Monsieur Edmund O. Egboh

Résumé
E. O. Egboh. La gomme arabique au Nigeria, 1897-1940. Un exemple de développement économique rural en régime colonial. Dès le début de l'occupation coloniale, on constata l'existence, dans la région du Nord, de peuplement d'acacias à gomme de qualité identique à ceux du Sénégal et du Soudan. En dépit des efforts de l'administration coloniale, la gomme arabique ne parvint pas à jouer plus qu'un rôle d'appoint dans l'économie rurale nigériane, les principales raisons de cet échec relatif étant le manque de savoir-faire dans le traitement et le conditionnement du produit, et l'organisation oligopolistique des marchés.

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EDMUND O. EGBOH

The Nigerian Gum Arabic Industry, 1897-1940
A Study in Rural Economic Development under Colonial Regime

One of the Nigerian economic crops which have received little attention from historians is gum arabic. An attempt is made in this paper to analyse the place which this economically important but neglected commodity has occupied in the country’s economic growth.

Gum arabic had been an article of commerce since the early days of the Christian era. The source of supply was the Sudan from which it was shipped via Arabian ports to Europe. The importance of the commodity in industry was immense. The finest and least coloured varieties were employed in the clearing of liqueurs, the ‘finishing’ of silk and in the preparation of fine water colour paints. Other high grades found application in confectionery for the manufacture of sweets, and in pharmacy for the production of pastilles and jujubes. Gum arabic was also employed in sizing and finishing textiles and paper, in calico-printing to aid certain processes in dyeing. The less costly varieties were used for adhesive purposes in the manufacture of stationery, matches and also in the preparation of ink.

The commercial value of gum depended largely on the purposes for which it was suited, the higher price being obtained for gums suitable for sizing silk and for the use of confectioners and pharmacists, and the lowest for those which could only be employed for sizing coarse materials and for the preparations of ink.¹

Gum arabic is the product of the tree called acasia verek. It had a wide distribution stretching from the Red Sea in the East to Senegal on the West Coast of Africa, roughly between parallels 11° and 14° North. The species occurred throughout the dry thorn forest zone of Northern Nigeria where it was known as acasia senegal. But only in Bornu province between parallels 12° and 13° North was it found in concentration.² Commenting on the gum arabic wealth of Bornu province, the Bornu Resident Commissioner W. P. Hewby wrote: ‘This [acasia senegal] is to be met in the greater part of Bornu, including the West and South, but in the greatest profusion by far on the hard black marshland bordering the river Wobe, the Chad neighbourhood and the vicinity of the [. . .] frontier drained by the river Yesseram, in which regions it is frequently to be seen generally in bushes under 15 feet high, in almost impenetrable patches several furlongs deep.’²

According to the North Bornu Resident, Major McClintock, Bornu province had large concentrations of acasia senegal. The richest division in the province had acasia senegal covering ‘not less than from 80,000 to 100,000 acres’, and the

2. MACDONALD 1941: 13. Gum arabic has to be distinguished from resins. Like other gums of commerce it is soluble in water, while resins are not. On the other hand, resins are soluble in methylated spirit or turpentine but gum arabic is not. (Ibid.)
3. Encl. in W.R. Dunstan to CO, 11 February 1908, CO 446/79/5025.

Cahiers d’Études africaines 69-70, XVIII–1–2, pp. 215-221.
second richest had ‘not less than from 50,000 to 80,000 acres’, and the third richest division, ‘not less than from 30,000 to 50,000 acres’. The Northern Nigeria Forest Officer, W. R. Elliott, who toured Northern Nigeria in 1904, similarly commented encouragingly: ‘From what I saw when in Bornu in 1904 and from information I picked up at odd times afterwards, I can safely state that there is a large tract of country bordering the Gongola river, covered thickly with gum acacias. This stretch of land on the east bank of the Gongola is about 20 to 30 miles wide and from 80 to 100 miles in length.’

