

This article was downloaded by: [Schler, Lynn]

On: 1 September 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 914293971]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



African Identities

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713611520>

Transnationalism and nationalism in the Nigerian Seamen's Union

Lynn Schler^a

^a Department of Politics and Government, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel

Online Publication Date: 01 August 2009

To cite this Article Schler, Lynn(2009)'Transnationalism and nationalism in the Nigerian Seamen's Union',African Identities,7:3,387 – 398

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14725840903031866

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14725840903031866>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transnationalism and nationalism in the Nigerian Seamen's Union

Lynn Schler*

Department of Politics and Government, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva, Israel

(Received 15 October 2008; final version received 25 February 2009)

This article will examine the shifting tactics employed by Nigerian seamen in their struggles to improve their working conditions onboard Elder Dempster vessels in the late colonial period. Nigerian seamen successfully exploited opportunities arising within the context of colonialism to participate in globalised economies and cultures, exposing them to new solidarities and empowering them to seek an improvement in their lives. In crafting their onboard protests, African seamen historically forged ideological and organisational alliances with the wider world of the black diaspora. But the era of decolonisation shifted the balance of power between seamen and the union leadership as they negotiated with colonial shipping companies in the transition to independence. As ruling elites in both Europe and Nigeria took political, economic and ideological actions to secure lasting power and influence for themselves, seamen experienced a profound disempowerment. Although intent on engaging with the globalised world, African seamen were ultimately prevented from securing for themselves positions of power and autonomy as an effective labour movement in the post-colonial context.

Keywords: Nigeria; labour unions; transnationalism; nationalism, black diaspora; decolonisation; seamen

The struggles conducted by African labour throughout the colonial and postcolonial eras have reflected ongoing efforts to maximise opportunities through dynamic processes of coalition-building. Either individually or through the official channels of unions, cultural organisations or political parties, African working-class struggles have tapped into fluid and evolving solidarities and alliances to overcome disempowerment and to advance their particular cultural, ideological and economic agendas. These alliances have varied in their scope, duration and significance, and in the extent to which they have coincided or conflicted with larger political, cultural, or ideological movements. While African working classes have mobilised creative strategies and exploited networks as part of larger efforts of organising, they have continually confronted limitations in their ability to assemble and exploit solidarities when these came into direct conflict with the political and ideological agendas of power elites. Thus, the history of labour organising in Africa must consider the limitations imposed upon rank-and-file labour in envisioning and implementing opportunities for collaborative efforts that threatened the political, ideological or racial borders upholding more powerful hegemonic interests.

*Email: lynsch@bgu.ac.il

ISSN 1472-5843 print/ISSN 1472-5851 online

© 2009 Taylor & Francis

DOI: 10.1080/14725840903031866

<http://www.informaworld.com>

Particularly in the shadow of nation-building in the era of decolonisation, African labour was corralled into allegiances reflecting the political programmes of the African power elite in collusion with colonial capitalist interests. Both local and transnational imaginaries lost ground to the nationalist perspectives, and it was ultimately the nation-state that became the pre-eminent framework within which class struggles were negotiated and fought in the postcolonial era. Thus, the triumph of colonial and African elite interests in preserving national political and ideological borders had far-reaching implications for how African organised labour could envision and exploit solidarities in the postcolonial era. This article will provide a close examination of organising among Nigerian seamen and demonstrate how political developments associated with the transition from colonialism to independence ultimately limited the autonomy of African labour in crafting strategies of protest.

Seamen provide a unique but highly informative opportunity for studying the impact of nationalisation on African labour precisely because their experiences leading up to decolonisation cut across geopolitical and cultural landscapes. In framing and responding to their local contexts, seamen exploited their mobility and drew upon ideological currents and material support circulating around what Paul Gilroy (1993) has termed the 'Black Atlantic'. Gilroy's notion of the Black Atlantic provides a powerful tool for emphasising fluidity and displacement as foundational features of black experiences, and foregrounds the transnational solidarities that arise from these historical positions. The creolisation of African seamen's identities had deep historical roots dating to the very origins of African seafaring on European vessels in the era of the slave trade. As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2001) have shown, black seamen exploited class and gender-based solidarities and participated in a multi-ethnic 'Atlantic proletariat' that ultimately challenged relations of power throughout the Atlantic world. Jeffrey Bolster (1997, 39) has argued that the work of seafaring was the catalyst for defining a new black ethnicity throughout the diaspora, as sailors embodied 'a mode of communication integrating local communities into the larger community of color'. But while seamen across time were inspired and invigorated by universalist currents, their autonomous organising strategies were deeply embedded in the local, finite context they occupied onboard ships. Thus, while Nigerian seamen of the colonial era embraced political and cultural ideologies emanating from the black diaspora, their organising efforts were constructed and played out within the tight quarters of colonial merchant vessels, and reflected a distinctly local agenda.

