

Seamen and the Nigerianization of Shipping in the Postcolonial Era

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Abstract

This article examines the impact that indigenization policies had on labor and on the cultures of work in postcolonial Nigeria. Scholars have studied indigenization in the context of nationalist politics, statecraft, and development in postcolonial Africa. However, we have little knowledge of how working classes experienced and interpreted indigenization schemes. Focusing on the indigenization of shipping, this article discusses both how Nigerian seamen anticipated the establishment of the Nigerian National Shipping Line and the actual impact of Nigerianization on their working lives. By taking a close look at changes in shipboard hierarchies, labor relations, and the culture of work on NNSL vessels, we can gain a deeper understanding of how broader political processes associated with decolonization and postindependence shaped working-class lives in postcolonial Nigeria.

Introduction

For both elites and the masses in colonial Africa, the prospect of decolonization was complex and multifaceted. The dismantling of European rule did not automatically bring about an end to colonial political and economic power, and the realization of decolonization in Africa required a broad range of initiatives spanning the political, economic, and cultural spheres. One of the cornerstones of postcolonial efforts to facilitate the transition to independence was the indigenization of economic enterprises. For postcolonial governments, the replacement of European capitalist interests with local entrepreneurs and managers was a tangible change that could make the process of decolonization visible to the popular base. But while indigenization was a strategy broadly adopted by ruling elites, we have little knowledge of what these policies signified in the lives of everyday Africans. Historians and political scientists have studied the processes and outcomes of indigenization as part of broader investigations into nationalist politics, statecraft, and development in postcolonial Africa.¹ In evaluating the progress of indigenization efforts, scholars have made larger claims concerning the power and efficacy of postcolonial states, and the success or failure of African economies in the transition to independence.² Largely missing from this historiography of indigenization are working-class perspectives. While indigenization had a direct impact on workplaces and work cultures, we know very little about how non-elites evaluated and experienced policies of indigenization, or how the process of indigenization affected working lives.

This article will examine the impact that indigenization policies had on African labor and on the cultures of work in postcolonial Nigeria. Focusing on the indigenization of shipping, this article will demonstrate how cultures of work onboard ships were transformed by Nigerianization and the establishment of the Nigerian National Shipping Line (NNSL). The NNSL was born of the nationalist fervor taking hold of the political and business elite in the final years of colonial rule, and the indigenization of shipping was seen as a vital step in the process of decolonization. But while slogans of economic nationalism paved the way for the establishment of the NNSL, the outcome of this political and ideological history was lived very differently “on the ground” by the seamen. Politicians linked the establishment of the NNSL to the broader struggle for decolonization, but for Nigerian seamen, there were significant disparities between the anticipated national line and the ultimate manifestation of the Nigerian National Shipping Line.

This article will examine the ways in which Nigerian seamen, formerly employed on colonial vessels, anticipated the changes brought on by the creation and operation of the NNSL, and the ways in which these seamen experienced the Nigerianization of shipping. It will show that seamen were lured to the NNSL by guarantees of better pay and fair treatment by management, but that they were also stirred by the opportunity to feel a sense of ownership and “home” onboard Nigerian vessels. For seamen, the initial manifestation of these dreams was largely a disappointment, as British captains and officers continued to command the ships while Nigerians underwent the lengthy process of officer training. But over time, the ships of the NNSL did undergo a process of Nigerianization. Based on archival research and interviews with former seamen, this article will examine how rank-and-file seamen experienced and interpreted these changes.³ It will interrogate the process of indigenization on board ships and evaluate what was “Nigerian” about the culture of work on NNSL ships. By taking a close look at shipboard hierarchies, labor relations, and the culture of work on NNSL vessels, we can gain a deeper understanding of how broader political processes associated with decolonization and post-independence made an impact on working-class lives in postcolonial Nigeria.

Seamen and the Promise of the Nigerian National Line

A full appreciation of seamen’s engagement with the NNSL must take into account their experiences as colonial subjects on British merchant ships in the colonial era. From the introduction of maritime trade between Europe and Africa, Africans were recruited to work as seamen on board European merchant vessels engaged in transatlantic trade. European shipping companies would routinely stop in Freetown to pick up Kru deckhands to supplement European crews. This system was well entrenched until the Second World War, when British shipping companies shifted recruitment to Lagos.⁴ The war led to an increased demand for African crews, and Nigerian seamen were contracted for rates far lower than those of the Kru in Freetown.⁵ During the

postwar era, ships arriving at the west coast of Africa increasingly recruited seamen in Lagos, and, by the end of colonial period, more than two thousand Nigerians were officially employed on European vessels.⁶

Nigerian seamen attempted to combat their categorization as a cheap source of labor through the establishment of the Nigerian Seamen's Union in 1942. The Union's declared objectives were "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."⁷ Despite these objectives, the union was not particularly effective at representing seamen's needs, as the leadership was preoccupied with internal power struggles. As one government review from the period reported,

[t]he 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.⁸

Thus, despite the rhetoric of sporadic demands, the Union did not serve as an effective instrument through which seamen could hope to improve their poor working conditions or combat pervasive discrimination onboard ships. African seamen often suffered racial discrimination in the form of physical abuse, name-calling, and random punishments by British officers. These confrontations with colonial hierarchies and biases primed them to embrace nationalist ideology.⁹

For Nigerian seamen, the opportunity to engage with and appropriate nationalist discourse came with the establishment of the NNSL in 1959. The creation of the NNSL was part of a broader indigenization scheme called for by the nationalist elite, who claimed that decolonization was an economic as well as a political issue.¹⁰ While shipping was not the only industry targeted, the indigenization of shipping held great symbolic importance, as European shipping conferences were seen as one of the most destructive monopolies associated with colonialism. As independence approached, some politicians reasoned that ongoing dependence on foreign shipping spelled "nothing but sheer national ruin and economic suicide," and wondered, "Are we emerging from political colonialism only to step into economic serfdom?"¹¹ The desire to indigenize was not unique to Nigeria, and Iheduru has argued that the Africanization of shipping held great symbolic importance in boosting the prestige of newly independent countries throughout the continent.¹²