Apart from Bornu, gum trees also occurred in other provinces especially Kano, Borgu and Bassa. The Bornu gum compared favourably with the world famous Sudanese gum, and its rival, the Senegalese gum. According to the Imperial Institute test, the Sudanese gum was 85% water-soluble.

The existence in Northern Nigeria of commercial gum aroused great interest in British industrial circles: British manufacturers to whom samples of the Bornu gum were submitted, stated that if properly collected, sorted and graded, the gum would command a ready sale at satisfactory prices in Britain. The interest which was thus aroused in Britain was understandable. Hitherto Sudan and Senegal had been the main exporters of commercial gum. Senegal alone had exported gum to the value of over £250,000 per annum, whilst gum exports from Sudan amounted to £200,000 per annum. The gum exported from these countries did not reach Britain directly. From Bordeaux and Trieste, it was re-exported to Britain at a good profit to the dealers. The bulk of the gum collected in Northern Nigeria was exported by caravan to Tripoli and from there to Trieste and Bordeaux, and sold as Senegalese gum.

To get the gum directly from Nigeria and to develop the Nigerian gum to compete with that from Sudan and Senegal, the Niger Company started gum-buying in Northern Nigeria. The company exported considerable quantities of gum to Britain. However, owing to the company’s inexperience in gum trade, the gum it exported was improperly sorted and graded. Consequently the company burnt its fingers, as the gum could not be sold at remunerative prices in England, and it ceased to buy gum in West Africa.

Gum sorting and grading, an essential first step towards the commercial utilisation of gum, was a special art practised entirely at Bordeaux, Trieste and Tripoli. It was not understood in England where the broker bought only sorted and graded gum. In order to develop this art, W.R. Dunstan, the Director of the Imperial Institute, strongly suggested to the Colonial Office that the Nigerian gum industry should be organised so that the gum collection, sorting and grading should be done in the Protectorate. The gum should then be brought down the Niger river and shipped to Britain, properly sorted and graded to suit the requirements of the British manufacturers. To acquire the sorting and grading techniques, Dunstan recommended that someone familiar with the gum arabic trade should be sent to Trieste, Tripoli and Bordeaux to learn as much as possible about the methods employed by the gum specialist dealers there. In Dunstan’s opinion, if the Nigerian gum was properly organised, it would be in a position to compete success-

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4. Encl. in W. R. Dunstan to CO, 11 February 1908, CO 446/79/5025.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Minutes by W. R. Dunstan, 16 February 1906, CO 446/58/5744. A report submitted by two Lagos botanical assistants (Leigh and Dawodu) in 1898 showed that gum-yielding trees had existed around Ogbomosho, Ilorin and all over Yorubaland. Gum collected from these areas was brought down to Lagos and sold to European traders for shipment to Europe. Encl. in George Denton to CO, 28 June 1898, CO 147/133/16802.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
fully with the Senegalese and Sudanese gum sorted and graded in North Africa and Europe.  

W. R. Dunstan was selected by the Colonial Office to make a fact-finding tour of Europe and North Africa in connection with the development of the Nigerian gum industry. In the summer of 1907, he was directed by the Colonial Office to visit Trieste, Tripoli and Smyrna for the purpose of making certain enquiries with regard to the trade in gum arabic and other kindred matters of importance in connection with the economic development of Northern and Southern Nigeria. During the study tour, Dunstan enquired both at Trieste and Bordeaux into the sorting and grading methods adopted by the gum merchants of these commercial centres and acquired useful information. He reported that the processes of sorting and grading were comparatively simple operations which could be readily taught to the Nigerian gum collectors.

Although tests had shown that the Nigerian gum compared favourably with the Sudanese gum, and that this consequently had persuaded the Colonial Office to sponsor Dunstan's study trip, there had been considerable doubt among British gum interests as to whether the Nigerian gum tree called *acasia senegal* was really the same as the *acasia verek* which produced the famous Sudanese gum. The doubt was removed by the Imperial Institute which reported in 1908 that the *acasia senegal* found in Nigeria was definitely the same tree as the *acasia verek* of the Sudan. Subsequent tests performed by the Imperial Institute in 1910, on the Nigerian and Sudanese gum, made Dunstan categorically state that the Nigerian gum was of a very desirable quality closely resembling the Sudanese gum. Encouraged by these reports, some British firms shipped quantities of gum from Nigeria to Britain. But owing to the inexperience of the firms concerned, the gum was of poor quality and did not command a remunerative price.