While rank-and-file seamen demonstrated their adaptability and creativity in formulating their ideological positions, union leadership in Lagos increasingly sought to subordinate seamen's protest efforts to further their own quest for influence in the shifting political landscape associated with decolonisation. This article will examine the shifting tactics employed by Nigerian seamen in their struggles to improve their working conditions onboard Elder Dempster vessels in the late colonial period. An examination of their organising efforts and demands reveals how some cultural, religious, and ideological discourses attracted them, inspired them and shaped their worldviews. In studying their defeats and failures, we can understand precisely how power was consolidated in the processes of decolonisation at the expense of these workers, and how deals struck between European and African elites on the eve of independence continue to limit the choices and opportunities available to African working classes today.

Recruitment and organising among Nigerian seamen

From the time commerce began between Britain and the coast of West Africa, British shipping interests looked to hire African seamen as a cheap supplement to crews recruited

in Europe. In the initial stages of trade, the overwhelming majority of these recruits came from the ethnic Kru, who as early as the eighteenth century were recruited in Liberia and later Freetown, Sierra Leone. European shipping companies would routinely stop in Freetown to pick up Kru deckhands and firemen before continuing down the coast (Frost 1999, 27). Over time, the Kru developed a tightly organised recruitment system, and headmen overseeing groups of seamen protected their interests and negotiated relatively favourable terms of employment. Due to their experience in seafaring and efficient organising efforts, British shipping companies relied heavily on Kru recruits, and they constituted the majority of seafaring African labour signed on in West Africa prior to World War II (Frost 1999, 102).

From the outbreak of World War II, shipping giants such as Elder Dempster, which controlled the majority of cargo, mail and passenger shipping between the United Kingdom (UK) and the West African coast, began diverting their African recruitment efforts to Lagos. The war had greatly increased demands on the company, and the need for seamen was acute. Janet J. Ewald (2000) has argued that, particularly in times of economic hardship, European shipping companies historically sought out fresh sources of coloured seamen to recruit throughout the maritime world, and tapped them to offset rising costs of labour. Elder Dempster's move to hire in Lagos was thus designed to circumvent the demands of Kru seamen hired in Freetown, with poorly organised Lagos recruits willing to sign on for lower salaries (Sherwood 1995, Davies 2000). Elder Dempster thus established a four-tiered pay scale during World War II. At the bottom were Nigerians recruited in Nigeria, followed by Africans recruited in Freetown. The third level of pay was given to Africans employed from Liverpool, while the highest salaries were reserved for European seamen, who were paid the National Maritime Board rates.

Thus, seamen recruited in Nigeria were embraced by colonial shipping companies as the cheap alternative to the Kru, with the additional benefit of being unorganised and inexperienced in labour contract negotiating. What the colonial employers did not anticipate, however, was the quick turnaround among the Lagos-based recruits from easily exploited and inexperienced manpower to agents of industrial discord and protest. Already in 1942, the seamen recruited in Nigeria formed their own union, the West African Union of Seamen. In the early years this was hardly a broad-based organisation, with membership dropping to an all-time low of six in 1946. But reorganisation came in 1947 and, along with it, a name change to the 'Nigerian Union of Seamen'. Following this spirit of revival was a swift climb in due-paying membership, reaching 2250 by 1953. But the union's declared objectives remained the same from the earliest years: to protect the interests of its members, regulate work hours and wages, ensure adequate accommodation for all seamen on vessels and ashore, to promote the general welfare of seamen and to regulate relations between employers and employees (*Report of Board of Enquiry* 1959).

At first Elder Dempster attempted to avoid any recognition or contact with the organisation. This was not hard to do, as the union was often more concerned with infighting than actually representing seamen in their conflicts with the shipping companies. As one government review from the period stated:

The record of the Union's activities over the years makes a most pathetic reading. Almost from its inception, there have always been instances of endless strife, distrust, intrigues, tribal discrimination, police arrests, litigation, rifts of members into factions, one faction trying at one time or the other, and often quite successfully, to overthrow the other from office, and to install itself into power. No set of officials of the union would appear to have held office happily together for any reasonable length of time. (*Report of Board of Enquiry* 1959, 4–5)

But, suddenly in 1948, in what appeared a stark turnaround, Elder Dempster conceded recognition of the Nigerian Union of Seamen as the sole representative of seamen engaged in Lagos. The two sides formed a local board with representation from the union, the shipping companies and local government to monitor the recruitment and supply of seamen working out of Lagos. The board was to establish and maintain a register of seamen, and West African ratings were to be recruited only from those whose names were on the register. Both parties agreed that all matters pertaining to Nigerian seamen should be decided in Lagos.