Despite ideological positions, the newly created African nations lacked the resources to establish their own shipping companies and had to rely on strategic partnerships with foreign shipping companies to launch their national lines.¹³ In Nigeria's case, the government signed a highly controversial deal of dual ownership with the British shipping giants, Elder Dempster and the Palm Line. The arrangement gave the Nigerians initially only 51 percent of the company's

shares and, at least in the initial years of operation, left many of the managerial positions in the hands of Europeans. Although the Nigerian government bought out these technical partners in less than two years, the NNSL remained a weak member of the West African Lines Conference, a cartel largely controlled by the British companies. Thus, rather than constituting “a truly Nigerian project,” the NNSL was never in a position to realize any nationalist ambitions, as Olukoju has argued.¹⁴

For seamen, the establishment of the NNSL presented an opportunity to express a nationalist allegiance. The transfer of Nigerian crews from Elder Dempster to employment in the NNSL was part of the founding process of the Nigerian line. A National Maritime Board was created in Lagos to recruit seamen for ship owners, and seamen were directed to employment by the NNSL through the Maritime Board.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the majority of Nigerian seamen interviewed for this project described the move to the NNSL as their own decision.¹⁶ This is because, while the opportunities and choices seamen had regarding whether to work for the NNSL were not fully their own, seamen’s engagement with nationalist ideologies and policies led them to embrace the NNSL as the answer to their frustrations and hopes. Seamen’s expectations of the National Line reflected a unique engagement with nationalist discourse, framed by the context of their working lives.

Many of the men interviewed claimed that they chose to move to NNSL as an expression of their nationalist sentiment following the end of colonial rule. The declaration of independence was remembered as a time of great celebration, and Nigerians on board ships organized parties for their entire crews. One seaman recalled that European captains also joined in the festivities, ordering cakes for the occasion and offering their crews free drinks: “Oh yes, a man to a bottle of brandy, two cartons of beer, stout, everything was free on that day. Anything you asked was free, you didn’t pay for anything on that day.”¹⁷ Seamen were proud to have their own shipping company and claimed that they came to work for the NNSL as an expression of their patriotism. As one said, “I was very happy to work with National Line because I was ready to serve my country.”¹⁸ Another expressed similar sentiments: “It was our national carrier, so we must be happy working for it. It was our national flag!”¹⁹ Others simply assumed that it would be better to work for a Nigerian line: “Yes, we were happy. Because it was an indigenous company, so we assumed it will be okay once it is established.”²⁰

Seamen’s enthusiastic embrace of the NNSL was rooted in the hope that working conditions would be better under the national lines. The enthusiasm with which Nigerian seamen greeted the creation of the NNSL was a direct reflection of the discrimination they had suffered at the hands of European officers. As one said,

I remember that one of the chief officers, a white man, often made racist comments addressing us—we blacks—and then I knew him to possess the South African white man’s attitude, a racist attitude. ... Do you know why they wanted us to

work for them? It was because of cheap labor, we were so cheap, that was why they kept on doing business with us.²¹

While seamen hoped that employment for the national line would mean an end to discrimination, they were specifically drawn to the prospect of better salaries. At its founding, the NNSL promised Nigerian seamen that it would adopt a new pay scale and begin paying for overtime. The latter was a benefit they did not receive on British ships and a longstanding point of contention between the seamen and management.²² Many seamen interviewed claimed that they were attracted to the promise of overtime pay, but this financial benefit was also linked to a general belief that they would be treated with more dignity on board the Nigerian ships. Seamen's hopes (and ultimate disappointment) can be seen in the following seaman's testimony regarding the move to the national lines:

It was my choice to be paid off [by the Elder Dempster Line] because we Nigerians now had our own ships and we left the European shipping line and joined our local line. It was because the National Line paid us a lot of overtime, but there was nothing like overtime in the E.D. Line. We came because of this, and also with the intention to serve our country, but later we suffered and regretted our action, joining the National Line. Really, apart from the money, we had this patriotism in us, but it was unfavorable to us.²³

Another incentive that fostered seamen's enthusiasm for the move to the NNSL was the food served onboard the Nigerian ships. For many seamen, the possibility of being served Nigerian food was an important draw for joining the National Line, as it was inseparable from deeper desires for belonging and a sense of home on board ships. The issue of food was prominent in seamen's detailed descriptions of life on ships, first on board Elder Dempster vessels and later on the NNSL. Many of those interviewed complained bitterly of the food they were served on British vessels. As one seaman recalled, "We ate English food, ate a lot of rice, they did not give us African food. No pepper on the food. The food was not really suitable for us, but we ate it like that."²⁴ The symbolic significance of food for the Nigerian crew comes through in another seaman's testimony:

The European stewards didn't know how to prepare or cook African food. We carried most of the burden, carrying passengers and cargoes to London. But each time they wanted to serve us, they gave us chicken! No! No! No! Everybody wanted to eat *fufu*, *eba*, *garri* In the cold weather we wanted that! *ti o ba je eba wa laagun!* (This Yoruba expression translates as, "When you eat *eba* you will sweat.")²⁵

While most seamen recalled that the food on British ships did not suit the majority of the Nigerians, the situation on the National Line was completely different. Seamen often linked their satisfaction with the move to the National

Line to the Nigerian food served onboard. One seaman recalled that the type of food served was the only real difference between the Elder Dempster and NNSL ships: "It was the same thing I was doing at the E.D. Line that I was also still doing at the NNSL, but the diet and food changed. The E.D. Line had European types of food, whereas the NNSL supplied us with Nigerian types of food like *garri*."²⁶ Another agreed: "There was not so much difference except on the feeding aspect."²⁷ One seaman who worked in the catering department explained that on the National Line, there was more consideration for all crew members' culinary tastes, whether they were European or Nigerian:

