

Colonial-Imposed Slavery and African Abolitionism: The Early Twentieth- Century Lagos Elites' Campaign Against the Native House Rule Ordinance

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the efforts of early-twentieth-century abolitionists in Lagos, Nigeria who campaigned against the Native House Rule Ordinance/Proclamation, a colonial law perceived as perpetuating indigenous slavery in the Niger Delta region. The study enriches the corpus of African abolitionist literature by revealing how a network of Lagos elites employed a strategic top-down approach to advocate for the law's repeal, which they believed sustained a form of slavery instituted by British colonialism. The research utilizes an extensive range of primary sources, including local Nigerian newspaper publications, correspondence, petitions, and archival documents from both Nigerian and British repositories. The paper contextualizes the Native House Rule system, explores the Lagos campaigners' strategies and arguments against the ordinance, and discusses the law's amendment and eventual repeal. Through detailed case studies and the examination of African-led initiatives, the study acknowledges the previously understated contributions of African activists, thereby rectifying a significant oversight in historical literature. This paper underscores the importance of recognizing indigenous agency in historical narratives, particularly in the context of abolition and resistance to colonial policies.

KEYWORDS

Slavery; abolition; Nigeria; Native House Rule Ordinance; South-eastern Nigeria

Introduction

Research on the abolition of indigenous slavery in 19th and early twentieth century Africa has undergone a transformation. It has shifted from focusing solely on the anti-slavery legislation of colonial powers and missionary efforts to also including investigations into local African abolitionism.¹ The growing body of literature on African abolitionism has concentrated on three distinct categories. The first encompasses Africans influenced by religion,

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predominantly missionaries, some of whom defied the gradualism advocated by their mission and espoused radical criticism of domestic slavery.² An illustrative example is David Asante, a Basel missionary in the Gold Coast, who engaged in abolitionist activities in Kyebi beginning in 1875. His radical anti-slavery stance provoked the colonial government which subsequently advised his relocation.³ The second strand of literature focuses on movements led by individuals of slave descent who spearheaded anti-slavery initiatives. A notable example occurred in the Igbo region of present-day Nigeria where the advent of wage labour led to the mobilization of slaves, locally known as 'ohu,' to demand freedom.⁴ The third category involves educated Africans, many of whom were solitary voices. Their arguments against slavery were published in books, like those by Africanus Horton, or articulated in early African newspapers that were African in ownership and focus such as those by James Hutton Brew.⁵ A particularly interesting finding emerging from research on educated African abolitionists is that some directed their anti-slavery arguments specifically against the colonial state, or more precisely, the colonial administration which educated Africans blamed for either permitting slavery to persist or for failing to enforce the law against slavery effectively.⁶ This criticism is understandable, particularly in British colonies in West Africa, where colonial administrators were concerned that emancipation might alienate the local chiefs essential for indirect rule.

Because the colonial state was perceived as complicit by educated Africans, some African abolitionists partnered with sympathetic European organizations to protest the colonial state's tacit support of domestic slavery. Consequently, some African-led anti-slavery campaigns have been overlooked or misattributed with credit given instead to the European collaborators. A notable instance is that of Francis P. Fearon in the late nineteenth century Gold Coast. Fearon was integral to a network of African activists who engaged the Aborigines Protection Society to challenge slavery practices in the Gold Coast. He directly held the colonial governor accountable for the continuance of slavery and penned numerous letters to the Aborigines Protection Society in London, urging them to bring the matter before Parliament and the Colonial Office.⁷ As the Aborigines Protection Society advanced Fearon's cause, leveraging his correspondence for publications in the British press and for dialogues with the Colonial Office, the campaign increasingly became associated with the Society, overshadowing Fearon's pivotal involvement.⁸ Only in recent times have historians recognized Francis P. Fearon's crucial role as the primary campaigner in the Aborigines Protection Society's anti-slavery efforts in the Gold Coast from 1890 to 1894.⁹

This article will contribute to the expanding corpus of literature by examining a cohort of abolitionists in early twentieth century Lagos, who campaigned against a colonial law known as the Native House Rule Ordinance. This law was construed as supporting indigenous slavery. While existing literature often

highlights individual educated African abolitionists, this study will augment that narrative by revealing how a network of Lagos elites employed a top-down strategy to advocate for the repeal of the Native House Rule Ordinance which the Lagos elites believed sustained slavery in the Niger Delta region. The ordinance emerged from British efforts to preserve the indigenous House system—or House rule—in the Niger Delta. Nonetheless, African abolitionists contended that the ordinance engendered a novel form of slavery, distinct from that which existed under House rule or native law, and thus was a construct of British colonialism. However, while recognizing the law as perpetuating slavery, scholars like Philip Igbafe, Adiele Afigbo, and Ugo Nwokeji do not unanimously agree that it represented a form of slavery solely invented by the British.¹⁰

The campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance can be examined from the separate or combined perspectives of the Church Mission Society missionaries (CMS), educated Lagosians (the primary focus of this article), and their role as an auxiliary to the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society. While several researchers have studied the campaign, in varying degrees of depth, it has not been thoroughly analyzed as an African-led campaign.¹¹ Kingsley Kenneth Dike Nworah was the first to conduct an extensive study of the campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance during his doctoral research. Nworah's work focused primarily on the British humanitarian campaigns and attitudes in West Africa, and within this framework, he discussed the campaign against the House Rule Ordinance from the perspective of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society.¹² In her examination of the Lagos Auxiliary, Rina Okonkwo briefly mentioned the campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance before shifting her focus to other initiatives by the same group.¹³ This study is the first to centralize the campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance, perceived as a law endorsing slavery, on the Lagos elites who opposed it. It delves into the arguments, strategies, and successes of the Lagos elites, and their success in overturning the law. Thus, the paper uncovers some lesser-known African abolitionists within the Lagos network and highlights African agency, challenging the narrative that principally recognizes European efforts in abolitionist movements. In this manner, it contributes to existing research by rectifying the oversight in historical literature that has largely overlooked the vital role of Africans.

