

Disrupting Tradition: Colonial Rule and Criminality in Northern Nigeria, 1900–30

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Abstract

This article examines how British rule disrupted precolonial socio-cultural systems, reshaping patterns of criminality in Northern Nigeria in the period between 1900 and 1930. Focusing on property and economic offences, it utilizes archival records, colonial reports and oral traditions to reconstruct local experiences. While colonial officials represented crime in terms of disorder or moral decline this article argues that property and economic crimes evolved not from deviant behaviour, but as adaptive responses to structural disruptions by British colonial rule. As the discussion will show, the imposition of new taxation, monetization and legal systems reconfigured economic life and social relations. Colonial regulatory efforts redefined certain activities as criminal and thus reshaped the criminal landscape. By relating criminality to processes of disruption and adaptation, this article repositions crime as a lens for understanding the social consequences of colonial rule. It also contributes to broader historiographical discussions on agency, transformation and everyday responses in colonial Africa.

The establishment of British colonial rule in Northern Nigeria in 1900 brought significant changes to the traditional social, cultural, political and economic structures that people relied on to manage their livelihoods and responsibilities.¹ As these structural changes occurred, colonial officials increasingly perceived instances of theft, fraud as well as other property and economic crimes as indicators of moral decline or native disorder, interpreting them as matters of deviance rather than as results of socio-economic disruption.² This perspective overlooks how colonized people coped with, negotiated and adapted to the changes and constraints that colonial rule imposed on them. This article seeks to address this issue by interpreting acts of criminal behaviour in relation to the impacts of colonial rule.

Many studies have examined colonial rule and its fundamental disruption of pre-existing systems. Barbara Bush, Mason Michael, Robert W. Shenton and Gareth Austin have shown how colonial taxation, forced labour, the monetization of the economy and the restructuring of land tenure altered access to resources and livelihoods.³ Scholars such as Walter Rodney, Mahmood Mamdani, Henk Wesseling and Yusuf B. Usman have examined these shifts from a political perspective,

¹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London, 2018); Patrick Ziltener, Daniel Künzler and André Walter, 'Research note: Measuring the impacts of colonialism: A new data set for the countries of Africa and Asia', *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 23/1 (2017), pp. 156–90.

² David Killingray, 'The maintenance of law and order in British Colonial Africa', *African Affairs*, 85/340 (1986), pp. 411–37; Thomas Martin, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940*, 1st edn (Cambridge, 2012).

³ Barbara Bush, 'Taxation in West Africa: Transforming the state and the individual, 1900–1940', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 32/1 (2004), pp. 93–123; Mason Michael, 'Working on the railway: Forced labor in Northern Nigeria, 1907–1912', in Peter C. W. Gutkind, Robin Cohen and Jean Copans (eds), *African Labor History* (London, 1978); Robert W. Shenton, *The Development of Capitalism in Northern Nigeria* (Toronto, 1986); Gareth

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demonstrating the insubordination of local rulers under colonial rule.⁴ Michael Watts and Moses E. Ochonu have highlighted the profound and often destabilizing impact of colonial economic policies on communities in Northern Nigeria, emphasizing how coercive taxation and labour demands generated widespread socio-economic strain. Their works help us understand the conditions that fostered adaptive criminal behaviours even before the full onset of the Great Depression.⁵ Although these studies document the scale of structural transformations, they frequently overlook the effects on daily behaviour, particularly the emergence of property and economic crimes. My article addresses this limitation by providing a nuanced understanding of the historical development of criminal behaviour in a colonial context.

Existing scholarship shows that policing and legal institutions in colonial Africa primarily served to consolidate colonial authority through coercion and social control. In different ways, David Killingray, Tekena N. Tamuno, Philip T. Ahire, Laurent Fourchard and Julian Go have shown that colonial policing functioned as an instrument of enforcing colonial rule, maintaining order and regulating populations through surveillance, exclusion and racial bias.⁶ While Fouchard emphasizes the policing of urban populations, Go traces the militarized and racialized nature of modern policing in Britain and the United States to imperial rule. Similarly, Martin Chanock and Richard Roberts demonstrate that colonial administrations reshaped customary law to strengthen their authority, although Africans also strategically used colonial judicial institutions to pursue their own interest.⁷ Collectively, these studies emphasize colonial perceptions of crime but devote less attention to indigenous adaptations. They also underrepresent property and economic crimes in Northern Nigeria, which often extended beyond local communities and affected colonial administrators, indigenous authorities and the native population.

This article focuses on Northern Nigeria, with an emphasis on the years between 1900, when the Northern Nigeria Protectorate was proclaimed by the British, and 1930, a time when several factors – from the global depression to domestic unrest – destabilized colonial rule.⁸ It examines property and economic crimes in this period as adaptive responses to the structural pressures of colonial governance. The colonial reorganization and disruption of economic systems, legal structures and social institutions introduced new pressures that altered behavioural patterns and expanded criminal activities beyond the boundaries of pre-colonial communities. The

Austin, 'From commodity to colonial currencies in West Africa: Introduction', *African Economic History*, 53/1 (2025), pp. 1–20.

⁴ See Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*; Henk Wesseling, *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880–1914* (Westport, CT, 1991); Yusuf Bala Usman, *The Transformation of Katsina, 1400–1883: The Emergence and Overthrow of the Sarautu System and the Establishment of the Emirate* (Zaria, 1981).

⁵ Michael Watts, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine, and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria* (Berkeley, CA, 1983); Moses E. Ochonu, *Colonial Meltdown: Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression* (Athens, OH, 2009).

⁶ Killingray, 'The Maintenance of Law and Order'; Tekena N. Tamuno, *The Police in Modern Nigeria 1861–1965: Origins, Development and Role* (Ibadan, 1970); Philip Terdoo Ahire, *Imperial Policing: The Emergence and Role of the Police in Colonial Nigeria, 1860–1960* (Milton Keynes, 1991); Laurent Fourchard, *Classify, Exclude, Police: Urban Lives in South Africa and Nigeria* (Newark, NJ, 2021), pp. 25–62; Julian Go, *Policing Empires: Militarization and Race in Britain and America* (Oxford, 2023), pp. 1–52.

⁷ Martin Chanock, *Law, Custom, and Social Order: The Colonial Experience in Malawi and Zambia* (Cambridge, 1985); Richard L. Roberts, *Litigants and Households: African Disputes and Colonial Courts in the French Soudan, 1895–1912* (Portsmouth, NH, 2005).

⁸ On the Great Depression and Nigeria, see, for example, Moses Ochunu, 'Conjoined to empire: The Great Depression and Nigeria', *African Economic History*, 34 (2006), pp. 103–45; Moses Ochunu, 'Critical convergence: The Great Depression and the meshing of Nigerian and British anti-colonial polemic', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 43/2 (2009), pp. 245–1; Daniel Olisa Iweze, 'Women's protests against colonial taxation in the Eastern Provinces of Nigeria', in Korinna Schönhärl, Gisela Hürlimann and Dorothea Rohde (eds), *Histories of Tax Evasion, Avoidance and Resistance* (London, 2022), pp. 115–34.

article positions criminality as an essential element within the broader framework of African strategies for managing foreign rule.