The change in the shipping companies' position towards the Nigerian Seamen's Union was in line with an overall shift in colonial policy towards African labour unions in the post-World War II period. A wave of strikes across the continent forced colonial governments and business interests to make some concessions in their stance toward organised labour. But while recognising the need for reform, Frederick Cooper (1996, 3) has argued that governments and employers

wanted to confine the labour question to a set of institutions and practices familiar to them from the industrial relations experience of the metropole: to treat labour as [separate] from politics. The threat of a labour crisis becoming unbound – linked to people other than waged workers . . . made governments especially willing to pay the costs of resolving labour issues [through recognised unions].

Thus, the decision to engage with the Nigerian Union of Seamen was a calculated attempt at making limited yet controlled concessions to Nigerian seamen, but did not represent any fundamental shift in the shipping companies' views on seamen's rights, and the whole endeavour was undertaken with a frustrated yearning for the good old pre-war days when African seamen had not yet awoken to claim their rights. As one Elder Dempster official wrote in 1959:

We have looked through the rules of the Nigerian Union of Seamen . . . It is a shocking document and much of what the Union appears to be aiming to do could not possibly be accepted by the [shipping] lines. I am referring to ship committees and so forth. I suppose in the old days there would have been someone in Nigeria who would have told the Unions not to be silly in framing rules of this kind, but I do not know whether there is anyone bold enough or authoritative enough to do so at the present time. (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1959c)

Despite the sporadic rhetoric of demands, throughout the 1950s the Nigerian Union of Seamen did not pose a serious threat to the shipping companies' designs of maintaining the status quo, because union leaders in Lagos remained preoccupied with internal political struggles for control over the organisation. The focus of the leadership constituted a colossal divide between the concerns of union officials and the everyday experiences of seamen on ships. This divide was partly unavoidable, as the unique nature of seamen's work took them away from Lagos and union headquarters for most of the time they were under contract. On the other hand, those based in Lagos were either Westernised elites posing as professional trade unionists and never actually employed as seamen, or seamen who had been denied work due to disciplinary actions taken against them onboard or criminal activity such as smuggling or drug trafficking (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1954). Thus, the gap separating the rank-and-file seamen from the leadership and decision-making organs of the union was exceptionally wide. In May 1959, President Ekore of the union, in an effort to discredit a resolution calling for his removal, described the problematic situation:

The Seamen's Union is not like any other and why trouble always finds a way easy, is because when a resolution has passed and [been] adopted by a handful of members ashore without the knowledge of members at sea, on arrival they will declare their stand

of ignorance and thereby seek to oppose the adopted resolution which actually is right. (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1959b)

Local struggles, transnational networks

While union officials in the 1950s might have been preoccupied with petty politics, the seamen working on colonial ships often faced miserable working conditions, replete with racial discrimination and dehumanising treatment. Many black seamen suffered physical abuse, name-calling, and random punishments by the officers who they served under, and group beatings or other violent attacks by their fellow white seamen, such as one seaman who was burnt in the fire-room by a white crew member who threw boiling water on him (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1958). Often, these incidents would land black seamen in the hospital, but the majority suffered these abuses and remained on board, lacking any record or verifiable proof against those who perpetrated these crimes. African seamen who did seek justice usually came up against an uninterested or unconvinced captain, and when it was a case of a black seaman's word against that of a white seaman, there was little hope that any justice would be served.

The insecurity faced by black seamen and the lack of retribution for white offenders clearly infuriated Africans, and primed them for embracing ideologies of liberation circulating in the contemporary black diaspora. As can be seen in the following letter written to the Elder Dempster shipping company in 1958, seamen's acts of protests revealed the development of a transnational perspective:

For your information, the African crews have long hesitated from retaliating not because they are cowards but because the Union has been continually telling them that they should obey before complaining. If by any chance you think that they are afraid of being defeated by the English offenders on board ships, you can refer to boxing history and see what Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson did to their white opponents. Today, Hogan Kid Bassey another black man is showing the world how he can handle the white man.

And while the [Shipping Master] sits back with his English friends from shipping companies, who carry away our raw material and minerals and enjoys this paradise of sunshine, our men – Africans and West Indians, are being slashed with knives and beaten with pokers in England.

Does this not prove conclusively that colour prejudice is rampant on all ships, particularly those of the Elder Dempster Lines? What is happening and what we have related here is no different from the incidents taking place in Little Rock, Arkansas, and London and Nottingham, England.