In the morning we wrote a menu: sometimes custard, Quaker oats, fried egg, omelets, scrambled eggs, and so on. In the afternoon, we prepared rice and stew. Whenever we had Europeans among the crew, we prepared them European food differently. We sometimes prepared salad and so on for the Europeans ... In the evening we prepared *fufu* with *egusi* or *ogbono* (traditional Nigerian soups). This was the food menu of the National Line but in the E.D. line, we ate only European food, whether the African crew liked it or not.²⁸

This seaman's testimony regarding the diverse menu on NNSL ships hints at a deeper claim with regard to the Nigerian National Line. Through the description of menus designed to suit both Nigerian and European tastes, the former steward intimated that NNSL ships were more inclusive and tolerant of the differences among crew members, regardless of their national background.

Obstacles to Indigenization

Despite their initial enthusiasm for the nationalist enterprise, there was a sense of disappointment among the Nigerian seamen regarding the unanticipated continuities between colonial and national ships. In the first decade of operations, European captains and officers commanded NNSL ships. Seamen were dismayed to discover that they continued to occupy the lowest rungs of ship hierarchies, and that colonial, racialized divisions of labor remained intact. As one seaman recalled,

Working with National Shipping Line, we were going to be free because it was our ship but still, when the ship came, we were the crew members. But the top, like captains, were white: chief engineer, chief mate, and bosun (petty officer) were all white people, even second and third engineer, second and third mate were white, ... the carpenter, the shippie used to be white but later we had a black person as carpenter. All white people from the beginning.²⁹

The presence of European officers on board made it harder for Nigerians to feel that the ships were their own. Changes in the conditions of service also took time to implement, only increasing seamen's frustrations. Archival records regarding the first few voyages of the NNSL's *Dan Fodio* and *Oduduwa* recount the

mounting discontent of seamen as they confronted a transition that did not live up to their expectations of the Nigerian National Line. On the early voyages of the *Dan Fodio*, despite initial promises, payment for overtime work had not yet been implemented when the ship first set sail. According to officials at the Palm Line in Liverpool in September 1959, the Nigerian crew became agitated regarding the issue of unpaid overtime. As the Chief Officer claimed,

The crew work up to 8 hours and when called to put in more work, outside this period, without some overtime allowance, they naturally feel demoralized. They are inclined to grumble and murmur and do the job without a tangle of cheerfulness.

Seamen threatened to walk out, and to appease them, management quickly organized an “*ex gratia* payment.”³⁰

In another incident, which took place in Rotterdam during the ship’s second voyage, it was reported that the Nigerian crew complained of mistreatment by the ship’s mate and threatened to walk off if he was not removed. The crew would not tolerate racial discrimination on Nigerian ships, but despite their protests, the mate was signed on again. The crew only agreed to sail when a Federal Commissioner from the United Kingdom convinced them “that it would be shameful as well as illegal to abandon their ships in a foreign port.”³¹ The situation came to a head on the *Dan Fodio* in August 1960, when five European officers resigned from the ship. They claimed that the Nigerian crew “had become unruly and chaotic because of the spirit of nationalism.”³²

The unrest seen on the ships of the NNSL in 1959 and 1960 is poignant testimony to the impact nationalist ideologies and organizing had on members of the working class. Seamen had internalized the ideological currents that shaped the era of decolonization, and became inspired to hope for, and even demand, change. But the pace of reform during decolonization did not satisfy the seamen’s longings, and their frustration at the *status quo* was evidenced in onboard protests and walk-outs.

Despite their dissatisfaction, the presence of European officers on NNSL was a sight that seamen would endure for nearly two decades more. The ideological commitment to Nigerianization would have to confront the lengthy process of training Nigerians to serve as officers and captains of the NNSL ships. While some politicians and the press strongly protested the decision of the government to establish the Nigerian national line in partnership with Elder Dempster and the Palm Line, the Nigerian Minister of Transport, Raymond Njoku, claimed that one of the main considerations leading to the deal was the issue of training. Njoku claimed that the British companies had the facilities and expertise to prepare Nigerians to eventually take over all aspects of the shipping enterprise. The agreement between the technical partners and the NNSL called for the employment of Nigerians in managerial positions, and the training of Nigerians in seagoing jobs as officers and crewmen.³³

But while efforts towards Nigerianization continued throughout the early years of the NNSL, it would be nearly a decade before Nigerians would command Nigerian ships. The training of officers and captains was a process spanning several years, including both periods of academic study and thousands of hours logged at sea. In addition, only a small percentage of those who applied for training courses met the minimal academic requirements for enrollment.³⁴ Despite these obstacles, the policy of Nigerianization remained a top priority and with each passing year, more Nigerians could be seen in various positions of command on board ships.³⁵ The 1963 Annual Report claimed that the National Line was operating with twelve deck cadets, seven engineer cadets, five radio officers and trainees. Of the seven vessels owned by the company, six were manned by Nigerian chief stewards, and had Nigerians in charge of the purser's department. The sense of urgency could be seen in the report: "This aspect of our policy is being pursued with the utmost vigour. It is our hope that with the training being given to the trainee managers and other personnel it will not be too long before our key posts in our company are Nigerianised."³⁶

For Nigerian seamen, the process of Nigerianization was long overdue. Seamen lobbied for more opportunities to advance in the shipboard hierarchy. Most rank-and-file seamen lacked the educational background to become officers themselves, but they strongly supported policies for training Nigerian officers to command the ships upon which they were employed. From both personal and organizational perspectives, seamen believed that the process of Nigerianization would improve the atmosphere on NNSL ships, as claimed by the Seamen's Union Chairman, Sidi Khayam, in a letter to management in 1959:

We would be immensely impressed, if you accept the application of Nigerianisation and set out a plan for qualified boatswains, Carpenters, Second Stewards, Chief Stewards, Officers and Engineers to eventually take over. This will definitely strengthen the confidence of African Crews towards your company and give us a feeling of more security.³⁷

African crews imagined that the replacement of European officers with Nigerians would spell an improvement in their working lives. But while seamen invested their hopes in this changeover, it soon became evident that racial solidarity did not guarantee harmonious working conditions on board ship. The following section will examine the impact that the Nigerianization of captains and officers had on working relationships on NNSL vessels. This discussion will be largely based on an examination of ship's logs from 1960 to 1985. These daily logs, written by captains, offer a rare view into the dynamics on board the ships. A review of the entries provides an excellent opportunity to examine day-to-day challenges, including technical difficulties, personnel issues, and disciplinary problems. Captains' logs contained detailed information related to incidents on their ships, but they are reflective of captains' perceptions and perspectives. Therefore, the reading of the ship logs must be juxtaposed

against the recollections of the seamen to get a fuller, more complex understanding of shipboard dynamics. Taken together, they offer rich and valuable insights into the impact of indigenization on NNSL vessels.

Ship Culture and Nigerianization

The appearance of Nigerian captains and officers was much anticipated by seamen and, over time, the replacement of European officers and masters with Nigerian did have a noticeable impact on the working cultures, labor hierarchies, and the overall running of the ships. Unlike British officers, many Nigerian captains did not maintain a professional distance between themselves and the rest of the crew. As Captain Alao Tajudeen described it, they were “Family. We were all one family. Although our training required that cadets should not mix with ratings, in Nigerian ships, this was never so.”³⁸ A seaman confirmed this lack of distance between Nigerian officers and crews: “They were all okay. Unlike the British, the Nigerians officer intermingled with the crew.”³⁹

Ships’ logs reveal that the Nigerian captains and officers often took on a fatherly role vis-à-vis their crews. At times, they approached their role not only as commanders, but also as caretakers. This can be seen in the description of an incident on the *River Ogun*, when a trainee carpenter insulted the chief officer. The ship’s log reported:

The Captain stated that from the carpenter’s bar bill, he could see that he drinks too much. He further reminded Mr. Familun that he is merely a trainee carpenter and if he carried on in this manner, he may not succeed in becoming a full-fledged carpenter. He therefore warned him to be of good behavior from now onwards...⁴⁰

Nigerian officers often attempted to provide guidance and support to seamen, as evidenced by a passage in a 1973 logbook of the *King Jaja*. It describes what happened when an assistant engineer, L. Adio, “refused to go on watch as he was found to be drunk and using swear words to Mr. Okwesa, Junior Engineer, and Mr. A.A. Yusuf, 4th Engineer.” In a letter to the captain, the chief engineer wrote, “In my own way I did try very hard to give him sympathetic advices repeatedly to change his behavior because he was already demoted to Asst. Engineer on the vessels of this company.”⁴¹ On the *Oduduwa* in September 1973, the second engineer pleaded with the captain to not take disciplinary action against two seamen who had failed to board the ship when it left Warri, and had to meet it in Sapale a few days later. As reported in the log: “The 2nd engineer having said that they are good workers, both men were severely cautioned and made to understand that any such subsequent behavior will result to severe penalties...”⁴²

Logbooks from the NNSL ships also reveal that Nigerian captains were able to develop a kind of dialogue with their crews, grounded in their shared

cultural background. They could speak to crew members in their native languages, and thus communicate more clearly than the European officers had. The logbook of the *River Majidun* from 1983 provides an example involving a seaman, A. Disu, who could not perform his duties in the galley because of excessive drunkenness. The Captain, who was called in to handle the situation, ordered the unruly Disu to rest in his cabin, but the seaman refused and “poured a torrent of abuses and insults on the Master.” Disu was later called to the captain, and in the presence of the catering officer and crew spokesman, was charged with “being absent from his place of duty, excessive drunkenness on board, disobedience of lawful order and command and action prejudicial to good order and discipline.” The captain read him the charges, and asked Disu if he understood, and when the seaman replied that he did not understand, the captain translated the charges into Yoruba. At that moment, Disu “prostrated [himself] and begged for leniency and forgiveness, that he [did not know what he was doing or saying, or] what he was charged for.”⁴³ The captain decided to fine Disu one day’s pay.

For Nigerian seamen, the move to the National Line was a kind of homecoming, and fostered a feeling of belonging on the ships of the NNSL. At the same time, seamen’s identification with the NNSL ships as their own cultivated a clear sense of entitlement with regard to their status on the vessels. This sense of entitlement emboldened seamen in their interactions with European officers and captains. This can be seen in an incident reported on the *Yinka Folawiyo* in 1976, when the second officer found a crewman, P. Ige, attempting to knock down the door to the chief officer’s cabin:

The 2nd officer found that P. Ige was trying to force the door of the chief officer’s cabin and calling him to come out. The 2nd officer asked P. Ige what he doing. Ige answered that he was celebrating Nigerian Independence Day. Then P. Ige started shouting abuses at the 2nd officer and calling him names: white bastard, you are not our brother, this is a Nigerian ship. The 2nd officer shouted: please keep away from me because you are drunk and don’t know what you are doing. Ige then stated that the 2nd officer takes Nigerian money and therefore, when Ige talks the 2nd officer was to shut up. Ige then hit the 2nd officer in the shoulder with the bottle once and after this with his hands. Whilst hitting the second officer who did not strike back Ige called him a white bastard and other foul words.⁴⁴

