

Jaja and Nana in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: Proto-Nationalists or Emergent Capitalists

by

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Abstract

The extant literature on the evolution of nationalism in Nigeria generally portrays King Jaja of Opobo and Governor Nana Olomu of Itsekiri as pioneers of the nationalist struggles against British imperialism in the Niger Delta. This paper, however, argues that the resistance of Jaja and Nana were basically meant for the protection of their personal economic interests and that the narrow pursuits of profit cannot constitute the effective beginning of nationalist ferment in Nigeria. Thus, Jaja and Nana's greatest national significance lies in their roles as Nigeria's first modern capitalists and entrepreneurial giants rather than as proto-nationalists. This study thus articulates and critiques their influence via nineteenth century proto-nationalists biographical assumptions by pointing illustrating the contradictions in historical portraits that slant towards proto-nationalism rather than commercial enterprises, thereby, raising important issues in Nigeria's nationalist historiography.

Keywords: Proto-nationalism, emergent capitalists, entrepreneurship and palm oil trade

Introduction

The present corpus of Nigerian biographical research tends to focus mainly on the lives of leading Nigerian political figures (Osuntokun 1978; Cookey 1974; Arifalo and Ogen 2006:2). This over-concentration on political biographies is so pronounced to the extent that a number of Nigeria's pre-colonial commercial heroes and entrepreneurial gurus in the Niger Delta, such as King Jaja of Opobo and Governor Nana Olomu of Itsekiri have been wrongly classified and portrayed as proto-nationalists, rather than business gurus. Indeed, as far as Nigerian nationalist historiography is concerned, Jaja and Nana were among the first set of nationalists in pre-colonial Nigeria (Ikime 1980:276; Onabamiro 1983:56; Fajana and Biggs 1976:137). The present study, however, contends that contrary to the widespread claim that these distinguished personalities were proto-nationalists, they were instead, simply super merchants and prescient business strategists.

In this study, traditional or proto-nationalism within the pre-colonial African setting is conceptualized as the series of movements or resistance by Africans to the various attempts by European powers to penetrate and occupy pre-colonial African states. It was the earliest form of resistance to alien political control. In this respect, proto-nationalism is quite different from modern nationalism which entails sentiments, activities and organizational developments aimed explicitly at the attainment of the independence of colonial territories (Coleman 1983:169-70). With this conceptualization, it appears difficult to fittingly situate fierce struggles that were borne out of the desire to protect personal business interests within the theoretical trajectory of proto or modern nationalism.

Indeed, this work is not simply interested in the biographical sketches of Jaja and Nana as outstanding historical figures. Its primary focus is on their contributions to the development of capitalism and indigenous entrepreneurship in Nigeria. Consequently, the study underscores the considerable ability with which Jaja and Nana organized their commercial enterprises and enormous wealth, and further argues that there is little evidence to suggest that they actually opposed the imposition of colonial rule. As a matter of fact, rather than outright colonial resistance, what they fervently fought against were the clauses that granted free access to British traders in their territories. Apparently, their resistance emanated from their desire to protect their trading monopolies at all cost. In fact, they admitted that they were willing to relinquish the sovereignties of their respective states if only the British would allow them to retain their trading monopolies (Ogen 2006:24; Pedler 1974:76-77). Thus, as far as the literature on Jaja and Nana are concerned, this biographical study represents a historiographical revision of the prevailing view on the evolution of nationalist consciousness in Nigeria.

The Business Exploits of King Jaja of Opobo

Jubo Jubogba, also known as Jo Jo Ubam by the Igbo and as Jaja of Opobo, first, by the Europeans and later by most people, was born about 1821 in Amaigbo village in the Orlu district of Eastern Nigeria (Isichei 1976:98). He has rightly been described as, perhaps, the most enterprising and accomplished of all African merchant princes on the west coast of Africa in the 19th century (Fajana and Biggs 1976:137-138). He first traded in Bonny but later founded a new flourishing trading settlement in 1869 in Opobo, a site where he felt he could best control the traditional sources of supply of palm oil in the region (Cookey 1974).

