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# COLONIAL CITIES IN WEST AFRICA, 1850S-1960S: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

Urbanization is not a recent phenomenon in West Africa in particular and in African in general (Smith, 1996: 47). Its origin dated back to the ancient time. The rate of urbanization in the region, however, scaled up since the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gulger and Flanagan, 1978: 22-23). The socio-economic and political developments of the colonial period, roughly 1850s-1960s, significantly shaped the location, nature and functions of towns, whose influence continues to the present time. So the researcher believes that studying urbanization as a social process in the colonial period enables one to understand the current trends. The study of urbanization in Africa in general and in West Africa in particular has got a new impetus since the second half of the twentieth century. This is mainly due to the emergence of African scholars from different fields of studies mainly anthropologists, sociologists, historians, geographers, political scientists, novelists and the active engagement and increasing interest of international institutions to sponsor researches on African studies (Simms, 1965:xiii). In their studies, most of them focus on changes and continuities in the overall patterns of urbanization in the region. They also give detailed explanation and analysis about the different perspectives in which the term urbanization can be used. There have been clear departures in the literatures themselves in the concepts, approaches and theories since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, most of the studies of the pre and early 1960s were limited in scope and narrative in nature. Their focus was mere description of the problems of urbanization and associated issues. Besides, they concentrate on developments limited to the city and give little or no space in studying the interdependence of the city and its surroundings. Recent findings, however, widen the scope and the issue to be addressed and employ multiple approaches. Besides, there has been a gradual shift in the approaches from simple historical description to critical investigation of the dynamic of changes overtime. In this article, the researcher focused on reviewing selected scholarly works partly due to the inaccessibility of some of the literatures.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, Cities, Historiography, Urbanization, West Africa

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article is a historiographical review of literatures written on colonial cities of West Africa on some selected themes focusing on the colonial period, roughly 1850s-1960s. The thematic areas that are given emphasis are urbanization-conceptual interpretations, the historical origin, developments and traits of colonial cities, administration and settlement patterns, social strata and bonding. Efforts have been made to analyze changes and continuities in the works of scholars with reference to the thematic areas they concentrate, the methodologies, and theories used in addressing the issue. The focus of the researcher is not limited to the works of historians but also considers the works of scholars from different fields of studies such as anthropology, political science, sociology, geography, archaeology, linguistic, philology and literature. The difficulty of accessing all the relevant sources in the field and handling within the given time and space, forced the researcher to focus only on some accessible literatures which are believed to be important to meet the objectives of the paper.

## OBJECTIVES

- To analyze the thematic, conceptual, methodological and theoretical shifts in the works of scholars in studying colonial cities in West Africa, 1850s-1960s
- To reconstruct the genesis, development and traits of the colonial cities of the region
- To identify the administrative and settlement patterns, social stratum and bonding of the colonial cities of the region

## 2. URBANIZATIONS: CONCEPTUAL INTERPRETATIONS

Urbanization is a complex and dynamic concept which it seems difficult to give it a simple conceptual framework (Gulger and Flanagan, 1978:85; Little, 1974:7-12). Different scholars view it from the perspectives of their own field of studies and come up with their own conceptual interpretations and analyses. In line with this, Josef Gulger and William Flanagan, reputed scholars who wrote a comprehensive book on the subject, assert that the meaning of the word urbanization ranges from simply describing a population living in a town to the extent how individuals adjust themselves to urban ways of lives (Gulger and Flanagan, 1978:185). On the other hand, Kenneth Little, an expert in African studies, considers it as a social process by which people adopt material and spiritual cultures of urban society (Little, 1974:7-12). The author criticizes the narrow definition of the term which emphasizes on mere description of demographic elements of urban society such as settlement pattern, the proportion of people living in town, the rate of population growth and others. He argues that the concept of urbanization is not limited to narrating demographic components but also reflects the socio-economic, cultural and organizational changes. Thus, it seems difficult to study urbanization as a separate entity. In support of Little's idea, Epstein, who contributes a lot on African urban studies, argue that urbanization is a comprehensive term, which consists of demographic, social, structural and cultural components (Epstein, 1967:276-277). For him, it is recommended to investigate each aspect in its inter-relations. John Hanna and Lynne Hanna in their book, *Urban Dynamics in Black Africa*, argue along the same line, demonstrate the different contexts in which the term can be used by taking urban policy and strategy as a reference (Hanna John and Hanna Lynne, 1981:12).

