church Missionary Society (CMS). The CMS had enjoyed strong support of

philanthropists in the British parliament. According to Ayandele (1968), all the colonial governors who served in Nigeria before the outbreak of the First World War feared the influence of the CMS. In recognition of the CMS influence, the African Association indicated its willingness to end its trade in liquor in order to win its support against the RNC. It suffices to observe that its decision to not trade in liquor, which was in tandem with the CMS religious position, was the reason why the RNC could not crush it. Similarly, Goldie's realisation that it was impossible for him to undermine or crush the CMS beckoned on him to diplomatically work with them. In fact, he pretended to be disposed to the CMS' moral world view and even supported their evangelistic missions financially in order to save his company (Ayandele, 1968). His strategy was perhaps welcomed by British authorities because of the role of Christian Missionaries in convincing colonised territories to submit to the modernity of Western civilisation through Western education.

The colonial government also dismissed the local traders' concerns on the backdrop of RNC's performance and in recognition of its acquisition of the protectorates of the Niger territories, which cost it £250,000 (Letter from the chamber to the Most Honourable, the Marquis Salisbury, K.G, 1892). This action, by the British, makes its claim to a free trade doubtful or questionable. The evil which resulted from the company's trade obstructionist policies and its interference with European and Nigerian traders' right was tacitly supported by the British. This unfortunate development spelt doom on the economies of the Nigerian societies and traders' gains, especially those on the Niger and Benue rivers, who preferred to trade with the highest bidder. In reaction to Goldie's continued provocation, the Brass people attacked the RNC's headquarters at Arkassa, in the Delta region, in 1894. This was in view of the fact that they had been effectively crippled economically and denied their preferred direct trade with the Germans. Similarly, the traders' had also learnt lessons from the account of Jaja of Opobo, who was sent on exile for exporting palm oil directly to Britain and was killed on his way back

home (Tayo, 2019). The fact of the matter was that, the people were at the point of starvation as a result of the RNC's exactions, which systematically squeezed them out of trade and commerce, in their own territories.

One of the roles of the RNC in the founding of Nigeria was its signing of dubious treaties of protection with the local rulers on the Niger and Delta areas. The content of the treaties were not understood by the indigenous rulers who signed them due to their inability to read and write. As a result, they thought what they had signed were mere treaties of trade, commerce and friendship. This implies that the traditional rulers who signed treaties with the RNC were ignorant of the terms and conditions of what they had signed with the representative of the imperial government in London. The multiplicity of treaties (over 400) the company signed with local chiefs on the Niger, Benue and Delta earned Britain a firm grip of the greater parts of what later metamorphosed into modern day Nigeria, as they were further incorporated into earlier ones signed by the British Consuls (Lupton, 1985). For instance, it had treaties signed with Ilorin, Bida, Bussa, Sokoto and Gwandu. Consequently, the entire caliphate had come under the influence of the company in 1899 (Lupton, 1985). The treaties of trade and protection which Goldie's RNC signed with the leaders of the aforementioned kingdoms and empires, solidified Britain's claims against those of its arch-rivals, the governments of France and Germany. These imperial nations felt obliged to honour them in order to avoid any form of military conflict, capable of undermining the interests of their trading firms in West Africa.

Closely related to the above, is the fact that, the charter which the company secured in 1886 empowered it to interfere in the internal politics of the territories it swindled into signing trade and diplomatic treaties aimed at deterring European competitors. As mentioned earlier, the charter it received also included the right to govern the territories under its jurisdiction. The right to govern territories was only a means to the realisation of the company's core economic motive. It also gave the RNC the exclusive rights to export palm oil and to obfuscate free trade agreements that run

contrary to British imperial objectives on the Niger and Delta regions. In addition to this, its interference was also made possible because it was granted the right to put an end to domestic slavery and to collect taxes. This was done in order to minimise the imperial company's cost of governance and to enable it maximise profits at the same time. These interferences clearly violated the gentleman's agreement Goldie had made with the local chiefs of the Delta before 1886. The agreement forbade his company from going beyond the coastal areas into the interior of Rivers Niger and Benue (Tayo, 2019). Be that as it may, Goldie's violation of the accord, became the fulcrum of the RNC's firm grip on trade as well as the people of the area. The direct consequence of Goldie's ungentlemanly action was the subjugation of the people and their eventual colonisation at the turn of the 20th century.