... If the Elder Dempster Lines and other shipping companies continue to send the English seamen to beat up African crews, we will show them that Africans are no cowards. (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1958)

Yet, while seamen aligned themselves ideologically to a wider world of black protest, most responses to onboard discrimination remained confined to single ships. Individual seamen or small groups would react to beatings or unfair treatment either by complaining through official channels onboard or through spontaneous physical violence, neither of which reaped any great results. While borrowing from broader political trends, seamen conceived of the ship as their ideological battleground, and sought solutions and dreamed of a better world on deck. For this reason, the Seamen's Union leadership, preoccupied with Lagos-based politics, remained largely useless and irrelevant in organising and initiating seamen's protests.

Yet, the end of the 1950s resulted in significant changes in the role the Seamen's Union played as representative of seamen's struggles. Two major incidents resulted in a

significant change in the status of the union as an equal negotiating partner with shipping companies, and this had far-reaching consequences for ship-based protests, and in turn, the status of individual seamen. The rest of this paper will examine first, the hiring of Sidi Khayam, a new general secretary for the union in 1958, and second, the strike that began on board the *M.V. Apapa* in Liverpool in 1959. The events and outcomes surrounding these two incidents will be evaluated for what they teach us about seamen's organising efforts and opportunities, and their successes and failures in the shadow of decolonisation. This examination will shed light on the long-term implications of decolonisation on African seamen in particular, and on African labour movements in general.

New union leadership: General Secretary Sidi Khayam

Sidi Khayam, born in Nigeria, had lived, worked and studied in England for nearly 10 years before he was recruited by the Nigerian Union of Seamen to be their new general secretary in 1958. Khayam was actually recruited in Liverpool, where some local African residents and Nigerian seamen persuaded him to return to Nigeria and head the Seamen's Union. Khayam had studied economics and law, although he did not complete any degree, and had scattered experience with trade union membership as he worked in various factories and industries throughout England. Khayam's appointment to the position of General Secretary was a great annoyance to the shipping companies, particularly because of the confrontational manner he adopted towards the employers from the beginning of his term. Attempting to solidify his position, Khayam was initially uncompromising in his attitude toward the shipping company, making strong demands for salary increases, payment for overtime and improved lodging for seamen onboard ships and ashore. But what was truly disturbing to the management of Elder Dempster was Khayam's habit of flying into a rage in his meetings with management, and frequently accusing them of racial discrimination. While the shipping companies were willing to enter into a dialogue with a legitimate representative of African labour to negotiate compromises with regard to pay scales or benefits, the employers were not willing to engage with an incendiary racial discourse. Thus, Elder Dempster refused to officially recognise him, claiming that he was appointed illegitimately. Unofficially, they schemed to get him deported from Nigeria (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1959–1962).

But the changes in the balance and nature of power in the era of decolonisation meant that simply deporting Khayam was not an option. Nigerian government officials, a group of anti-radical Westernised elites owing their positions of influence to their proximity to colonial rulers, were equally in favour of getting rid of Khayam in theory. They realised, however, that he could be discredited and hence neutralised through legitimate means. As the Minister of Labour, Nwokedi, suggested to the Elder Dempster representative in Lagos in 1959:

Khayam is unfavourable and it would be best to see him out of the country. But the ministry would like the seamen themselves to get rid of Khayam and they consider that the only way to achieve this would be for Khayam to be shown up beyond doubt, on a wider screen than at present, as an irresponsible person not working in the seamen's best interests. The proposed method for 'exposing' Khayam would be to have a 'trade dispute' and for the Labour Department to appoint a conciliator. It could be expected that Khayam's behaviour during conciliation meetings would finally make clear to all his unreasonableness and irresponsibility ... resulting in the seamen denouncing and dismissing him. (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1959–1962)

Thus, in the era of decolonisation, the rules of the game had changed and both the shipping companies and the government had to endure Khayam.

As it turns out, Sidi Khayam's relationship to the rank-and-file membership of the union was no less antagonistic and his approach toward them was equally belligerent. A few months after taking office, he issued a statement to the general membership, instituting an uncompromising expression of his rule over the organisation and demanding unambiguous obedience from the Seamen's Union members. As the statement said:

Our plan is to run the Nigerian Union of Seamen on a pattern different from the gangster-tactics of yesteryears We have had enough complaints, some are true, some are not. But the damn truth is, that there is [an] absence of evidence that some of us are really serious seamen. From now [on] the union will take steps to rub in some discipline for those who are caught on petty-theft, underhanded business, smart rackets and fishy deals. It's none of our business to defend such mess.

