

CHAPTER 14 EARLY EUROPEAN CONTACT WITH THE COASTAL PEOPLES OF NIGERIA

Objectives

At the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- Describe the nature of early contact between the Europeans and the coastal people of Nigeria;
- Assess effects of European contact on coastal state in Nigeria;
- Discuss the arrival of Christian missionaries in the coastal states of Nigeria and problems encountered by these missionaries.

Introduction

This chapter gives a vivid analysis of early contact between the Europeans and coastal peoples of Nigeria. It will also assess effects of European contact on the coastal states of Nigeria. Attempts will be made to x-ray the arrival of Christian missionaries in Nigeria coastal states as well as certain problems encountered by the early Christian missionaries.

14.1 Early European Contacts with the Coastal States

The first European country that explored the coastal states of Nigeria was Portugal. The first Portuguese explorer who visited Benin in 1472 was Ruy de Sequeira. In 1515, another Portuguese mission, led by Joa Afonso D'Aveiro, visited Benin. Aveiro's visit opened up a new era in Benin history because it gave Portugal the opportunity to restore diplomatic ties with Benin.

These diplomatic ties encouraged Benin to supply Portugal with certain commodities, like slaves, pepper and ivory, in exchange for European goods, such as beads, looking glass and red cloths. The Portuguese had every hope that Benin Empire would be a fertile ground for planting Christianity.

Other European countries that establish some form of trading contacts with coastal states like Benin, Warri were the Dutch, the French and the British whose major interests was the lucrative/profitable business on slaves.

14.2 Effects of European Contacts with Coastal States in Nigeria

- (a) **Economic effects:** The major effect of European contact with coastal states was economic. The booming trade between coastal states and European countries led to the establishment of trading posts in Warri and Gwatto or Ughoton. While European countries supplied such goods as cloth, glass wares, alcohol, guns and gun powder in exchange for large quantities of pepper (Pimenta-del-Rabbah), ivory and palm oil from Benin. British merchants who explored

coastland areas of Benin like Thomas Wyndham and Antonio Penteads – a Portuguese also sold commodities like British linen cloths and copper bracelets to the Benin people.

European contact with coastal states drew these states into a pattern of trade called the Atlantic or Triangular trade. This trade was organized in such way that coastal and hinterland slaves were sold to Europeans by coastal middlemen traders. The slaves worked in plantations in West Indies.

Equally, the economic contact between the Edo Empire of Benin and the Portuguese were based on wrong assessment. For instance, a Benin Oba called Esigie was only interested in using Portuguese guns in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the imperial army. Oba Esigie used Portuguese guns to defeat Idah in 1515

- (b) **Political effects:** The era of the Trans Atlantic slave trade and the ignoble roles played by coastal middlemen traders who monopolized the trade gave rise to prosperous city states in the Niger-Delta such as Old Calabar, Brass, Bonny. It equally enriched many coastal rulers, like Jaja of Opobo, Kosoko of Lagos, King Pepple of Bonny, who later had problems with European countries like Britain during the era of abolition of the slave trade. The slave trade also brought about drastic changes in the Niger Delta socio-political organization whereby the Canoe House Administration now prevailed.
- (c) **Religious effects:** The expectations of the European explorers and missionaries was to Christianize the people of coastal states who practiced the African traditional religion. The Portuguese had every hope that the Benin Empire would offer a fertile ground for the planting of Christianity. The Benin monarch, under Oba Esigie, requested King Manuel II of Portugal to send them Roman Catholic Missionaries. The Portuguese missionaries built churches in Benin and started the process of evangelization. Historians recorded that the Portuguese initial attempt to evangelize the people of Benin recorded little success although some converts amongst members of the Benin royal family were made. For instance, Esigie's son and two of his nobles embraced Christianity and became baptized in 1815.

It could be stated here that European early attempts to Christianize the coastal states of Nigeria did not record much success. This was due to certain constraints that ranged from cultural barriers, linguistic problems and the rich cultural heritage of the coastal states, especially Benin, Itsekiri and Warri kingdoms.

- (d) **Social effects:** Early European contacts with coastal states helped European countries, like Portugal, to spread European civilization. The Portuguese taught the coastal states their language and equally encouraged coastal people to embrace Portuguese cultural values.

The participation of the coastal states in the Trans Atlantic Slave trade led to the introduction of new food crops from the West Indies such as cassava, potatoes and sugar cane.