This study is underpinned by materials sourced from various archives. Notably, this article drew from local Nigerian newspaper publications that served as platforms for the campaign. The British Library and Readex provided access to early African newspapers such as *The Nigerian Times* and *the Nigerian Chronicle*. Additionally, the archives of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society at Oxford were consulted, where reports, correspondence from the Lagos Auxiliary, newspaper clippings from Nigerian publications, petitions from individuals affected by the ordinance, and communications

between the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society and the Colonial Office as well as the Governor of Southern Nigeria, among others, were obtained. The National Archives of Nigeria, located in Ibadan and Enugu, were also utilized, providing correspondence between local Africans and the colonial authorities regarding the campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance. The United Kingdom National Archives at Kew were instrumental in accessing the Colonial Office's response to the campaign, including materials and reactions from the Secretary of State for the Colonies and other colonial personnel.

Context of the Native House Rule Ordinance/Proclamation

Southern Nigeria was a protectorate in the coastal areas of what is now modern-day Nigeria established in 1900 from the amalgamation of the Niger Coast Protectorate (originally established as the Oil Rivers Protectorate and renamed in 1893) with territories previously administered by the Royal Niger Company. The Lagos Colony was incorporated into the Southern Nigeria Protectorate in 1906, and the territory was officially renamed the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria governed by a single colonial administrator. In 1914, Southern Nigeria united with the Northern Nigeria Protectorate to form the single entity of Nigeria. In 1900, geographically, the region that was formerly the Niger Coast Protectorate included the coastal city-states of the Bight of Biafra (Niger Delta) and the hinterland which were then under the influence of the Aro traders. For more than a decade after the establishment of the Oil Rivers Protectorate, the British exhibited minimal interest in expanding their influence into the interior. It wasn't until 1900 that the British initiated deeper administrative control which until then had been confined to the city-states of the Niger Delta.¹⁴ The domestic slavery practices within the city-states was notably transformed after the early abolition of the slave trade leading to the Oil Rivers Protectorate's formation. Kenneth Dike's studies show how revolts in places like Old Calabar and Bonny resulted in the emancipation of many slaves and significant social and economic progress.¹⁵ Legitimate trade, shifts in slave supply, and missionary work drove these changes. By 1885, according to Afigbo, the Niger Delta's city-states, including Brass, New Calabar, Bonny, and Opobo, saw critical shifts in domestic slavery practices.¹⁶

Some of the coastal communities practiced the House rule/system, which is a unit of social organization.¹⁷ A House is a trading association of freemen and slaves under a leader and chief with each city-state in the delta region comprising several Houses.¹⁸ The House system extends beyond a single physical compound but is not extensive enough to constitute a village. As trade with Europeans and the hinterland expanded, with Niger Delta communities acting as intermediaries, the House evolved into a lineage system, a cooperative trading unit, and a local government institution. Typically, every trader of

significance owned numerous slaves within a House. These individuals, along with the trader's immediate and extended family, formed the core of a House.¹⁹ Niger Delta historian Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa posited that the Houses of the city-states in the nineteenth century developed from the ancient lineage institutions of the coastal fishing villages but were transformed by the significantly increased recruitment of new members during the slave trade.²⁰ However, by the late nineteenth century, the slave hierarchy in these areas had become flexible enough that successful slaves could ascend to become heads of a House.²¹ For instance, King Jaja of Opobo, originally a slave from the hinterland, worked his way up to become the head of a House and later a traditional ruler in the Niger Delta.²² In contrast, the hinterland was still largely under the control of the Aro traders and their slave trading network before 1900 and where British influence had not yet reached. The Aros continued to conduct slave raids, utilizing their juju as a pretext for acquiring slaves, and waged wars, selling the captives within the region and to city-states where the burgeoning legitimate trade still required slave labour.