In exploring how colonialism disrupted societal structures in Northern Nigeria, the article moves beyond the simplistic dichotomy of 'tradition' versus 'modernity'. These terms carry significant implications that can impede understanding when perceived as a simple shift from an immutable past to a Westernized present.⁹ I view 'tradition' not as a static pre-colonial state but as a vibrant and politically meaningful blend of Islamic and local institutions that British indirect rule reinterpreted and transformed in Northern Nigeria. Consequently, this article views modernity as a contested claim to political and administrative legitimacy. This study demonstrates that colonial disruption did not solely eradicate Northern Nigerian traditions; rather, colonial rule enforced the incorporation of Northern Nigerian traditions into the colonial modern structure.

Methodologically, this article uses archival documents from the National Archives in Kaduna alongside oral history evidence to reconstruct the nature and patterns of criminal behaviour and societal responses in colonial Northern Nigeria. While the archival materials reflect official opinions shaped by colonial administrative priorities, oral accounts offer insights into how local communities experienced, interpreted and remembered these events. It is worth noting that the oral accounts are not direct eyewitness testimonies from the early colonial era. Instead, they represent forms of knowledge passed down through generations and preserved in family stories and community traditions.¹⁰ In numerous regions of Northern Nigeria, the history of the colonial era has been passed down by elders who either witnessed these changes first-hand or received stories from those who did. Consequently, individuals born at or after the end of the colonial period, such as those who were interviewed for this study, rely on inherited stories that embody collective memory rather than personal experience. These narratives are critically combined with archival evidence, enabling triangulation and aiding the recovery of aspects of social life and local interpretation that are frequently missing from colonial records. Moreover, a significant limitation of this study is that the archival records, which were primarily created by the colonial authorities, focus predominantly on men and offer limited insights into women's roles in crime and law enforcement. Although this article uses oral sources to supplement archival data, such material only partially mitigates the imbalance.

This article adds to broader conversations and insights into human adaptation, societal change and the effects of colonial rule by demonstrating how people responded to structural challenges. It proceeds in several steps: it begins by exploring the precolonial authority and colonial administrative disruption in Northern Nigeria, followed by a discussion of changes in the landscape of the pre-colonial criminal system. The discussion continues by examining the upheaval in the socio-economic order and then explores property and economic crime as adaptive practices.

Precolonial authority and colonial administrative disruption in Northern Nigeria

Northern Nigeria was governed by the Sokoto Caliphate, the Borno Empire and independent areas. Usman Dan Fodio established the Sokoto Caliphate after the 1804 jihad, organizing emirates such as Katsina, Kano, Zaria, Bauchi and Ilorin under emirs who reported to Sokoto. The Borno Empire operated a centralized system under

⁹ Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), pp. 113–49.

¹⁰ See Jan Vansina, 'Oral tradition and its methodology', in Joseph Ki-Zerbo (ed.), *General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory*, vol. 1 (Portsmouth, NH, 1981), pp. 142–65, at p. 143.

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the Shehu, supported by a council, and combined Kanuri traditions with Islamic law, with the Chima system overseeing rural administration. Society was hierarchical, and the state relied on taxes and trade tolls, while officials like the Talba handled judicial and policing roles. Independent regions, though less centralized, relied on priests, masquerades and ancestral authority to enforce rules and punish offenders through reparations, ostracism or slavery.¹¹

Crime is a phenomenon that exists and evolves within and across different societies, and different social settings or groups often use cultural lenses to perceive and describe it. Therefore, human behaviour or character and its acceptability serve as determinants of what is considered a crime within a social structure.¹² Despite its diversity, precolonial Northern Nigeria developed organized systems, particularly with regard to social regulation, governance and economic order, through customary and religious institutions. Leaders exercised authority in settings where kinship structures existed, and religious authorities and norms regulated social life, mediated disputes, and facilitated economic transactions, all of which operated within communal and moral structures.¹³

As with other societies, precolonial societies understood and defined misconduct or criminal acts through socio-cultural or religious perspectives, in which the societal and political context determined whether a given behaviour was deemed acceptable or criminal.¹⁴ Local customs restricted most criminal activities and their corresponding punishments to the immediate area, without extending to other communities that were not structured under the same socio-political and economic frameworks that shaped their criminal justice system.¹⁵ However, intercommunal crimes, such as highway robberies, banditry and slave raids, were more widespread before the arrival of the British.¹⁶ Firearms were already in use and held considerable symbolic importance as artifacts in precolonial societies such as Hausaland and Borno in Northern Nigeria.¹⁷

One of the key features of the region is religion, particularly Islam, which was the dominant religion shaping the region's broader space. This is important because understanding how local communities established their precolonial structures is crucial. For instance, in the criminal justice system, *Alkali* or Islamic courts, which operated in Muslim-dominated areas, the officials referred murder or manslaughter cases to the central chief (Emir). Islamic criminal law focused on individual wrongs, and the most common means of redressing offences were fines, flogging, amputation and damage.¹⁸ The *Dogarai*, as the precolonial police,

¹¹ Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (New York, 1967); Ibrahim Maina Waziri, *The Chima Fiefdom System in Kanem-Bornu and Its Transformation into District Head Administration in British Borno, Northern Nigeria (19th and 20th Centuries)*, Joseph C. Miller Memorial Lectures Series, vol. 16 (Berlin, 2023), pp. 10–16.

¹² Abdulrahman Bello Dambazzau, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 2nd Edition (2nd edn; Ibadan, 2011), pp. 6–29.

¹³ Michael G. Smith, *Government in Zazzau, 1800–1950* (Oxford, 1960).

¹⁴ Ronald Burns, 'Culture as a determinant of crime: An alternative perspective', *Environment and Behavior*, 32/3 (2000), pp. 347–60; and Nicola Lacey, David Soskice and David Hope, 'Understanding the determinants of penal policy: Crime, culture, and comparative political economy', *Annual Review of Criminology*, 1/1 (2018), pp. 195–217. On precolonial African societies, see, for example, Taslim Olawale Elias, *The Nature of African Customary Law* (Manchester, 1956); Peter O. Nwankwo, *Criminal Justice in the Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial Eras: An Application of the Colonial Model to Changes in the Severity of Punishment in the Nigerian Law* (Lanham, MD, 2010); Rotimi Kemi, *The Police in a Federal State: The Nigerian Experience* (Lagos, 2001), pp. 1–3.

¹⁵ Oral interview with Nuhu Jabboa former clergyman (aged 88 at the time), at Rafin Zurfi, Bauchi', 10 October 2023 (all oral interviews cited in this work were conducted by the author, and the audio recording and transcripts remain in author's possession); C. A. Woodhouse, 'Some account of the inhabitants of the Waja District of Bauchi Province, Nigeria Part II', *African Affairs*, 23/91 (1924), pp. 110–121, at p. 194.

¹⁶ Charles William James Orr, *The Making of Northern Nigeria* (London, 1965), p. 137.

¹⁷ Saheed Aderinto, *Guns and Society in Colonial Nigeria: Firearms, Culture, and Public Order* (Bloomington, IN, 2018), pp. 29–34.