Though he was originally an Igbo enslaved person, he became acculturated into Bonny society so successfully that even his enemies agreed that his state was one of the best administered entities on the west coast of Africa during the pre-colonial era (Crowder 1968:119). Apart from his outstanding business acumen, he had a keen understanding of Western values. He was fluent in English and even sent one of his sons to a Glasgow school. He also set up a secular school in his capital and lived in a European-style house, as did his chiefs. Jaja's secular school was under the tutelage of a Kentucky born African American, Emma White who relocated to Opobo and even changed her name to Emma Jaja (Isichei 1976:98; Ayandele 1966:81). In fact, Crowder (1968:119) states that "Jaja, ruler of a small but rich state, was clearly in the process of modernizing it independently of European rule". A British palm oil merchant, Alexander Cowan went to Opobo for Alexander Miller Brother and Company in 1887 and made the following comments:

There can be no doubt Ja-Ja was the most powerful potentate the Oil Rivers ever produced. He was just as shrewd and fore-seeing as he was powerful...He could be stern, and he was strict, but he was always just, and the form of government he set up was as near perfect as anything of its kind could be. Every man had the right of appeal, and, though in effect his own authority was never questioned, he conformed to his own rules, and governed through his council of chiefs (Pedler 1974:74).

Interestingly, Jaja was a man of prodigious ability with a gifted and telling acumen. Within a few years of the foundation of Opobo, he rapidly drew the palm oil trade away from Bonny in his role as middle-man between the European merchants and the produce sellers in the interior (Pedler 1974:75). He also cleverly aligned with only Alexander Miller Brother and Company at the expense of several other British firms trading in the Niger Delta. This move led to fierce commercial rivalries among the British firms.

In 1884 other British firms apart from Alexander Miller felt that Jaja was profiting unduly at their expense. They thereafter came together and unilaterally fixed the price of produce. Thus, Jaja retaliated by breaking into the export trade, hitherto an exclusive preserve of the European firms. He succeeded in shipping his palm oil to Birmingham, thereby becoming the first Nigerian direct exporter of palm oil (Gertzel 1962:361-6; Pedler 1974:76). Furthermore, Jaja effectively pioneered Nigeria's indigenous produce export trade.

He utilized his immense wealth from the palm oil trade to acquire enormous political cum military power to the extent that in 1875 he sent some of his soldiers to help the British during the prosecution of the Ashanti War in the then Gold Coast. For this wonderful support, Queen Victoria showed her appreciation by presenting him with a sword of honor (Fajana and Biggs 1976:138).

The trade depression in England from the 1880s galvanized the British traders into assuming that their profits would increase phenomenally if they could checkmate Jaja's middle-man's role in the eastern Niger Delta (Isichei 1976:99). In order to achieve this objective, they systematically sought the assistance of the British Consul. Thus, in 1884, Consul Hewett asked Jaja to sign a treaty placing his territory under British protection. Jaja agreed, but only on the condition that the clauses which stipulated free trade and free access to all parts of the territory for Europeans traders should be expunged (Cookey 1974). Consul Hewett reluctantly agreed and deleted the offensive clauses, but a year later the British declared a Protectorate over the territory of the Gulf of Guinea. Apart from frowning at this Declaration, Jaja completely rejected the provisions for free trade (Pedler 1974:76-77 and Fajana and Biggs 1976:138).

Thereafter, the British accused Jaja of terrorism, of organizing armed attacks and of obstructing trade and the waterways. In 1887, the new Vice-Consul, Harry Johnston recommended his deportation which was immediately approved by the British Foreign Office. Johnston later invited him to a naval vessel for discussions and promised that Jaja would be free to leave whenever he wished, but he dishonorably broke his pledge. Jaja was taken to Accra where he was tried. The sentence was deportation for five years in the West Indies. Jaja appealed against the deportation order through the assistance of a British Officer, Major Macdonald who felt that Jaja had been unjustly treated. He won the appeal, and his sentence was revoked but his anticipated triumphal home-coming could not be actualized; he died on the way (Fajana and Biggs 1976:138-9; Pedler 1974:76-7). Lord Salisbury, the British Prime Minister deeply regretted the treatment meted to Jaja, and insisted that in civilized lands, those that deported him would have been tried for kidnapping (Crowder 1968:121).

