ROLE OF TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS IN DEVELOPMENT

by

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The Colonial Period

The pattern and role of transportation and communications in the colonial period in Africa were conceived in order to promote the economic growth and development of the metropolitan countries by integrating the markets of the colonial territories to the markets of the metropolitan countries, that is, to Europe.

This is clearly seen in the direction of the main roads and railways—directly from the coast to the interior, rather than laterally along the coast to connect the different countries of Africa. Given the existence of different colonial jurisdictions this pattern was logical and inevitable, and was aimed to achieve the following objectives:

(a) Economic, military and administrative control.

In the context of the existing technology railways were suitable for hauling bulky non-perishable raw materials to the coast from the interior—timber and other forest products (cocoa, coffee, etc), mineral ores (iron, phosphates, gold and diamonds, chrome ores, tin, etc).

Railways were also suitable for troop movements to the interior and the borders (motor transportation was not in vogue at the start of the colonial period) and roads were constructed as feeders to railways to connect administrative centres.

(b) Avoidance of contact with colonial territories under other jurisdictions which may be contiguous, as well as other monetary zones. Wherever adjacent territories were under the same jurisdiction these were, of course, linked together—Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika after the first World War.

The aim here was to isolate different colonial jurisdictions and monetary zones:

Examples: (i) Gambia was completely isolated from Senegal, forming an enclave along the Gambia river and at the same time assisting in the isolation of the Casamance region from the rest of Senegal.

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(ii) The Katanga - Matadi rail line in the Congo (Kinshasa) had to run all the way to the West Coast of the continent instead of to the East Coast which was closer and would have promoted speedier exit for the minerals of Katanga.

(iii) Absence of rail or road links among the countries of the Great Lakes region (Tanganyika was under the Germans and could not therefore become an outlet for Zambia - then Northern Rhodesia).

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Whatever economic growth book place within each colonial country was therefore incidental (growth of towns along main road and rail axes, and of economic activity along the coastal zones) the main aim of the transportation network being to promote the economic growth of Europe through its direct link up - by railway and sea - to the colonial markets.

Given the pattern of traffic - bulky exports to the sea coast and less bulky imports into the interior - the pattern of excess capacity of most African railways on the return journey from the coast was established, and became an important cost factor in railway economics - a cost factor which could not easily be overcome by railway tariffs when, subsequently, road transportation developed in competition to railways. It should be noted that originally the prevailing concept was to construct roads as feeders to railways in order to avoid such competition and to make the railways continue to stay in business. This worked for a time until the railways became a transportation bottleneck, unable to move all the available traffic very speedily, thus stimulating the construction of parallel roads for motor transportation as this developed.
The use of different railway guages was not entirely accidental, and promoted further isolation of colonial jurisdictions, reducing the possibility of a direct link-up among the different railways. Even within the same country different guages were used to isolate company activities from other general economic activities (e.g. the Marampa-Pepel rail link was thus constructed on a different guage from that of the rest of the railways in Sierra Leone).

The communications network by undersea cable system played the same role as the transportation network reinforce jurisdictional isolation and administrative control. All cable links to former French territories passed through Paris, all cable links to former British territories passed through London. The tariff rates were also discriminatory and designed to reduce communications contact between different territories under different colonial jurisdictions.

Other institutional developments that took place in the colonial period also followed naturally the jurisdictional boundaries - monetary zones, for example.

With the development of air transportation which technically is more flexible than railways and roads, carrier schedules nevertheless reflected the integral nature of each metropolitan zone. The major objective was to link up countries under each zone - the various airlines in West Africa or in East and Central Africa - rather than to link countries generally according to convenience and regardless of jurisdiction.

The Post - Independence Period after the Second World War.

Whereas in the colonial period the main objective of the African transportation and communications systems was metropolitan growth and development rather than the growth and development of the colonial territories, in the post-independence period the objective of African economic growth and development has come to the foreground in discussions.

This has certain implications for the restructuring as well as modification of the existing transportation and communications network to promote African development.
Thus the concept of African economic integration on a sub-regional, and eventually regional, basis cuts across the colonial pattern of separate colonial jurisdictions in transportation, communications, trade and monetary markets.

However, in view of the historical pattern, two different trends are discernible existing side by side:

1) The reinforcing of the colonial pattern of transportation and communications
2) The attempt to link up the various separate and existing colonial transportation and communications systems.

