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*The period between 1900 and 1914 marked a significant transformation in the economic landscape of Niger Province, a critical territory within colonial Northern Nigeria. This research explores the colonial economic structure implemented by British colonial authorities and its profound impact on local societies, economies, and governance. Through an analysis of colonial policies, taxation systems, and trade practices, the study reveals how colonialism restructured traditional economic systems, facilitating the extraction of resources while undermining indigenous industries. This paper further examines the effects of infrastructure development, particularly railways, on both economic integration and regional exploitation. Using a combination of archival research and existing scholarly literature, the findings contribute to the broader discourse on colonialism's legacy in Africa, illustrating the tension between economic exploitation and the adaptation of local communities. The study concludes that the colonial economic structure was beneficial to the transformation of the economy of the Niger Province and contributed to the emergence of modern economic development in Nigeria as a whole.*

**Keywords:** Colonial Economy, Niger province**Introduction**

The Niger Province during the colonial period covers an area of 28,666 square miles with a population of 556,778.<sup>2</sup> Like much of Nigeria, the Niger Province experienced significant transformation under British colonial rule from 1900 to 1914. During this time, British colonial rule deeply influenced the economic structures and practices in the province. The colonial administration was driven by economic motivations, established systems and policies that profoundly altered the social, economic, and political landscapes of the people. The imposition of colonial policies and the emergence of new market dynamics altered traditional economic activities and fostered a distinctive colonial economy. The British colonial administration implemented policies aimed at resource extraction and profit maximization, significantly affecting the indigenous peoples and their economic practices. Key initiatives included the imposition of taxes, the establishment of cash crop production, and the introduction of infrastructure projects that served colonial interests.<sup>3</sup>

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2Annual Report By Thurley Esquire, District Officer, Public Works Department, No. 33- Niger Province 1940.

3Crowder, M., "The Berlin West Africa Conference and the Partition of Africa", The Journal of African History, 9(1), (1968), 57-74.



The interplay between these policies and local economic structures created a dual economy characterized by both subsistence and cash crop production, affecting agricultural practices and trade networks. Additionally, the emergence and expansion of markets during this period were critical to the colonial economic structure. Colonial authorities encouraged the integration of local economies into global trade networks, primarily through the commercialization of crops and commodities such as palm oil, groundnuts, and textiles. The establishment of markets did not only facilitate the exchange of goods and services, but also restructured social relations and economic hierarchies in Niger Province, which resulted in marginalizing traditional practices in favor of colonial economic interests. It is important to note that there were profound transformations that swept through Niger Province, which ultimately set the stage for the emergence of modern economic practices in Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> This discussion chapter delves into the structure of the colonial economy, focusing on land and labor policies, agricultural strategies, taxation, infrastructure development, and market expansion. The aim is to set the foundation for understanding the impact of colonial policies and the growth and expansion of markets in Niger Province during this era.

### **The Structure of the Colonial Economy in Niger Province**

The colonial economy in Niger Province, which is now part of modern-day Nigeria, was significantly influenced by European imperialism, particularly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This section discusses the structure of the colonial economy in Niger Province during the period from 1900 to 1914.<sup>5</sup> The colonial economy in Niger Province was primarily agrarian and heavily relied on the exploitation of natural resources for export. Thus it is pertinent to first consider the structure of the colonial economy.<sup>6</sup> In line with Jatau's position that agriculture is one of the oldest and remains the most important occupation of the people in the area since pre-colonial period, it is important to reiterate that the economy of Niger Province was predominantly dependent on agriculture, with staple crops such as yams, cassava, and maize being cultivated alongside cash crops like groundnuts, palm oil, and cotton.<sup>7</sup> These cash crops were introduced by colonial administrators to integrate local farmers into the global market. Indigenous farming practices were modified to align with colonial objectives, leading to the establishment of large plantations managed by colonial companies and European settlers.<sup>8</sup>

The second most important aspect of the structure of the colonial economy in Niger province was Labor relations.<sup>9</sup> The labor force was largely composed of

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4Adeyemi L. A., "The Economic History of Nigeria", Journal of Economic History, University of Ibadan, 1988.

5Akinwumi, O., "Agriculture and Economic Development in Colonial Nigeria", The Nigerian Journal of Economic and Social Studies, (1989).

6CO 879/48/6: "Maps and Papers Relating to the Colonial Territories: Niger and Lagos, 1900-1914"

7Gaius Jatau, "Railway Transportation and the Economy and Society of Southern Kaduna, 1927-1993" PhD Thesis, University of Jos, 2015.