Ige was subsequently dismissed from the vessel, and the chief officer refused to sail again with the NNSL. But it was not only the British officers who became targets of crew member’s growing empowerment. Nigerian seamen’s sense of entitlement on NNSL ships also led them to challenge the authority and privileges of Nigerian officers and captains. The sense of ownership onboard inspired some to defy the ship hierarchy, as can be seen in this account in the *River Ogun’s* logbook for 1970:

T. Morron, Able Seaman, entered the chief officer's cabin shouting and complaining about the cleaning of hatches. Mr. Oyewumi, Chief Officer, ordered him out of the cabin and back to work and he replied "fuck you, this cabin doesn't belong to you, it belongs to the whole staff of the National Lines" and continued using abusive language towards the Chief Officer for several minutes.⁴⁵

Particularly when docked in Lagos, where seamen could simply walk off ships and go home to rejoin their families when they deemed the captain's orders unreasonable, their sense of entitlement grew more pronounced. This comparative freedom inspired them to initiate bolder protests against commands they found unfair. For example, a few days before Christmas in 1974, Capt. F. Lemessurier informed the crew of the *Oranyan* that they would be given no time off for the holiday. But once the ship anchored in Lagos on December 23, several seamen and some officers simply walked off the ship; on December 27, the captain reported that he was still awaiting their return.⁴⁶

The atmosphere onboard NNSL vessels reflected seamen's level of comfort, at times leading to a lack of discipline. As rules were slowly relaxed, general discipline began to decline onboard ships. This was apparent even among officers, some of whom disregarded regulations regarding uniforms, requiring the NNSL management to publish the following reminder:

We have observed in the past year a decline in the standards required and/or a neglect on the part of some of our officers to wear the correct company uniform whilst serving in the fleet both afloat and in port. It is, of course, appreciated and accepted that on occasion dirty or uncomfortable work in the course of their various duties necessitates that officers wear boiler suits or other protective clothing. We accordingly advise reasonable cognizance of this fact, but not to the extent it becomes an item of permitted uniform for unjustified purposes.⁴⁷

The breakdown of discipline was often the result of alcohol consumption. Drinking while on duty was a widespread problem, and many of the incidents of insolence and fighting reported in logbooks involved drunk crew members. One noteworthy journey in this regard was on the *Ahmadu Tijani* in 1978, when multiple incidents of drunkenness, fighting, and insubordination were reported in the captain's log. A greaser, Dosunnui, was involved in several incidents that led to serious acts of insubordination and threatened the safety of the ship, as described in the following entry from Antwerp in 1978:

Whilst the crew were being given cash advances, Mr. Dosunnui showed acts of misconduct to the Master whilst under the influence of alcohol. Mr. Dosunnui wanted wages for the rest of the article period paid to him as he claimed he had signed a 6 month agreement and was therefore entitled to wages he had not earned. Attempts by some members of the crew to restrain Mr. Dosunnui failed and he finally took a seat in the Master's day room—claiming he is not a slave and had the right to sit anywhere.⁴⁸

The disregard for authority on Nigerian ships could infuriate the European officers, as in a tense exchange between Fourth Officer Imonikhe and the captain of the *River Benue* in 1976. The fourth officer had ignored the captain's orders to keep anchor watches on the bridge, and was found instead in the saloon eating breakfast. The captain reprimanded him, telling him that if he did not act and behave like an officer he would be demoted. According to the captain's log, Imonikhe "laughed and asked if he was being threatened. He was told that if being reprimanded constituted being threatened, then he was indeed."⁴⁹

The Disempowerment of Seamen

While ship logbooks describe incidents of insubordination among crew members, these records do not document the widespread abuses of power by captains and officers on Nigerian ships. Oral interviews with rank-and-file seamen, on the other hand, revealed a pervasive sense that despite their hopes that Nigerian ships would provide a sense of belonging and security, the reality of employment with the NNSL was a great disappointment. Seamen complained that NNSL ships lacked the discipline and order that characterized European vessels, and this led to problems with maintenance as well as ongoing conflicts between officers and the rank and file. Crews on Nigerian ships also complained that Nigerian captains did not always abide by the conditions of work established in agreements between management and the seamen's union, and instead made arbitrary or self-serving decisions that left seamen feeling exploited or mistreated. Seamen charged that over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, until the liquidation of the NNSL in 1994, Nigerian captains increasingly exploited their positions of power and disregarded seamen's rights and entitlements.

The decline in conditions onboard the ships largely mirrored the broader fate of the NNSL as a failed political project, and the incidents of authoritarianism and arbitrary command must therefore be situated against the backdrop of the broader political history of postcolonial Nigeria. This history is one characterized by ongoing political and economic instability that, over time, led to increasing authoritarian tendencies and corruption on the part of ruling elites.⁵⁰ Some scholars, such as Osaghae, have argued that colonialism introduced a system of law and order based on coercion and authoritarianism, while others have claimed that authoritarian regimes had deep roots in precolonial societies in Nigeria.⁵¹ Despite disagreements over the roots of the phenomenon, scholars largely concur that the postcolonial period has been characterized by increasingly hegemonic tendencies among the ruling classes. The demise of the First Republic in 1966 signified an end to the democratic experiment in Nigeria, and gave way to a succession of military rulers over the next three decades, barring the Second Republic lasting from 1979 to 1983. Military rule increased the abuse of power by members of the ruling classes. As Augustine Ikelegbe has argued, the succession of coups and military dictatorships institutionalized

“authoritarian rule, hegemonic agendas, patrimonialism, clientelism, and repression.”⁵² Against the backdrop of diminishing resources and rising uncertainty, those in power have increasingly turned to draconian methods to maintain their positions.⁵³

The troubled history of the Nigerian National Shipping Line follows this same trajectory. Political and economic circumstances in Nigeria greatly limited the potential for the NNSL to succeed: there was a lack of sufficient resources to operate and expand over time, a profoundly unstable political climate in Nigeria that led to a revolving door of management hirings and firings, and an acute lack of the managerial and technical expertise necessary for running a successful shipping venture. This list of insurmountable challenges brought debilitating instability to the NNSL over time, leading the way to abuses. The NNSL became an easy source of revenue for politicians who bled the company of resources until its liquidation in 1994. The gradual disappearance of resources led to a deterioration of working conditions onboard National Line vessels. Maintenance of ships was disregarded, seamen’s wages were cut, and overtime was not paid. Rank-and-file crew members were largely unable to protect their own interests under these circumstances, while captains and officers were better positioned to exploit opportunities that arose. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, seamen complained that relations with officers became increasingly unpredictable and exploitive.