From the foregoing discussions, it seems safe to argue that urbanization should be considered as a complex social process, which has shown a clear departure from the previous trend. The works of scholars, particularly before 1960s, which use the term in its particularistic intent and descriptive nature, changed to multi faceted dimensions and, analytical approaches. It is in this recent context that I use the term for this article.

## 3. COLONIAL CITIES: ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT, AND TRAITS

Concerning to the origin of urbanization process in West Africa, Afro-centric writers strongly oppose the westerners' assumption that relates it with 'modernity' and European contact (Smith, 1996:1-2; Simms, 1965: Xii-Xiii). Afro-centric writers like Smith, Gulger and Flanagan, rather argue that the history of urbanization predated European contact, and traced back to the ancient time when Africans developed their own civilizations. But large scale urban development has been recorded beginning since recent times though still in its infancy.

Some scholars study the historical development of towns in West Africa chronologically and some others thematically. For instance, R. Ray Field classifies it into three stages namely: the old towns that emerged during the Trans-Saharan Trade; the Guinea Coast cities which emerged during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade; and colonial cities of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that appeared with the arrival of European colonizers (Rayfield, 1974:163-185). Smith, on his part, summarizes urban history of the region chronologically as pre-1600, 1600-1850, and from 1850 onwards (Smith, 1996: 62-65). On the other hand, Gulger and Flanagan, categorize urbanization process into two stages. The first was the establishment of Portuguese small forts along the coast in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries while the second was the administrative stations of the British and French, which later on evolved into big cities.

The authors indicate that most of the colonial cities emerged after the Berlin conference, 1884/5 (Gulger and Flanagan, 1978: 26-32). Important to note here, though there is a difference among scholars on the name of the stages and time frame of the development of towns in West Africa, they all share the idea that urban development in the region is not a recent phenomenon but it got a new impetus during the colonial period. They also demonstrate that the region was exposed to external influences for centuries. None of the above scholars, however, specify which town evolved in which period and the factors behind its origin.

Smith, on his part, argues that the historical development of towns in West Africa directly or indirectly linked with westerners' imperialist motives. As opposed to some scholars who argue the closing of western influences in the region in the post colonial period, Smith believes that the subject-client relationship legacy of colonialism continued to the present time (Smith, 1996:62-65). The westerners, who owned key economic sectors, continue to play a leading role in all aspects of the states of the region after independence.

As mentioned above, both Euro-centric and Afro-centric writers on the subject agreed that towns in West Africa were transformed with increasing European contact and control (Gulger and Flanagan, 1978:22-23). Little elaborates this idea in that the Europeans came to the region with new spatial urban planning policies and strategies. The new orientations caused the emergence of new urban mode of lives, administrative and settlement patterns, trends, social strata and bonding (Little, 1957:579-596). The indigenous small towns and villages were neglected and gradually declined for they were considered incompatible to the experiences and demands of the new comers. In this regard, Simon Elate describes, particularly the British found their own residences adjacent to the old villages; while the French colonizers established new residences for themselves within the villages with significant shift in overall patterns. On the other hand, the Germans preferred to build forts which later on became administrative urban centers (Elate, 2004:51-56). The author provides in-depth discussion and analysis about the diversified motives and preferences of the major colonial powers in the establishment of new urban centers.

The ever changing European preferences and demands, and the recurrent rivalries among themselves caused the destruction of some of the old indigenous towns and the revival of some others (Yarak, 2004:271-180). In support of the above idea, Larry Yarak, argues that the colonial cities in West Africa were the result of migration, imperial rivalries and changing economic interests of Westerners(Yarak, 2004:271-180). A case in point, according to the author, was the town of Elmina. The town of Elmina, which once had been a famous trading center in the region, was destroyed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for the rivalry between Britain and France and partly due to the decline of Trans-Saharan Slave Trade. The author also put his fear that such trend would remain a challenge to some African cities in the future and as a result African cities should strive for economic development, and develop a strategy to utilize foreign influences to their ends.

The location of the cities in the region, as Gugler and Flanagan demonstrate, was often determined by the availability of resources and their accessibility to the sea. In this situation, most of the cities of the period under discussion were located along or close to coast (Gulger and Flanagan: 1978:26-32). Gavin William as cited in Gulger and Flanagan, demonstrates that colonial cities emerged initially as administrative and commercial centers (Gulger and Flanagan: 1978:26). Epstein, on his part, argues that most of the cities in the region were centers of import and export rather than being center of production (Epstein, 1967:277-282). In addition, the author notes that many countries of West Africa had one major city where major socio-economic and political institutions concentrated. The author's article is well developed for it was reviewed at various times in the 1960s. Simon, on his part, summarizes the above idea by claiming that the imperialists' interests significantly changed the physical, functions and social structures of African cities in general and West African in particular (Simone, 2004: 67). He believes that urban development in the region was not accompanied by capital strength and technological innovation of the cities(Simone, 2004: 67). The author recommends to all stockholders of the region to work towards economic development, innovation, industrialization through creating a joint venture.