Similarly, the role of the company at the Berlin conference of 1884/1885 cannot be overemphasized nor downplayed. The mercantile European trading companies already operating in West Africa not only exerted pressure on their governments for more control in their spheres of influence, but were also present at the conference to help their imperial governments consolidate on their commercial exploits. They were fully persuaded that increased involvement of their governments would result in the provision of security, improved infrastructure and a more conducive environment for their businesses to thrive. It was against this backdrop that the West African section of the London Chamber of Commerce, in 1885, recommended closer administration of British West African territories, which included the policing of the Niger and Benue Rivers and an effective communication system on regular basis, for safe operations, aimed at minimising risks of incidence (Pedler, 1975).

To this end, Goldie worked very closely with the British government to stall German and French further penetration into Northern Nigeria and parts of Eastern Nigeria at the conference. As the representative of NAC at the conference, he contended that the Middle and Lower Niger and Benue Rivers were firmly under the Union Jack

(Wuam & Jatau, 2022). These areas were not only ceded to the British, they were also without delay declared British protectorates, to formalise the claims and halt any form of encroachment by the French and the Germans. After the conference, it swiftly penetrated the hinterlands and signed treaties with more local chiefs and supported chiefdoms and kingdoms threatened by the French and the Germans (Falola, T. et al, 2014). These activities of the company, stamped British presence and influence in what is now Nigeria. In addition to this, it effectively used gunboats to conquer and control territories under the coastal chiefs. Little wonder why the British quickly declared a protectorate over the Niger, dominated the oil Rivers, eastern trade as well as parts of Western Nigeria, especially Lagos. The point being made is that the exploits of Goldie and his company made it very easy for the British to advance its claim and interest on Nigeria at the Berlin conference, with little or no resistance. This ultimately helped to curb German and French further penetration into the interior of Nigeria.

At the height of the RNC's imperial activities in Nigeria, the inhabitants of the area now called Nigeria was estimated to be around 20 million, of which the RNC controlled and administered a population estimated to be about 10 million people (Lugard, 1937). In geographical terms, it controlled the entire Northern Nigeria; an area that was far more than a quarter of a million and included a strip of territory along the River Niger and the Delta states to the South (Lugard, 1937). Therefore, the company controlled and managed more than half of what was later renamed Nigeria by Flora Shaw. It is instructive to note that Goldie's tremendous exploit in West Africa is comparable only to that of Cecil Rhodes and his British South African Company. Fascinated and impressed by the foundation Goldie had laid before his arrival, Fredrick Lord Lugard, Nigeria's first colonial governor, who amalgamated the country, unmistakably concluded that he was the founder of Nigeria, and that his ideas of a future Nigeria influenced the policy which he adopted after the RNC's charter was revoked on the 31st of December 1899 (Lugard, 1937).

According to Lugard, George Goldie planned that Nigeria be governed on European principle albeit indirectly through local chiefs in isolated settlements. His idea of government in colonial Nigeria was informed by the unfavourable climate of West Africa. This led him to the conclusion that the administration of a future Nigeria must be conducted from an office in London (Lugard, 1937). Lugard's revelation suggests that the indirect rule system he introduced into Nigeria, which utilised native authorities in the administration of the Northern and Southern Protectorates, was partly influenced by Goldie's vision of a future Nigeria. Nevertheless, the Lugardian indirect rule system was different from that of Goldie, chiefly because Nigeria was not governed directly from London as he had envisioned. While the Governor-General was at the helm of affairs in Lagos, he received directives from the Secretary of States who was based in London and was directly responsible and accountable to the Queen in Council (the British Parliament). It is pertinent to note that Goldie's argument that Nigeria should be administered from London may have been influenced by the fear of the deadly malaria disease which killed many British officials on the Niger River. That notwithstanding, Lugard took cognisance of his concerns and made use of only a few British officials on the ground for effective coordination as well as policy formulation and implementation. The discovery of quinine, an effective antidote to malaria, most probably explained the policy discrepancy.

The Fall of the RNC and the Making of Modern Nigeria

Sir Ralph Moor's appointment as Consul to the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1891 came with great challenges for Goldie. Moor was opposed to the RNC's obsession with monopoly in its assigned territory, among other things. Similarly, traders who had partnered the RNC on the West African Coast for economic gains suddenly became its enemies and hell-bent at breaking its monopoly. In order to achieve their aim, they promoted the smuggling of palm oil into the Oil Rivers Protectorate which had been

renamed the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1893 (Keazor, 2014). Their strategy failed because Goldie had appropriately responded to it with great cunning and ruthlessness.