¹⁸ Author's interview with Nahu Jabbo; Charles Kingsley Meek, *The Northern Tribes of Nigeria: An Ethnographical Account of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria Together with a Report on the 1921 Decennial Census* (London, 1971).

performed functions such as capturing and disciplining offenders, guarding towns, preventing crime and executing justice with punishments such as mutilation and death.¹⁹

Colonial authorities reshaped crime in Northern Nigeria by directly engaging with and dismantling the existing systems they found. The British significantly altered the region's governance structure by integrating it into their colonial system beginning in 1900. Under this objective, Frederick Lugard, then High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria and later on Governor-General of Nigeria, resolved to preserve the Islamic faith practised in the region's emirate areas for centuries. Lugard based this decision on the religion's significance to existing societal structures and its potential to support colonial interests.²⁰ However, later developments indicated that these assumptions were brief misunderstandings. Because the region's socio-economic and political systems were incompatible with the British 'modern' paradigm, colonial officials readjusted the structures to conform to the tenets of colonial administration.²¹ For instance, the British regarded officeholders such as the *Waziri* (*Vizier*), who served as the emir's principal administrator, the *Ma'aji* (treasurer), and the Alkali (Chief Justice) as integral to the system of indirect rule.²² In contrast, authorities considered positions such as *Sarkin Bayi* (slave officials) and *Sarkin Yaki* (military commander) obsolete, with an intent to modify the system.²³ Lugard expressed it as follows:

Our endeavour since the occupation has been to break down this system, which led to much maladministration, illegality, and extortion. It has been sought to create coadunate districts by a reallocation of villages and, further, to insist upon the permanent residence of district heads within the areas told off to them.²⁴

Lugard revamped the existing structure while preserving the administrative system of the emirate. Under British oversight, it included the emir, his advisors and district leaders who managed various districts. Below them were village chiefs responsible for governing the villages in the districts.²⁵

Colonial officials regarded the independent areas as primitive and uncivilized due to lack of centralized political structures that could aid in governance, despite the presence of established socio-economic activities.²⁶ Therefore, they devised strategies to consolidate groups with linguistic similarities under selected paramount chiefs and cultivate support for influential headmen capable of governance.²⁷ The gradual nature of this process demonstrates that the indigenous population reluctantly accepted the administrative approach. For instance, the persistent resistance to British rule in the plateau regions stemmed from the indigenous population's unfamiliarity with

¹⁹ Rotimi Kemi, 'The N. A. Systems and Security in the Northern and Western Regions of Nigeria', in Abdalla U. Adamu (ed), *Chieftaincy and Security in Nigeria Past, Present and Future* (October 2003), p. 61.

²⁰ Obaro Ikime, 'The British in Bauchi, 1901–1908: An episode in the British occupation and control of Northern Nigeria', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 7/2 (1974), pp. 271–91, at p. 273; Alan Burns, *History of Nigeria* (London, 1972), pp. 74–5.

²¹ Ikime, 'The British in Bauchi', p. 273.

²² Frederick Lugard, 'Memo. 2 – Books, returns and office records of political officers' (revised, 1916), in Frederick Lugard, *Political Memoranda: Revision of Instructions to Political Officers on Subjects Chiefly Political and Administrative, 1913–1918* (3rd edn; London, 1970), pp. 41–61, at pp. 54–5.

²³ Percy Girouard (as High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria), *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1907–8* [= *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 594*] (London, 1909), p. 29.

²⁴ Frederick Lugard, *Report by Sir F. D. Lugard on the Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria and Administration, 1912–1919* (London, 1920), p. 14.

²⁵ Author's interview with Mathew Joro, a former member of prison staff (aged 70 at the time), 28 September 2023 at Sabon Layi, Bauchi.

²⁶ Alan Burns, *History of Nigeria* (London, 1948), p. 184.

²⁷ Girouard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1907–8*, p. 30. See also Paul E. Lovejoy and Jan S. Hogendorn, *Slow Death for Slavery: The Course of Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897–1936* (New York, 1993), p. 181.

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the caliphate's socio-political structure, which the British administration introduced through indirect rule.²⁸

For proper control, the colonial state created a structure with two complementary tiers: the central and provincial tiers. The central colonial authority comprised the Governor, an advisory council, a legislative council, the judiciary, the police, as well as a military contingent that governed the entire territory of Northern Nigeria from Lagos. The second tier of government consisted of provinces, headed by provincial colonial officials called Residents and supported by District Officers. The provincial level also had its own judiciary, police and Native Administration (NA).²⁹ The government established provincial administrations in all major towns and emirate centres, assigning colonial Resident officials to each province and demarcating existing jurisdictions.³⁰ The conception of provinces in the colonial period was to decentralize these territories into functional units, thereby shifting decision-making power from the central government for political, administrative, economic and social reasons.³¹

The colonial authorities used pre-existing institutions to implement the indirect rule system, administering provinces in cooperation with traditional rulers, and designated the NA.³² With its police, courts and treasury, the NA appeared suitable for maintaining law and order and became the mainstay of colonial rule in Northern Nigeria. In Northern Nigeria, an indirect rule system was established because the political staff would have struggled to connect with the local population under a colonial system that permitted direct leadership. European officers lacked adequate knowledge of the local culture and political systems.³³ Britain's personnel inadequacies, financial constraints, communication issues and insufficient expatriate staff led to the adoption of indigenous ruling hierarchies and service assistants, both of which were crucial to the survival of colonial rule.³⁴

Changes in indigenous governance and the integration of native rulers into the colonial system made them far less accountable to the populations they governed on behalf of colonial authorities, including the criminal justice system. The impact of the indirect rule system was the creation of what Mamdani calls 'decentralised despotism', primarily in rural areas, thereby separating subjects from citizens in urban areas.³⁵ British officials subordinated indigenous authorities partly through taxation and control of native treasuries, a significant aspect of indirect British rule in Northern Nigeria.³⁶

²⁸ Shenton, *The Development of Capitalism in Northern Nigeria*, p. 22.

²⁹ Philip Atsu Afeadie, *Brokering Colonial Rule: Political Agents in Northern Nigeria, 1886-1914* (Saarbrücken, 2008), p. 12.

³⁰ Frederick Lugard (as High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria), *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902* [= *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 409*] (London, 1903), p. 52; Ehiedu E. G. Iweriebor, 'State systems in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Nigeria: An overview', *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale Di Studi e Documentazione Dell'Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente*, 4/37 (1982), pp. 507–13, at p. 507; Z. O. Apata, 'Lugard and the creation of provincial administration Northern Nigeria 1900–1918', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 21 (1992), pp. 111–23, at p. 113.

³¹ Joseph R. A. Ayee, 'Provincial governance in Africa: The Ghanaian experience', *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee/Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America*, 44/3 (2011), pp. 409–21, at p. 409.

³² Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, p. 51; Iweriebor, 'State systems', p. 509.

³³ Adiele Eberechukwu Afigbo, 'The consolidation of British imperial administration in Nigeria: 1900–1918', *Civilisations*, 21/4 (1971), pp. 436–59, at p. 438.