So far, there has not been consensus among many scholars of the field as to whether urbanization caused economic development or vice-versa. According to Mabogunje and some other scholars, the emergence of cities is a prerequisite to bring economic development while some others claim that economic prosperity leads to urban development (Mabogunje, 1968:21-22). The author emphasises

the significance of the time frame to study the productive or dependency roles of cities.

Regarding the changes and continuities in the overall pattern of urbanization in West Africa, scholars consider it from different angles and perspectives. For Hanna J. and Hanna, L., colonial cities underwent radical departure from the preexisting cities (Hanna J. and Hanna, L., 1981:18-29). They indicate that the increasing number and size of the cities accompanied by significant socio-economic and political transformations. The attempt of the authors to show the qualitative and quantitative changes the cities underwent, which had not been commonly applied in the previous studies, is quite appreciable.

Similarly, by taking the case of Nigerian towns, Akin Mabogunje indicates that the British conquest brought economic growth (Mabogunje, 1968:120-123). He argues that the British imported European crafting technology, which gradually drove out the traditional handicrafts from markets. The traditional occupational groups forced to adopt the new technology which indeed raised the income of the workers and their social status. The author, however, neglects the negative impacts of the new trend on the natives' cultural practices.

Concerning settlement pattern and structural changes of the towns, the works of Elate and M. Dembele, is worth citing for it gives comparative analysis between the colonial trends with the pre-existing counterparts (Elate, 2004: 52; Dembele, 2004: 217-219). According to them, the plans of colonial cities were replicas of European metropolis while in the old ones, there were no plans; and settlements were made arbitrarily. Elate, in particular, explains that the new arrangements caused the emergence of new villages with modern spatial planning at the same time led to the appearance of slums (Elate, 2004: 51-66). Undeniably, the new adjustment also created awareness to peoples on how to make sustainable development by wise use of resources and the environment. The explanations of both of the above scholars are detailed and critical. But they scarcely discuss the role and fate of indigenous architectural practices, and the overall negative impacts of the new adjustment.

On the other hand, there are also a handful of scholars who argue on the continuities of the pre-existing patterns of urbanization (Epstein, 2004:278-279; Gulger and Flanagan, 1978: 1-2). These writers believe that many of the traditions and architecture of the old villages were made complementary of the new adjustment. As a result, most of the indigenous people could maintain their cultural practice, unique to the region, particularly their architectural building traditions in their settlement quarters. The authors confirm that the overall administrative and settlement patterns of the whites were different from the native ones for they have different working and resident quarters. As the primary purpose of the colonial policies and strategies was to make the life of the whites easy and attractive, it was not implemented in blacks living and working places (Gulger and Flanagan, 2004: 1-2.).

Concerning the themes, theories and approaches to the study of urbanization, one can easily notice a clear departure over time particularly before and after 1960s (McIntosh, K. and McIntosh, J., 1984:73-98; Mabogunje, 1968:25-27). In this regard, Mabogunje, asserts that the studies before 1960s restricted to the study of problems of urbanization (such as unemployment, congested settlements and others) rather than studying it as a social process. Besides, most of them ignore or slightly touch the factors behind the rise or fall of towns in the region and do not study the interdependence of cities with its surroundings (Mabogunje, 1968:25-27). In line with this, S.K. McIntosh and R.J. McIntosh argue that the previous studies were narrow in scope and descriptive in intent (McIntosh, K. and McIntosh, J., 1984:73-78). This might be due to the absence of advanced research training and lack of relevant sources. On the other hand, the recent studies, as the authors note, employed mixed approaches: qualitative and quantitative and multiple theories. They try to understand the interaction and integration of city with its interdependence with the neighboring states. Comparative analysis of cities within the region in particular, and within the continent in general, becomes common tradition in the works of many. Recent findings also inclined to investigate the subject from the perspectives of different fields of specializations (Njoh, 1999:p.4).