8 CO 657/9: "Nigeria: General Correspondence and Reports, 1900-1914"

9SNP 7/55: "Annual Reports on the Southern Provinces of Nigeria, 1900-1914"

local farmers and laborers who were subjected to exploitative conditions. The colonial administration imposed taxes that pressured farmers to produce surplus for sale, leading to increased labor exploitation. Forced labor systems and recruitment of laborers for agricultural and infrastructural projects were common, significantly altering traditional labor practices. Trade and commercial<sup>10</sup> activities also forms part of the structure of the colonial economy in Niger province. This was important following the establishment of trading posts facilitated the export of agricultural products and the import of European manufactured goods. The colonial government controlled trade activities through laws and regulations, limiting local merchants' capacity to operate independently. The era saw the development of a cash economy, where barter was gradually replaced by currency transactions, as colonial authorities sought to impose monetary systems aligned with their fiscal policies.<sup>11</sup>

Also part of the structure of the colonial economy in Niger Province during the period under investigation was infrastructure development.<sup>12</sup> Generally, discussions on the structure of the colonial economy of the Nigeria province cannot be exhausted without considering the place of the colonial infrastructure development. This is because it was an important aspect of the colonial economic policies promoted to enhance the flow of goods from the hinterlands to the coast, the colonial government invested in infrastructure, such as roads and railways. Notably, the construction of the Niger Railway improved access to major markets and export routes.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to consider the impact of colonial policies on the structure of the colonial economy in Nigeria Province during the period.<sup>14</sup> Colonial policies encouraged monoculture, which created vulnerabilities in the agricultural sector. Additionally, the focus on export-oriented agriculture often neglected food security for the local population. Taxation policies and land tenure systems adversely affected indigenous land rights and intensified the inequalities in land distribution. Colonial policies had a profound impact on the economic framework of Niger Province, reshaping traditional practices and establishing a colonial economic structure focused on extraction and cash cropping. The British colonial administration introduced several policies that sought to maximize resource extraction while enforcing a new taxation system that pressured local farmers to transition from subsistence farming to cash crop production.<sup>15</sup>

One of the significant policies implemented was the introduction of taxation, particularly the hut tax, which required indigenous people to pay a fee for each

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10CSO 26/191: "Correspondence Relating to Native Administration and Revenue in Niger Province, 1903-1914"

11Crowder, M., "The Influence of British Colonial Policy on Export Agriculture in Nigeria", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, (1968).

12Hopkins, A. G., "Economic Aspects of Political Adaptation: Senegal in Comparative Colonial Perspective," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1966, 133-143.

13Iliffe, J., *The Africans*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1987).

14Lovejoy, Paul E., "The Role of the Niger River in the Economic History of Northern Nigeria," *Journal of African Economic History*, No. 13, 1984, pp. 1-22.

15McPhee, J., "Colonial Economic Practices and their Legacies in Nigeria", *African Economic History*, 41(1), (2013), 45-68.

dwelling they occupied. This tax incentivized the production of cash crops as families needed to generate income to meet their tax obligations. As noted in historical records from the Nigerian National Archives, "the hut tax led to a shift from food production to cash crops, fundamentally altering local agricultural practices."<sup>16</sup> Lugard explained the nature of British tax imposed on Muslims and non-Muslims areas in Niger Province and Northern Nigeria as a whole.<sup>17</sup> This included haraji and government tax in the Muslim and non-Muslim areas respectively. They levied capitation tax on each individual in proportion to his wealth and on his hut or land. The taxation was naturally arbitrary. As for the method of collection, the Emirs were to collect the tax from each compound in their domain based on the rate announced. The village head supervised him. The district head was to bring the total tax collection to the headquarters. Record shows that from the very early phase of colonial rule in Africa, the colonial administrators virtually relied on forced labor and taxation for realizing their economic interest. These policies impacted on the Niger Province both positively and negatively as it led to increase in revenue generation on the one hand, and abject poverty and untold hardship on the other hand. The desire to achieve the economic motives necessitated the colonialist to introduce certain social policies, which were imperative to the realization of the colonial objectives.

Another critical policy was the promotion of cash crops such as palm oil, cotton, and groundnuts. The colonial administration facilitated the establishment of export markets for these crops, seeking to integrate Niger Province into global trade networks. According to Adeyemi, "the push for cotton production led to a substantial increase in monoculture farming, which not only impacted local food security but also dictated the economic viability of the Niger Province".<sup>18</sup> The colonial administration also invested in infrastructure, including railroads and ports, to facilitate the movement of goods to international markets. Colonial records indicate that such investments were often focused on areas that benefitted the export economy, neglecting the development of local needs. These infrastructural projects led to the emergence of urban centers in Niger Province, which became hubs for market activities but also hubs of colonial economic control, exacerbating existing imbalances in local economies.<sup>19</sup>

**Table 1:** Table Showing Niger Province, Four Administrative Divisions 1900-1960

Province	Region	Division	Native Administration
Niger	Northern	Abuja	Abuja and Lapai Emirates
Niger	Northern	Bida	Agai and Bida Emirates
Niger	Northern	Kontagora	Kontagora, Wushishi Chifedom, Zuru Federation
Niger	Northern	Minna	Gwari, Kamuku Federation with

<sup>16</sup>Achebe, C., *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, (1984).

<sup>17</sup> Lord Lugard, *Dual Mandate in Tropical Africa*, William Blackwood & Sons, London, 1922, P. 240.

<sup>18</sup>Adeyemi L. A., "The Economic History of Nigeria", *Journal of Economic History*, University of Ibadan, 1988.

<sup>19</sup>Haugerud, A., "The Weight of History: The Politics of Remembrance and Development in Post-Colonial Niger", *Cultural Anthropology*, 10(4), (1995), 391-415.

			headquarters at Kagara
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Source: NAK: Niger Province Annual Report 1912.