. . . Any person whose acts will likely prevent all seamen from getting their rights and respect, who wants to clown around his job and shows us up as drones to shipping captains will get a fast punch out the union door. He will get a black eye from the union before the shipping company does it. Any guy who is feeling lazy can drop on shore to doze or booze about the place, but he is not going to pull down our prestige or weaken the effort the Nigerian Union of Seamen wants to put up for decent and hardworking African crews.

Members who feel a bit big or want to bluff their way by looking too sulky for instructions can just ask themselves how much they get for the same job white crews perform.

. . . And anyone who figures we don't mean business can start the stew and see how it tastes. We mean every damn decision we have put down here - that he will be thrown out of the NUS picture outright. (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1959)

Khayam's sharp approach aimed at gaining him respect both from seamen and the union did not do much to further his cause, and it seemed each rebuff from above and below sent him into a new rage. His luck changed, however, in the aftermath of the *Apapa* strike of 1959, an event he played no role in initiating, but one that he masterfully managed to exploit to his advantage.

The *M.V. Apapa* strike of 1959

On 27 May 1959, the *M.V. Apapa* vessel arrived in Lagos. The crew met with the General Secretary of the Nigerian Union of Seamen, Sidi Khayam, to complain of ill-treatment of the African crew during their most recent voyage. At the root of the seamen's grievances was what they identified as the systematic discrimination of black seamen onboard Elder Dempster ships. They had several specific examples of this discrimination, claiming, for instance, that African seamen were limited to purchasing only Woodbines, Senior Service and Capstan cigarettes, while the European crew was allowed to have any available brand. The seamen also complained that the bartender watered down the beer of Africans, but not the European crew's. They charged that the newly-appointed Chief Steward denied Africans steak, chicken and turkey, and instead served them only pork. The crew also suspected that the chief steward had ordered customs officers to perform in-depth searches of the belongings of crew members who had complained of the new arrangements regarding food, cigarettes and beer. The most serious allegations were made against the second steward, who had become violent with crew, 'pushing men about with his hands, cursing them and almost causing a physical fight'. This same second steward demanded that the crew wash his car during working hours and when the men refused he threatened to blacklist them from further employment (*Report of the Board of Enquiry* 1959a).

In the weeks leading up to the strike, Sidi Khayam was busy trying to oust the executive officers from the union and organised a no-confidence vote in a Delegates Conference, and, although he had met with the *Apapa* crew, he actually discouraged a walk-out and persuaded them to sail again with the *Apapa* on 2 June for Liverpool

(*Daily Telegraph* (Lagos), 27 May 1959). The *Apapa* arrived in Liverpool on 15 June 1959. On 17 June, the Nigerian crew, represented by a local African resident of Liverpool, submitted a letter to Malcolm Glasier, director of Elder Dempster, detailing their complaints and demanding the removal of the *Apapa*'s European chief steward, second steward and chief storekeeper from the ship. Not surprisingly, the company refused this request. Some attempts were made at negotiating with the crew, but when the demand for removing the European bosses from the ship was refused, 75 members of the African crew walked off the ship on Wednesday, 24 June. They went from the docks to Stanley House, a community centre for African seamen in the city of Liverpool.

It was also reported on this day that a 'shore-African' named Ogun went to the docks to collect men from five other ships to join the striking *Apapa* crew at the Stanley House. A meeting was called that night of all the African crews in port, hosted by a few local African residents of Liverpool, and with Ogun acting as chairman. Unable to force the crew back to work, Elder Dempster decided on Thursday, 25 June 25, that the *Apapa* would sail without her African crew. On Sunday, 28 June, the *Apapa* crew was repatriated to Nigeria via airplane, and the rest of the striking crews returned to their ships. The arrival of the *Apapa* crew in Lagos was followed by a mass protest of all crews in port, marching to the prime minister's house and demanding a meeting. The prime minister, Tafawa Balewa, went into the street to hear their grievances, and then invited a delegation of representatives, including Sidi Khayam, in for a meeting. In the aftermath, it was agreed that a committee of inquiry would be formed to investigate the seamen's grievances.