#### 4. ADMINISTRATIVE AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

As discussed above, the European colonial spatial urban planning policy and strategy changed

the settlement patterns, natures and functions of the pre-existing urban areas (Elate, 2004:51-56; Njoh, 1999:5-6). The new patterns, according to Elate, made physical and administrative separation of Africans and Europeans dwelling areas (Elate, 2004:51-56). The colonialists thought that neither the indigenous town planning nor administrative structure compatible to realize their imperialist motives. Thus, the colonialists, as the author asserts, substituted the preexisting patterns with European urban planning models without critical analysis of the existing reality (Elate, 2004:51-56; Njoh, 1999:5-6). Typical examples of towns that emerged in European pattern of town planning include: Dakar in Senegal; Conakry in Guinea; Freetown in Sierra Leone; Abijan in Cote d' Ivore and Accra in Ghana. On the other side, there were also towns like Douala in Cameroon and Lagos in Nigeria where a combination of European and indigenous traits implemented (Njoh, 1999:6-8).

According to Njoh, the colonialists claimed that the native traits are 'uncivilized', and need to be 'modernized' to meet their economic and political needs. Some of the demands of the colonialists include exploiting resources, controlling land use activities, creating conducive living and working places for the whites, indoctrinating westerns' values and practices, and the newly imported urban development policies and strategies. It was in no way to transform the lives of the indigenous populations (Njoh, 1999:64).

Njoh in his same book further notes that the colonialists enacted a law that demanded zoning and township to patrol mainly land use activities (Njoh, 1999:59-64). The law allowed Europeans to settle in elevated areas overlooking the natives, along or near shores, and adjacent to the cities. The blacks on the other hand, were forced to dwell on the foot of the hills and other hostile areas. The new comers also partitioned buildings based on the functions they rendered as residential houses only to residential areas; and shops to business centers (Njoh, 1999:59-64).

By taking the case of Douala in Cameroon, Elate explains that the Germans (1884-1916) dwell on the Bell plateau by driving out the native people. The displaced people established a new settlement called 'New Bell', which later on, ended up to slums. The plan, as the author notes, put a 1km gap between European and African living quarters. This new arrangement continued to exist during the period of French occupation (1916-1960) (Elate, 2004: 56-59.). The finding of Elate clearly shows that the emergence of slum is a colonial legacy in Cameroon particular and in other most colonial cities of the region in general. The author explanation is detailed and supported by a variety of sources.

Similarly, Dembele provides a detail explanation about the French urban planning and architecture in the city of Djenne and Bamako (Dembele, 2004:241-245). According to him, the French introduced new urban planning and used vacant lands ("Terres Vacantes Sans Maitres") for different purposes. Open spaces, ethnic realms and sacred places became targets of the new adjustment. The policy rather encouraged the building of villa style houses for business activities and residents. The author concludes that the functions and structures of old villages and towns which were dominated by ethnic and spiritual orientation changed in the model of European metropolis. This policy was also implemented in other French colonies of the continent, which indeed caused lasting resentment particularly among religious groups whose sacred lands were taken for other purposes.

Scholars agreed that urban planning policies of colonial powers were accompanied by racial and socio-cultural segregations. In this regard, the work of A.J. Christopher is best example which gives detailed analyses on the racial and cultural segregation and residential quarters separations between the whites and blacks in British tropical colonies. For him, cultural segregation was emanated from the assumption that Europeans' cultures and values are 'superior' to the natives. On the other hand, residential segregation referred physical and administrative partitions of the whites and the blacks living and working quarters. Discrimination in any form definitely led mental segregation. The author notes that racial segregation that dominated the past, overwhelmed by social discrimination between the rich and poor after independence (Christopher, 1992:95-107).

Njoh attributes discrimination that based on 'racial superiority' to the British and Germans while 'cultural superiority' to the French, Spanish and Portuguese (Njoh, 2004: 68-72). According to him, the Germans introduced segregationist policy in Freetown and Douala in 1901 and 1910 respectively. The author further notes that in Nigeria, the British founded white settlements at a distance from the indigenous population claiming to block transmission of diseases from the blacks (Njoh, 2004: 68-72).

On the other hand, R. Boxer, maintains that by undermining the indigenous cultural elements, the

Portuguese attempted to indoctrinate their own culture through education. But in most of their colonies, they were not in a position to make their policy practical. According to the author, they themselves rather unknowingly were absorbed into the indigenous traits and practices. Some of the exceptional cases in this regard were the Mulatto population in the islands of Cape Verde and Sao Tome, who were entirely assimilated into Portuguese's culture (Boxer, 1963:136,155). But, the justifications as to why the Portuguese policy worked in some areas and not in another is not clearly indicated in the work of the author.