### The Colonial land and labour Policies

Colonial land policies in Niger Province were primarily aimed at facilitating European control and exploitation of resources. Large tracts of fertile land were appropriated by the colonial government and often allocated to European settlers and companies. This resulted in the displacement of local communities and the reorganization of indigenous land tenure systems. Labor policies were equally repressive, with the colonial administration imposing various forms of forced labor, including corvée and indentured labor, to ensure a steady workforce for colonial enterprises. The recruitment of labor often involved coercive means, creating social disruption and economic hardship for local populations.<sup>20</sup>

### Colonial agricultural policies in Niger Province

Colonial agricultural policies were designed to integrate Niger Province into the global economy as a supplier of raw materials. According to Ross, agricultural officers were stationed at Bida and at Minna. While the former deals with Bida and Abuja Divisions and the latter with Minna and Kontagora.<sup>21</sup> The British promoted cash crops like cocoa, groundnuts, cotton, and rubber while discouraging subsistence farming.<sup>22</sup> Agricultural policies favored the establishment of plantations and large-scale farming operations run by Europeans. Indigenous farmers were often forced to adopt cash crop cultivation through various means, including taxation and coercion. Although the focus on cash crops integrated the province into the global economy, it also undermined food security and traditional agricultural practices.<sup>23</sup> Rainfall and crops were generally good, but in the Bida area groundnuts, beans, rice and fibre suffered badly from abnormal spacing of the rains and their yield was estimated to have been reduced by half or a quarter of the normal yield per acre. However, in the case of rice, it was partly offset by increased acreage under cultivation. It is estimated that approximately five thousand tons of grain such as rice and corn were supplied for government requirements.<sup>24</sup>

The colonial government introduced large scale farming business, which was aimed at incorporating the local people as laborers. The implication was that local agricultural practice (food crops production) was relatively abandoned in order to meet the labor demands of the colonial government in cash crops production. This therefore, signified a shift from food crops production to cash

<sup>20</sup>Boahen, A. A., *African Perspectives on Colonialism*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (1990).

<sup>21</sup>Annual Report By Thurley Esquire, District Officer, Public Works Department, No. 33-Niger Province 1940.

<sup>22</sup>Crowder, Michael, "Indirect Rule: French and British Style," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1972, pp. 199-219.

<sup>23</sup>Adebanjo, James Tunde, "Economic Structures in Colonial Niger Province: Administration and Development, 1900-1914," PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan, 2007.

<sup>24</sup>National Archives Kaduna, Nassarawa Province, 698P/1914 'Jema'a Division, Moro'a District Assessment Report by Mr. Kirk Patrick, 6.

crops production and other labor demanding activities. The colonialists exploited the peasant labor in tin mines, railway construction, roads construction, and the production of cash crops etcetera. Thus, the production of food crops was discouraged in order to direct and redirects the peasant labor to the previously mentioned. The peasant population or laborers received meager wages for their labor. They received 4-6d weekly.<sup>25</sup>

### **Taxation and Monetization Policies under Colonial Economy**

Taxation was a primary tool used by the colonial administration to control the local population and stimulate cash crop production. The introduction of hut and poll taxes compelled villagers to participate in the colonial economy by selling labor or agricultural produce to meet tax obligations. Modernization policies often prioritized projects that facilitated resource extraction and export, such as road construction to connect plantations and mines with ports. These policies led to the monetization of the local economy but also increased economic inequality and dependency on colonial markets.<sup>26</sup> The tax system was the basis for the colonial enterprise in Nigeria. It provided the resources upon which the colonial administration depended. It is pertinent to note how the colonial agents went about the processes of district assessment and eventual taxation and how cumulatively the village areas and districts which constituted parts of the divisions were vital economic arteries for resources mobilization and utilization during the entire phase of the colonial enterprise in Niger Province.<sup>27</sup>

### **Infrastructure and Crafts**

Infrastructure development under colonial rule was primarily geared towards supporting economic exploitation. The construction of railways, roads, and ports facilitated the export of raw materials and the import of manufactured goods. However, these projects were often undertaken with little regard for local needs or environmental sustainability. Traditional crafts and industries suffered as cheap European goods flooded local markets, undermining indigenous production and craftsmanship. Infrastructure development also displaced communities and disrupted traditional trade routes and economic practices.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Development of Cash Crop Economy**

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25National Archives Kaduna, Nassarawa Province, 698P/1914 'Jema'a Division.

26Usman, Umar Muhammad, "The Impact of Colonial Rule on Traditional Economic Systems in Niger Province, 1900-1914," MA Dissertation, SOAS, University of London, 2012.

27Terhemba Wuam, "Tax Assessment and Taxation in Agricultural Communities in the Early Colonial Period in Nigeria: The Case of Esagi District of Agaie-Lapai Division of Niger Province", In C.B.N Ogbogbo, O.O. Okpeh Jr., S.O. Onor, T. Wuam, (eds), Yakubu Aboki Ochefu Economic History Series: Nigerian Economic History Perspective, Ibadan, Historical Society of Nigeria, 2021, 151.

28McPhee, R. D., "Imperialism, Economic Change and Local Responses: The Case of Nigeria", African Economic History, (2008).