The question of how to produce high quality gum in Northern Nigeria worried the colonial administration. The Resident of Bornu H.R. Palmer later Lieutenant-Governor of Northern Nigeria wrote: 'It appears to me that given transport and certain amount of instruction in preparation, there is no reason why Bornu should not rival Kordofan.' Palmer considered that the ordinary British firms in Nigeria had not the specialist knowledge and keenness to make the trade a success. Hence, he proposed to ship five tons of gum to Europe through the instrument of the Native Administration acting on an entrepreneurial basis. His efforts resulted in the shipment of only two tons in 1922. A handsome profit was made on the venture. Following the 1922 shipment, interested firms in Europe immediately placed an order for 100 tons of gum. The Native Administration was unable to undertake this, and the Palmer-Native Administration scheme came to an end.

In 1925, a Senior Conservator of Forests, J.H.J. Farquhar attempted to develop the Nigerian gum trade. But for his efforts to be successful, it was necessary to have a resident Forest Officer in Bornu to organise the industry on the spot. Unfortunately, however, the colonial government was unable to station a Forest Officer in Bornu. Consequently, Farquhar's efforts came to nothing. In 1927, the possibility of a forest officer from Sudan visiting Nigeria was considered. As none could be spared by the Sudanese government, the Nigerian government decided to send a forestry officer to Sudan to study the way Sudan had organised its indus-

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12. CO to Ag. High Commissioner Girouard, 5 July 1907, CO 446/69/22359.
13. Encl. in Dunstan to CO, 11 February 1908, CO 446/79/5025.
14. Encl. in H. Bell to CO, 17 November 1911, CO 446/100/39632.
16. Ibid. While Bornu was the centre of the Nigerian gum trade, Kordofan was the centre for the Sudanese gum trade.
17. Ibid.: 4.
try.18 A Conservator of Forests, A.H.W. Weir, was selected for the visit. He toured the Sudan for a period of eight months. On his return, he was posted to Maiduguri in Bornu province to study the commercial possibilities of its gum industry and help in its development.19

The first thing Weir did on arrival was to survey the acasia verek stock of Bornu province. His survey showed that over a large area of the north-centre of the Bornu province, acasia verek was to be found. But in many areas where thick forests of acasia verek had been reported to exist in the past, only a few stands of the tree were in existence. Most of the trees had been cut down, and some died out at the end of their life cycle. The destruction of the acasia verek ‘forests’ was doubtless due to the fact that the ‘shifting’ cultivator was attracted to the thick patches of acasia verek forests where he could get a plentiful supply of decayed vegetable matter as manure for his crops and at the same time a supply of tree branches with which to fence his farm against wandering stock. There was also the fact that the natural increase of population and settled conditions had led the people to invade woodlands hitherto considered uninhabitable.20 Commenting in 1914 on the verek destruction in Bornu province, a Northern Nigerian Forest Officer, B.E.B. Shaw, said: ‘I must now point out a matter of serious importance and that is the great destruction of acasias going on in the province, the trees being felled in order to clear ground for farming; a large quantity is also cut for firewood. There is no doubt that these acasias covered at one time a far larger area than they do at the present time.’21

Assessing the relative importance of the Bornu verek, and comparing it with that of the Sudan, Weir stated that the gum-bearing area of the Sudan was in the neighbourhood of 50,000 square miles. On the other hand, the verek-bearing areas of Bornu totalled about 5,000 square miles, and would produce about 2,000 tons of gum annually. Thus, although it had an area which could be profitably exploited, Bornu could not be considered as a serious rival to the Sudan.