Therefore, when the British administration under the leadership of Ralph Moor decided to address domestic slavery in 1900 and extend its control into the hinterland region, it initiated a military expedition into the area. The Aro Expedition (1901-1902) was the largest military operation in the region at the time.²³ The Aro had a well-established system for acquiring and selling slaves in the hinterland, which included the Ibini Ukpabi oracle, which served as a judicial authority in local dispute resolutions. However, at times, the oracle's judgments resulted in individuals being wrongfully declared guilty of crimes or witchcraft, and those falsely accused were subsequently enslaved.²⁴ Sir Ralph Moor determined that any efforts to eradicate slave dealing in the hinterland would be futile unless the Aro were decisively defeated, and the juju dismantled. In line with this conviction and as a precursor to the expedition, the government drafted the Slave Dealing Proclamation No. 5 of 1901 which criminalized slave dealing with a penalty of seven years' imprisonment for offenders.²⁵ After enacting this legislation, Sir Ralph Moor articulated the objectives of the hinterland expedition: to eliminate slave dealing and the slave trade in order to enforce the slave dealing ordinance; to dismantle the Ibini Ukpabi; to usher in civilization by promoting legitimate trade; to introduce a new currency and eradicate the use of slaves as currency; and to establish a labour market as an alternative to the system of slavery.²⁶

However, the Slave Dealing Proclamation No. 5 of 1901 would have impacted the Niger Delta coastal region which had already undergone significant changes in its practice of domestic slavery. Prior to passing the Slave Dealing Proclamation and initiating the expedition, Sir Ralph Moor had consulted with the chiefs of the coastal states of Old Calabar, Opobo, Brass, Degema, Warri, and Sapele. He sought to reassure these chiefs who were concerned that the new anti-slavery law would disrupt their House system by

potentially freeing many of their enslaved workers.²⁷ Not only did all the chiefs and House heads oppose the Slave Dealing Proclamation, but Sir Ralph Moor also faced the reality that the law could paralyze trade which was predominantly conducted by the Houses. The Houses functioned as effective local governance institutions, and some House heads were potentates who had signed celebrated treaties of protection with the British.²⁸ Furthermore, members of the Native Councils, established by the British as a form of local government, were heads of Houses. Freeing their slaves—as implied by the Slave Dealing Proclamation—could jeopardize trade and undermine the influence of the Native Council members.²⁹ In this context, Ralph Moor introduced the Native House Rule Proclamation/Ordinance in 1901, ostensibly to preserve the House system by preventing slaves in the Houses from leaving.³⁰ However, Lagos elites and colonial officials would later debate whether the Native House Rule law merely preserved the state of the House system or created a new form of slavery.

The ordinance defined *House* as a group of individuals subject to the control, authority, and rule of a chief, known as the Head of a House, in accordance with native law and custom. It further described a *Member of a House* as any person who, by birth or other means (effectively including slaves), becomes subject to the control, authority, and rule of a Head of a House. The law stipulated that everyone must be a member of a House, with members required to submit to the total control of the *Head of the House*. Those who

refuse or neglect to submit themselves to the control, authority, and rule of the Head of their House in accordance with native law and custom shall be liable upon conviction to a fine not exceeding £50, or imprisonment with or without hard labor for any term not exceeding one year, or both.³¹

The law conferred upon the head of a House the right to issue arrest warrants for insubordination or for those attempting to flee the house. British District Commissioners were tasked with enforcing the Native House Rule Ordinance in their respective districts.³² Before this law, slavery was relatively mild, and there was a clear path to manumission. However, the ordinance made manumission almost impossible unless at the discretion of the head of House. The ordinance targeted European groups, especially missionaries known for encouraging slaves to join the church or educational institutions. The law stated that any European native who knowingly or unknowingly employed a native belonging to a House without the express or implied consent of the Head of the House would be liable to a fine or to imprisonment.³³ This deliberate targeting of Europeans occurred because, as J. C. Anene argued, missionaries had been undermining the House system in the coastal region by encouraging slaves to demand more rights.³⁴

One significant aspect of the Native House Rule Ordinance was its expansion beyond the original areas where the House system was practiced. As J. C. Anene

pointed out, 'the absurd aspect of the legislation was its extension to the whole protectorate, as if the Ibos, Ibibios, and Edo had houses.'³⁵ Essentially, Ralph Moor broadened the law's scope to include the territories of the Aro people which were brought under control during the Aro Expedition.³⁶ Later investigations conducted in 1911 by the Colonial Office, in response to the campaign discussed below, revealed that the colonial administration extended the law partly due to its utility in securing labour for public projects.³⁷ In regions where the House system was not originally practiced, the law became a means for enslavers to legally retain their slaves, issue arrest warrants for runaways, and generally tighten their control. Due to the extent and nature of the changes brought about by the ordinance, many slaves fled beyond its jurisdiction into Western and Northern Nigeria where they found relative freedom.³⁸

Campaigners Gathered in Lagos, The Lagos Auxiliary

Some of the slaves who escaped to the Northern Protectorate and Western region were relentlessly pursued by the heads of Houses utilizing the machinery of the colonial state. Some were extradited and eventually returned to their Houses.³⁹ However, it was through such acts of resistance, namely running away, that an abolition movement began in Lagos. Educated Africans in Lagos became aware of the House Rule Ordinance through the stories of some of its victims and sometimes by assisting them. For instance, Sapara Williams, a local lawyer in Lagos and a member of the elite, was involved in several such cases. One notable case was that of Jimmy Eyitoyoh (Johnson) which gained prominence during the campaign.⁴⁰ Jimmy originated from a village in southeastern Nigeria, and his father was a slave making Jimmy enslaved from birth. After their enslaver's death, a new enslaver inherited all the slaves and distributed them among relatives and children. Jimmy was assigned to a female individual named Orodi. Around this time, the Native House Ordinance began to take effect in the region, worsening the conditions for slaves. With no avenue for manumission, Jimmy fled to southwestern Nigeria, eventually reaching Lagos in search of freedom and employment. In Lagos, he found a job on a steam dredger. However, the dredger departed Lagos for the Forcados River in the region where his former enslaver resided. There, Jimmy was recognized by Magbeni, Orodi's husband. The chief, accompanied by a police officer, boarded the dredger to arrest and flog Jimmy for escaping and attempted to reclaim him under the native House Rule Ordinance. Magbeni agreed to let Jimmy continue his employment only if he consented to pay fifteen shillings per month through the district officer, and they drafted an agreement to this effect. It was Stuart D. Campbell, a European worker on the dredger who witnessed Jimmy's flogging and the agreement to pay fifteen shillings a month to Magbeni, who brought the case to Sapara Williams's attention in early 1910.⁴¹