³⁴ Philip Afeadie, 'Reforms in Katsina and the Kano government crisis of 1908', *Research Review*, 27/2 (2012), pp. 75–111, at p. 76.

³⁵ Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, p. 186.

³⁶ Obaro Ikime, 'The British and Native Administration finance in Northern Nigeria, 1900–1934', *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 7/4 (1975), pp. 673–92, at p. 674.

Shifting the landscape of the precolonial criminal justice system

The introduction of British indirect rule retained some courts and gradually changed the pre-existing system.³⁷ Key in this regard were the 'Courts Proclamation' and the 'Native Courts Proclamation No.5' of 1902.³⁸ The court proclamation established a Supreme and Provincial Court, with the Supreme Court having original and appellate jurisdiction over all non-natives and cantonments. Colonial authorities designed the law to support their presence and uphold colonial peace rather than to ensure the rule of law.³⁹ The Supreme Court had concurrent jurisdiction with the Provincial Courts, and the Cantonment Magistrate served as the Supreme Court's Commissioner.⁴⁰ The authorities established provincial courts to control and administer the provinces and guard against non-native activities.⁴¹ The Residents headed the provincial courts, administered English law, and dealt with crimes under specific Protectorate laws, such as those in the 'slavery', 'liquor', 'extortion', 'firearms' and 'personation' proclamations, then prevalent.⁴²

The colonial administration retained the native courts and directed the Residents to guide and improve the native rules. It considered the court system in Northern Nigeria, especially the Alkali court, to be an excellent means of administering justice in native societies, particularly in civil cases. Highly educated men who had a deep understanding of the law's impartiality and supremacy presided over the courts, which operated in most large towns in the north.⁴³ Thus, by 1902, the British considered the Alkali courts as suitable native judicial institutions, which had been utilizing the Islamic legal frameworks for Muslim communities in the precolonial period, while building a distinct system for the non-Muslims.⁴⁴ The establishment of a native court under British rule reduced the authority of the emir and chief alkali courts, particularly their power to try murder cases.⁴⁵ This development and these changes reduced Islamic jurisprudence to the status of customary law, with Residents supervising their activities.⁴⁶

The Residents allowed the native courts to carry out sentences under their supervision to ensure that punishments were just and humane. The Resident had the authority to decide on the court's final injunctions or punishments, although officials did not incarcerate prisoners of native courts in British prisons.⁴⁷ However, the emir appointed the *Alkali* (Judges) only with the approval of the Resident and conferred punishments exclusive of mutilation and torture, which were repugnant to humanity and to natural justice. There were questions about flogging as punishment in the colonial period, which were pre-colonial practices, raising concerns about humane

³⁷ Saladin Haruna, 'Oral Interview at Yelwa, Bauchi', by author, 29 October 2023.

³⁸ Anthony C. Diala, 'A butterfly that thinks itself a bird: The identity of customary courts in Nigeria', *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, 51/3 (2019), pp. 381–405, at pp. 385–6.

³⁹ Killingray, 'The maintenance of law and order', p. 4.

⁴⁰ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, p. 71.

⁴¹ I. M. Okonjo, *British Administration in Nigeria, 1900–1950: A Nigerian View* (New York, 1974), p. 37.

⁴² Frederick Lugard (as High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria), *Northern Nigeria: Report for the Period from 1st January, 1900, to 31st January 1901* [= *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 346*] (London, 1901), p. 16. For comments on legislation and chances to existing ordinances, see also Frederick Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1901* [= *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 377*] (London, 1903), pp. 24–6. See Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, for remarks on the supervision of the courts by the British Residents (p. 76) as well as two tables on admissions into the gaol and the nature of crimes (p. 95).

⁴³ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, p. 75.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 34 and 75.

⁴⁵ Yushau Sodiq, *A History of the Application of Islamic Law in Nigeria* (Cham, 2017), pp. 73–4.

⁴⁶ Gunnar J. Weimann, *Islamic Criminal Law in Northern Nigeria: Politics, Religion, Judicial Practice* (Amsterdam, 2010), p. 17; Sodiq, *A History of the Application of Islamic Law*, pp. 39–40.

⁴⁷ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, p. 76.

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punishments through flogging. Steven Pierce has noted that both the native and provincial courts frequently overstepped their authority by administering excessively severe floggings and issuing flogging sentences for offences that did not legally warrant such punishment.⁴⁸ Colonial officials did not consider the people's traditional understanding of crime and control when bringing about these changes.⁴⁹ The colonial Resident officer promoted colonial policy and interests by establishing and sustaining native courts to control crimes such as bribery, extortion and inhuman punishment within the colonial regime.⁵⁰

The British prohibited some Islamic and indigenous forms of punishment, including mutilation and trials by ordeal, along with their associated penalties, which people believed provided a strong framework for controlling crimes in the pre-colonial period using statutory legislation. For instance, the British outlawed slavery, which was also part of the pre-existing system of punishment for an offence.⁵¹ Changes in the native criminal justice system extended beyond procedural reforms, including reforms to modify homicide laws and the addition of new offences. Colonial authorities aimed to abolish unacceptable penalties, such as amputation and stoning to death, and close loopholes that hindered the proper punishment of criminals under Islamic law.⁵² Islamic criminal law oversees land disputes, robbery, manslaughter and other crimes in markets. However, the colonial government used native courts and their criminal systems to prohibit or regulate bribery, mutilation and the imprisonment of convicts.⁵³

The Resident Officers headed the provincial courts, and the *Alkali* headed the native courts. In this case, two principal NA officials led the court. The emir was responsible for all criminal cases, whereas the *Alkali* piloted civil cases. Colonial government limited native courts to civil and minor criminal cases because of the abolition of mutilation punishment. The government emphasized decency and humanity in the administration of imprisonment, limiting the courts' powers until they proved that former abuses had ceased. It is worth noting that the British did not allow the officials to execute death sentences without the consent of the Residents.⁵⁴ The colonial government regulated penalties and fees imposed by native or *Alkali* courts. At the initial stage of colonial rule in the region, Lugard commented on flogging as a common punishment that native courts inflicted on men and women, claiming that 'It is usual to allow the condemned to buy his lashes, which is commonly done. The infliction was often humane, the rule being that the flogger must retain cowries under his armpit, which prevents the infliction of a severe blow.'⁵⁵ At this stage, Lugard was careful not to tamper with existing punishments. Residents allowed native courts to execute their sentences under their supervision to ensure that sentences were neither unjust nor inhumane. Officials did not confine any prisoners to a British prison, and the executive responsible for executing punishments was to be 'fully responsible for the justice of the sentence'.⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Steven Pierce, 'Punishment and the political body: Flogging and colonialism in Northern Nigeria', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 14/2 (2001), pp. 153–84.

⁴⁹ Rudolph Peters, *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law: Theory and Practice from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 120.

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Nuhu Jabbo.

⁵¹ Alan Milner, 'Sentencing patterns in Nigeria', in Alan Milner (ed.), *African Penal System* (London, 1969), pp. 261–91, at p. 263.

⁵² Peters, *Crime and Punishment in Islamic Law*, p. 115.