Jaja's novel and entrepreneurial prowess is significant in many respects. Though political historians are ready to situate his resistance to British imperialism within the purview of the history of Nigeria's nationalist struggles, and to underscore the fact that he was the first Nigerian nationalist of the nineteenth century (Fajana and Biggs 1976:137); this present study is, however, more interested in Jaja's display of a remarkably high quality of economic wizardry and entrepreneurship. As noted earlier, he was daring and adventurous in his decision to ship palm oil direct to England. He also refused to allow British traders any access to his hinterland markets and insisted on levying duties on British merchants trading in his kingdom. At a point, there was complete stoppage of trade with British traders in his kingdom until one British firm, Alexander Miller, agreed to trade on his terms (Crowder 1968:120; Pedler 1974:76-7).

His trading policies alarmed other British firms trading in the Niger Delta with the exception of Alexander Miller Brother and Company, which prospered and had stations throughout southern Nigeria partly because it co-operated with Jaja. It is, however, instructive to note that the other eight firms that were virulently opposed to his policies 'ganged' up to form the African Association which was incorporated in 1889. Hence, it was this African Association and a few other firms that eventually formed the United African Company (UAC) in 1929 (Pedler 1974:1, 78 and 139). Thus, the history of the origins of the UAC would not be complete without adequate reference to the intense commercial rivalries between Jaja and the firm of Alexander Miller who were contemptuously referred to as the agents of Jaja by the other firms, on the one hand, and the other eight British firms in opposition to Jaja, on the other (Ogen 2006:20).

And while Jaja was making waves at Opobo in the eastern part of the Niger Delta, another great merchant prince had also emerged in the western part of the Niger Delta. He was no other person than the legendary Nana Olomu of Itsekiri.

Nana Olomu of Itsekiri: Palm Oil Super Magnate

Nana Olomu was born about 1852 at Jakpa in the Itsekiri region, and thus become the wealthiest Itsekiri trader of his age. Incidentally, his father, Olomu was also the richest and most powerful Itsekiri merchant during his life time. Nana's remarkable success was predicated on his inherited wealthy status, his outstanding acumen in the organization of his financial and human resources and also on his formidable military machine (Ikime 1966:40-42). It has, however, been reasonably argued that his career was a striking example of how political advancement was based more on commercial prowess, rather than on inherited status (Soremekun 1985:149; Hopkins 1973:146).

Nana like Jaja was a state builder. He was able to build his kingdom due to his effective control of the trade in palm oil, which unlike the slave trade called for greater organization and financial resources (Law 1993:105). He also greatly developed the new capital at Ebrohimi which had earlier been founded by his father on an almost impregnable site by dumping heaps of sand on a hitherto muddy and swampy location (Isichei 1977:123; Ikpe 1989:53).

Subsequently, he stationed his trading agents who were responsible for the purchase and transportation of oil in the Urhobo hinterland. This arrangement was further enhanced with his decision to take wives from all the leading Urhobo clans with which he traded (Crowder 1968:121; Ikime 1966:40-41). In 1885 he became the Governor of the Benin and Ethiope Rivers. A British official, Gallwey who toured the Urhobo region in 1892 affirms that:

In terms of relations with the British, Nana was the Jaja of the Western Delta. His hold on most of the Urhobo oil markets was even firmer than Jaja's. In terms of wealth, Nana was probably much wealthier than Jaja and like Jaja was able to dictate his own trade terms and had no need for trust (Ikime 1977:46).

Correspondingly, Nana also held up palm oil exports between 1886 and 1887 when the price of palm oil suddenly fell by 40% in order to force European merchants to accept the terms and conditions of sale as laid down by local producers and suppliers. This was a strategic way of securing a favorable balance of trade for the Urhobo producers and Itsekiri middle-men (Hopkins 1973:155). In 1891 the British tried to undermine Nana's economic interests by opening up another Vice-Consulate at Sapele, apart from the one on the Benin River in order to penetrate the hinterland and reduce the trade on the Benin River - the main source of his wealth. However, Nana retaliated by sending his agents to Sapele too. The British were astounded to find out that his agents were in firm control of the trade, and that his trading influence was extremely strong. Indeed, he was so powerful and sufficiently wealthy to dictate his own trade terms, to hold up trade when it suited his fancy and to refuse to take trust from European firms (Ikime 1980:278).