The establishment of a cash crop economy was a cornerstone of colonial economic strategy in Niger Province. The cultivation of export-oriented crops like cocoa, groundnuts, and cotton became widespread, driven by colonial policies and market demands. The promotion of these crops often came at the expense of traditional food crops, leading to changes in land use patterns and agricultural practices. While the cash crop economy generated revenue for the colonial administration and profits for European businesses, it created dependency on volatile global markets and contributed to the marginalization of small-scale farmers.<sup>29</sup>

### **Growths and Expansion of Markets**

This section focuses on the growth and expansion of markets from 1900 to 1914. It is important to note that this period was marked by significant developments in market structures in Niger Province, fueled by the consolidation of colonial rule and the integration of the local economy into the global market. To explore the growth and expansion of markets of the Niger Province during the period under study, it is important ab initio to consider the introduction of market centers. This is because the colonial authorities established market centers to facilitate trade. During this period, towns like Bida and Minna developed into commercial hubs as colonial administrators promoted them for trade and commerce.<sup>30</sup> The establishment of standardized market days allowed for increased trade activities, where farmers, traders, and consumers could engage easily. The establishment of a markets enhanced trade and commerce in Niger Province. It also encouraged and boosted agricultural production of both cash and food crops as well as livestock production. This was because the people were sure of a market for their produce. Traders were equally encouraged from within and outside the Province to patronize the market because they were sure of obtaining the desired agricultural commodities.<sup>31</sup>

significance of pre-colonial markets in what later became known as Niger Province in Northern Nigeria. Focusing on the regional trade centers—Bida, Agaie-lapai, Kontagora, and Zungeru and Abuja. The sections highlights the intricate system of distribution and exchange that facilitated regional integration and supported local livelihoods. Economic activities in pre-colonial Africa, particularly in regions such as Niger Province, have often been misrepresented in earlier Eurocentric historiographies as subsistence-based and economically unsophisticated. However, recent scholarship has illuminated the complexity and dynamism of African indigenous economies. The markets of Bida, Agaie-Lapia, Kontagora, Zungeru and Abuja were not merely centers of barter; they were crucial nodes in a wide-reaching commercial network that linked local production systems with regional and even trans-Saharan trade routes.<sup>32</sup>

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29 Gann L. H. and Peter Duignan, "Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960" in L. H. Gann and Peter Duignan (Eds.), *The Economics of Colonialism*, Volume 4, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

30 Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, Blackwood & Sons, 1922.

31 Gann L. H. and Peter Duignan, "Colonialism in Africa, 1870–1960".

32 NAK: Nupe Division Annual Report, 1911, Kaduna: NAK, File SNP 17/6/311.

Niger Province, situated in the middle belt of what would become Nigeria, is characterized by a diverse geography including fertile river valleys, savannahs, and transitional forest zones. This diversity fostered a range of economic specializations, agriculture, crafts, pastoralism, and hunting. All of which found their expression in the region's bustling market life. Understanding the distribution and trade mechanisms that operated in these markets not only provides insight into the pre-colonial economic organization but also into the socio-political structures that sustained them.

### **Market Typology and Periodicity**

The pre-colonial Niger Province market system was structured around both periodic and permanent markets. Periodic markets, often held every four or five days, allowed traders and consumers from surrounding villages to converge on designated sites. Permanent markets, such as those in Bida and Kontagora, operated daily and served as urban economic hubs.<sup>33</sup> The periodicity of markets followed a regional rotational pattern to maximize economic reach and minimize market overlap. For instance, if the market in Agaie operated on a Monday, the market in a neighboring district might be scheduled for Wednesday, ensuring that itinerant traders could attend multiple markets in a week. This system fostered regional circulation of goods and ensured continual economic momentum throughout the week.<sup>34</sup>

### **Bida Market: The Economic Heart of the Nupe Kingdom**

Bida, the capital of the Nupe Emirate, was the largest and most economically influential city in the province. Situated at a strategic location along the River Kaduna and in proximity to the Niger River, Bida developed into a central distribution point for goods flowing in from various parts of the region. The market at Bida was held daily, with peak activities on specific market days, typically every fourth day.<sup>35</sup> As a political and military power in the 19th century, Bida had significant control over trade routes and was a principal beneficiary of tribute and taxation systems. The Emirate's involvement in regional trade was institutionalized, with royal agents overseeing caravan movements, levying taxes on traders, and even maintaining trade monopolies on certain goods.<sup>36</sup> The range of goods traded in Bida was vast. Agricultural produce such as yams, millet, guinea corn, beans, and shea butter were brought in from the surrounding rural areas. Artisanal products, including textiles (notably handwoven Nupe cloth), pottery, brasswork, and leather goods, also featured prominently. Bida was also an important node for the redistribution of

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33 Nadel, S. F. *A Black Byzantium: The Kingdom of Nupe in Nigeria*. London: Oxford University Press, 1942, 92.

34 Nadel, S. F. *A Black Byzantium: The Kingdom of Nupe in Nigeria*. London: Oxford University Press, 1942, 92.

35 Nwoko, Kenneth C. "Market Systems and Pre-Colonial Trade in Nigeria." *Journal of African Economic History* 41, No. 2, 2013, Pp. 45-70.