It should be noted that in spite of these two opposite trends, the first is still stronger than the second (which has hardly proceeded beyond the blue-print stage) and is still very much intact.

A. Reinforcing of the colonial transportation and communications network.

From the point of view of the interest of former metropolitan powers it is obvious that their economic advantages continue to be served by reinforcing in every way possible the structure which they have constructed in transportation, communications and trade. This is more evident in the former French zone than in the former British zone where the independence period has resulted in a greater weakening of the colonial links.

(a) The concept of "Eurafrique" or the Association of the former French colonies with the European Common Market is not a new development but the strengthening of a pre-existing system based on the concept of transportation-and-communications-oriented spheres of influence. The only new factor is that former colonial powers of Africa, with the exception of the British, have given up the concept of competition for that of cooperation in their economic relationships towards their former colonies. This is inevitable since the only colonial power of any influence in Africa, with the exception again of the British, are the French, the Belgians, Germans and Italians having practically lost their territories, the Portuguese and Spaniards holding rather shakily on to theirs. This development explains the dominance of France in the European Common Market, as well as the conflict between France and Britain over the European Common Market.
Britain have lost a good deal of the economic foothold which it had in its former African colonies' works on the assumption that it is too late to regain those links and maintain them as the French still do. Hence its attempts to join the European Common Market which from the viewpoint of all former metropolitan countries would be more to their interests since this would complete the cooperative arrangement and extend the field of interest to take in the former British colonies and consolidate the pre-existing pattern of metropolitan - colonial economic relations.

France, however, takes the opposite view, still regarding Britain as a powerful competitor whose bargaining position would be strong if it entered the European Common Market with such links as remain with its former colonies. The strategy of France is therefore to establish, where possible, direct economic links with the former British colonies by way of trade and investment a strategy which is being assisted by the seeking of direct contacts with the European Common Market by Nigeria and East Africa. This strategy reveals itself in French investment interests and technical assistance projects in East Africa (Tanzania and Zambia, especially), in Sierra Leone (harbour construction and water supplies) and in the oil deposits in Eastern Nigeria (which explains the alignment of British support with the Federal Government and of the support of France and its former colonies - Gabon, Côte d'Ivoire - with Biafra in the year-old conflict between the Federal Nigerian Government and Eastern Nigeria).

French and Common Market investments through the European Development Fund are concentrated on maintaining the existing transportation and communications network in the 14 associated countries of Africa: existing railways are being modernized, extended and reinforced. New roads are being constructed to reinforce the existing pattern, with emphasis on separate national road systems rather than sub-regional roads. The previous Telecommunications system in francophone Africa is being consolidated through the U.A.M., the airline system through Air Afrique and U.A.T. In former British West Africa the previously defunct W.A.A.C. airline is being restored with Ghana and Nigeria as the major partners, and the E.A.A. system remains intact.
Resistance to linking up these and other existing systems into a rational pattern is being encountered in the form of selective granting as well as selective non-granting of landing rights. Thus Ethiopian Airlines finds it difficult to extend its run along the West African Coast up to Senegal, and there are problems between the East African and Nigerian airlines.

Telecommunications are still being kept separate and intact as between Anglophone and Francophone Africa: the cable system of Francophone Africa still converges on Paris, of Anglophone Africa on London and discriminatory tariff rates still keep the two systems separate.

Former colonial countries, chiefly British and French, continue to find it easier to establish contact with London and Paris than with one another through the orientation of the existing communication and airlines, supplemented in the case of air transportation by Air France and British United Airways.

One serious consequence of this reinforcing of the colonial pattern of communications and transportation is a communications black-out whenever a disruption of traffic occurs at the metropolitan and in Paris or in London, and a transmission of higher costs in imports from the metropolitan countries which are still the main suppliers.

B. The attempt to link up separate colonial transportation and communication systems.

In spite of the trend towards the reinforcing of the existing Colonial transportation and communications network it is recognized widely among African countries that growth and development in Africa can only be served as a major objective by modifying the existing pattern through interconnexions and by building up new links.