This strike that began in Liverpool was initiated by the seamen, but there were clearly influences from local Liverpool residents, including members of the Socialist Labour League, with both local British and African members in contact with ships' crews and representing their interests to Elder Dempster (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1959e). The role of diaspora Africans and British communists in the inspiration, organisation, leadership and carrying-out of the *M.V. Apapa* strike is highly significant, particularly when compared to the inaction of the Nigerian Seamen's Union's leadership. Liverpool-based Africans, such as a Mr Akinsanya, from an organisation known as the National Union of Nigeria, began meeting with representatives of Elder Dempster to complain about working conditions onboard the *Apapa* over one month before the strike. When the strike broke out, it was members of the National Union of Nigeria in Liverpool that organised crew protests and rallied seamen from other ships to join in the walkout. As soon as the strike broke out, they also sent a written protest to the company, calling themselves the 'African Defence Association'. The letter declared that their group was made up of the 'African Intelligentsia and Literary Detectives of this city' for the purpose of 'protecting the socio-economic interests of our Nigerian Seafaring brothers' and was symbolically signed 'Sojourner Truth'. In make-up and intent, the organisation represented a solidarity bridging Nigerians across the diaspora, and reflected an alliance moving beyond the borders of the mother country, as they wrote: 'In defense of Reason and In Honour's Cause, we speak of Africa and golden joys and as Nigerian Ambassadors of Goodwill we remain in friendships' garden always' (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1959d).

Nigerian seamen in the aftermath of the *Apapa* strike

As far as Elder Dempster was concerned, the strike onboard the *Apapa* did not create any immediate disaster. In fact, the news of the ship that sailed without its African crew provided some comic relief for the British press, which recounted harrowing tales of *Apapa* passengers cleaning their own rooms and serving their own food. The passengers

themselves apparently approached the whole incident with equal amusement, and were duly pleased to receive an 'inconvenience compensation' from Elder Dempster at the end of the voyage.

But from the Nigerian government's perspective, the lingering threat of masses of discontented seamen fuelled the decision to appoint a committee of inquiry. This was a typical response of late-colonial regimes faced with strikes during this period. As Cooper (1996, 16) has argued, 'Commissions of inquiry into major strikes were used to delineate . . . problem areas' and determine the 'techniques and resources' that would be used 'to set things right.' Investigations conducted in the framework of these inquiries and the final reports they produced 'became apparatuses of surveillance, shapers of discourse, and definers of spaces for legitimate contestation'. In bestowing all authority and judgement in the hands of a commission of inquiry, colonial regimes 'were also saying that Africa's forms of knowledge were irrelevant'.

The establishment of the Board of Enquiry in the case of the *M.V. Apapa* set very clear boundaries for the terrain of the conflict, confining what was being discussed, and who was being represented. 'The Board of the Enquiry into the Trade Dispute between the Elder Dempster Limited Lines and the Nigerian Union of Seamen,' as the investigation was called, was headed by two Nigerian conservatives: the Industrial Relations Commissioner, Thompson Edogbeji Salubi, and the Secretary General of the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria, L.L. Borha, a declared anti-communist. Also on the board was Alfred McClatchey, the secretary of the Employers Consultative Association.

Publicly, Elder Dempster supported the investigation, while privately the company was kept abreast of the committee's work directly from chairman Salubi. Officials at Elder Dempster attempted to have the report serve as a firm condemnation of Sidi Khayam, and hoped that he would be removed in the aftermath. But despite the efforts of the company, the Board of Enquiry was not willing to make any resounding condemnations of the union's general secretary in their report, which was finally released in 1960. In fact, the report had quite the opposite effect, with the recommendations actually forcing Elder Dempster to fully recognise Khayam and to co-operate with him in the establishment of formal mechanisms for representing the interests of both the union and management. Khayam was now a full partner in any future negotiations. The union was to be the official channel for representing all seamen, and responsible for recruitment, registration of seamen, and for negotiating with management.

Following the publication of the report, Khayam marked his decisive victory by celebrating the *Apapa* crisis, as he reminisced:

'It was this incident which led to the inauguration, to the setting up of specific machineries for negotiations and settlement of problems, to the real recognition of the Nigerian Union of Seamen, to more respect of Nigerian Seamen because they had proved they are not cowards but can stand up, protest and demonstrate and assert their views before management. We mustered our families, sons, daughters, wives in the most spectacular demonstration ever held in our country.' The Salubi report, then, had the unintended consequence of bestowing in Khayam a sense of proprietorship over the official narrative of the seamen's victory, and enabled him to boldly re-write the history of his role in it.