⁵³ Auwalu H. Yadudu, 'Colonialism and the transformation of the substance and form of Islamic Law in the Northern States of Nigeria', *Journal of Law and Religion*, 9/1 (1991), pp. 17–47, at pp. 26–34.

⁵⁴ Frederick D. Lugard (as High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria), *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1904* [= Colonia Reports – Annual, No. 476] (London, 1905), p. 83.

⁵⁵ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, p. 76.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Nevertheless, enforcing native courts posed a dilemma due to the ethnic and religious diversity in the independent areas, and Lugard expressed concerns about implementing such a law in non-Muslim areas.⁵⁷ Although he considered modifying the native courts Proclamation to meet the requirements of these areas, concerns remained about appropriate mechanisms for crime and punishment.⁵⁸ Lugard saw these ethnic groups as 'lawless' and suggested that '[a]mong these tribes, it is my policy to centralise authority, as far as may be, in a recognised chief, and to introduce the civilising agency of trade, while repressing all inter-tribal quarrels'.⁵⁹ This seemed to work at an early stage, but with little progress, while the authorities planned to engage future political officers to oversee the system's implementation.⁶⁰

The colonial administration issued the native courts proclamation to address the challenge of implementing native courts in non-Muslim or decentralized societies, necessitating modifications to meet their conditions.⁶¹ Consequently, the provincial administration introduced a plurality of criminal law regimes: native courts handled issues or cases in Muslim areas or communities. In contrast, magistrates and higher courts applied English criminal law used in non-Muslim regions, which were considered native.⁶² Native courts in non-Muslim areas comprised joint chiefs with limited judicial authority. Despite their limited judicial authority, they possessed extensive knowledge of the locality, people and traditional tribal customs, making them difficult to replace. The authorities did not force Muslim and non-Muslim communities to follow Islamic courts. However, in mixed-population districts, non-Muslim assessors sat with the *Alkali* in cases involving non-Muslims because of the close connection between religion and law for Muslims.⁶³ Relatedly, the village headmen in independent areas directed and supervised summonses. The courts established in independent districts were initially unsatisfactory to the colonial regime.⁶⁴

Upheaval in the socio-economic order

The colonial administration described the pre-existing taxation system in Northern Nigeria as the 'arbitrary and tyrannical levies of the past' that rulers collected.⁶⁵ The pre-existing tax revenue included *zakka* on grain, *jangali* (cattle tax), *kudin sarauta* (accession duty), *gado* (death duties) and *gaisuwa* (gifts). The emirs initially collected these dues and tributes from the towns and villages under their control, often in the form of goods and enslaved individuals, as they represented a more substantial source of income for the emirs.⁶⁶ In 1904, the government of Northern Nigeria implemented the Land Revenue Ordinance, and the Residents in the provinces reassessed the tribute, rent or dues each village should pay to the overlord based on its actual taxable capacity, modifying the pre-existing structure.⁶⁷

⁵⁷ Frederick Lugard, 'Memo. No. VIII – Native Courts' (1916), in Lugard, *Political Memoranda*, pp. 265–93, at pp. 270–8.

⁵⁸ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, pp. 75–6.

⁵⁹ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for the Period from 1st January, 1900, to 31st January 1901*, p. 29.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶² Victor L. K. Essien, 'The Northern Nigerian penal code: A reflection of diverse values in penal legislation', *NYLS Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 5/1 (1983), pp. 87–102, at p. 88.

⁶³ Burns, *History of Nigeria*, pp. 250–1.

⁶⁴ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, p. 45.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

⁶⁶ Orr, *The Making of Northern Nigeria*, p. 118.

⁶⁷ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, p. 52.

Under the new order, the Emirs and chiefs collected and paid a quarter of the revenue to the government, and they divided the remaining one-third to one-fourth between personal income and public project expenditure, thereby establishing the native authority treasury system in Northern Nigeria.⁶⁸ As an initial step, they suppressed and ended the *gaisuwa*, sustained the *kudin sarauna* and fixed the *Jangali* at 1s per head of cattle by 1904.⁶⁹ Orr has argued that the rulers resented colonial rule because of the ruin it would bring to their income;⁷⁰ however, it also significantly affected their authority over tax management. The introduction of the indirect rule system maintained tax collection, established a capitalist monetary structure and compelled the native administration to fulfil its obligations to the colonial authority.⁷¹

Instances such as the colonial administration's introduction of caravan tolls or taxes illustrate the reduced control native authorities had over the system – a stark contrast to their dominance in the pre-colonial period. The district and village heads collected taxes and handed them over to the emir, who retained the emirate's share and gave a portion to the government.⁷² The British justified colonial taxation on the grounds that it would stimulate industry and agriculture, allowing farmers to produce surpluses and pay taxes, thereby exploiting the peasantry, who had to grow cash crops to pay them.⁷³ Lugard stated in 1904 that the tax reform would provide steady revenue to the native authorities, thereby reducing peasant oppression and curtailing past warfare and raids. He predicted that these arrangements would have broader benefits: 'closer touch between the administration and the native chiefs and people will be promoted, and native rule, supported and supervised by Government, can be made.'⁷⁴

Colonialism introduced significant changes by monetizing the economy, particularly with the introduction of coinage. While the indigenous economy had its own methods of exchange, the colonial system replaced iron, cowries and gold, integrating them into the colonial capitalist economic system.⁷⁵ The introduction of coinage to replace cowries further strengthened the monetization of the economy, and the authorities persuaded traders to pay their taxes in coins (shillings). Wage labour mainly occurred through forced labour and, subsequently, through colonial authorities' imposition of taxes payable only in British currency.⁷⁶ To consolidate taxation in the area, the colonial government ensured that the natives took up wage employment, especially in the mines, to pay the tax they could, with the Residents supplying labour.⁷⁷ Hence, traders demanded currency from government officials and soldiers, and the police asked to pay for food and other local products in the new currency.⁷⁸ For instance, the Niger company in charge of the mines in Bauchi was discouraged from paying labourers by money order but encouraged to pay them in cash so that labourers would be more likely to pay taxes.⁷⁹ This was because, by

⁶⁸ Olujemi R. Ekundare, *An Economic History of Nigeria 1860-1960* (London, 1973), p. 107.

⁶⁹ Frederick Beckles Gall, *Nigeria Northern Provinces; Gazetteer of Bauchi Province* (London, 1920), p. 23.

⁷⁰ Charles William James Orr, *The Making of Northern Nigeria* (Frank Cass & Company Ltd, 1965), p. 149.

⁷¹ Author's interview with Nuhu Jabbo.

⁷² Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1904*, p. 13.

⁷³ Ibrahim M. Jumare, 'Colonial taxation in the capital emirate of Northern Nigeria', *African Economic History*, 26 (1998), pp. 83–97, at p. 86.

⁷⁴ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1904*, p. 15.

⁷⁵ Ahire, *Imperial Policing*, p. 18.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Olasiji Oshin, 'Developing infrastructure of exploitation: The example of colonial transport on the Bauchi tin fields, 1902–1914', *Transafrican Journal of History*, 17 (1988), pp. 123–38, at p. 126.