As early as 1908, Sapara Williams was assisting Henry Peter Plange and his wife, Adelina Warri, in their fight against the enforcement of the ordinance against them.⁴² Sapara Williams, a friend of James Bright Davies, another prominent member of the Lagos elite, co-founded *The Nigerian Times* with Davies in 1910.⁴³ Williams also maintained a close friendship with Herbert Macaulay who, like Williams, supported victims of the ordinance as early as 1908.⁴⁴ Both Sapara Williams and James Bright Davies were friends with Chris Johnson, the editor of *the Nigeria Chronicle*. In August 1910, the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, formed in 1909 through the merger of The Aborigines' Protection Society and the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, sent a letter to the editors of various prominent Nigerian newspapers. This letter urged the local population to form an Auxiliary.⁴⁵ By 1910, the the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society aimed to establish auxiliaries in British West African colonies to campaign for local people's rights. Consequently, the president of the London-based society sent a circular letter to notable Africans and newspaper editors in Lagos, Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, and Gambia.⁴⁶ Since the 1880s, when it was known as the Aborigines' Protection Society, this organization had supported campaigners against British policies in West Africa.⁴⁷ The circular announced that Rev. John Harris, the new organizing secretary of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, planned to visit West Africa in early 1911 to formally establish the new auxiliaries.

In an August 1910 editorial, Davies highlighted the call from the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society to all West Africans as articulated by its president, Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton. Davies wrote: 'The appeal ... has brought to our recollection that there is in full force and operation an ordinance which legalises and perpetuates slavery.'⁴⁸ On the publication of the circular letter in *The Nigerian Times*, Davies allocated a significant portion of an entire issue to the topic. He published the ordinance, a detailed petition from a victim dating back to 1908, and a comprehensive commentary titled 'Southern Nigeria Slavery Ordinance.'⁴⁹ In his commentary, Davies argued that the ordinance not only sanctioned but also entrenched a novel form of slavery previously unseen locally. He scrutinized the ordinance's language and presented various practical cases to demonstrate its support for slavery, stating, we are open to correction

if anyone would be candid enough, after a careful perusal of the ordinance, to come forward and point out to us that we are wrong in entertaining the opinion that this is a law which deliberately encourages, sanctions, and upholds slavery.⁵⁰

Furthermore, he expressed frustration over previous failed attempts to draw British public attention to the issue, noting: 'All our efforts so far to highlight our plight to the British public have invariably ended in failure.'⁵¹ This persistent lack of success laid the groundwork for his advocacy for the establishment of a Lagos Auxiliary.

As observed by Kingsley Nworah Dike, the response in Lagos to the call for an auxiliary was so enthusiastic that it was fully organized within the same month the appeal was published, even before the arrival of the society's representative in 1911 to formally establish the West African auxiliary.⁵² The initial meeting to arrange the formation of the Lagos auxiliary was convened on August 30, 1910, by Sapara Williams and Herbert Macaulay, grandson of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who acted as its secretary.⁵³ At this meeting, Bishop James Johnson was appointed president and chairman of the Lagos Auxiliary with Sapara Williams serving as vice-president and vice-chairman. S. Herbert Pearse, a prominent merchant, was chosen as secretary while James Bright Davies, editor of *the Nigerian Times*, took on the role of Secretary for Foreign Correspondence responsible for liaising with the parent organization in London. Other notable members included Chris Johnson, editor of *the Nigerian Chronicle*, Reverend Mojola Agbebi, Reverend S. A. Coker, and J. Osho Davies.⁵⁴ Mojola Agbebi suggested that the Auxiliary expand its membership to include various African communities encompassing the traditional elite, Muslims, and traditional religious followers.⁵⁵ In his inaugural address, Bishop James Johnson outlined the purpose of the Lagos auxiliary, drawing attention to various issues including the Native House Rule Ordinance.⁵⁶

Immediately following the inaugural meeting of the Lagos auxiliary, the campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance gained momentum.⁵⁷ The *Nigerian Times* and *the Nigerian Chronicle* published campaign materials featuring extensive discussions on the editorial pages. The campaign's structure involved several steps. First, the Lagos Auxiliary collected materials, compiled letters, petitions, and commentaries. Then, they forwarded these to the committee of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society in London. According to its constitution, the primary objective of the Lagos Auxiliary was 'to supply the Home Committee of the parent society with carefully considered information, enabling it to take action with the Home Government.'⁵⁸ The Home Committee communicated directly with the Colonial Office in London, sending letters to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, members of the British Parliament, and occasionally to the Colonial Governor in Nigeria. The Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society also leveraged the British press and published articles about their campaigns in their widely read journal. Additionally, the organization sometimes issued pamphlets about campaign issues. All these media were utilized in the campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance.

