ROAD DEVELOPMENT IN COLONIAL AKOKOLAND, 1920 - 1960: A PANACEA TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN AKOKO DISTRICT, SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Akoko, a sub-set of the Yoruba, domiciled in southwestern Nigeria, witnessed significant road development between 1920 and 1960. Road network was one of the priorities of colonial rule in most of the British held territories. This was due to the fact that colonial economy was hinged on the exploitation of the rich resources in the hinterland by colonial masters for the development of their home countries. The construction of roads to link the rural communities to colonial headquarters was of great importance to colonial rulers, but quite unlike the British, the building of road in Akokoland during the period under survey was unexplainably under-played. Massive road construction work by the British was not undertaken in Akoko until the third decade of the twentieth century. This paper attempts to look at road construction in Akokoland from 1920-1960. It also analyses the impact of road development in Akokoland. The paper concludes that not much was done to construct motor able roads in Akokoland during the period under survey.

Keywords: Akokoland, Road Construction, Economic Development, Colonialism, Southwestern Nigeria

Road Construction in Akokoland

Introduction

Before the introduction of transport facilities in Akoko, people in Akoko were known to have travelled on paths over short and long distances within and outside Akoko for trading. At the

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genesis of colonial administration in Nigeria, road network was one of the priorities of colonial rule in most of the British held territories. This was due to the fact that colonial economy was hinged on the exploitation of the rich resources in the hinterland by colonial masters for the development of their home countries. That the construction of roads to link the rural communities to colonial headquarters was of great importance to colonial rulers, but quite unlike the British, the building of road in Akokoland during the period under survey was unexplainably underplayed. Massive road construction work by the British was not undertaken in Akoko until the third decade of the twentieth century (NAI Ben prof BP471/18 1921). Before this time, European traders as well as British administration relied heavily on the use of the caravan routes with little modification.)Baale Isreal 2013)

Road Construction

In 1920, soon after the transfer of Akoko to the southern provinces to form part of Owo Division, proposals were made to widen some of the important trade routes to make them motor able roads.(NAI Ondo Prof File 1920-1921) In the Akoko district, for instance, three of those routes attracted the urgent attention of the British officers. The first was the Owo-Ikare route which would link the western portion of Akoko not only with Owo, the centre of the Native Administration but also with Lokoja, an important commercial centre. The second was the Isua-Akunnu-Ikare route which would serve the eastern part of Akoko. It would also link Akoko with Owo via Ipele, a rich oil palm belt. The third, Ikare-Omuo, was a north-eastern route passing through Arigidi, Afa, Oyin and finally joining the Ado- Ekiti/ Kabba route at Omuo. The British officers also felt the need to link such small feeder paths as the Upe-Epinmi-Isua route with the major routes. By so doing, a greater portion of Akoko would be opened up for trade by a network of roads. (NAI Ondo Prof 1.2 1920-1921).

Two factors aided the British in the task of road construction in Akoko. The first was that the nature of the forest being mostly

thick savannah, allowed easy clearing. Secondly, the traditional rulers were willing to co-operate with the officers in the supply of human labour for road construction. Even when road workers came to be paid by the Native Administration, there were occasions when people were recruited on emergency road works without payment. In some other occasions people volunteered freely to make sure that such projects were completed on time. (NAI Ondo Prof 4/1 1930).

The construction of road in Owo division, of which Akoko district formed a part, was undertaken by two agencies – the Public Work Department (PWD) and the Native Administration (NA). The former took charge of Benin-Ifon-Akure road, that is, between the Ose River in the east and the Ogbese in the west, the two provincial boundaries. The other agency, the Native Administration, handled the other road in Owo division that is between Owo and Akoko districts' town and villages. Unfortunately, the funds at the disposal of the Native Administration were grossly inadequate to cope with the gigantic work of road construction and maintenance. In 1922, Mr. G.H. Barham, a senior inspector of work, embarked on the construction of two bridges over Rivers Ogbesse and Osse on Ipele- Akunu road. He however, abandoned the project due to inadequate fund. He had only £2,600(NAI CSO Papers 1922). As a result of this financial difficulty he erected temporary wooden bridges on the two rivers. The danger of such wooden bridges was apparent as they very often collapsed during use particularly if the woods had become dry. These bridges constituted a death-trap to the people. Moreover, the make-shift culverts made on small streams were easily washed away by strong torrents during the rains.

