

# PORT DEVELOPMENT AND MODERNISATION ON THE WEST AFRICAN ATLANTIC COAST IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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## INTRODUCTION

The literature on African ports is substantial in its own right but slight compared to that on ports in other parts of the world. With one exception (Hoyle and Hilling, 1970), there is no continent-wide or regional collection of scholarly studies or a single all-encompassing monograph on the subject. The literature has been dominated by case studies of ports within national boundaries. Given the geographic size and population of Nigeria, studies on its ports have been dominant in the literature on West Africa (Ogundana, 1961, 1972, 1976; Udoh, 1979; Olukoju, 1992, 1996a). However, this tendency has limited the scope of comparative analysis of ports across the region or, indeed, the continent. This paper, therefore, examines and compares aspects of port development and modernization on the Atlantic coast of West Africa during the twentieth century.

## THE DYNAMICS OF PORT DEVELOPMENT

By way of an introduction to this subject, some generalizations can be made about the features and development of ports. First, ports may be classified as either “natural” or artificial, but either category of ports still requires modernization or development to make them fit for optimal use. Second, technology is therefore critical to port development no matter the original state of the harbour. For example, between 1892 and 1924, the British firm of Coode, Fitzmaurice and Partners, undertook extensive investigations, produced elaborate engineering plans and applied engineering expertise to the development of Lagos and Port Harcourt (Olukoju, 1992, 1996a). This was the pattern in other parts of West Africa. The importance of technology is underscored by the creation of artificial ports and the removal of bars at the entrance of ports: Lagos, Port Harcourt and Tema are classic illustrations of the triumph of engineering and modern technology over physical or natural barriers. Third, the size and draught of shipping influence the pattern, scope and direction of port development. Port authorities constantly dredge harbours and port entrances to make them accommodate bigger ships and increase the volume of port traffic. Silting was a perennial threat to the maintenance of adequate bar draught at these ports. Fourth, the State and the business community have played vital roles in port development. The State’s overwhelmingly importance has been complemented by the pressure group activity of the business community, especially during the colonial period (roughly between 1860 and 1960).

Fifth, port projects are capital intensive and the weakness of the private sector has limited it to a minor role in port development. This explains the virtual absence of private ports as only the State could bear the burden of raising the capital for such costly projects. This is in addition to the contentious issues of land and property rights in and around the ports, which are best handled by the State. Sixth, ports are generally developed in the context of an integrated transport system or policy. In other words, ports and maritime facilities are

complemented by land-based, especially rail transport, networks in a symbiotic relationship. Across West Africa, the most important ports have extensive rail and road transport links with the major centres of economic activity in their hinterlands. In Lagos, for example, after 1919, the centre of port activities shifted from Lagos Island to Apapa, as the latter had direct rail links with the hinterland (Olukoju, 1992; cf. Somuyiwa and Dosunmu, 2008). Seventh, political factors as much as economic considerations have informed the development and modernization of ports all over the world. In Japan, for example, the imperative of regional development led to the creation of “developer” ports (Olukoju, 2004b).

#### PORT DEVELOPMENT IN WEST AFRICA: CONTEXTS, POLICIES AND PATTERNS

Port scholars have proposed models of port development, perhaps the best known being James Bird’s “Anyport” model. This has, however, been superseded by unanticipated developments, when it was originally proposed on the Port of London model, such as containerization and the emergence of hub ports. Generally, port development models are linear but there is nothing inexorable about processes in human affairs. For example, ports experience growth, decline and resurgence, depending on their peculiar contexts and any combination of factors or dynamics.

Port development and modernization in twentieth-century West Africa took place in the interlocking contexts of multiple dynamics —morphology (site and situation); political/colonial/postcolonial developments (imperial and post-independence rivalry, especially, the quest for hub port status or regional transit traffic); global economic cycles of boom and slump; structure of shipping trade; capital and technology (Hoyle and Hilling, 1970; Olukoju, 1996b; Pinder and Slack, 2004)—. A fundamental dynamic has been the nature of the West African coastline, which is striking in its evenness, in contrast to the rugged or indented coastline of Japan, for instance, which has a large number of natural harbours. Hence, the entire West African coastline measuring over a thousand kilometers has only three natural harbours —Lagos, Banjul, and Freetown—. Other ports in the region, numbering well over ninety, have natural physical constraints, especially shallow entrances and narrow channels.

Much of West Africa’s port development took place between 1860 and 1960, the century of European colonial rule. Given the natural problems of site and situation along the coast, port development involved the commitment of much capital (raised by the colonial governments) and advanced engineering technology. Extensive harbour works were undertaken at Dakar (Senegal), Conakry (Guinea), Abidjan (Côte d’Ivoire), Lomé (Togo) and Cotonou (Dahomey, now Republic of Benin), all French colonies, and at Lagos and Port Harcourt (Nigeria), Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Tema (Gold Coast, now known as Ghana), all British colonies. Of these ports, Port Harcourt and Tema were artificial ports constructed in the 1920s and 1950s-1961, respectively.