The influence of the church was evident from the large number of clergymen who joined the organization. However, some members of the Lagos Auxiliary were already engaged in social campaigns on issues such as the colonial exploitation of the Congo Free State (internationally led by E. D. Morel) and slavery in cocoa farms in São Tomé and Príncipe.⁵⁹ Prior to forming the Lagos

Auxiliary, some of these individuals, led by Sapara Williams, Herbert Macaulay, James Bright Davies and Chris Johnson, had gathered to raise funds for E. D. Morel's campaigns in the Congo.⁶⁰ This effort overlapped with the activities of the Lagos Auxiliary. For instance, at the third Auxiliary meeting on September 23, 1910, Herbert Macaulay mentioned the possible visit of Rev. John Harris and his wife to Lagos in 1911 as representatives of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society. He proposed forming a committee for their arrival. He also mentioned an upcoming visit by E. D. Morel and suggested organizing a welcoming committee for him. However, since Morel was not affiliated with the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, Macaulay pointed this out and requested the formation of a separate committee for Morel's visit. Sapara Williams then suggested that 'the reception committee should be distinct and separate from the Auxiliary,' nominating Chris Johnson who had been active in raising funds to organize a reception meeting for E.D. Morel. Accepting this task, Chris Johnson noted that E.D. Morel knew 'nothing of the local movement on his behalf'.⁶¹ From the outset of the campaign against the House rule ordinance, there was a concerted effort by some members of the Lagos Auxiliary to draw parallels between the House rule ordinance and other ongoing international campaigns against slavery in Africa. For example, Chris Johnson wrote:

what horrors have not been perpetuated in the name of civilisation? Under the guise of philanthropy, the Congo misrule which now happily is doomed had reared its head; in the name of 'the contract labour' slavery is still maintained in the cocoa territories; and in the Native House Rule proclamation of Southern Nigeria slavery in an insidious form is resuscitated and protected by law.⁶²

On its formation, the Lagos Auxiliary prioritized the repeal of the Native House Rule Ordinance of 1901. The Auxiliary's strategy focused on highlighting individual cases of slavery and resistance that had been occurring prior to its establishment. These cases were then used to discuss the broader implications of the Native House Rule Ordinance. The case of Jimmy Eyitoyoh was particularly pivotal in this campaign. Davies published in *The Nigerian Times* the monthly receipts for the fifteen shillings Jimmy paid to his enslaver and forwarded a copy of the agreement to the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society in London. However, using this case in the campaign had severe repercussions for Jimmy. James Bright Davies reported to London that Jimmy had been severely reprimanded by the colonial administration for sharing his story with the Lagos campaigners and was subsequently dismissed from his job on the dredger.⁶³ This incident prompted the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society to contact the Colonial Office about the backlash against Jimmy Eyitoyoh.⁶⁴ In May 1911, Reverend John H. Harris, the organizing secretary of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society in London, and his wife visited Lagos on a fact-finding mission. The Lagos Auxiliary arranged for

them to meet with Jimmy.⁶⁵ Reverend Harris took Jimmy's story and photographs back to England where he wrote a pamphlet that highlighted Jimmy's case to critique the ordinance. This case was subsequently debated and discussed several times in the British Parliament.

Another noteworthy case presented by the Lagos Auxiliary was that of Oye, a petty trader from Ijesha in Ekiti, who was enslaved in Benin following an inter-tribal war. Through a series of ownership changes, Oye eventually landed with Igba in Orugbo, bearing a son, Alaba. Later in Asaba, she remarried, had two more children, and thrived as a trader. The implementation of the Native House Rule Ordinance sparked rumours that slaves were bound to their masters indefinitely. Alarmed, Oye implored Igba for her freedom after a quarter-century of servitude. Igba responded with fury, confiscating Oye's property, confining her, and issuing threats to her life, then sold Oye's younger children to Chiefs Dore and Dudu. The same ordinance hindered Oye's efforts to regain her children, effectively making them Member of Houses. In her petitions, she contended against this law:

your memorialist's two children are at the moment being held in slavery and treated as slaves; that they are not free to go wherever they choose, being deprived of their liberty under the Native House Rule Ordinance.⁶⁶

The sale of her children to two different Houses was emphasized by James Bright Davies as evidence of slave dealing. Oye's case eventually reached the British Parliament in 1911, prompting inquiries to the Secretary of State for the Colonies about her situation and whether her children were still being held as slaves. The Secretary of State for the Colonies responded, stating that it was government policy to respect native customs and that the children were treated well in their new Houses. He mentioned that 'This case was dealt with by a properly constituted native court under the supervision of a British officer, and it was established that neither of the persons names could be properly described as slaves. ... Both were quite happy and contented.'⁶⁷ Many Lagos campaigners were surprised to read the Secretary of State for the Colonies' statement about their contentment (this parliamentary discussion was published by Davies).⁶⁸ James Bright Davies stated in an editorial sent to the London committee that the Secretary of State for Colonies had been misled by the representations of the colonial government in Nigeria into believing that the children were happy. He wrote:

We are in a position to state that from the day that Aloba [one of the children] learnt of the adverse decision of the Secretary of State with respect to himself and his sister, he made good his escape and have been living ever since as a free man enjoying his liberty and freedom within the confines of the Lagos colony and protectorate in peace and comfort.⁶⁹

Another case that emerged during the height of the campaign involved Chief Ogbe from the Delta region who came to Lagos for an agricultural show in

December 1910. During his visit, Chief Ogbe was on the lookout for an enslaved boy who had escaped and sought refuge in Lagos. After the show, the police received a warrant to arrest a boy named Joe who had fled from Chief Ogbe's house. The warrant accused Joe of running away and stealing clothes and a canoe. The police subsequently arrested Joe and brought him before a magistrate in Lagos with a request for him to be taken to Warri, Chief Ogbe's region, for trial. However, after petitions from the Lagos Auxiliary, the Magistrate offered to try the case himself, leading Chief Ogbe to quietly return to Warri. James Bright Davies commented on this incident, stating that

we have in this case a typical example of the general character of the charge which the slave holder in the Warri district habitually advance against their fugitive slaves in order to assure their return to bondage ... they evidently feel that the support of the Ordinance is a very questionable one, and that therefore the offence of Running away from the Head of the House must be bolstered up with a criminal charge in which, strange to say, the theft of a canoe invariably figures as one of the counts of indictments.⁷⁰

This incident mirrors the case of Thomas Sobotie, an escaped slave from the Niger Delta region who fled to Akotogbo in the Ondo district (Southwest Nigeria) where he converted to Christianity under the United Native African Church. When his former enslaver learned he was in the Ondo area, he issued a warrant for Sobotie's arrest through the District Officer, claiming Sobotie had stolen his goods. This resulted in Sobotie's arrest in Ondo, his return to his enslaver, and his re-enslavement.⁷¹ These and many other cases and petitions, published in local newspapers, formed the basis of the campaign material.⁷²

The Debate on Native Law and Natural Justice

At the core of the Lagos Auxiliary's campaign were a set of ideas and arguments concerning the motive behind the Native House Rule Ordinance, its alignment with native customs, and natural justice. James Bright Davies initiated this argument in his disquisition, suggesting that the ordinance stemmed from the colonial administration's intent to obtain labour and carriers without cost for government work and was unrelated to native law.⁷³ Davies contended that the emphasis on native law and custom was merely a façade, a 'salve for British consciences' as the law had no real connection to customary practices. In one of his essays, he stated:

We are ardent advocates of policy of governing the native communities through the medium of their ancient natural rulers through their Customary Laws and Native institutions; but we do not hesitate to say that domestic slavery as Native institutions is a much more humane system than that which now obtains under the system which has been set up in its place under the provisions of this (Native House Rule) ordinance.⁷⁴

In this essay and another written two months later, Davies outlined the differences between slavery under native custom in the Niger Delta region and the form of slavery instituted by the ordinance. He noted that under the pre-ordinance system, there was a clear path to manumission, whereas the ordinance doomed slaves and their descendants to perpetual bondage. He highlighted that the ordinance amounted to a prohibition of inter-marriage among different Houses to preserve the stock of Houses. Davies also pointed out that in the native system, slaves could rise to become heads of Houses, a possibility negated by the ordinance.⁷⁵

Davies further contended: 'If the provisions of the Native House Rule Ordinance had borne the remotest resemblance to any harmless tribal custom of the country, we would have been the last person to point a finger at it. We give place to no one as staunch advocates for the maintenance of our native law and custom and native institutions in our social and domestic relations. But as we find that this ordinance establishes slavery in its most insidious and barbarous form it is our duty to stand on the house-top and cry out for the British people to hear'.⁷⁶ These essays were integral to the campaign materials sent to the committee in London, which in turn led to correspondence with the Secretary of State for the Colonies. A clear and practical reason for Davies' argument that the ordinance did not align with native custom was to counter the colonial government's claim that abolishing the law could lead to chaos. Davies consistently argued against this, stating:

we have been told that it would not be wise to disturb or interfere with the tribal custom of the country in such a manner as might lead to a disorganisation of the order and economic conditions as at present existing.. none of its [native House Rule Ordinance] provisions can be regarded as constituting a comparison with any known tribal custom of the natives.⁷⁷

The crux of the argument was that the British colonial administration had instituted a new form of slavery in Nigeria, a claim that prompted many defensive responses from the colonial authorities.⁷⁸ Chris Johnson of the Lagos Auxiliary also contributed to this debate with a nuanced argument, differing from that of James Bright Davies. For Johnson, the relevance of the ordinance in upholding or deviating from native law was secondary to its moral justification.⁷⁹ He argued that the colonial state should preserve only the beneficial aspects of native laws. The primary concern for Johnson was whether the ordinance aligned with natural justice.⁸⁰ Johnson argued that civilization should aim to eliminate any practice that offends natural justice, regardless of its origin in native customs and laws.⁸¹ He posited that, if the House rule system 'in its original form presents certain undesirable features, it is the duty of the government then to remove the objectionable [features] in a way as would tend to the happiness of the greater number'.⁸² For Johnson, the ordinance was fundamentally unjust: 'A law which denies a man the freedom of action and coerce[s] him to

the service of another under a penalty is unjust and unnatural'.⁸³ Like Davies, Johnson believed the Native House Rule Ordinance introduced a novel form of slavery previously unseen in Africa. However, even if the colonial administration argued that it reflected existing social organization, he maintained that this was not a valid reason to preserve it.⁸⁴