Thus the question of sub-regional integration in Africa becomes basically a transportation and communications problem. The comparative futility of all sub-regional integration movements so far, with the exception of the integration movement between Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, is a result of the apparent unwillingness to accept the nature of the problem as being essential a transportation and communications problem.
In this light, the proposed sub-regional transportation links in West, East, Central and North Africa take a significance and are seen to be key to any sub-regional integration movements. Until the road links are constructed sub-regional integration movements are unlikely to get off the ground and will remain more than pious wishes. Railroads are unlikely to play a significant part in this development, as compared with motor roads and air transportation, given the expense and rigidity of rail routes, and the primary suitability for heavy and bulky goods.

(a) The proposed transportation link between North and West Africa from Algeria to Mali and Niger.

This is being delayed by an irrelevant technical issue of motor road versus railway, and by a proposal by the French to construct a railway instead of the two motor road links under consideration. The clear superiority of motor roads over railroads is indicated by the following considerations in their favour:

(i) they are relatively cheaper to construct as a network;
(ii) there is greater flexibility in regard to the rolling stock that uses motor roads;
(iii) the transportation of oil and gas by railways which should justify their construction in the desert area is made irrelevant through the cheaper construction of pipelines;
(iv) current technology enables motor transportation to adapt itself to rough terrain and rough desert roads through construction of special tyres and caterpillar wheels;
(v) efficient rail transportation would require electrification – an additional expense – while oil is more readily available than coal in the region to be served.

(b) The East African transport link

A major step is being taken by the Tanzania-Zambia railway for which financing has been proposed by the African Development Bank and the People's Republic of China. However, motor roads are likely to be cheaper and more flexible than a railway and to make a great contribution to the Economic development of the sub-region. Pipelines for the transportation of oil to Zambia are likely to be cheaper to construct.
(c) The West African Road Transport System

This is being delayed unduly for reasons unconnected with the economics of the system. The countries involved seem unwilling to take their major arterial roads up to their borders, and the West African Transportation Authority based in Monrovia is practically dead.

It is ironical that in April 1968 a meeting scheduled for the 14 countries of the West African sub-region and attended by Heads of States and Governments of about 8 established a protocol for a West African Economic Community. So long as the transportation problem is ignored, the West African Economic Community, like the West African Free Trade Area, the West African Customs Union, the Central African Customs Union or the Union of States of Central Africa are likely to remain more than still-born organizations.

(d) The Central African Transport System.

This is mostly at the blueprint stage, aiming to develop a rational system of roads and railways.

**The African Telecommunications Plan**

A joint programme by the ECA and the International Telecommunications Union, the plan for a Pan-African telecommunications system was discussed in 1960 by the Sub-Committee for Africa at the First Planning Assembly of the International Consultative Committee for Telephony and Telegraphy of the International Telecommunications Union. The so-called Dakar Plan was established by the Sub-Committee at its meeting held in Dakar in 1962.

The Plan calls for:

a) new network linking African countries two by two by direct circuits or by suitable traffic concentration points;

b) the wide use of overhead wire lines, supplemented by radio relay links and submarine cables;

c) the extension of the present high frequency radio system to fill the gap until the new plan is implemented; this requires an interim crash programme to provide telephone and telegraph services between African capitals via high frequency radio in order to fill the present communications gap between and among these capitals;
(d) a long-term goal to provide quick, reliable and cheap communications to all parts of Africa and between any part of Africa to all parts of the world and vice-versa.

The last objective, taking into account the great size of Africa, has led to examination of the possibility of communications by satellites.

This Plan is still "at the plan stage". There is evidence of a degree of hesitation - if not reluctance - on the part of I.T.U. to proceed with the plan, considerations of expense aside. Naturally such a plan would take many years to implement. The essential thing is that a beginning should be made.

Obstacles to the Implementation of a transportation and communications system oriented to growth and development in Africa.

1) Presumed cultural differences and ideas : Franco - and Anglophone
2) Neglect of the common condition : the common denominator of tribal social structure, common needs and aspirations
3) Support of existing colonial structures in transportation, communications and monetary zones
4) Presumed fears of political domination of one African country by another
5) Preference for supporting foreign economies rather than the economy of any African country
6) Internal and external financial and other forms of resistance to the implementation of projects designed to promote economic integration and growth at the level of transportation and communications
7) Inadequate thought and recognition by African governments and leaders of the basic necessity of a new transportation and communications structure to African economic growth.