Thus, the published report empowered Khayam, and he in turn reminded seamen of his new power: 'From now on, we must devote all our energies in working harder, in improving our skill and mastery of the job, in maintaining respect for our superiors and preserving patience until we are on port to report our grievances to the union.' (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1960)

The granting of legitimacy also meant that Khayam had to adopt a more conciliatory tone with Elder Dempster. The change did not go unnoticed by management, but not everyone was convinced, as one official wrote:

On the few occasions that I have personally met him, Khayam has always been well behaved. I still, however, subscribe to the view that leopards do not usually change their spots. It may well be that Khayam will reform and I am quite ready to give him this opportunity. I will not, however, disguise the fact that doubts still linger. (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1960a)

The shift in Khayam's position was an outcome of the new alliance with Elder Dempster's management, and this came at the expense of his willingness to represent seamen's concerns. As put by one Elder Dempster official:

There is a very cordial atmosphere prevailing in our day to day relations with the Nigerian Union of Seamen. Several times in the past few weeks Mr Khayam and other senior Union officials have been in contact with us on various subjects and a great deal of good sense and goodwill has been shown and without going into great detail there have been occasions when misinformed seamen making unreasonable demands have been sharply cautioned in our presence by the Union. (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1960b)

The new proximity to management required that Khayam and the union give up the rhetoric of racial oppression, and one of the successful outcomes of the new order was a narrowing of the union's agenda away from race issues. As Khayam now explained to union members: 'We must effectively learn more and more that it is not only colour. People cheat and oppress others because they believe in oppression which gives them profits, and whether black or white' (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1960).

For the colonial regime, the abandonment of racial discourse provided security that conflicts with African labour would remain within a moderate range of disputes between employers and wage earners. As this was a prerequisite for securing his own position, Sidi Khayam was willing to make this compromise. The move away from racial discourse also helped Khayam justify his demand that seamen turn their gaze toward Lagos rather than Liverpool in their search for leadership. Seeking the unambiguous loyalty of the Nigerian seamen, Khayam began to see Liverpool activists as bad influences, and worked with Elder Dempster to cut ties between seamen and the Nigerian National Union based in Liverpool. Under the banner of 'Nigerianisation', the union leadership was able to consolidate its power over the rank-and file membership. 'Nigerianisation' enabled the union to refuse contact with international seamen's unions, and remove dissident Freetown ratings from the Lagos registers. Independence thus justified a turn inwards, and a hardening of ideological, discursive, and identity borders around new states and away from alternative communities. The shift in Khayam's attitude and tactics was in line with the political manoeuvres of many African elites in the era of decolonisation, ultimately impacting the nature of political regimes in the post-colonial era. As Cooper (1996, 5) claimed:

the study of labour in the period of decolonisation can give us some kind of indication of how Africans ended up with the kind of independence [they] got – politically assertive and socially conservative regimes focused on their control of the coercive, patronage, and symbolic apparatus of the state, distrustful of and hostile to the continued influence of social movements that once helped challenge the colonial state, fearful of groups that might make claims.

Conclusion

For Nigerian seamen, the political and ideological currents favoring the strengthening of the union served to disempower them in their ship-based protests, and the union's insistence that crews rely solely on a 'Nigerian' leadership rather than a fluid set of tools

based in a multitude of locations represented a profound silencing. The imposition of Nigerianisation severed the historic racial and class links that seamen had forged between themselves and others beyond the borders of Nigeria. The *Apapa* strike, and hundreds of incidents leading up to this action, grew out of a belief among African seamen that they could achieve the vision of justice they constructed for themselves. Their struggles were not limited to concerns over pay scales and clothing allowances, but expressed deeper and more fundamental wishes for colour-blind camaraderie of men, perhaps similar to that enjoyed by black seamen in the days of sailing. Crews fought discrimination through transnational alliances, and their sense of empowerment led to creative and forceful initiatives such as walk-outs and demands for firing of their European bosses. The Salubi inquiry was a typical and effective tactic of the colonial regime and local westernised elites to eliminate the radical and destabilising creative force of African labourers that was so clearly evident in the *Apapa* strike.

In the era following the publication of the Salubi Report, seamen continued to suffer racial oppression, but they also internalised the fact that they could no longer protest for themselves. This can be seen in the following letter from the crew of the *M.V. Apapa* at port in Liverpool in 1961:

to our greatest surprise, when we arrive at Las Palmas this trip . . . the stewards who feel to buy drinks collect their money and give it to one man. The cleaners do likewise. On those men returning the ship, the captain was on the gangway himself and started to dump these drinks in the water before the passengers who were looking [at] the view of the town. Despite all the pleas by the head cleaner, he dump everything, including only one that Ibeji hold for himself. . . . Despite all the explanations to the captain, the drinks were dumped. The attitude so provoked our minds. Because none of that of the [white] sailors were dumped so we [took] it for another discrimination so an emergency general meeting was called and it last 20 minutes. We took a decision the two head men were delegated to the captain that we the entire crew want our drinks or he pay for them. . . . the captain promised to pay for the drinks. The headmen told him . . . that he cannot take it upon himself to accept the money for the whole crew . . . before we sail way on the Thursday the 20th we do not take any step either, we are just putting it to your knowledge at the same time we would like to know from you whether to receive the money from him or not. Reply not needed until our arrival. (Merseyside Maritime Museum 1961)