36 Nwoko, Kenneth C. "Market Systems and Pre-Colonial Trade in Nigeria...Pp. 45-70.

imported items such as salt, kola nuts, and cloth from Kano and other Hausa cities, as well as North African goods transiting through the Sahara.<sup>37</sup>

### **AgaiMarket: A Regional Redistribution Hub**

Agai, located southeast of Bida, was another critical market town within the Nupe sphere of influence. Though not as large as Bida, Agai served as a vital redistribution center, particularly for agricultural goods. The market operated every fourth day and attracted both local farmers and itinerant traders from further afield. One of Agai's unique economic functions was its role in the livestock trade. The town sat at a crossroads for pastoralists descending from the northern savannah and sedentary farmers of the southern territories. Cattle, sheep, and goats were commonly traded, alongside dairy products and animal hides. Agai also maintained strong trade relations with Yoruba territories to the south, enabling the flow of goods such as palm oil and kolanuts northward, while grains and livestock moved in the opposite direction. This interregional exchange was facilitated by a class of professional traders, many of whom were women, who used established caravan routes protected by local authorities and fortified rest points.<sup>38</sup> Dominated by the Nupe people, specializing in rice farming and textile production. Agai served as an important stop along major trade routes. According to Mr Ndayako Adullahi the Baro Port located in Agai was a major transportation hub before the introduction of rail lines. He buttressed that Baro port enhanced trade locally and internationally with the presence of John Holt company. Major cash and food crops was transported from Baro to Lagos and even beyond.<sup>39</sup> Lapai was known for its leatherwork and local crafts. Bello mentioned that the C of O expired in 2024, all lands occupied by the British officially expired in 2024.<sup>40</sup>

### **Kontagora Market: Frontier Trade and Slave Economy**

Kontagora, located in the Northwest of Niger Province, was the heart of the Kontagora Emirate and a significant frontier town bordering the Sokoto Caliphate. Its market was of both economic and military importance, particularly during the height of the 19th century slave trade. While agricultural goods and crafts were traded, the Kontagora market was notorious for its role in the slave economy. The emirate, known for its militarism, frequently raided neighboring territories and sold captives in exchange for horses, weapons, and luxury goods. Slaves were not only exported northwards into the Caliphate and beyond but also absorbed into local labor systems, working in agriculture, crafts, and domestic service. Kontagora's market operated periodically, typically every four days, and served as a point of interaction between the Hausa-speaking north and the Nupe-Gwari south. Its role as a frontier market meant it

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37 Hogben, S. J., and A. H. M. Kirk-Greene. *The Emirates of Northern Nigeria: A Preliminary Survey of Their Historical Traditions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966, P. 72.

38 NAK: Extracts from the Royal Niger Company Reports, 1886–1900." Lagos: RNC Files, Box 5.

39 Interview with Mr Ndayako Adullahi, Age 68, Lapai, Zonal Inspector Niger state Ministry of Education, 28, November 2024

40 Interview with Mr Ndayako Adullahi, Age 68, Lapai, Zonal Inspector Niger state Ministry of Education, 28, November 2024

also facilitated the movement of military goods and functioned as a rest and provisioning stop for long-distance caravans moving toward Sokoto or further east.<sup>41</sup>

### **Zungeru Market: Cross-Cultural Commercialism**

Zungeru, though later made famous as the colonial capital of Northern Nigeria, had a vibrant market life even before the advent of British rule. Located along the Kaduna River and serving as a point of convergence for the Gwari, Nupe, and Hausa communities, Zungeru's market had a distinctly cosmopolitan character.<sup>42</sup> The market operated periodically, likely every fifth day, and served both agricultural and craft producers. Its riverine location made it a favorable point for the exchange of fish, smoked meat, honey, and palm products, which were transported in canoe flotillas from surrounding riverine settlements. Moreover, Zungeru was a center of ironworking and blacksmithing. Local artisans produced hoes, cutlasses, and arrowheads, which were traded locally and exported to other markets, including Bida and Kontagora. The market also provided a platform for religious and cultural exchange, with traders introducing new ideas, rituals, and practices into the fabric of the town's multiethnic society.

### **Abuja Market: A Strategic Node in the Gwari Trade Corridor**

While modern-day Abuja is known as Nigeria's capital city, the pre-colonial town of Abuja (presently referred to as Suleja) was a significant historical settlement located at the northern fringes of the Niger Province, just before the confluence with the larger Zaria and Hausa territories. Abuja was originally founded by the Gwari people and later emerged as a semi-autonomous polity under the suzerainty of the Hausa emirates, particularly Zaria. Despite its relatively smaller size compared to Bida or Kontagora, Abuja functioned as a vibrant and strategically located market town whose influence was disproportionately large due to its geographic and political significance.<sup>43</sup>

The market in Abuja was primarily periodic, typically held every fourth day, following the regional rotational calendar that ensured its alignment with nearby trade centers like Zuba, Kwali, and Gawu. This periodic system allowed Abuja to tap into the itinerant trader networks circulating throughout the Gwari highlands and extending into the more densely populated Hausa hinterland. As a result, Abuja functioned as both a collection center for local goods and a transit hub for regional commerce, enabling a steady flow of goods and people through its compact but bustling market.<sup>44</sup> Abuja's geographic position was of strategic importance. It sat on the transitional ecological zone between the savannah and woodland regions, which allowed it to serve as a conduit for trade routes running northward toward Zaria, Kano, and Katsina, and

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41Lugard, Frederick. *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1922, Pp. 55-60.