Several CMS missionaries stationed in the region actively opposed the Native House Rule Ordinance, although their efforts were largely unsuccessful before the intervention of the Lagos Auxiliary.⁸⁵ Notably, Bishop Herbert Tugwell and Rev. George Basden participated in this debate.⁸⁶ Utilizing their extensive experience from serving in different locales within the Niger Delta and the Igbo region, these missionaries contended that the House system was practiced by only a select few cultures in the Delta district. They argued that the 1901 ordinance was erroneously applied as if it were a universal custom across all the cultures in the area.⁸⁷ Bishop Tugwell maintained that the House system was a recent and unheard-of concept in some districts and suggested that the ordinance may have established a novel system, foreign to certain cultures, including places like Onitsha.⁸⁸ Rev. Basden asserted that 'it is quite true that for generations this House system has been the custom in possibly the greater part of the delta district, i.e. Bonny, Brass, but as far as I have been able to gather during 11 years experience the custom never existed beyond those limited Delta districts. But the government – by its ordinance of 1901 – has legalised as if the custom were universal. In other words they have made a distantly local custom apply to the whole country ... establishing and extending a pernicious system over a far wider area than was the case prior to the country being taken over as a British Protectorate'.⁸⁹ The CMS mission faced significant challenges due to the ordinance, as some of their students and local converts were members of Native Houses where the House head withdrew them from school. This issue led some missionaries to question the value of educating Africans in the region if their heads of House could subsequently assert ownership over them.⁹⁰

Amendment and Repeal of Native House Rule Ordinance

The campaign in Lagos received a significant boost when the organising secretary of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society in London, Rev. John Harris, and his wife visited Nigeria in 1911 to officially inaugurate the auxiliary and investigate the claims made by the Lagos campaigners. By the end of 1910, the denials from the Colonial Office had prompted the London committee to halt all communication with the Colonial Office concerning the Native House Rule Ordinance, awaiting confirmation from Rev. Harris who was scheduled to visit Nigeria in 1911.⁹¹ Rev. Harris's visit, though brief, significantly accelerated the campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance in several respects. His visit's importance was highlighted in his address to the people of Lagos when he stated that

in Southern Nigeria itself there are matters which cause the committee serious concern.. more especially the House Rule Ordinance which is in operation in the Eastern and Central Provinces. I would remind my assembled friends that the interest which has been aroused upon this particular subject is entirely due to the work of our local auxiliary.⁹²

The Lagos auxiliary organized meetings for Rev. Harris with some of the ordinance's victims. James Bright Davies chronicled part of Harris's visit, reporting: 'On Thursday afternoon (April 27), a special meeting composed of numbers selected at the previous day's meeting assembled at the Elephant House and discussed with Mr. Harris the provisions of the House Rule Ordinance and the reforms which might be introduced into it by way of amending it. Jimmy Johnson, the slave boy of Magbeni ... was brought before this meeting and questions were asked of him.'⁹³

After confirming the veracity of the information and meeting with some of the victims, the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society compiled their findings and penned a formal letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.⁹⁴ In this letter, they proposed six amendments to the law: limiting claims by heads of Houses to only their family members; ensuring freedom of contract for adults; prohibiting the separation of slave families; making provisions for slaves to gain their freedom; safeguarding the liberty to marry; and ensuring that official powers was not used to coerce individuals back under the control of their enslaver against their will.⁹⁵ The Colonial Office responded by stating that the colonial government was already in the process of investigating the law in reaction to the ongoing campaign and would consider reforms following their investigation.⁹⁶ However, at this juncture, the Lagos campaign prompted a counter-campaign in Nigeria. Some heads of Houses and chiefs from regions affected by the ordinance began writing letters and petitions to the colonial administration defending the law.⁹⁷ In one such petition, the Chiefs of Bonny, Opobo, Old and New Calabar, Brass, and Okrika criticized the campaigners, whom they labelled as 'Lagosians, and strangers who regard the disintegration of the House as a benefit,' alleging that these Lagosians were ignorant about the people they condemn.⁹⁸

The government investigation was completed by late 1911.⁹⁹ Correspondence gathered from various colonial officers, including district officers, provincial commissioners, provincial secretaries, assistant provincial commissioners and secretaries, police magistrates, and other police officials, proved some of the accusations made by the Lagos Auxiliary.¹⁰⁰ This led the Secretary of State for the Colonies to admit internally that the law was indeed supportive of slavery. In a letter to Egerton (the colonial governor), the Secretary observed:

I am amazed to find that we have a condition existing in Southern Nigeria so little removed from slavery not only under our flag but under the authority of our ordinance. It is quite clear that the House Rule Ordinance is valued and maintained by the Government officials there mainly as a tiny veiled system of forced labour

which enables them to obtain portage and canoe haulage for free of cost and probably other services besides. The native chiefs naturally support it for the considerable advantages which it gives to them.¹⁰¹