During the era of treaty signing in Nigeria, Nana Olomu fully understood the immediate import of British imperial intentions in the Niger Delta. Like Jaja, he struck out offensive clauses which stipulated free access to British traders to trade wherever they pleased in his kingdom. These uncooperative tendencies on his part were the precursor to the Ebrohimi expedition of 1894 (Ikime 1980:276; Onabamiro 1983:56).

Thus, Major Claude Macdonald, the British Commissioner and Consul General for Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1887 reported that Nana's influence was exceedingly widespread and that it would be in the best interest of British traders, missionaries and colonialists to urgently and decisively checkmate Nana's growing influence and power. Macdonald further reported that at a particular occasion when he met Nana at the Benin River for a crucial meeting, Nana came in a war canoe paddled by about 100 people with four or five similar canoes serving as escorts, and personal bodyguards of twenty armed men with Winchester repeater rifles. Macdonald concluded that Nana was "a man possessed of great power and wealth, astute, energetic and intelligent" (Ikime 1966:44).

Indeed, Nana was credited with having a fleet of 200 trade canoes and another 100 war canoes with the ability to muster 20,000 war boys. After his defeat in 1884, the arms seized in Ebrohimi included 106 cannons, 445 blunderbusses, 640 guns, 10 revolvers, in addition to 1640 kegs of gunpowder and 2500 rounds of machine gun ammunition (Ikime 1966:41). Therefore, there was no doubt that his impressive military machine, enormous wealth and great influence were critical factors in his virtual monopoly of the palm oil trade.

Nevertheless, the British wrongly accused him of: disrupting commercial activities in the Niger Delta, of terrorizing the Urhobo and turning them against the British, of engaging in the inhuman traffic in slaves, and the most blatant lie, of practising human sacrifice (Ikime 1980:278). Nana's real offence, however, was that his wealth, position and power gave him considerable influence over the areas surrounding the Benin River and the Warri district, thereby making the penetration of British traders to be extremely difficult if not impossible. Consequently, in 1894, the British laid siege on Ebrohimi. Nana replied by further fortifying his capital. Henceforth, the resistance put up by him was bitter and daring, and as skillful as it was brilliant. Crowder (1971:2), rightly suggests that as far as military historians are concerned, wars are not assessed solely in terms of the victory or success of the victors, but also on the prowess and ingenuity of the vanquished, in the face of overwhelming odds.

Therefore Nana impressively combined conventional warfare with guerilla tactics, and used to the fullest advantage his superior knowledge of the creeks along the British had to sail to reach Ebrohimi, thereby making what they initially thought would be a casual military expedition, one their most difficult and costly imperial adventures in West Africa. In short, Nana forced the British to build up a large naval and military force off the Benin River, representing virtually the entire British naval strength in West Africa, and the most impressive collection of British forces in the Niger Delta up until that date (Onabamiro 1983:57 and Ikime 1977:47). This action prompted the British to send four warships: the HMS *Alecto*, HMS *Phoebe*, HMS *Philomel* and HMS *Widgem* to attack all the villages around Ebrohimi, which were destroyed. Yet, Nana refused to surrender or obey British entreaties to come for a discussion at the Consulate, based on the memory of what happened to Jaja when he acquiesced to such a request (Onabamiro 1983:57).

And thus, all attempts to take Ebrohimi by going up the creek failed, and in fact, Nana successfully repelled the British forces on three occasions so they were forced to withdraw with 'heavy' casualties. And even cutting a path through the dense swamp forest also proved an impossible task which was rendered scary and dangerous because of Nana's cleverly masked batteries. Attacking Ebrohimi by land also failed because of the heavy fire directed against the British by Nana's forces. However, Nana's capital eventually fell on September 25, 1894, mainly because, Dogho, (Nana's local rival) provided the British with logistic and intelligence support and even showed them the best route to Ebrohimi, and as a result, Nana was eventually tried and exiled to Ghana. And interestingly, his goods were also sold and the proceeds were used to defray the cost of the expedition, marking the demise of his trading empire (Ikime 1980:278; 1966:47; 1977:47).