42 Mohammed, Kawu. "Nupe Economic Institutions and Trade Networks, 1750-1900." *Journal of West African History* 9, No. 1, 2022, Pp. 91-115.

43 Mohammed, Kawu. "Nupe Economic Institutions and Trade Networks, Pp. 91-115.

44Bello, Halimat. *Women Traders and Market Networks in Nupe Kingdom*. PhD diss., University of Ilorin, 2019, P. 37.

southward toward Bida, Agaie, and even Yoruba towns beyond the Niger River. Additionally, its location along caravan routes made it a safe rest stop for long-distance traders. Unlike larger urban markets, Abuja's market had a distinctly inter-ethnic and multicultural character, with Gwari, Nupe, Hausa, and Bassa traders interacting regularly.<sup>45</sup> Goods traded in Abuja reflected both its local production strengths and its role as a redistribution node. From the surrounding Gwari communities, the market received a steady supply of grains (notably sorghum and millet), tubers, honey, firewood, and forest products such as medicinal herbs, dyes, and fruits. Abuja was also well known for its iron tools, a legacy of the Gwari blacksmithing tradition. These included hoes, knives, hunting traps, arrowheads, and charcoal-fired cooking stoves, which were both used locally and traded with neighboring markets.

Although Abuja was less militarized than Kontagora or politically centralized like Bida, its relative political autonomy gave it a commercial advantage. The local chief (Sarkin Abuja) maintained market peace through designated officials who collected levies and regulated weights and measures. Notably, Abuja had a strong tradition of non-aggression and diplomatic neutrality, making its market a safe zone for inter-group commerce, especially in periods of tension or conflict among surrounding emirates.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, gender roles in Abuja's market were remarkably balanced. Women, especially from Gwari communities, dominated the pottery trade and also played vital roles in food processing, textile dyeing, and petty trade. Men were more involved in blacksmithing, wood carving, and long-distance caravan trade. The gendered division of labour did not prevent collaboration, and many trading families operated as economic units, with joint ventures in farm production and market sales.<sup>47</sup>

#### **Lapai Market: Agrarian Commerce and Strategic Mediation in the Lower Nupe Region**

Lapai, situated in the eastern flank of the Nupe-speaking territory and adjacent to the Gwari and Koro homelands, was an integral node in the pre-colonial commercial landscape of Niger Province. Though less frequently spotlighted in colonial archives than Bida or Kontagora, Lapai's economic importance in the pre-colonial period stemmed from its agricultural richness, ethnic diversity, and its position as a mediating town between central Nupe territories and the frontier communities bordering the Benue River basin and northern Yoruba territories.<sup>48</sup> The market in Lapai was periodic in nature, held every fourth or fifth day, following the rotational calendar that linked it with other markets in the Nupe heartland such as Agaie and Pategi. These scheduled intervals allowed for an influx of traders from both nearby rural areas and more distant regions, creating vibrant and well-attended market days characterized by intensive buying, selling, and social interaction.

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45 Bello, Halimat. *Women Traders and Market Networks in Nupe Kingdom*. PhD diss., University of Ilorin, 2019, Pp. 37-50.

46 NAK: *Trade Routes and Caravan Traffic in Northern Nigeria, 1898-1912*, File CSO 26/2.

47 NAK: *Trade Routes and Caravan Traffic in Northern Nigeria, 1898-1912*, File CSO 26/2.

48 NAK: *Niger Province Colonial Intelligence Reports, 1904-1916*, Pp. 87-100.

Geographically, Lapai benefited from fertile plains nourished by tributaries of the River Gurara and River Niger. As such, it developed into a major agrarian production center, supplying a variety of staple crops to surrounding and distant markets. Yams, guinea corn, millet, beans, cassava, and shea butter were among the key items brought into the Lapai market by local farmers. Lapai also developed a reputation for the processing and storage of grains, supported by traditional granaries and trade guilds that ensured year-round availability and surpluses for trade during lean seasons elsewhere.<sup>49</sup>In addition to crops, Lapai was an important livestock and poultry market, where Fulani herders and Nupe agriculturalists interacted economically. Cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, and guinea fowl were routinely traded, with pastoralists often bartering livestock for grains and other foodstuffs. The town's proximity to open grazing lands and watered plains made it an ideal location for such exchanges, reinforcing Lapai's role as a key center of pastoral-agrarian interaction.<sup>50</sup>

Lapai also developed a niche for regional redistribution, acting as an intermediary market between smaller villages and larger urban centers like Bida and Agaie. Traders in Lapai often collected goods from peripheral rural settlements and assembled them for sale or transport to larger cities. In this sense, Lapai played a logistical and aggregation role in the Nupe commercial system. Goods like palm oil and kolanuts—brought in from southern trade partners—would be offloaded in Lapai and then sent onward to northern destinations. One notable feature of Lapai's economy was its artisanal base, particularly in cloth weaving, dyeing, and calabash decoration. While not as industrially developed as Bida's brasswork or Kontagora's smithing, Lapai's craftsmen maintained steady production of household utensils, farming tools, and decorative items. Women in Lapai were particularly active in local dyeing industries, using indigo and other plant-based pigments to create fabric patterns that were culturally significant and commercially valued in Nupe society.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Lapai's market was deeply embedded in the social and political hierarchy of the Lapai Emirate, established in the 19th century following the expansion of Islamic rule under the Sokoto Caliphate. Although Lapai's emirate was politically subordinate to larger emirates like Bida or Zaria, its leadership maintained local autonomy and took a strong interest in regulating market activities. Market officials, appointed by the Emir and supported by council elders, were responsible for resolving disputes, standardizing weights and measures, collecting taxes, and ensuring market peace. This institutional oversight helped to legitimize the market as a trusted arena for exchange, attracting merchants from diverse ethnic backgrounds including Nupe, Gwari, Koro, Yoruba, and Hausa communities.<sup>52</sup>The religious landscape of Lapai, shaped by Islam and traditional beliefs, also influenced its economic structure.