As earlier mentioned, the charter granted to the company in 1886 was revoked in 1899. The creation of the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF) in 1897 under Lord Lugard, an experienced and accomplished colonial officer and an employee of the RNC, was spiteful and a clear indication that Joseph Chamberlain, a former president of the Board of Trade and Secretary of States for colonies between 29 June 1895 and 16 September 1903, was against the renewal of Goldie's buccaneering company's charter beyond 1899. Another reason often advanced for the refusal of Chamberlain to renew the RNC's charter, was its continuing territorial and commercial disputes with French companies as well as persistent complaints of the local people against it. This made him absolutely in favour of an outright transition to colonial rule, which he felt would better secure and advance the interests of the British in Nigeria and West Africa in general.

He therefore settled for a negotiated revocation settlement with Goldie's RNC. The result was that the RNC sold its acquired territory, which was equivalent to Northern Nigeria to the British government for £865,000 and forfeited its rights and interests. It was however compensated with only commercial rights and royalty on mineral exploitation for 99 years (Magwvat, 1984). With the abrogation of the RNC's charter and its rule over the Niger and Benue, Lugard and the newly formed imperial army, the RWAFF swiftly advanced towards Borgu and the little left of the French in the area retreated, leaving the Niger firmly in the hands of the British (Flint, 1960). Consequently, Lugard hoisted the Union Jack at Lokoja on the 1st of January 1900, while declaring that all lands formerly in the hands of the RNC had become the property of her Royal Majesty, the Queen. He also had all the lands registered and promulgated the infamous Crown Land Law No.16, which effectively transferred all land to the Crown (Magwvat, 1984). But that was not enough to secure the entire territories that constituted Northern Nigeria, as the Tivs and the Sokoto Caliphate as well as some of its emirate still had their independence intact

(Mohammed, 2007). An all-encompassing occupation and effective administration required the conquest and bringing of these territories under the Crown's suzerainty. Lugard's imperial army invaded these autonomous treaties, defeated, occupied and incorporated them into the British Empire (Ferguson, 1985). The Southern parts of the company's spheres of influence in the palm oil zone, now known as the Niger-Delta, were merged into the Niger Coast Protectorates and renamed Southern Nigeria in 1900.

Thus, there were three separate colonial administrative jurisdictions in Nigeria by 1900. They were the Northern Protectorates, Southern Protectorates and the Colony of Lagos, which was acquired by the British in 1861. The administrative units were further reduced to two in 1906 when the Colony of Lagos and Southern Protectorates were amalgamated to form the Colony and Protectorates of Southern Nigeria (Charles Jnr, 1967). By 1910, the British political and commercial influence had spread to all parts of the Southern and Northern Protectorates. In 1914, Lugard amalgamated the Colony and protectorates of Southern Nigeria and the Northern Protectorate to form Modern Nigeria. The Nigerian Council was established in the same year to kick-start central administration for the newly formed country. To do this, the secretariat, treasury, political department, works department, judiciary and communication networks were put in place or expanded upon the pre-existing framework of the defunct RNC's government (Wuam & Jatau, 2022). The erstwhile RNC also made substantial contribution to the number of staff which worked in colonial Nigeria under Lugard. The RNC changed its name to The Niger Company Ltd and was later absorbed by Unilever as a subsidiary in the 1930's and continues to operate in Nigeria (Cook, 1964).

Conclusion

Modern Nigerian political, socio-cultural as well economic realities have been significantly defined and influenced by European colonial rule at the turn of the 20th century. But before the imposition and consolidation of colonial rule in Nigeria, the legal entity that was instrumental in establishing British presence and interest in the Nigerian

areas, especially the areas surrounding the River Niger, was Goldie's RNC. Effective occupation and colonization by the British was made possible and built upon its prior military conquests and the enforcement of treaties it had already signed with the indigenous rulers of the states on the Niger River and Delta region. Thus, the role of the RNC in the formation of Nigeria in 1914 is beyond any reasonable doubt. Goldie's autocratic style of leadership as well as his imposition of trade monopoly on the Niger and Benue Rivers, which extended to the Delta states, were central to the successes recorded by the company. This enabled the company to put an end to free trade, generate revenue through the imposition of custom duties on European and African traders, while systematically interfering in the local politics of the people. Furthermore, the right given to the RNC to govern territories made it possible for it to establish de facto courts called court of equity to try cases, especially trade disputes in favour of its unscrupulous ambition and at the expense of the locals who demonstrated penchant for free trade. Most importantly, it deprived the Germans and the French the right to free trade with the inhabitants of the Nigerian area and warded off their ambitions to occupy Nigeria. This made it very easy for the British to gain full control of the territories that make up Nigeria and to colonise it between 1900 and 1960. The sum-total of the RNC's exploit in Nigeria informed Lugard's conclusion that, Sir George Goldie, the Governor of the RNC, was the most deserved founder of modern Nigeria.

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