

The incidences of theft of railway metals in colonial Northern Nigeria

This paper looks at how the penetration of European metals disrupted the local blacksmithing industry leading to theft of railway metals in colonial Northern Nigeria.

* Railway sleepers are metals used as base for rail tracks. Elsewhere in the world, sleepers were of wood and not iron. The fact that wooden sleepers are less durable and expensive to maintain makes the use of iron sleepers necessary in colonial Nigeria.

*Railway keys are bolts used for tightening the track and sleepers together.



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This paper examines the prevalence of theft of railway metals in Northern Nigeria. This is due to the economic changes resulting from the arrival of the railway. The arrival of the railway resulted in penetration of European scrap metals leading to disruption in the traditional trade relations in raw materials where smiths in urban centers previously relied on rural smiths for raw materials. Until the arrival of the railways the blacksmith industry was threatened by increased desiccating climatic shift, widespread deforestation resulting from exploitation of woods, shortage of raw materials like iron ore, hardwood, water and clay. The arrival of the European metals serves as alternate raw materials to the blacksmiths, for it was cheap and easy to forge compared to the local iron. However, as the European metal penetrates the local markets, it becomes concentrated in the new urban and peri urban markets resulting in: reliance of rural smiths on urban smiths for raw materials, shortage of raw materials among rural smiths leading to thefts of railway keys and sleepers. Despite the punitive measures at stemming the theft, it persisted and the British were unable to stabilize it. At the end, the British were forced into distributing large quantities of these metals to blacksmiths across the region.



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