In 1923, a sum of £1, 150 was set aside from the Native Administration vote for the construction of new roads and the maintenance of the Ipele-Ikeram road. This happened to be the only road constructed in the division. (N.A.I Ondo Prof. 4/1 9 1923) In the same year also, the British constructed the Owo-Ikeram road, an important road linking Owo with Lokoja. Following many appeals to the government for the construction

of bridges on these rivers, the government decided to finance the construction of the bridges not only over the Osse River on the Owo-Ikare road but also over the Ogbesse and Osse Rivers on the Ipele-Ikaram road. To make the work easy, concrete and official the division was offered the services of an Engineer, Mr. Dumbar and a surveyor and draughtsman, Mr. King.

With the assistance of the Engineer, the three bridges were constructed even though they were of the wooden type. The burden of maintenance was to be borne by the Native Administration. But the real problem of the Native Administration was lack of funds. For any effective maintenance of these roads, the authority would have to spend a greater percentage of its revenue on the roads, thus for a long time, the Native Administration was not capable of coping with the task of maintaining these roads. For instance, it was estimated in 1930 that a large sum of £37, 880 was needed to bring the principal road in Owo Division to a satisfactory standard that would enhance easy transport. (N.A.I Ondo Prof. 4/1 1930) Regrettably, the vote for road maintenance in that year was a meager sum of £1, 300. (N.A.I Ondo Prof. 4/1 1930) Consequently, the Ipele-Ikeram road and other roads considered to be of less importance had to be abandoned to give priority to the Owo-Ikaram road which the officers considered to be a more useful road from the point of view of its commercial importance. The inability of the Native Authority to maintain the Ipele-Ikaram road led to its closure in 1930, owing to the dangerous state of the bridges over the Osse and the Ogbeesse. (N.A.I Ondo Prof. 4/1 1930) This road was not reopened until 1940s. Financial problem equally delayed the construction of Ikare-Omuo road until 1928. The road was opened to traffic in 1932 when the bridge over the Otagala River was completed. (N.A.I Ondo Prof. 4/1 1932) By the end of 1940, only the important commercial centres in Akoko had been linked by a network of roads, even though not one of these roads was tarred. However, they increased trade and served some useful social purposes.

The purpose of road construction was to enhance the movement of personnel and goods. Some proportion of the

revenue collected was devoted to road construction. Though much was expended on the personnel and the structure of administration, some attention was paid to road construction given the poor state of road infrastructure in Akokoland before 1919. By that date, the area did not possess any noticeable motorable roads but by 1926, 46 miles of roads had been constructed in the Division. A further 97 miles were added between 1926 and 1931. (N.A.I Ondo Prof. 4/1 1932)

While this was a significant improvement on the record of the Northern Nigeria (Kabba Province) administration, it must be stressed that the motives behind road construction were not simply altruistic. Moreover, much of the credit for the feat should go to the people themselves whose initiative and communal self-help efforts accounted for the relative success achieved in this regard. Thus, the Oka-Iboropa road was started on the personal initiative of the Olubaka of Oka, who desired a road outlet for his hilltop kingdom, but this remained a mere track for long owing to the ruggedness of the terrain in and around Oka.

A major initiative of the colonial government in road construction was the decision taken in 1919. In that year, the British decided to link Owo, headquarters of the new Division, with Ikare, the strategically located headquarters of the erstwhile Nupe district in Akoko and a commercial centre of considerable importance. The road was to pass through Oba, also in Akoko, to connect the western part of the Division with Owo. This project was important for administrative and economic reasons. In recognition of this, the Lieutenant-Governor of the Southern Provinces of Nigeria in 1920 promised the assistance of the Public Works Engineer to facilitate its execution. (Annual Report 1929). However, the anticipated help did not come until much later because Owo Division was within the jurisdiction of the Senior Executive Engineer of the Public Works Department (P.W.D) Benin. This juridical location made it difficult to secure the assistance of the P.W.D because its sphere of operations did not coincide with (but cut across) Provincial boundaries. In this particular case, a single officer in Benin was placed in charge of such a vast area, comprising Ondo and Benin Provinces, which

he could not cover effectively. While this case reflects the general inadequacy of personnel relative to need during the period, it should also be seen as a reflection of the low priority given to social and infrastructural development by colonial governments during the period.