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49NAK: Niger Province Colonial Intelligence Reports. 1904–1916, Pp. 87-100.

50 Niger Province Colonial Intelligence Reports. 1904–1916, Pp. 87-100.

51 Lovejoy, Paul E. Caravans of Kola: The Hausa Kola Trade, 1700–1900. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1980.

52 Lovejoy, Paul E. Caravans of Kola: The Hausa Kola Trade, 1700–1900. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1980.

Islamic scholars (malamai) frequently acted as arbitrators in commercial disputes and as guardians of ethical trade practices. Meanwhile, traditional festivals and seasonal rituals surrounding planting and harvest times often coincided with market peaks, demonstrating the interconnectedness of spiritual life and economic rhythms.<sup>53</sup>

The transport and communication infrastructure in pre-colonial Lapai further supported its trade function. Though primarily reliant on footpaths and caravan trails, Lapai's market was linked to broader networks extending to Zungeru in the north, Agaie in the west, and Koton-Karfe and Lokoja to the south. Traders traveled in organized groups, often with armed escorts to ward off bandits or slave raiders—a common threat on inter-town routes in the pre-colonial Niger valley. Porters and pack animals (donkeys, oxen, and occasionally camels) were used to move heavy goods such as grain sacks, earthenware, and livestock. Perhaps one of Lapai's most important and understudied contributions to pre-colonial trade in Niger Province was its role in the interfacing of southern and northern commodities. While Bida served as a northern distribution powerhouse, Lapai acted as the gateway through which southern goods—particularly palm oil, kolanuts, and forest products—made their entry into Nupe territory, often bypassing the more militarized and centralized zones. This intermediary role was critical for maintaining peaceful trade flows and ensuring a stable food and goods supply chain for the region.<sup>54</sup>

In terms of demographics, Lapai's market reflected the region's ethnic fluidity and social dynamism. The town was home to mixed populations of Nupe and Gwari, along with significant Koro and Bassa minorities. This multicultural setting promoted language exchange, trade partnerships, and intermarriage, which further deepened economic and social integration.<sup>55</sup> Lapai market in the pre-colonial Niger Province was more than a secondary trading outpost; it was a strategic agrarian and redistribution hub that linked rural economies with broader trade circuits. Its success was underpinned by its geographic endowments, political stability, artisanal specialization, and its function as a southern gateway into the Nupe economy. By serving as a crossroad between agricultural production, livestock trade, and long-distance commerce, Lapai contributed significantly to the sustenance and dynamism of the broader economic system that defined pre colonial Niger Province.<sup>56</sup>

**Expansion of Trade Networks:** The development of trade routes and the expansion of existing ones facilitated the movement of goods across regions. The colonial economy linked Niger Province with other parts of Nigeria as well as international markets. The introduction of European goods, such as textiles and manufactured items, led to the emergence of a new consumer culture among local populations, altering traditional trading practices and relationships.<sup>57</sup> The nature of trade and commerce in Niger Province between

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53 Nwoko, Kenneth C. "Market Systems and Pre-Colonial Trade in Nigeria...Pp. 45–75.

54 Nwoko, Kenneth C. "Market Systems and Pre-Colonial Trade in Nigeria...Pp. 45–75.

55 Ajayi, J. F. Ade, and Michael Crowder, eds. *History of West Africa, Vol. II*. London: Longman, 1974, P. 57.

56 Ajayi, J. F. Ade, and Michael Crowder, eds. *History of West Africa, 1974*, P. 57.

57 Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton, *Nigeria and the British: Exploitation or Development?*, Zed Books, 2008.

1900 and 1914 was periodic; traders purchased clothes, scents, salt, kolas, kanwa (potash), native saddles, swords, blankets and gowns in exchange for agricultural products.<sup>58</sup> In other words, traders moved from house to house, and frequently exchanged their wares for provisions (agricultural products). With the expansion of trade networks, traders did not only visit the established markets, but also moved from house to house to exchange their products with provisions from the people.