⁷⁸ Orr, *The Making of Northern Nigeria*, p. 148.

⁷⁹ Oshin, 'Developing infrastructure of exploitation', p. 127.

1907, tax collection had declined, and the colonial government needed to increase the circulation and acceptance of European currency.⁸⁰

The British subordinated indigenous authorities to British officials primarily through tax administration and the control of 'native treasuries', a significant aspect of British indirect rule in Northern Nigeria.⁸¹ Political structural changes promoted the colonial capitalist economy, and the Native Administration was central to it. Lugard aimed to transform Northern Nigeria through his anti-slavery crusade, modelling it on the post-manumission British West Indies, where formerly enslaved people worked on plantations and the caliphate aristocracy became wage-paying landowners.⁸² The government based the colonial economy on land for agriculture and mining, determining product prices and taxes. People paid these taxes in British currency after selling locally produced goods, thereby helping to circulate the new currency.⁸³

Property and economic crime as adaptive practice

Property and economic crimes in colonial Northern Nigeria did not manifest in a singular form, nor did they arise from a uniform set of motivations or causes. Crimes such as theft in its various forms, fraud and embezzlement of government funds became prevalent. The present section of the article demonstrates the overlap among distinct yet interconnected patterns of crime committed by native administrative officials (many of whom had privileges that colonial law subsequently criminalized), the police and the general populace, highlighting subsistence-driven crimes linked to taxation and economic pressure across broader territorial spaces. Although these categories are analytically distinct, they were all influenced by the broader structural disruptions introduced by colonial rule. This reconfigured economic life, legal authority and social relations, bringing people initially under different socio-economic structures under a single colonial system.

Generally, crime and control evolve in response to societal changes, shaping people's reactions as socio-political structures shift, leading to socially desirable and undesirable consequences.⁸⁴ Colonial rule in Northern Nigeria disrupted socio-cultural settings, precipitating numerous structural changes, creating new opportunities and pressures and reshaping criminal activities. The codification of native laws demonstrated the influence of colonialism, despite the institution of an indirect rule system to govern the areas. This was because the colonial government prioritized establishing power through crime control to maintain peace throughout the period.⁸⁵ Authorities consistently modified pre-colonial practices, creating restrictions on certain practices and establishing police forces and courts to enforce them.⁸⁶

The transition from self-sufficient farming and trading to participation in colonial markets intensified the economic strain on the population, leading to increased poverty and social upheaval.⁸⁷ Ochonu notes that these economic pressures, intensified by colonial taxation and market integration, contributed to social disruption and new

⁸⁰ Girouard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1907–8*, p. 44.

⁸¹ Ikime, 'The British and Native Administration finance', p. 674.

⁸² Shenton, *The Development of Capitalism in Northern Nigeria*, pp. 24, 29.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 50–3.

⁸⁴ Uwe Ewald, 'The effect of social changes upon crime', in Louise Shelley and József Vigh (eds), *Social Changes, Crime and Police* (London, 2023), pp. 35–7.

⁸⁵ Killingray, 'The maintenance of law and order in British colonial Africa', p. 413.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Lovejoy and Hogendorn, *Slow Death for Slavery*, pp. 202–15.

forms of economic struggle even before the Great Depression.⁸⁸ According to the colonial report of 1905, 'slave dealing, robbery with violence, stealing in the various forms known to the law, and extortion, generally accompanied by intimidation or impersonation' became prevalent in Northern Nigeria.⁸⁹ Islamic jurisprudence in Northern Nigeria once fully legitimized and regulated practices such as slaveholding; colonial law subsequently criminalized these practices. Legal redefinitions were significant aspects of the broader colonial project of classifying and excluding certain populations or practices.⁹⁰

When colonial authorities reclassified these practices as crimes, they forced local actors to adapt, often continuing them clandestinely or finding new avenues for economic survival. The disruption of tradition challenged the authority of the pre-existing leadership and affected people's economic and social well-being, creating a strong link between their financial conditions and criminal tendencies. People without sufficient financial means felt stressed, tense and discontented, increasing their likelihood of engaging in unlawful behaviour.

Consequently, crimes, particularly property and economic offences such as currency counterfeiting, burglary, extortion, theft, fraud, embezzlement and arson, evolved from violations of colonial administrative structures.⁹¹ Theft, particularly at night, increased, with incidents reported as early as 1905 in townships such as Zaria, Bauchi and Gombe, as well as in a few district centres. The criminals primarily targeted European settlements, focusing on British properties, suggesting a greater perception of wealth and opportunity rather than money, as little currency was available aside from colonial officials' pay.⁹² In certain regions where the currency became widely used, it was evident that criminals were eager to obtain it, and counterfeiters demonstrated their skill in producing counterfeit currency. Reports indicated that '[t]he issue of coppers has also created a great suspicion of our silver coinage of the higher values, owing to the large number of counterfeit coins which have got into circulation in the shape of tinned pennies and halfpennies, and which are passed on the more ignorant natives as one and two shilling pieces'.⁹³ The counterfeiters added milled edges to the copper coins to enhance their deception, and for the local blacksmiths, who were present in every village, applying a tin coating was simple.⁹⁴

As people began to understand the utility of money in meeting their needs, their desire to acquire more currency increased, and the incidence of theft also increased. According to the 1905 colonial report,

Three hundred and sixty-one persons were tried for slave-dealing, or other offences against the laws for the suppression of slavery, as against 318 during the previous year; 100 for highway or other robbery, as against 120; and 278 for extortion or impersonation or other similar offences, as against 274 during the previous year. Of the 2,928 persons tried for criminal offences during the year, 2,400 were convicted.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Ochonu, *Colonial Meltdown*, pp. 27–9, 49.

⁸⁹ Frederick Lugard (as High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria), *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1905–6* [= *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 516*] (London, 1907), p. 21.

⁹⁰ Fourchard, *Classify, Exclude, Police*.

⁹¹ National Archives Kaduna, Secretariat Northern Province 6/79: 'Prevalence of theft in Bauchi; Orders to police/resident', 1907.

⁹² Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, p. 94.

⁹³ William Wallace (as High Commissioner of Northern Nigeria), *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1906–7* [= *Colonial Reports – Annual, No. 551*] (London, 1907), p. 42.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1905–6*, p. 110.