Eventually, the colonial government constructed the Owo-Kabba road via Ikare and Ikaram in Akokoland. Construction began in 1922 and by 1925 a bridge to span the Osse River (the western boundary of Akokol and Owo) was already under construction. By 1927, when the road was completed, it was the first motorable road in Akokoland. (NAI CSO 26/3 29667, Vol. I. 1927) Between 1920 and 1929 other road projects were also undertaken to "open up" the Akoko country. Work began on the Isua-Epinmi road in 1921 but this, and the Ikare-Arigidi road, which were both self-help projects, were taken over by the N.A. by 1928, the Ikare-Ogbagi road had been opened to traffic and was eventually extended to Irun, also in Akoko, located at the periphery of the cocoa-producing areas of Ekitiland. The villages along the 14 mile Arigidi-Okeagbe-Oyin-Omuo road voluntarily constructed eleven miles of access roads but these lacked bridges and culverts which vitiated their optimal utilization. The completion in 1929 of the 25 mile Idoani-Ifira-Isua-Ise-Auga-Akunnu road was significant for completing the circular route through the Division. (N.A.I Ondo Prof. 4/1 1929) By that year also, Supare in western Akokoland, had been linked by road with Owo and Ikare while the Arigidi-Omuo road was also completed. The extension from Akungba to Oka of the Ikare-Owo road, which was done in 1929, was described as the "most difficult and most useful road projects carried out by the Native Administration" (Annual Report 1929). The importance attached to this project derived from the fact that it gave the hilltop community of Oka, the largest of the Akoko communities, access road to the major artery of communications in the Owo Division. From 1930-1940 attention was placed on the maintenance of these roads by the communities and the N.A. no road was tarred in Akoko during this period. The above has shown that the N.A. attempted to provide roads all over Akokoland in conjunction

with the affected communities. It needs to be emphasised that road construction encountered serious problems, posed by the peculiarity rugged terrain of Akokoland and the shortage of funds and of skilled manpower. The N.A. therefore, undertook the projects in order of the administrative and economic importance ascribed to them. Moreover, costs were reduced by contracting out the projects. However, as we shall see, it was the people themselves who bore the brunt of the construction of the roads.

Effects of Road Construction on Akokoland

With the commencement of road construction in Akokoland from the 1920s, wage labour became an important feature of colonial road construction. Incidentally, the period marked the end of the enthusiasm that characterised road construction before the period. Employees were then working for money rather than the joy of linking one's village to the global world. As a result, record of laziness of laborers became a common- place. For instance, the Olubaka of Oka wrote a letter to the District Officer in Owo on 22nd August, 1936 calling his attention to the fact that, the workers employed on Ikare township road were too playful; they were not doing their work. (N. A. I. Owo Div. 1/1, 1932) Also, in the letter of the District Officer to the Olisua of Isua, dated 8th November, 1938, Bello Lemamu was dismissed for being lazy, untrustworthy and inefficient as a worker on the road, (N. A. I. Owo Div. 1/1, 1938)

Even with the evolution of wage labour in road construction in 1930s, forced labour continued to be used. This was as a result of inadequacy of funds. Hence, government could not take care of the various demands of the people for road construction, in spite of the people's production of cash crops, a very important factor in African request for roads. For example, £2,000 feeder road grant given to Akoko Division by the Western Region government in 1955 was meant for reconstruction of roads as follows.(N. A. I. Owo Div. 1/1, 1955)

1. Extension of the road
2. Blasting of stones off the road
3. Cutting drains on the sides of the sides of road especially in the towns and quarters and having them plastered
4. Tarring of the road from the road junction (Ikare road junction) to Epeme a distance of 8miles
5. Ikare-Epeme bridge
6. Oka-Ere-Afo road building, it was agreed that the works of culverts and bridges should start at once and that the Road Overseer ,Mr. Kolawole should arrange to employ a contractor to start the work .

In another attempt to develop roads in Owo Division, the Regional Government raised a loan of 4,000 pound to finance Road Development Programme covering the period 1955 to 1960. The roads were:

1. Owo – Imeri (Osse bridge)
2. Owo –Okiomo
3. Owo – Benin Road
4. Owo –Okeluse
5. Ufon – Okeluse
6. Ukuti – Ipele – Ifon
7. Ifon – Osse bridge
8. Owo –Ipenme – Ikare Road
9. Isuada – Eporo
10. Owo – Ala – Idanre.