The nineteenth century was a transitional period in the development of West African ports. This was because though colonial occupation by European powers was well under way along the coast, much of the hinterland had yet to be subjugated. What is worth noting is that colonial state was the principal agency of port development. Hence, much of West African port development was undertaken after 1918, when European colonial rule had been imposed on the entire West African coast and its hinterland. However, extensive developments had taken place at Dakar (Senegal) between 1865 and 1898 and at Lagos (Nigeria) between 1892 and 1914. Given the challenges of the peculiar West African terrain, port development was

state-led, highly capital intensive and technology driven. Port development policy oscillated between concentration (developing and operating a few strategic ports) and diffusion (opening more ports as outlets for trade and shipping). The concentration of investment on a few strategic ports was the dominant trend during the colonial period and, particularly, during the two World Wars. It is significant that the privileged ports were those with rail links with the hinterland. Conversely, port diffusion took place, especially from the 1960s onwards, in the context of actual or anticipated economic boom or for political considerations.

Further developments took place in the second half of the twentieth century, which coincided with the post-independence period. While some of the projects concerned the modernization or extension of existing harbour facilities, others involved the creation of new ports (O'Mahony, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c). The onset of containerization as well as of oil and mineral exports led to the rise of specialist ports. In Nigeria, for example, the Tin Can Island port was constructed to relieve the port congestion crisis of the 1970s while the Onne port emerged to handle the country's oil exports. However, several port development projects were driven by political considerations rather than economic rationality (Olukoju, 1996b). Port projects were treated as prestige projects or undertaken as patronage to reward political constituencies. Accordingly, they merely resulted in excess or idle port capacity. Such white elephant projects wasted valuable capital, which could have been invested in more viable and productive projects.

The leading West African ports are Lagos, Abidjan and Dakar but none is among the world's top 70 ports. However, these ports, together with Douala in Cameroun, account for 30 per cent of the shipping trade of West and Central Africa. With total merchandise traffic of over 30 million tons, Lagos alone accounts for 55% of total Nigerian traffic (a consistent trend since the colonial period) and 25% of total trade of the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS) region (Harding, Palsson and Raballand, 2007: 11). Abidjan, Dakar, Lomé and Cotonou handle the bulk of the shipping trade of the respective countries of Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Togo and Benin as well as the transit traffic bound for their northern, landlocked neighbours. Two-thirds of the region's container traffic is concentrated on the ports of Dakar, Abidjan, Tema and Lagos in a west-east axis.

#### THE DEVELOPMENTAL IMPACT OF PORTS

Japanese and Western examples buttress the assumption that ports can be growth poles in the context of a regional or national development strategy (Hanappe and Savy, 1980; Olukoju, 1996a, 1996b, 2003-2004). The impact of such "developer ports" (cf. Olukoju, 2004b) is however less dramatic in the underdeveloped socioeconomic conditions of West Africa. Still, the impact of ports is felt in urban development, port-based industrialization, linkages with the agricultural economy and overland transport development (Olukoju, 2004a). The rise of containerization has also extended the impact of ports —with the help of the railway and road haulage— to the distant hinterlands with the emergence of inland container depots (ICD) or dry ports. The synergy of maritime and land (especially, rail) transport has provided outlets for large areas of the hinterland. The Dakar-Soudan railway line, the Lagos-Kano and Port Harcourt-Jos networks exemplify the developmental impact of port and rail intermodal transport in the hinterland of West African ports.

However, the developmental impact of ports is not always salutary. For example, ports tend to aggravate the population drift to port-cities, to the detriment of the rural areas. Indeed, the drift to the port-cities has merely compounded social and planning problems in the

affected urban centres while also draining the rural agricultural economy of human and material resources for development. Unemployment, increasing crime rates, high cost of living and attendant social crises are common challenges facing West African port-cities, most of which were/are also national capitals (Olukoju, 2004a). This is exemplified by Dakar in Senegal, and Lagos and Port-Harcourt in Nigeria. All West African port-cities have large shanty towns inhabited by low-income earners. The settlements contain overcrowded and insanitary dwellings which contravene town planning regulations and lack basic facilities – paved roads, potable water and regular power supply. Ironically, while the expansion of port trade has caused the phenomenal growth of West African port-cities, urbanisation has smothered the expansion of ports, thus posing a threat to their future prospects. At Lagos, for example, port functions had to be relocated to the Snake and Ogogoro islands but this has raised the fresh problem of access to the ports from the hinterland (Harding, Palsson and Raballand, 2007:19).

Moreover, port development has often generated skewed or lopsided regional development. This is illustrated by the over-concentration of industrial and commercial establishments in the ports' immediate hinterlands. This is typified by Dakar, Abidjan and Lagos, where over half of Nigeria's industrial and commercial enterprises are located. This constitutes a potential threat to national security as any emergency in that region imperils the nation's political economy. The ship and cargo congestion at the Lagos ports in the 1970s had a paralyzing effect on the country's economy. In effect, the assumed positive correlation between port development and urban/national development has not always been established. At best, port development concentrates development and resources at a few locations but those enclaves do not exert a balanced and commensurate developmental impact on the wider, national economy.