**Influence of British Policies:** The British colonial administration encouraged export trade, leading to increased demand for cash crops. This demand expanded local markets and stimulated production, with farmers adjusting their output to meet market needs with policies that favored certain crops, specifically those that aligned with British economic interests (like cotton and palm oil), further influencing market dynamics.<sup>59</sup>

**Impact of Economic Changes:** The economic transformations resulted in significant social changes, including the emergence of a new class of wealthy traders and the marginalization of subsistence farmers. Rural-to-urban migration increased as individuals sought better opportunities in growing market towns, leading to urban growth and challenges associated with rapid urbanization.<sup>60</sup>

**The Role of Native Authorities:** Native authorities, often co-opted by colonial powers, played a significant role in market regulation and tax collection, which further solidified the colonial economic structure. These local leaders were pivotal in integrating local economic practices with colonial policies, facilitating the expansion of the market environment. The colonial economy of Niger Province was characterized by an agrarian structure heavily influenced by colonial policies aimed at resource exploitation and market integration. The expansion of markets from 1900 to 1914 demonstrated significant transformations in trade dynamics, underpinned by infrastructural development and shifting labor relations. Overall, the period marked a significant turning point in the economic landscape of Niger Province, setting the stage for long-lasting impacts on local livelihoods and the socioeconomic fabric of the region.<sup>61</sup>

### Import Trade

Colonial rule saw the influx of European manufactured goods into Niger Province. These imports included textiles, metal goods, and household items that were previously produced locally. The availability of these goods altered consumption patterns and created new market dynamics. However, the dominance of imported goods stifled local industries and crafts, leading to economic dislocation and loss of traditional livelihoods. The import trade was

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58National Archives Kaduna, Nassarawa Province, 698P/1914...

59Charles Orr, *The Making of Northern Nigeria*, Macmillan & Co, 1911.

60Crowder, Michael, "Indirect Rule: French and British Style," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1972, pp. 199-219.

61Charles Orr, *The Making of Northern Nigeria*, Macmillan & Co, 1911.

controlled by European firms, further entrenching colonial economic dominance.<sup>62</sup>

### Export Trade

The export trade flourished under colonial rule, with Niger Province becoming an important supplier of raw materials to European industries. Cash crops like cocoa, groundnuts, and rubber were exported in large quantities, generating significant profits for European traders and the colonial administration. The emphasis on exports drove infrastructural development, such as railways and ports, to facilitate the flow of goods. However, the export-oriented economy also made the region vulnerable to global market fluctuations and reduced its economic self-sufficiency.<sup>63</sup>

The growth and expansion of markets in Niger Province during the early 20th century can be attributed to both colonial policies and the changes in production practices triggered by those policies. As local economies were increasingly integrated into the colonial economy, new market dynamics emerged that transformed traditional exchange systems and created opportunities and challenges for the indigenous population. With the rise of cash crop production, new market mechanisms developed to support the trade of commodities like palm oil and groundnuts. Colonial administrations often established regulated markets to manage supply chains and ensure consistent revenue streams. According to the *Journal of Economic History*, "the establishment of official markets allowed for a systematic exchange of cash crops, considerably enhancing their market value and creating dependencies on colonial traders."<sup>64</sup>

Indigenous traders also adapted to these market changes, evolving their roles within the new economic structure. Local entrepreneurs began to capitalize on the demand for consumer goods introduced by colonial authorities. Items such as textiles, metal goods, and foodstuffs became increasingly available in the marketplaces of Niger Province, creating a diversified market environment. This transition is well-documented in colonial reports from the period, which detail the growth of local merchant classes that emerged as intermediaries between colonial powers and the indigenous populace. However, this growth was not without its challenges. The expansion of markets often marginalized traditional barter systems and local economic practices. The imposition of colonial currencies and payment systems disrupted existing trade relationships, while the colonial focus on cash crops often resulted in food scarcity.<sup>65</sup>

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62Adebanjo, James Tunde, "Economic Structures in Colonial Niger Province: Administration and Development, 1900-1914," PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan, 2007.

63Usman, Umar Muhammad, "The Impact of Colonial Rule on Traditional Economic Systems in Niger Province, 1900-1914," MA Dissertation, SOAS, University of London, 2012.

64Adeyemi L. A., "The Economic History of Nigeria", *Journal of Economic History*, University of Ibadan, 1988.

65Reuben B'rama Ziri, "The History of Bida Emirate in the 20th Century: A Study in Colonialism and the Transformation of Social Classes, 1900-1960", PhD Thesis, Department of History Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1992, 206.

Historical analyses reflect that "the shift towards cash cropping at the expense of food production created vulnerabilities for the local population," as noted in a critical examination from the African Studies Review.<sup>66</sup>

The colonial economic structure of Niger Province from 1900 to 1914 was significantly shaped by British colonial policies that fostered new market dynamics while undermining traditional practices. The impact of this restructuring had long-term implications for the economic landscape of the region and laid the groundwork for future economic challenges. The engagement with archival materials, journals, and scholarly texts provides a narrative of this transformative period in the Niger Province and highlights the complexities underlying the colonial economic framework.

### **Conclusion**

The period of colonial rule from 1900 to 1914 brought profound economic changes to Niger Province. The implementation of land and labor policies, agricultural strategies, taxation, and infrastructure development primarily served the interests of the colonial powers, often at the expense of local communities. The development of a cash crop economy and the expansion of markets integrated the region into the global economic system but also introduced new dependencies and vulnerabilities. While these changes laid the groundwork for modern economic development, they also disrupted traditional structures and created lasting social and economic challenges. The legacy of colonial economic policies in Niger Province is complex, marked by both developmental strides and enduring inequalities. Understanding this history is crucial for analyzing contemporary economic and social dynamics in the region.

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McPhee, R. D., "Imperialism, Economic Change and Local Responses: The Case of Nigeria", African Economic History, (2008).