As a result of the efforts made by the colonial government through officials such as Weir to develop the Nigerian gum trade, certain European firms seriously showed interest in the Nigerian gum industry. In 1929, a British company, James Laing, the largest English importer of gum arabic, wrote to A.H.W. Weir, requesting information on the possibility of establishing a regular trade relations with Nigeria owing to the fact that the Sudanese gum market could not meet the demand for gum in Britain.22 Weir in reply, pointed out that although a regular gum trade could be started with Nigeria, the African gum collectors regarded the trade as a minor affair which was not sufficiently attractive to them: ‘The natives are much more prosperous than the Sudani and to pick gum pays them less than most of their other interests, skins, hides, and salt, etc., so that they have to be attracted to the industry. So far the price offered (by the Niger Company buying) at Geidom and Maiduguri has been low viz. one penny per pound and I understand they have not bought much.’23

Thus the low and unremunerative prices offered by the European firms to the collectors for their gum, made it impossible for them to engage in large scale gum collection for export. For this reason, both Weir and the Resident in Bornu were unable to secure a non-European to act as a gum buying agent for Messrs. James Laing and Company as requested by that company in 1929.24

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In 1933, another British firm, Messrs. B. Seebohm Rowntree which in 1926 had enquired into the development of the Nigerian gum trade, applied to the Nigerian government for concessions to exploit gum arabic in Bornu. The company was engaged in the development of the gum arabic industry in Nigeria by about 1930. It established a collecting station at Nguru in Bornu province and had two Europeans attached to the Nguru station. Rowntree's European employees travelled over a wide area visiting the district chiefs and village heads and explaining to them the importance of the country's potential gum wealth which at the time was running waste. They spent much time persuading the chiefs and the village heads to induce the local inhabitants to engage in gum collection from the woodlands. In December 1932, Rowntree himself visited Nigeria to see things for himself. He stated that he had spent time and money educating the local population to tap the gum properly, but regretted that the people did not bring the gum to his company to buy. He reported that the collectors instead brought the gum to the open market where he had to compete for it with other firms which had not spent anything to encourage its collection.

Rowntree's statement reveals the exploitative attitude of European traders in colonial territories. He opposed the practice of African producers bringing their produce to the open market, where, barring a price ring by the European buyers, the African producers could secure a more advantageous bargain owing to the presence of a number of competitive European buyers. Rowntree appeared to have justified his wish to secure the monopoly of buying the gum by claiming that his firm had incurred some expense in its propaganda drive to encourage the local people to engage in gum collection. But it should be pointed out that Rowntree's firm was not the only body engaged in propaganda work to encourage local people to collect gum. Apart from the interest shown in gum arabic by political officers such as Residents, government forest officers were commissioned by the colonial administration to undertake the special duty of persuading Africans to collect gum arabic for the export trade.

According to K.R. MacDonald, the ruling local price for Nigerian gum per pound was only 2d which was not always attained, and as the gum was sold in the ordinary market and not by auction as in the Sudan after 1921, the firms' buying agents could keep prices down by means of price rings, and it was possible that the producer rarely obtained the full value for his produce. Thus by creating monopoly conditions, the European firms could eliminate competitive buying, and therefore could afford to pay low prices for the produce.

When Rowntree failed to secure the situation under which he could establish the monopoly of his firm in gum buying, he attempted to achieve his objective partially by securing complete monopoly over a limited area producing gum. He applied for an exclusive concession where his firm would engage in the direct collection of the gum by employing cheap local labour. To persuade the colonial administration to consider his request, he stated that such a concession would confer certain benefits. Firstly, it would ensure the development of a source of wealth which at present was running waste. Secondly, it would increase the spending power of the Africans employed in the working of the concession. Thirdly, the area would be developed under expert European guidance. Fourthly, the concession area would serve as a valuable demonstration plot for encouraging gum