Pursuant to the Ministry of Public Works determination to construct more roads, the Trunk "B" Owo – Ikare Road Osse bridge was expanded and the Owo – Ikare was extended to Kabba boundary, and the whole length tarred with full width. (Public Works Department Circular No. MPW. 3.1 1955) The Ikare – Omuo road also was given a general improvement grant by the Regional Government for the general improvement on the road. A capital grant was also given out for the Divisional Council important roods such as the Oba – Afo and Ikun road

for the replacement of wooden bridges with permanent structures and other general improvements. (Public Works Department Circular No. MPW. 3.1 1955)

Attempts were made to develop cocoa road, to this, a grant of £2,500 grant was earmarked for the construction of the following roads:

1bridge on Akunnu- Ishe Road -	£193
1bridge on Supare – Akungba road -	£123
1 culvert on Ishe – Isua Road	£190
1 bridge on Ikare – Lagidishi Road	£277
Labour and farm officers	£500
Medical and Survey store	£350(Public Works

Department Circular No. MPW. 3.1 1955)

Other roads constructed in Akoko in 1955 were the Ikare - Omuo road, Okerigbe hill along Akungba – Ikare road, Oba, Afo, Ikun and Idoani road, Erushu – Okeagbe, Irun Afin, Ifira – Afo, Etioro - Supare and Ishua – Ukpe. The Owo- Ikare road was tarred in 1955, remaining the only road tarred in Akoko during the colonial era. In 1955 – 1960 the western regional government earmarked 2million four hundred thousand six hundred pound for road construction, only Owo- Kabba regional boundary of 19 miles was earmarked for tarring in Owo- Akoko Divisions. The tarring was completed in 1956. (Public Works Department Circular No. MPW. 3.1 1955)

From the above analysis, it becomes glaring that up till the 1950s and even after the colonial period, most bridges in the division were wooden and the roads were often in bad conditions, since they were not well maintained. For example, the rainstorm of the night of 9th – 10th July, 1933 made the main Owo -Ikare road to be covered with water to the depth of two feet, especially in the places around Osse river. This made the roads to remain non-motor able for a long time.(Ayegbusi Felix) In his letter to Akoko Divisional Council on the 16th of May, 1955, the district Engineer also confirmed that, the provincial roads in Akoko Division suffer from lack of funds to carry out proper

maintenance. (Public Works Department Circular No. MPW. 3.1 1955) Also, in 1938, Ipele - Idoani - Ifira road was closed to vehicular movement, because it was in a very bad condition. (Public Works Department Circular No. MPW. 3.1 1955)

In similar vein, most roads were built by communal efforts without any technical advice. Most of the European engineers were highly inexperienced as many of the roads they proposed were struck out of the road programme in the 1930s because their original layouts were bad and uneconomic. This accounted for the delay in the construction of Oka- Epenme, Isua- Ifira and Oka- Afo roads. These roads were not constructed until after revised layouts and surveys were done. (Public Works Department Circular No. MPW. 3.1 1955) Also, several existing culverts collapsed on Ikare - Epenme, Ikare - Ishe and Ikare - Omuo roads. This made the roads to remain non-motor able for most part of 1941, as new culverts had to be made in their places. (Public Works Department Circular No. MPW. 3.1 1955)

Equally, lorries and cars plying the roads were very scanty. As at the 1940s in Owo, Ikare and different other parts of the division, people had to wait for eight days or more before the only lorry plying their roads could come. In 1955- 1956, when Owo-Ikare road was tarred, the total number of heavy, light lorries, cars and motorcycles using it were estimated to be 708 per week. (Public Works Department Circular No. MPW. 3.1 1955) All these made road transportation to be costly. Pa Felix Ayegbusi of Ikare related how he always preferred trekking to Owo and used his money to buy things he needed to waiting for a long time for a costly motor transportation.(Ayegbusi Felix 2014) Improvement in this area came on the eve of the colonial period when many people bought cars and lorries in the division. Thus, human porterage was still widespread in the division in spite of the network of roads that passed through it. In other words, head loading along the existing roads and footpaths complemented the wheeled transportation of the colonial era in Akoko Division.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it was observed that the colonial government in Akokoland did not pay serious attention to road construction in Akoko as it was in other southwestern divisions. However, from the third decade of the 20th century, road constructions had started in Akoko, most of the roads were poorly constructed through the NA, wage labours from the local people and the communal help from the people, Nevertheless no road as tarred in Akoko until 1956. This was the Owo-Ikare road. Other roads in Akoko were not tarred until after independence.

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