The seamen's letter is testimony to the entrenchment of the union's authority in the post-colonial era, and the recognition among seamen that they could no longer act for themselves. We have seen that Nigerian seamen successfully exploited opportunities arising within the context of colonialism to participate in globalised economies and cultures, exposing them to new solidarities and empowering them to seek an improvement in their lives. At the same time, ruling elites in both Europe and Nigeria took political, economic and ideological actions to secure lasting power and influence for themselves, and this occurred continually at the expense of seamen's autonomy. Although intent on engaging with the globalised world, African seamen were ultimately prevented from securing for themselves positions of power and autonomy as an effective labour movement in the post-colonial context. Thus, for ordinary seamen, changes with nationalisation did result in a change in the definition of the possible, but what was possible was, in many regards, far less.

Notes on contributor

Lynn Schler is a lecturer in African History in the Department of Politics and Government at Ben Gurion University, Israel. Her work has focused on the cultural and social history of colonialism in West Africa. She is the author of *The strangers of new bell: immigration, public space and*

community in colonial Douala, 1916–1960 (Unisa Press, South Africa, 2008). Her current research and publications are focused on transnationalism and nationalism among Nigerian seamen, with research being conducted in both Nigeria and Liverpool.

References

- Bolster, J., 1997. *Black Jacks: African American seamen in the age of sail*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Cooper, F., 1996. *Decolonization and African society: the labor question in French and British Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, P.N., 2000. *The trade makers: Elder Dempster in West Africa, 1852–1972, 1973–1989*. St. John's, Newfoundland: International Maritime Economic History Association.
- Ewald, J.J., 2000. Crossers of the sea: slaves, freedmen, and other migrants in the northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1914. *The American historical review*, 105 (1), 69–91.
- Frost, D., 1999. *Work and community in among West African migrant workers since the nineteenth century*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Gilroy, P., 1993. *The black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Linebaugh, P. and Rediker, M., 2001. *The many-headed hydra: the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1954. 4C 1908 Nigerian Union of Seamen Apapa strike 1959. Letter from Elder Dempster representative in Lagos to M.B. Glasier, 19 February 1954.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1958. 4C 1908 Nigerian Union 1959–1962. Letter from A. Monday to M.B. Glasier, 10 October 1958.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1959. 4C 1908 Nigerian Union of Seamen 1959–1962. Letter from the Secretariat and Education Bureau to the general membership, 10 January 1959.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1959a. 4C 1908 Nigerian Union of Seamen 1959–1962. Letter from R.H. Chalcraft to M. Glasier, 10 February 1959.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1959b. 4C 1908 Nigerian Union of Seamen 1959–1962. Presidential address by S.M. Ekore, 15 May 1959.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1959c. 4C 1908 Nigerian Union of Seamen 1959–1962. Letter from the Shipping Federation to M.B. Glasier, 25 June 1959.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1959d. 4C 1908 Nigerian Union of Seamen 1959–1962. African Defence Association (signed from Sojourner Truth) to Mr Glasier, 30 June 1959.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1959e. 4C 1908 Nigerian Union of Seamen 1959–1962. Letter from M.B. Glasier to R.N. Chalcraft, 6 July 1959.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1959–1962. 4C 1908 Nigerian Union of Seamen 1959–1962.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1960. 4C 1908 Nigerian Seamen's Union. Sidi Khayam address to the First Delegates Conference. (No date, but must be in 1960 at the earliest because of reference to Salubi enquiry.)
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1960a. The Nigeria Shipping Federation to M.B. Glasier, 9 January 1960.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1960b. Elder Dempster, Lagos. Robertson to Steamship Nautical Dept, Liverpool, 26 April 1960.
- Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1961. 4C 1908 Nigerian Seamen's Union. Crew letter from the m.v. Apapa in Liverpool to Gen. Sec. Sidi Khayam, 18 July 1961.
- Report of the Board of Enquiry into the trade dispute between the Elder Dempster Lines Limited and the Nigerian Union of Seamen*, 1959. Lagos, Nigeria.
- Report of the Board of Enquiry into the trade dispute*, 1959a. Lagos, Nigeria, Appendix C.
- Sherwood, M., 1995. Strikes! African seamen, Elder Dempster and the government 1940–42. In: D. Frost, ed. *Ethnic labour and British imperial trade: a history of ethnic seafarers in the UK*. London: Frank Cass.