Jaja and Nana as Emergent Capitalists

As far as Nigerian nationalist historiography is concerned, Jaja and Nana's greatness could be found in their principled resistance to foreign political control. Indeed, Fajana and Biggs (1976:137) describe Jaja as the first Nigerian nationalist of the nineteenth century. In the same vein, Crowder (1968:122) sees Nana as an acclaimed hero of the resistance to colonial rule in Nigeria. Thus, Jaja and Nana's principled oppositions to British influence in the Niger Delta have largely been interpreted as the precursors to Nigeria's nationalist struggles.

This study is, however, of the view that the stiff opposition to foreign penetration and the fierce resistance against British imperialism by the duo were essentially informed by their fervent desire to protect by all means their considerable commercial interests. Therefore, it is the humble position of this paper that the wars that Jaja and Nana fought were basically trade wars meant for the protection of their trading monopolies. Hence, their greatest significance lies in their roles as entrepreneurs cum super-merchants and not as proto-nationalists. For example, they did not hesitate to sign treaties that effectively placed their kingdoms under the British Crown; and second, they mainly kicked against the clauses that granted free access to European traders. This is the major reason why they deployed military forces which they were used to maintain their trading monopolies in the Niger Delta in defense of their strategic commercial interests against British interlopers.

Yet, in contrast, Jaja and Nana's contemporaries such as *Sultan Attahiru* of Sokoto, *Oba Ovonramwen* of Benin and *Awujale Aboki Tunwase* of Ijebuland, to mention but a few, fought relentlessly to defend the corporate existence and political sovereignties of their respective kingdoms (Crowder 1968:134-136; Oduwobi 2004:34-36; Ayandele 1992: 21); the same cannot be said of Jaja and Nana whose struggles were primarily inspired by the need to protect their personal business interests. Indeed, unlike the former set of proto-nationalists mentioned, Jaja and Nana were not too fastidious about political sovereignty, but were primarily interested in obtaining explicit guarantees for the maintenance of their exclusive trading rights.

And most interestingly in this saga, Jaja and Nana also frustrated and prevented fellow African merchants living in their domains from threatening the trade monopolies which they enjoyed. The resultant effect was that they had to contend with the resentment of not only by the British traders but also via the anger of local rivals who were too anxious to break their efficient monopolies and stranglehold on the palm oil trade (Ikime 1966:41; Crowder 1968:120-22). It could, therefore, be seen that the remarkable and historic resistance of Jaja and Nana to British imperialism was not informed by altruistic intentions. And essentially, it would seem to have been primarily inspired by their desire to maximize personal profit and to protect their trading monopolies by all possible means.

Conclusion

This study is primarily inspired by the need to correct the erroneous impression that the legendary King Jaja of Opobo and Governor Nana Olomu of Itsekiri were among the first set of proto-nationalists in Nigeria. Therefore it is the considered opinion of this paper that Jaja and Nana could best be regarded as Nigeria's first modern capitalists and entrepreneurial giants rather than as proto-nationalists. Consequently, the focus of this work is on Jaja and Nana's enormous wealth, business empires and the considerable ability with which they organized their commercial enterprises. Indeed, towards the end of the 19th century Jaja and Nana's names symbolized the kind of wealth and influence that African merchants had ever attained. They developed effective trade barriers which prevented, even though temporarily, the incursion of European traders into the hinterland and they also stimulated a lot of economic activities in their attempts to penetrate the hinterland as a way of linking the sources of produce with their coastal states (Ikpe 1989:54; Forrest 1994:13).

Moreover, the combined resistance against the penetration of British traders and even local merchants for personal economic motives cannot be reasonably said to the effective beginning of nationalist ferment in Nigeria as earlier writers would want us to believe. It must be stated clearly that this cogent historiographical re-interpretation is not intended to diminish the huge statures of Jaja and Nana in Nigeria's pre-colonial history, but simply as an essential exercise aimed at placing their contributions to national development in Nigeria within a proper historical perspective.

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