This dynamic could be seen most clearly around the issue of overtime. Of all the disputes that arose onboard between captains and crews, compensation for overtime was particularly contentious. For seamen, the payment of overtime was one of the principal reasons to forsake the European lines for the NNSL. According to the “Conditions of Service” formulated in 1960, seamen would be paid overtime for anything beyond the standard shift lengths: eight to nine hours on weekdays; six hours on Saturdays, and four hours on Sundays. However, the regulation gave the master a great deal of discretion in determining what constituted overtime work and how it might be compensated. First, seamen were required to work overtime at the master’s command, and thus could not refuse to work extra hours. Furthermore, overtime pay was not required in emergency situations “affecting the safety of the vessel, passengers, crew or cargo (of which the Master shall be the sole judge) or for safety or emergency boat and fire drills.” The declaration of an emergency was often disputed by the seamen, who resented working overtime without supplemental pay.⁵⁴ Other points of contention arose around the form that overtime compensation took. According to the regulation, the ship’s commander was to keep a record of the overtime hours worked by each seaman and determine the compensation he would receive. Compensation was not always in the form of salary, and overtime that was accumulated on sailing days, when the workload was heavier, could be compensated with time-off while in port. As the regulation stated, “Under normal circumstances, but subject always to the Master’s discretion, compensating time-off in port will be limited to overtime hours earned on days of sailing and arrival.”⁵⁵

The agreement therefore gave captains full discretion in determining what was considered overtime and how it would be compensated. This opened the door for many abuses and disputes, particularly as company resources became increasingly scarce. As the NNSL faced increasing indebtedness over the course of the 1980s, seamen were infuriated to discover that overtime work was not being logged or paid by their officers. Conflicts resulted, including this incident chronicled in the *River Ogun's* logbook. A carpenter on the crew insulted the chief officer "with dirty words and refused to work overtime." Following his investigation of the incident, the ship's captain reported that the carpenter had refused to work overtime because his previous overtime had not been approved.⁵⁶ While the ships' logs report the disciplinary actions taken against seamen, they rarely record abuses of privilege and status on the part of officers, including the captains themselves. In interviews, seamen complained that Nigerian captains did not record overtime hours, and in fact, they had little regard for adhering to the standard workday. Seamen often remarked, by way of contrast, that British officers had always kept to a strict schedule. As one explained, "The European captains never give us problem[s]. There was time for everything—there was time for work, food, and so on."⁵⁷ Under the British, another seaman explained, work was more regulated and predictable: "Everything have normal time and hours. When it is your time, you go and work, and when you finish, nobody worry me."⁵⁸

Nigerian officers, on the other hand, asked their crews to work at odd hours without being compensated, many seamen complained. Seamen described their subjugation to the whims of officers, and expressed a feeling of betrayal at the hands of their compatriots:

When we were in National Line, the Nigerian people, captains and officers, made the work very boring for us. For example, there is time for work and time for food, but when everyone had eaten, Nigerian captains, chief engineers and second engineers always came for their own meal at odd hours, for example at night, they woke up the steward at the wee hours of the night to warm food for them and their girlfriends. They bothered the steward a lot. This was not so under E.D. Line, work time was work time, meal time was meal time for the white men, but Nigerian officers called at any time. We worked with National Line as if we were slaves.⁵⁹

Seamen told stories of being humiliated by Nigerian officers and captains who exploited their positions of power and mistreated their crews. Some seamen retaliated by refusing orders:

One Nigerian captain told me that he wanted a crate of beer and he told me to carry it for him. I told him I don't work for him and I can't carry it because he didn't pay me. He told me to clean his room for him, I abandoned it ... One chief engineer (then we had both white and black men), when we were serving he asked for water, I replied that water is there and he said put some in the cup

for me. There I was very angry and I told him that if you are waiting for me to put some water in the cup for you, I will not do it. He insisted on water, I was just looking at him. All other officers who were there laughed and the white captain shook his head.⁶⁰

For some seamen, the experience with Nigerian captains was so disappointing, that they ultimately preferred the British. One rank-and-file crew member explained, "When our people took over, there was relative peace, a short-lived peace, because the way and manner our Nigerian officers spoke to us was forceful, so either you liked it or not, we must do whatever we were told to do, obey first before complaining." When asked if Nigerian bosses were better than the white captains, the seaman continued, "I can't say they were better because they were both educated in the act of seamanship, but the patience the white bosses had, the Nigerian bosses never had it."⁶¹

Nationalization and the Disillusioned Working Class

This review of seamen's experiences in the transition from colonialism to independence has shown that nationalism resonated in specific ways for these members of the working class. The founding of the Nigerian National Line provided seamen with an opportunity to engage with nationalist discourse, and they did so within the context of their working lives. Seamen's vision of postcolonial society was in stark contrast to that of the political elite, and reflected what Fox and Miller-Idriss have referred to as "everyday nationhood." As they wrote, the nation is "the practical accomplishment of ordinary people engaging in routine activities."⁶² Thus, for seamen, "Nigeria" was found on ship menus and in work routines.