As a provisional measure pending either a repeal or comprehensive reform, the Secretary of State for the Colonies authorized an immediate amendment. This led to the first triumph of the campaign at the beginning of 1912.¹⁰² The stated purpose of the amendment was to allow members of Houses who wished to leave to do so in exchange for an amount set by the district commissioner between £15 and £50.¹⁰³ The Lagos Auxiliary criticized the amendment as insufficient, particularly due to its ambiguity regarding the children of slaves who were also under the control of the heads of Houses.¹⁰⁴ In this context, Chris Johnson offered some of the most poignant commentary. He argued that slaves could only accumulate capital by the grace of their House heads, who, knowing that slaves could seek freedom upon amassing sufficient wealth, would be careful not to allow this.¹⁰⁵ For Johnson, the most egregious aspect of the Native House Rule Ordinance—the return of runaway slaves by the colonial state’s apparatus—had not been addressed. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that many slaves managed to purchase their freedom thanks to the amendment. However, chiefs and heads of Houses began devising subtle strategies to prevent their members from leaving.¹⁰⁶ By this time, however, the Secretary of State for colonies was already persuaded that the law was unjust and warranted repeal.¹⁰⁷ One factor was the upcoming change in colonial governance: Frederick Lugard was set to assume the role of governor of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate from September 1912.

The Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society’s Committee began lobbying Frederick Lugard in 1912, engaging in extensive correspondence, and meeting him directly in London. These discussions focused on the Native House Rule Ordinance and advocated for its repeal.¹⁰⁸ From June 1912, the London Committee responded to James Bright Davies’ campaign letter, stating:

everything is to be held over pending the arrival of Sir Frederick Lugard. The Home Committee would appreciate if you could arrange to formally welcome Sir Frederick, preferably when your president, Bishop Johnson, and Bishop Oluwole, along with other society leaders, are available. Additionally, either then or at a later date, you should request an interview to petition Sir Frederick Lugard for reform in the position of domestic slaves.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, when Lugard arrived in Lagos in October 1912, the Lagos elites presented him with a welcome address, congratulating him and further highlighting their campaign issues.¹¹⁰ Lugard initially proposed replacing the native house system with a ‘native trading system’ comprising voluntary, registered members regulated by the government. However, Lewis Harcourt, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, had become convinced that the law promoted slavery and thus rejected this proposal. Instead, he advocated for the law’s repeal to be

deferred for three years. Lugard concurred with this suggestion, and the commencement of the repeal was scheduled for 1 January 1915.¹¹¹

From 1914 onwards, the colonial administration began receiving requests for compensation due to the law's repeal from heads of Houses and chiefs.¹¹² Some chiefs sought compensation for the slaves they would lose as a result of the repeal, while others argued that the property of such slaves belonged to the House and should not be taken by the slaves. As a petition from the chiefs of Calabar stated,

as the abrogation of the ordinance carries with it freedom from all obligation on the part of the slave or members to the masters [..]the practical result of the measure then is emancipation. Under the circumstances, therefore, we earnestly and sincerely ask that the masters and head of Houses be compensated by the government.¹¹³

However, chiefs from some other communities, particularly those in the hinterland where slaves from the coastal regions were taken, supported the repeal when it was announced by the colonial administration. For instance, the District Officer stationed at Uyo reported that 'I have discussed the whole matter with the Ibibio chiefs, who say, of course, that the repeal of the House rule ordinance will not affect them at all, except perhaps, to benefit them by their relations returning to their old homes.'¹¹⁴

Conclusion

This article has shed light on a pivotal aspect of African history by highlighting the active engagement of African abolitionists in the early twentieth century, especially in Lagos. Their determined campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance of 1901, a colonial law interpreted as supporting the practice of indigenous slavery, represents a vital epoch in the broader struggle against slavery and oppressive colonial policies. Relying on an extensive array of primary and secondary sources, this study has underscored the agency of local African elites in challenging and ultimately dismantling a law they viewed as perpetuating slavery in the Niger Delta region. They posited that the ordinance was misaligned with native customs, instead instituting a novel form of slavery divergent from pre-existing norms under House rule or native law. This perspective challenged the dominant colonial narrative and illuminated the complexities of the colonial administration's dealings with native institutions and practices. While there was an existing campaign prior to the formation of the Auxiliary, the establishment of the Auxiliary provided African campaigners with a significant platform, thereby elevating the campaign against the Native House Rule Ordinance and positioning it as a movement centered in Lagos.

One notable omission in this research is the missionary campaign against the same ordinance. While not the primary focus of this article, it is important to acknowledge that the Church Mission Society also staged a campaign against

the Native House Rule Ordinance which was initially ineffective. However, at the height of the Lagos Auxiliary campaign, the CMS missionaries joined with Bishop Tugwell in sending letters to the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society and to James Bright Davies of the Lagos Auxiliary.¹¹⁵ Although the Auxiliary campaign may seem like one of the first instances where Africans united to combat domestic slavery, such congregations had already been happening: the Auxiliary merely accelerated this process. This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on African abolitionism by addressing an oversight in historical literature that has often underrepresented the crucial role of African abolitionists. While there is extensive research on how figures from the 1910 Lagos Auxiliary contributed to Nationalism in Nigeria, further research is warranted on individuals like James Bright Davies and Chris Johnson as abolitionists outside of the narrow subject of the ordinance.

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