Sources indicate that as compared to other regions in the continent of Africa, the number of white settlements in West African cities was very small (Gulger and Flanagan, 1978:2-3; Simms, 1965:xii-xiii). Thus, the colonial cities in West Africa were predominantly occupied by indigenous people and immigrants from other countries in the region. This might partly due to the hostile climatic conditions of the region to the whites who did not experience it before. In this regard, the author argues that in most cases, the native peoples could easily acquire urban lands, freely moved between urban and rural areas (Gulger and Flanagan, 1978:2-3; Simms, 1965:xii-xiii). On the other side, Simms asserts that comparatively, ethnic discrimination and conflicts in the region was not as strong as to other areas in sub-Saharan Africa (Simms, 1965:xii-xiii).

## 5. SOCIAL STRATA AND BONDING

Taking different parameters like education, economic status, occupation and others, scholars categorize urban residents of West African colonial cities into different social strata. Little, for instance, using education as a reference identifies three socio-cultural groups namely the educated, the semi-literate, and the illiterate. The individual's position in his/her hierarchy determined individual's membership to the existing social group (Little, 1965:4, 138-162). Based on occupation, Simms in his book distinguishes five groups in colonial cities of Nigeria. These were the higher public officials, the professionals, businessmen, minor white collar workers and laboring classes (Simms, 1965:31-32). According to him, though non-ethnic social groups expanded, the influence of kinship and tribal ties, and the intervention Europeans continued to exist in a lesser extent. Both of the above scholars' works are well organized and substantiated with wide range of primary sources.

Concerning social relationships and interactions in the region, writers like Epstein, Joan Aldous, Remi Clignet and others confirm that it was too complex (Epstein, 1967:280-281; Aldous, 1962:6-12; Clignet, 1966:168-171). Relations became multi dimensional, not particularistic. The authors rightly argue that kinship structure which predetermined social bonding in the earlier periods became of little or no consequence for the increasing tendency of individualism and partly due to the expansion of non-ethnic based associations like education, living quarters and others.

In support of the above idea, Little, who produced and published a number of books and articles on voluntary associations in West Africa, indicate that the purpose of the emergence of non-ethnic based associations was to help each other and to adjust themselves to urban way of life (Little, 1957: 579-596). These institutions include trade unions, political parties, religious and cult associations and sporting clubs. The author asserts that non-ethnic based associations gradually eroded the social discrimination between the rich and the poor, and other groups and thereby strengthening the bond of unity among themselves (Little, 1965:148-153.) The author, however, notes that extended family structure, though declining, continued to survive.

By taking the cases of some major towns in Ivory Coast, Clignet offers us a detailed analysis of the patterns of marriage and family structure in the colonial period (Clignet, 1966: 385-401). Urbanization, as many scholars agreed, encouraged marriage alliances across different ethnic and cultural groups. Both sexes particularly in the region had the freedom to choose their own partners. In most cases, males got marriage in their later years than girls. This indeed, according to the author, became a source of conflict between mates and accelerated the rate of divorce. In similar theme, Simms argues that urbanization discouraged polygamy for the increasing rise of living cost. It also caused to raise the rate of divorce and the decline of extended family bonding. But the impact of urbanization varied from city to city (Simms, 195: 24-26).



## 6. CONCLUSION

The colonial period in West Africa, 1850s-1960s, witnessed that urban development was not accompanied by large scale industrialization and innovation. Colonial urban centers in the region were also characterized by separation of European and African living and working quarters, high rate of rural to urban migration, unemployment, wide gap between the rich and the poor, ethnic diversity, and the emergence of slums. Imperial motives of the colonizers largely dictated the physical, socio-economic and political structures and functions of the cities even to the present time. Scholars identify changes and continuities in the overall patterns of urbanization in the period under discussion. They attempt to address the issue from the perspectives of their own fields of specialization.

The scholarly works on the subject has increased in volume and number from time to time. One can easily observe changes in the studies in their themes, concepts, theories and methods. Earlier studies particularly literatures published before 1960s were limited in scope and narrative in nature. They concentrate on developments limited to the city and give little or no space in studying the interdependence of the city and its surroundings. Most of them were written from Euro-centric perspectives. On the other hand, recent studies integrate the earlier approaches with variety of modern theories and methodologies. Besides, there has been a gradual shift in the approaches from simple historical description to critical investigation of the dynamic of changes overtime. Afro-centric scholars also come to the forefront particularly after 1960s and attempt to decolonize the history of Africa in general and the region in particular. Recent findings widen the scope of studying the issue by analyzing the socio-cultural, economic and political dimensions of colonial cities of the region. But as to my observation, so far historians have limited contribution to the making of knowledge on the subject. Most of the available literatures are works of social anthropologists and sociologists. So, in the future it is hoped that they would play a key role in dealing with the social-cultural history of the region.

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