Although the colonial authorities attributed the early spike in criminal records, as seen above, to the wonderful activities of the police, the desire to steal colonial currency became evident even among government police. As early as May 1905, government police guards Momo Gani and Moma Lere in the Bauchi Province stole two mint boxes, each containing £250, from the twelve treasure boxes they were posted to safeguard at night.⁹⁶ In addition, police constable Isa Kano, deployed in charge of taxes, received £12 7d 3s in caravan taxes and absconded with the money.⁹⁷ These incidents emphasize how the influence of new currency and its associated value created novel opportunities for economic crime, consistent with the adaptive response. The High Commissioner acknowledged the new currency's impact on the increase in theft incidence when he mentioned in his letter to the Resident of Bauchi that 'it is only of late that since cash currency began to become popularised that the natives [had] realised the value of specie and that this epidemic of theft [had] broken'.⁹⁸

The introduction of coinage around 1907 further monetized the economy, gradually replacing indigenous exchange items such as iron and cowries.⁹⁹ The shift from kind to cash in 1909 accelerated the consolidation of taxation to raise revenue for colonial and native administrations. It was generally understood that every man or strong adult in the territory should pay direct tax; authorities granted exemptions to women and some *mallams* (Islamic teachers).¹⁰⁰ This development further unsettled conventional economic practices and prompted the development of new economic frameworks to sustain livelihoods. The authorities coerced traders and workers into paying taxes in coinage (shillings), the British currency.¹⁰¹ The requirement to pay taxes in cash created unrestrained movement of people to other areas of the region to search for paid jobs, acquire currency to survive and pay taxes, placing excessive pressure on rural communities, which often lacked sufficient cash income to meet their tax obligations, serving as a motivation for increased economic crimes such as fraudulent activities and tax avoidance.¹⁰² Some individuals could not secure paid employment or pay taxes, leading them to flee to other locations and making them susceptible to theft or tax evasion. This direct pressure to acquire currency, often unavailable in rural areas, or to flee, caused significant strain and compelled some individuals to engage in this form of crime as an adaptive strategy.¹⁰³ Police reports demonstrate cases of people leaving their areas due to tax avoidance. Reports indicated that Mallam Umaru left Yadakunya in Kano Province to evade taxes, and his whereabouts remained unknown.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, the chiefs observed the tradition in which their subjects brought gifts when visiting or paying annual homage as symbols of loyalty and respect and enjoyed the privilege of having their subjects work on their farms. Considering it extortion, corruption and an illegal levy, the colonial authorities stopped this practice. An issue that became a problem between Resident Howard and Emir Hassan of Bauchi was the emir's farms in various districts and the district heads' provision of labourers to

⁹⁶ National Archives Kaduna, Secretariat Northern Province 9/1991: 'Theft of government money by police sentries at Bauchi' (1905), p. 1.

⁹⁷ National Archives Kaduna, Secretariat Northern Province 6: 'Official correspondence, 1904–1912', p. 110: Feilding J. Cargill, Resident of Kano Province, to William Wallace, 19 November 1906.

⁹⁸ National Archives Kaduna, Secretariat Northern Province 9/1991: 'Theft of government money by police sentries' (1905), p. 4.

⁹⁹ Ahire, *Imperial Policing*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁰ Author's interview with Nuhu Jabbo.

¹⁰¹ Ahire, *Imperial Policing*, p. 18.

¹⁰² Orr, *The Making of Northern Nigeria*, p. 119; Holger Weiss, 'Migrations during times of drought and famine in early colonial Northern Nigeria', *Studia Orientalia*, 95 (2003), pp. 1–30, at p. 3.

¹⁰³ Author's interview with Nuhu Jabbo.

¹⁰⁴ National Archives Kaduna, Secretariat Northern Province 9/1630: 'Police Department Report (Annual)', 1914.

14 DISRUPTING TRADITION

Table 1 Property crimes from 1913 to 1919.

Year	No. of Criminals Convicted
1913	97
1914	63
1915	136
1916	195
1917	152
1918	246
1919	781

Source: Police Department Annual Reports, Secretariat Northern Province 9/3723, National Archives Kaduna.

work on them, which Howard considered forced labour.¹⁰⁵ The Revenue Proclamation also stated that no emir or chief should collect any present or item without paying for it, considering such an act a breach of duty and thus a form of corruption. Thus, they sentenced Yakubu, the son of Usman, the District Head and Sarkin Yaki, to a twelve-month prison sentence after he accepted cattle as a gift from his subjects.¹⁰⁶ This case highlights how traditional practices, once legitimate, were criminalized under colonial rule, forcing Indigenous leaders to adapt to modified legal structures or face punitive measures, which further stimulated economic crimes.¹⁰⁷

Among the common people, there were cases of unidentified individuals visiting villages, posing as colonial representatives, and extorting and coercing villagers into handing over livestock, poultry and crops.¹⁰⁸ These criminals occasionally threatened to use military force against people if they failed to meet their demands. Lugard acknowledged that ‘the offence of “personation” and of extortion in the name of the [colonial] Government’ was resulting in ‘an incalculable amount of oppression and misery’, and maintained that ‘[t]he uncomplaining acquiescence of the people and their extraordinary credulity encourage this form of crime’.¹⁰⁹ Lugard’s position highlights bias in colonial records, where official narratives attribute criminal susceptibility to indigenous credulity rather than systemic colonial vulnerabilities. Such crimes hinged on criminals’ motivation to utilize the colonial system, making it difficult for people who were the victims to verify the authenticity of impersonators and report them to the authorities.

Significantly, people participated in road and building construction, and colonial documents recorded the names of the engaged labourers and the taxes they paid.¹¹⁰ This pushed people from rural to urban areas to seek jobs, stimulating urbanization, and many in rural areas continued to engage in agriculture to pay taxes. This spurred significant migration of people seeking diverse fortunes, fuelling criminality, and led to continued increases in property and economic crimes from 1915.¹¹¹ While reports of burglaries and robberies were prevalent in many townships in the region, Table 1 shows a rising number of property crime incidents in the provinces of Kano, Bauchi, Nupe, and Zaria, with theft predominant. From 1913 to 1914, there was a reduction;

¹⁰⁵ Ikime, ‘The British in Bauchi’, p. 285.

¹⁰⁶ National Archives Kaduna, Secretariat Northern Province 6, 17/168P: ‘Bauchi Province Administration of through the Native Administration’, 1909, Secretariat Northern Province 6, 17/168P.

¹⁰⁷ National Archives Kaduna, Bauchi Native Authority records: ‘Criminal and doubtful characters etc., wanted properties stolen or lost: File 13’, 1943.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ For these quotes, see, respectively, Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for 1902*, p. 72; and Lugard, *Northern Nigeria: Report for the Period from 1st January, 1900, to 31st January 1901*, p. 11.

¹¹⁰ National Archives Kaduna, BAUPROF 728: ‘General tax and Jangali’, 1935.

¹¹¹ National Archives Kaduna, SNP 9/2244: Police Department Annual Report for Northern Nigeria, 1915, p. 11.

however, from 1915 to 1919, there was no decrease. For instance, the number increased by more than 200% in 1919 compared to 1918, demonstrating how people navigated the colonial system, which changed their traditions through criminality.