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26. MACDONALD 1941: 15.
27. Ibid. In the Sudan from 1922, the gum was auctioned for the producers by government officers, the merchants bidding for the produce which went to the merchant who made the highest bid at which the producer was willing to sell. Auctioning the gum paid the producer more than selling it in the ordinary market which could be 'ringed' by middlemen and agents of the firms (BLUNT 1926: 4).
arabic production in other areas. Fifthly, the produce of the concession would increase the freight for railway and African animal transport.28

The Governor, Donald Cameron, recommended Rowntree's concession application to the Colonial Office for approval.29 The concession applied for consisted of four forest areas which had been declared forest reserves. Two of them covered an area of ninety-six square miles. The concession was for a period of twenty-five years. Within the concession, the concessionaire, as requested by Rowntree, would have the exclusive right to produce gum from the *acasia verek* growing there. He would also see that the gum trees in the concession areas were protected against intruders who might destroy them. However, the local inhabitants' pasturage rights were guaranteed. In settling the boundaries of the reserves to be granted as concessions, small enclaves occupied by local inhabitants would be unaffected and the existing occupants would be free to collect gum within the enclaves. But subsequent immigrants into the enclaves would not acquire the right to collect gum.30 As part of the concession agreement, an undertaking previously made by the government to Messrs. Rowntree, was allowed to stand. According to the undertaking, the government had agreed in 1930 that no royalty, direct tax or other charges would be placed on the gum industry for five years. In addition, there would be no increase in the railway rates for the transport of gum arabic during the same period.31 The Colonial Office approved the application on the ground that the Rowntree project was a desirable one, and would be of material assistance in promoting the gum industry.32 The terms for the grant of the concession appeared to have been too liberal since no provision was made for royalty payment either to the government or to the African owners of the *acasia verek* forests. Moreover, by providing that no increase in the railway rates for gum transport should be made during a period of five years, the agreement made it impossible for the railway authority to increase the transport rate owing to a possible increase in the value of gum in the world market. Thus the concession agreement seemed to have been made more to the advantage of the concessionaire and less to that of the government or the African *acasia verek* owners.

At this stage, effort should be made to examine the export trade in gum arabic from 1897 to 1940. (See Figs. 1-2.) Britain was the largest importer of gum arabic from Nigeria, Germany coming next, with only a sprinkling going to undesignated European countries. Gum arabic export seemed to have proceeded steadily with the exports occasionally reaching one million pounds (lbs.)—about 446.4 tons—a year, particularly in the thirties, despite the world depression of that period. However, although a steady gum arabic trade existed with Europe, Nigeria's gum arabic export never hit the annual 2,000-ton mark estimated by Weir.

Instead of producing more gum at a give-away price, the producers preferred to engage in the production of more rewarding products such as hides and skins. Thus, the story of gum production in colonial Nigeria clearly shows that economic development under colonial regime was exploitation-motivated, and that the degree of exploitation suffered by the colonial subjects was dependent upon the availability of alternative means of livelihood. As far as gum production was concerned,

28. B. Seebohm Rowntree to Donald Cameron, Encl. in D. Cameron to CO, 6 July 1933, CO 583/189/1086/1.
29. D. Cameron to CO, 6 July 1933, CO 583/189/1086/1.
30. Memo. on the Proposals for the Grant of Gum Collecting Concession to Messrs. Rowntree & Co. Ltd., Encl. in D. Cameron to CO, 6 July 1933, CO 583/189/1086/1.
31. D. Cameron to CO, 6 July 1933, CO 583/189/1086/1; CO to Seebohm Rowntree, 5 August 1933, CO 583/189/1086/1.
32. Some of the gum arabic exported from Nigeria came from the French Niger colony where some quantities of gum were collected and sold in Nigeria (MacDonald 1941: 14).
the people of colonial Nigeria largely escaped exploitation by refusing to produce gum at the nominal price offered. They were able to do this successfully because they had alternative means of earning their livelihood. Thus, the worst form of economic exploitation under colonial regime was possible only under conditions of monoculture where the people had no alternatives, and could survive only by producing that commodity in which the colonial overlord was interested and for which he paid the lowest possible price.