



Brief Summary of “Possessed: A History of the Crown Colony of Lagos-1861-1906”

This book was written by Mr. Olasupo Shasore, Senior Advocate of Nigeria, former Attorney-General & Commissioner for Justice, Lagos State (2007-2011). The book was published in 2014 and later reprinted in 2018 with a slight change in the subtitle as well as a significant enlargement of the introductory parts. The 1st edition focused more on the law and Justice of forced possession whilst this focuses on the broader implications.

Possessed is primarily about the events leading to the “possession” of Lagos on 6th August, 1861 and the bombardment or conquest of Lagos by the British forces on Christmas Eve in 1851. Many Lagosians and Europeans died over the period of five days that it took to subdue the then Kingdom of Lagos. The book exposed the false narrative that the bombardment and later possession was carried out to enforce abolition of slave trade and deposing a usurper king when official British government records shows that it was carried out to take possession of a prized trade port and town. The author evinced this with reference to the minute records of Lord Palmerston, then Prime Minister and former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, where he said:

“The extension of our trade on the west coast of Africa generally and upon the Niger in particular is an object which ought to be actively and perseveringly pursued but it cannot be accomplished without physical effort for the protection of that trade. It may be in one sense that trade ought not to be enforced by cannon balls but on the other hand trade cannot flourish without security and that security may often be unattainable without the exhibition of physical force.”

it would ultimately lead to a forced amalgamation of Lagos Colony, firstly to a Niger coast (Southern) protectorate and then with the Northern protectorate in 1914. Along the way the story of brave individual and collective struggle against imperial control reveals heroism, courage and defiance of the Lagosians in order to resist and survive the domination. In my opinion, the most important parts of the book are the introduction (pages 1-12), chapter 1-sins of our fathers (pages 21-26) and chapter 4-The Bombardment of Lagos, 1851 (89-147).

Introduction-The ‘Mother’ (1-12)

The author explained how Lagos is the mother town of the modern day Nigeria. He also narrated the history and origin of the initial inhabitants and the name ‘Lagos’ as well as the other names the City might have been known as in the past (See pages 4-7). The town was cosmopolitan with 30,000 population speaking several languages Oyo(Yoruba), Egun,

Portuguese and English with about 1,500 emigrants from Sierra Leone, Brazil and Cuba. They also include about 25 English, German, French, Italian and Portuguese inhabitants. The timeline for beginning of slave trade in Lagos was also traced to 1690. It also narrated the historical rebellious nature of Lagos inhabitants as found in official colonial papers

Chapter 1-Sins of our Fathers (Pages 21-26)

This chapter summarized the evils of slave trade in an apologetic manner and also a commendable short summary of the Berlin Scramble that divided Africa amongst the world powers.

Chapter 4-The Bombardment of Lagos, 1851(89-147)

This chapter described the Kingdom of Lagos as a thriving trading town, the atlantic slave trade, the battle for the throne of Lagos between Kosoko & Akitoye(described as civil war),the attack and bombardment of Lagos and the real motive.

Interesting Quotes

“Provocative as the title of this book may appear, I found I could not get away from it the moment the word suggested itself to me. First, I realised that the central objective of British policy on the West Coast of Africa in the mid 1800s was directed at its handling of its settlements. Then I recalled the approval delicately given by Lord John Russell at London to the Consul Foote of Lagos on the 22nd June 1861:

“In a former despatch, I informed you that the question as to whether the Island of Lagos should be taken possession of as a British Dependency was still under consideration of Her Majesty’s Government and I have now to inform you that this question has been decided in the affirmative”.

Today, it should seem incongruous to design policy to ‘possess’ by ownership a nation, but people and the land-but imperial era governments in the nineteenth century did just that, to their own economic benefit.” (Preface)

In sum, and in my opinion, the issue that instigated the possession of Lagos is still relevant today: “control over the trading revenue of Lagos”. Almost a trillion naira is generated as VAT from Lagos by the Federal Government and same is distributed across the Country against the global norm and our constitution: consumption taxes is for states. Also, this history has led to “Gedegbe Le’Eko” push back that led to Lagos remaining separate from the Western Region at Independence.

Thank you.

‘Wale Irokosu

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