Furthermore, under colonial rule, infrastructural development, including railways, led to the emergence of railway-related crimes. Railway stations and coaches in the region experienced a high rate of theft, especially of railway materials, such as metal sleeper keys. Theft was motivated by the activities of blacksmiths, triggered by the gradual introduction of European metals into Northern Nigeria, which posed challenges for the blacksmithing industry, including a scarcity of local metals.¹¹² This criminality, which emerged from the strains of negative experiences, such as the scarcity of local metals and the advent of railways, shifted blacksmiths' attention toward European metals, leading to the theft of sleeper keys on railway lines.¹¹³ From 1917 to 1918, authorities apprehended sixty-nine individuals and found them guilty of crimes such as theft and possession of railway keys and sleepers.¹¹⁴ In the Bauchi Light Railway Section, officials reported the loss of 3365 sleeper keys in 1923, rising to 5491 in 1924.¹¹⁵ According to reports, a blacksmith named Bala Makeri instructed his children and associates to go to Barikin Buguda in Jos District to steal iron. Apart from the theft of iron, there were cases of theft of ploughing cows, which accounted for many of the theft cases. The colonial reports reported that 'in recent years, there has been a considerable amount of stealing of mixed farming (and probably other) cattle around Lanzai in Bauchi Province'. People sold these items, including animals, to obtain currency.¹¹⁶ To show how colonial currency influenced these developments, the authorities also labelled individuals who did not pay taxes as criminals, and people increasingly sought alternative means to access currency and evade taxes. In this regard, the colonial state used mechanisms such as taxation and currency controls to classify individuals and exclude them from economic or social legitimacy if they failed to conform.¹¹⁷

Such crimes continued to spread to rural areas, marking a significant shift as organized crime groups emerged and employed various strategies.¹¹⁸ Socio-economic developments in labour as a factor of production, mining, agriculture, currency, export trade and transportation systems, such as roads and railways, provided avenues for the development of crime. The transition from self-sufficient farming to participation in colonial markets intensified the economic strain on the population, leading to increased poverty and social upheaval. This situation further exacerbated economic conditions and the prevalence of unlawful activities, including livestock theft and cross-border smuggling. These illicit practices emerged as individuals sought ways to avoid taxation or generate income through illegal channels.¹¹⁹

Despite this development, significant urban growth and population shifts occurred as individuals left rural areas to seek employment in cities. By the 1920s, reports stated that there were instances where '[i]mmigration from French territory into the

¹¹² Shehu Tijjani Yusuf, 'The incidences of theft of railway metals in colonial Northern Nigeria', *Afro Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, 2/2 (2011), pp. 1–23, at pp. 5–7.

¹¹³ Author's interview with James Dangana, age 74, a retired civil servant, on 5 December 2023 at Wuntin Dada, Bauchi.

¹¹⁴ Yusuf, 'The incidences of theft', p. 12.

¹¹⁵ National Archives Kaduna, Secretariat Northern Province 9/3581: 'Police Department Northern Provinces Annual Reports', 1925, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ 'Criminal and doubtful characters', p. 40.

¹¹⁷ Fourchard, *Classify, Exclude, Police*.

¹¹⁸ 'Criminal and doubtful characters', p. 8.

¹¹⁹ Jumare, 'Colonial taxation', p. 95.

Adamawa Province has increased'.¹²⁰ In such instances, the opening up of new areas by railways was a factor. By 1930, the construction of roads and buildings connecting major towns had invigorated this movement, leading to notable expansion in these towns and a surge in activity among the native population.¹²¹ During this period, metropolitan areas such as Kano, Jos, Katsina, Maiduguri and Zaria emerged as focal points.¹²² The influx of people strained urban facilities and led to the growth of unofficial settlements that became breeding grounds for crime, a pattern mirrored in the urban colonial context, as documented by scholars such as Laurent Fourchard.¹²³ Ochonu's analysis of the Great Depression period further illuminates how widespread economic distress profoundly intensified these migratory patterns and their associated social dislocations, contributing to an escalation of urban criminality.¹²⁴

In these situations, thefts, break-ins and fraudulent business activities became increasingly prevalent.¹²⁵ Individuals resorted to criminal activity as a means of survival and negotiation, employing it as an adaptive strategy to preserve their existence and independence within a colonial system designed to limit them. When considered collectively, these diverse types of property and economic crimes did not exhibit a single pattern of criminal behaviour but rather a range of adaptive strategies shaped by different positions within the colonial system. In this context, criminal activities in Northern Nigeria were not simply acts of defiance but rather adaptations to evolving societal structures under colonialism.

The patterns of property and economic crimes in colonial Northern Nigeria reflect broader themes in British West Africa and, in some ways, align with parts of Southern Africa, such as Malawi and Zimbabwe. In both regions, colonial legal systems redefined indigenous practices by criminalizing customary behaviours and reshaping social relations through indirect rule. Chanock highlighted how colonial authorities manipulated customary law to consolidate power and exclude groups, a process mirrored in Northern Nigeria, where native courts lost autonomy and traditional punishments were abolished or modified.¹²⁶ However, Northern Nigeria's adaptive criminality emerged from structural disruptions, paralleling wider West African dynamics in which colonial-era socio-economic and political changes stimulated new crime categories.

Conclusion

This article has traced how the colonial disruption of pre-colonial structures in Nigeria led to the emergence of economic and property crimes from 1900 to 1930. Disruptions in the political, criminal justice and economic orders changed the traditions of the people, eclipsing certain behaviours under English criminal law. Changes to the precolonial administrative system reduced the authority of native officials to monitor and regulate certain practices, such as taxation and gifts they received. The introduction of a new currency for tax payments pushed people to take paid jobs, as colonial authorities considered tax evasion a crime. The colonial government tampered with and transformed the criminal justice system, imposing absolute punishment on offenders in the colonial period. This led to crimes such as

¹²⁰ K. L. Hall (Acting Senior Assistant Secretary), *Nigeria: Report for 1926* [= *Colonial Report – Annual, No. 1335*] (London, 1927), p. 10.

¹²¹ Gall, *Nigeria Northern Provinces*, p. 19.

¹²² Lovejoy and Hogendorn, *Slow Death for Slavery*, pp. 218–19.

¹²³ Fourchard, *Classify, Exclude, Police*, pp. 55–61.

¹²⁴ Ochonu, *Colonial Meltdown*, pp. 81–4.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹²⁶ Chanock, *Law, Custom, and Social Order*, pp. 52–6.

housebreaking, burglary, extortion, stealing, false pretences and embezzlement. The pattern of criminal activity, which was a response to the changes brought about by the colonial regime, indicates that it spread beyond local boundaries, affecting both indigenous leaders and their constituents.

Criminal activity in colonial Northern Nigeria arose from various pressures, including adverse experiences, resource scarcity and the disintegration of essential social connections. Colonial rule and the disruption of indigenous systems for administering justice led to an increase in uncontrolled criminal activities, stimulating the pervasiveness of crime as people moved to other places to commit crimes. The transformation of crime during the colonial period demonstrates that people unconsciously responded to the disruptions caused by colonialism. These developments arose from frustrations with the colonial economic system, which pushed people to negotiate changes. It inadvertently exacerbated crime, affecting colonial administrations, Indigenous leaders and their communities. As society changed, crime increased and altered, and in this context, crimes in Northern Nigeria were not simply acts of deviance but adaptive responses to colonial societal and structural changes.

Instead of viewing criminal acts solely as signs of disorder or administrative failure, property and economic offences revealed how colonial subjects reacted to and managed structural disruptions. This perspective challenges narratives that centre on state control, emphasizing instead how local actors employed adaptive strategies as they interacted with evolving economic, political and social structures. As this article has suggested, crime is not a marginal aspect of colonial history: it is crucial to understanding the social impacts of colonial rule and allows us to trace everyday forms of adaptation, negotiation and agency.

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