## CONCLUSION

Port development in West Africa did not occur in isolation. It was aligned with the construction of railways and roads, the rise of coastal urban centres and the development of the agricultural and mining sectors of the economy. It was critical to the evolution of an import-dependent and primary produce export colonial economy that remained largely in expatriate hands long after formal political independence. In post-independence West Africa, port development has been driven by the following dynamics.

First, and perhaps most important, is maritime/economic nationalism, which is reflected in the conscious effort of individual countries to develop national ports to avoid dependence on their neighbours in the conduct of their sea-borne trade. This partly accounts for the multiplicity of ports on the West African coast, where several ports exist in close proximity but are separated by international boundaries. As an illustration, Cotonou in Benin and Lomé in Togo are closer to Lagos than is Port Harcourt, another Nigerian port. The diffusion of ports was a direct product of European imperial rivalry which has been sustained by the successor African states and regimes.

Second, a corollary of maritime nationalism is the quest for regional hub status for the shipping traffic of West and Central Africa. This largely explains the frenzied developments in Cameroun, Nigeria, Benin, Côte D'Ivoire and Senegal, as each country has desperately sought since the late 1980s to be the regional hub. But no single port, not even Lagos, can conveniently serve as West Africa's shipping hub. However, each of the leading ports also seeks a larger share of the region's transshipment traffic (O'Mahony, 1989b).

Third, port development policies have been determined essentially by the internal politics and government policy in the individual West African countries. Specifically, political considerations have often resulted in the diffusion of ports even at the risk of creating idle, unutilized capacity. The case of Calabar in Nigeria illustrates the futility of developing a port which has lost its natural hinterland to a neighbouring country (Cameroun) with which Nigeria does not enjoy the best of bilateral relations, as they both seek for preeminence in their respective regions – West and Central Africa (O'Mahony, 1989c). The situation has been complicated by the perpetuation of the imperial rivalry between their former colonial masters (Britain and France) and the contest for the Bakassi Peninsula, which Nigeria lost to Cameroun at the World Court.

Fourth, containerization has also been a potent driving force in the establishment of new ports and the modernization of old ones. In West Africa, the container traffic, though merely a tenth of total Singaporean traffic and only 0.6 per cent of total world trade, is concentrated at a few specialist ports, which are equipped to handle the specialized cargo. Abidjan and the Tin Can Island port in Lagos are the most important for handling national traffic but Abidjan carries a higher proportion of transit cargo bound for the landlocked (fellow French-speaking) neighbours of Côte d'Ivoire.

A symbiotic relationship exists between ports and port-cities and their hinterlands. Ports and their adjoining cities are inextricably linked with the implication that crisis in one invariably affects the other. For instance, the bubonic plagues in the cities of Dakar and Lagos during the inter-war years affected the trade and shipping of their ports because of the consequent quarantine regulations (Olukoju, 2004a). Hence, local and global dynamics as well as economic and political factors shaped the fortunes of ports and port-cities in the region. As earlier indicated, the eastern Nigerian port of Calabar, for example, has been the victim of colonial-era boundary creation which has robbed it of its natural hinterland in Cameroun. (Udo, 1979). As well, global economic boom and crises (such as the depressions of 1920-22 and 1929-33) have affected the fortunes of ports, port-cities and their parent countries.

The developmental impact of West African ports is debatable. On the one hand, ports represent axes of economic growth, provide an economic basis for adjoining port-cities and even define the character of their parent nations. This is aptly illustrated by the role of Lagos, Dakar, Abidjan, Cotonou, Lomé and Freetown, in particular, in their respective countries. Undoubtedly, port development and commercial prosperity were pivotal to urbanization in coastal West Africa. On the other hand, West African ports have skewed the distribution of national resources, which tend to be concentrated at a few isolated port-based commercial-industrial centres. Lagos, for example, has the largest concentration (up to 60 percent) of industrial and commercial establishments in Nigeria. Moreover, ports, by the nature of their operations, have cemented the external dependency relations of West African nation-states with the countries of the North, especially their former colonial masters. This neo-colonial arrangement has been sustained in the post-independence period without any immediate signs of abatement.

In the final analysis, port development in West Africa has served the imperial and, later, the national agenda of the different countries of West Africa. As in the shipping industry, competition rather than complementarity has characterized port and economic development policies in the region. This belies the individual countries' commitment to regional integration under the ECOWAS platform. To be sure, there are regional inter-governmental consultative

bodies in the maritime sector, such as the Port Management Association of West and Central Africa (PMAWCA) and the Maritime Organisation of West and Central Africa (MOWCA), though the latter is focused on shipping. Yet, at best, port and economic development policies in West Africa have produced and sustained, since the colonial period, a hierarchy of ports within and across national boundaries. Port diffusion for political and strategic, rather than economic, reasons has tied down or wasted resources that could have been better utilized in other sectors of the economy. This has largely contributed to the relative underdevelopment of the region's ports and maritime sector.

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