It has been shown that seamen's vision of the National Line was not matched by its reality, and the appearance of black captains and officers did not bring what seamen had hoped would be a lasting harmony to NNSL ships. Rather, interviews with seamen and a review of ship logs revealed that the process of Nigerianization was uneven and contradictory. Seamen had anticipated a sense of coming home when they boarded NNSL vessels, and initially enjoyed a feeling of empowerment and entitlement on their national ships. But over time, the lines of authority on NNSL ships were blurred and crossed, leading to a breakdown in discipline and order. Although seamen contributed to the undermining of hierarchy and authority, they were also most vulnerable to these lapses in order, as officers and captains were able to exploit their positions of power for their own benefit. In the eyes of the crew, the uncertainty and instability of relations onboard NNSL vessels gave birth to new injustices.

Just as seamen had linked their nationalist allegiance to the context of their working lives, so too did they see the failures of the NNSL as symbolic of the failed national project of Nigeria. Therefore, conflicts with Nigerian captains and officers, and a deep disappointment with working conditions on NNSL ships, led to a deeper disillusionment with postcolonial reality. Under these

circumstances, it is not surprising that some rank-and-file seamen expressed a romantic longing for the predictability and stability of colonial ships:

In E.D. Line, we worked according to the law and when you do that you are better-off but in the National Line anything could happen. Lack of discipline ... Even British ship officers used to taunt us that between British officers and Nigerian officers, who is better? Really, we were happy that we had our fellow Nigerians as captains and ship officers but they maltreated us.⁶³

Some seamen came to romanticize the relationships they had with the British officers, and these testimonies are powerful indictments of the National Shipping Line as an anticlimax to the seamen's nationalist aspirations. Much of the literature on the shortcomings and failures of nation-building in postcolonial Nigeria focuses on political instability and ethnic conflicts. Little attention has been paid to the ways in which the working classes experienced these disappointments in the context of labor. This investigation into the ways in which seamen experienced indigenization deepens our understanding of the disillusionment that characterized working-class engagements with decolonization in postcolonial Nigeria.

NOTES

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1. See, for example, Leslie L. Rood, "Nationalisation and Indigenisation in Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 14 (1976): 427–47; Stephanie Decker, "Building Up Goodwill: British Business, Development and Economic Nationalism in Ghana and Nigeria, 1945–1977." *Enterprise and Society* 9 (2008): 602–13; Ernest J. Wilson, "Strategies of State Control of the Economy: Nationalization and Indigenization in Africa." *Comparative Politics* 22 (1990): 401–19; Adeoye A. Akinsanya, *The Expropriation of Multinational Property in the Third World* (New York, 1980).

2. In the case of Nigeria, indigenization has been interrogated and evaluated mostly at the level of public policy and political ideology. See, for example, Chibuzo Ogbuagu, "The Nigerian Indigenization Policy: Nationalism or Pragmatism?" *African Affairs* 82 (1983): 241–66; Paul Collins, "Public Policy and the Development of Indigenous Capitalism: The Nigerian Experience," *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 15 (1977): 127–50; Adeoye Akinsanya, "The Power Structure in Nigeria and the Indigenization of the Economy," *Pakistan Horizon* 47 (1994): 63–79; Fiona C. Beveridge, "Taking Control of Foreign Investment: A Case Study of Indigenisation in Nigeria," *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 40 (1991): 302–33; Michael Adejugbe, "The Myths and Realities of Nigeria's Business Indigenization," *Development and Change* 15 (1984): 577–92.

3. Interviews conducted for this study were carried out in Nigeria over the course of three research trips from 2007–2011. More than seventy interviews with former seamen, seamen's wives, officers, and captains were conducted.

4. Diane Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers since the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool, 1999), 27.

5. Marika Sherwood, "Strikes! African Seamen, Elder Dempster and the Government 1940–1942," in *Ethnic Labour and British Imperial Trade: A History of Ethnic Seafarers in the UK*, ed. D. Frost, (London, 1995), 130.

6. It was reported that British companies alone employed over seventeen hundred Nigerian seamen. Seamen were drawn largely from the coastal region of Nigeria, although

there were also recruits from inland areas, and most major ethnic groups were represented among both the crews and officers. Merseyside Maritime Museum, 4C 1908 Nigerian Union of Seamen 1959–1962, Meeting notes, November 1, 1959. See also Report of the Board of Enquiry into the Trade Dispute between the Elder Dempster Lines Limited and the Nigerian Union of Seamen. Lagos: Federal Government Printer, 1959.

7. Report of the Board of Enquiry into the Trade Dispute between the Elder Dempster Lines Limited and the Nigerian Union of Seamen. Lagos: Federal Government Printer, 1959.

8. Report of the Board of Enquiry into the Trade Dispute between the Elder Dempster Lines Limited and the Nigerian Union of Seamen. Lagos: Federal Government Printer, 1959: 4–5.

9. See Lynn Schler, “Transnationalism and Nationalism in the Nigerian Seamen’s Union,” *African Identities* 7 (2009): 387–98; Lynn Schler, “Becoming Nigerian: African Seamen, Decolonisation, and the Nationalisation of Consciousness,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11 (2011): 42–62.

10. Anthony Hopkins, “Economic Aspects of Political Movements in Nigeria and in the Gold Coast 1918–1939,” *Journal of African History* 7 (1966): 133–52.

11. The speaker was Chief T. T. Solaru in the House of Representatives. See Charlotte Leubuscher, *West African Shipping Trade, 1909–1959* (Leiden, 1963), 67–68.

12. Okechukwu C. Iheduru, *The Political Economy of International Shipping in Developing Countries* (Newark, DE, 1996), 53.

13. Leubuscher, *The West African Shipping Trade*, 66.

14. Ayodeji Olukoju, “A ‘Truly Nigerian Project?’: The Politics of the Establishment of the Nigerian National Shipping Line (NNSL), 1957–1959. *International Journal of Maritime History* 10 (2003): 69–90.

15. Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, mss/292/9663/1, Conditions of Service for West African Seamen, 1960.

16. See for example, Interview with Lawrence Miekumo, Lagos, Nigeria, December 27, 2007; Interview with Festus Adegunle Akintade, Lagos, Nigeria, December 24, 2007; Interview with Daniel Ofudje, Lagos, Nigeria, January 14, 2008.

17. Interview with Muritala Olayinka ali-Balogun, Lagos, Nigeria, December 15, 2007.

18. Interview with Festus Adegunle Akintade, Lagos, Nigeria, December 24, 2007.

19. Interview with Anomorisa Johnson, Lagos, Nigeria, January 22, 2011.

20. Interview with Jimmy Bessan, Lagos, Nigeria, July 3, 2011.

21. Interview with Kojo George, Lagos, Nigeria, December 27, 2007.

22. For a longer discussion of seamen’s organized protests in the colonial era, see Lynn Schler, “Transnationalism and Nationalism in the Nigerian Seamen’s Union,” *African Identities* 7 (2009): 387–98.

23. Interview with Daniel Ofudje, Lagos, Nigeria, January 14, 2008.

24. Interview with Patric Pereira, Lagos, Nigeria, January 24, 2011.

25. Interview with Muritala Olayinka all-Balogun, Lagos, Nigeria, December 15, 2007.

26. Interview with Gold Agbodobiri, Lagos, Nigeria, January 24, 2011.

27. Interview with Anomorisa Johnson, Lagos, Nigeria, January 22, 2011.

28. Interview with John Larry, Lgos, Nigeria, January 20, 2008.

29. Interview with Adebowale Adeleye, Lagos, Nigeria, December 16, 2007.

30. Merseyside Maritime Museum, 2247 J. Joyce 1959–1961, Notes of meeting on Nigerian Crew matters, September 4, 1959.

31. Merseyside Maritime Museum, 2247 J. Joyce 1959–1961, Notes of meeting on Nigerian Crew matters, September 4, 1959.

32. Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, mss/292/966.3/1, Report on the m.v. *Dan Fodio* crisis, August 12, 1960.

33. Merseyside Maritime Museum, 2247 J. Joyce 1959–1961, Minister of Transport Njoku, House of Representatives Debates, 17 August 1959.

34. Merseyside Maritime Museum, 2247 J. Joyce 1959–1961, NNSL Board meeting notes, 27 October 1959.

35. Basseyy Udo Ekong, “Survival Opportunities and Strategies of a Marginal Firm in Cartelized Oligopoly: Case Study of the Nigerian National Shipping Line.” PhD dissertation, Department of Marketing and Transportation Administration, Michigan State University, 1974: 328.

36. Bassey Udo Ekong, "Survival Opportunities and Strategies of a Marginal Firm in Cartelized Oligopoly: Case Study of the Nigerian National Shipping Line." PhD dissertation, Department of Marketing and Transportation Administration, Michigan State University, 1974: 329.
37. Merseyside Maritime Museum, 1908, Khayam to Crews Manager, 27 October 1959.
38. Interview with Capt. Alao Tajudeen, Lagos, Nigeria, 23 January 2011.
39. Interview with Jimmy Bessan, Lagos, Nigeria, 3 July 2011.
40. Ship's Log Book: *M.V. River Ogun*, 25.9.80, entry: 4.4.81 at sea: 5.4.81.
41. Ship's Log Book: *M.V. King Jaja*, 31.10.73, entry: 26.3.74 Liverpool.
42. Ship's Log Book: *M.V. Oduduwa*, 20.8.73, entry: 16.9.73 N.A.: 17.9.73.
43. Ship's Log Book: *River Majidum*, 30.9.82, entry: 5.4.83.
44. Ship's Log Book: *Yinka Folawiyo*, 24.5.76, entry: Date and place unknown.
45. Ship's Log Book: *M.V. River Ogun*, 2.4.70, entry: 17.7.70 Calabar.
46. Ship's Log Book: *Oranyan*, 4.4.74, entry: 27.12.74 Lagos Bar.
47. Ship's Log Book: *M.V. King Jaja*, N/A, entry: 3.1.69 Avonmouth.
48. Ship's Log Book: *MV Ahmadu Tijani* 14.2.78, entry: 31.5.78 Antwerp.
49. Ship's Log Book: *M.V. River Benue*; 21.7.76, entry: 22.12.76.
50. Eghosa E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1998), 19.
51. Albert, Isaac Olawale. "Problems of democratic governance in Nigeria: the past in the present." Paper prepared for presentation at the Triennial History Workshop on Democracy: Popular Precedents, Popular Practice and Popular Culture, " University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, July 13–16, 1994.
52. Augustine Ikelegbe, "The perverse manifestation of civil society: evidence from Nigeria." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 39.1 (2001): 1–24:7.
53. Eghosa E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence* (Bloomington, ID, 1998), 313.
54. Ship's Log Book: *M.V. River Oji*, 11.12.80, entry: 20.4.81 Port of Abidjan.
55. Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick, mss/292D/966.3/1, Conditions of Service for West African Seamen, 1960.
56. Ship's Log Book: *M.V. River Ogun*, 25.9.80, entry: 4.4.81 at sea: 5.4.81.
57. Interview with Pa Agbaosi, Lagos, Nigeria, 15 December 2007.
58. Interview with John Razaal, Lagos, 24 January 2011.
59. Interview with Ari Festus, Lagos, Nigeria, 24 December 2007.
60. Interview with Lawrence Miekumo, Lagos, Nigeria, 27 December 2007.
61. Interview with Adebowale Adeleye, Lagos, Nigeria, 16 December 2007.
62. Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood," *Ethnicities* 8.4 (2008): 536–63: 537.
63. Interview with Ari Festus, Lagos, Nigeria, 24 December 2007.