14.3 The Arrival of Early European Christian Missionaries in the Coastal States of Nigeria and Challenges Met by Them

The first attempt to Christianize Nigerian coastal states was made by the Capuchin Catholics who visited the Benin Kingdom in the 15th century. The Portuguese Christian missionaries built churches and established schools all geared towards promoting and sustaining the business of evangelism. Portuguese missionaries also worked hard to Christianize the Benin monarchy as well as other coastal kings with the hope that these kings can probably assist the missionaries to spread Christianity to their subjects. Unfortunately, the early missionaries recorded little success because early converts to Christianity reverted to the African traditional religion while a good percentage of Christian converts practiced religions syncretism whereby the combined Christian religion tenets and paganism.

Historians have outlined several reasons why the early Portuguese missionaries failed to plant Christianity in Benin and other coastal states. These reasons are listed below:

- (i) The Benin monarchy was firmly rooted in the traditional African religion of the Edo people such that no Oba could embrace the Christian creed without undermining (weakening) his Obaship position.
- (ii) Benin culture was too ancient and too fully-developed to collapse on first encounter with Christianity.
- (iii) Benin was an inland kingdom rather than a coastal community and as such the missionaries were unable to carry out evangelizing activities in many communities.
- (iv) The tropical nature of the Benin climate drastically decimated (reduced) the population of the European missionaries who suffered many tropical diseases like malaria and yellow fever.
- (v) There was language problems because the missionaries did not learn Edo language which was the only vehicle for communication while the interpreters employed could not translate the Portuguese language fluently.

Summary

- The Portuguese explorers, who visited Benin between 1472 to 1515 Ruy De Sequeira and Joa Afonso Aveiro, had two main objectives namely to establish economic contacts with monarchies in the coastal states and to Christianize the Niger Deltas.
- Early contact between Europeans and coastal people led to the establishment of trading stations in places like Warri, Gwatto, Bonny, Elem Kalabari and Nembe where goods like gun, gun powder, cloth, glass wares, slaves, ivory, pepper and palm oil were exchanged between the European traders and coastal middlemen traders.
- The middlemen position enjoyed by the coastal people during the nefarious Trans Atlantic slave trade gave rise to prosperous cities such as old Calabar, Bony and Brass.
- European efforts to bring Christianity to coastal states in the Niger Delta did not achieve its dividends due to the rich cultural values of Benin Kingdom and other coastal states.

- Language problems, the strong attachment of Benin monarchy to African traditional religion, tropical nature of many coastal states and the endemic malaria epidemic reduced the tempo of European Christian evangelical activities in the coastland regions of Nigeria in the 15th century.

Revision Questions

Objectives

1. The first known area where the Europeans made their contact in coastal Nigeria was _____.
A. Lagos-Calabar
B. Itshekiri kingdom
C. Benin Kingdom
D. the old Oyo empire
2. The first Portuguese explorer who visited Benin in 1472 is _____.
A. Joa Afonso D'Aveiro
B. Thomas Whynham
C. Ruy de Sequeiera
D. Mungo Park
3. Benin kingdom supplied Portuguese traders with the following commodities except _____.
A. guns
B. ivory
C. pepper
D. slaves
4. European traders supplied the following commodities to coastal peoples except _____.
A. guns
B. copper bracelets
C. clothes
D. ivory
5. European contact with the coastal states drew them into a pattern of trade called _____.
A. long distance trade
B. Trans Saharan trade
C. internal trade

D. Trans Atlantic trade

6. _____ was a famous Benin king who used Portuguese guns to defeat Idah in 1515.
- A. Oba Olua
 - B. Oba Esigie
 - C. Oba Ozolua
 - D. Oba Evian
7. Early European Christian missionaries failed to spread Christianity in the coastal state of Benin due to the following reasons except _____.
- A. language barriers and problems of interpreters
 - B. inland nature of the Benin kingdom
 - C. racial hatred by Benin rulers against Portuguese evangelizers
 - D. Benin monarchy's strong attachment to African traditional religion.
8. The following European countries established trading posts in coastal states of Nigeria except _____.
- A. Dutch
 - B. French
 - C. Britain
 - D. Italy
9. The following coastal states in the Niger became very prosperous due to their participation in the Trans Atlantic slave trade except _____.
- A. Old Calabar
 - B. Brass
 - C. Andoni
 - D. Bonny
10. The first European country to explore the coastland areas of Nigeria is ____.
- A. Britain
 - B. France
 - C. Portugal
 - D. Spain

Essay Questions

1. Describe the nature of early European contact with the coastal states in Nigeria in the 15th century.
2. Discuss four effects of European contact with Nigerian coastal states in the 15th century.
3. Why did early European missionary efforts to spread Christianity to coastal states of Nigeria failed?
4. Is it correct to assert that the early European explorers and traders should be held responsible for the colonial conquests of the Nigerian nation in the nineteenth and 20th centuries?
5. How correct is it to say that the trading relationship between the coastal states of Nigeria and their European trading partners is unequal and exploitative?