MANAGING WARTIME SHORTAGES: THE SALT PALAVER IN THE OKIGWE DIVISION OF EASTERN NIGERIA, 1939-1945

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Introduction

This paper is a case study of the inadequacies of the British colonial government in Nigeria during the World War II. It contends that shortages and frequent changes of political officers caused administrative lapses and insufficiency culminating in the dissatisfaction many Nigerians felt during the war. The study x-rays the management of the distribution of salt which was in short supply in the Okigwe Division of Eastern Nigeria.

Staff Shortages

As for the colonial administrative personnel, two changes, on the average, were made in the apex of the administrative set-up of the Division (i.e. the District Officer) annually during the war. Even more frequent changes were made of the European subordinates of the District Officer - Cadets and Assistant District Officers. In 1940, when the office of Cadet would seem to have been phased out, three different officers served in that capacity between January and September. This meant that officers scarcely had time to settle down in their new stations and understudy the problems there in order to contribute to their solution before they were posted out. On personnel shortage, it is seen that the central administration of the Division was manned by a District Officer based at Okigwe, an Assistant District Officer in Orlu and a handful of African staff (usually not more than six at a time) who acted as clerks, interpreters and treasurers. So serious was the each area to make orders providing for "regulating or prohibiting the production, treatment, keeping, storage, movement, transporta-tion, distribution, sale, purchase, use or consumption of articles of food in any

description and in particular for controlling prices at which such articles may be sold". 10 Section 142 of the same regu-lation provided that any person who failed to comply with any order, request or direction by a 'competent authority' shall be guilty of an offence. Under section 222 of the regulation a person guilty of an offence against any of the provisions of the regulation shall

(a) On summary conviction be liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year or to a fine not exceeding five hundred pounds or to both such imprisonment and such fine.

(b) On conviction before a judge, be liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years or to a fine not exceeding five hundred pounds, or to both such fine and such imprisonment. [11]

Based on the principle of devolution of powers highlighted above, the Assistant Food Controller, Owerri Province (of which Okigwe Division was part) on 13th September 1941 issued an order which among other things provided that no person shall hoard or keep quantities of salt over forty pounds in weight except under permit by the competent authority.[12] Exercising the powers conferred on him as the competent authority in Okigwe Division the District Officer on 4th June 1943 issued a public notice which among other things warned that "any person who I have reason to suspect of hoarding salt shall be liable to have his premises searched and any salt found there impounded and sold at factory prices i.e. 6s:2d for a 40 lb bag and 12s:6d for a 90 lb bag".[13]

Prior to the war, Britain was, almost exclusively the source of imported salt in Igboland. With the outbreak of the war and the subsequent problems of production and supply, other sources had to be found. The new sources included Egypt, South Africa, and Spain. Though salt from these sources helped increase available stocks, they did not have a corresponding effect on the demand and supply equation. This was mainly as a result of the peoples negative attitude towards salt imported from these places. The people for the most part preferred English salt which they believed was of the best possible quality. This attitude was not, unfortu-nately, based on objective criteria - since many of the rejected brands were of equally good

quality sometimes better than the English. This was especially the case with South African salt. It was perhaps in recognition of this fact that this brand was more expensive than the English. That this was so was confirmed by the Resident Owerri Province in a telegram of 19th November 1941 to the District Officer Okigwe. In the said telegram he noted that "... South African salt better grade than English with less water content". He therefore advised that "... where possible firms should sell two bags conjointly for retail ... and where no English salt was available, firms should hold up sales of South African salt ..." [14] to enable him arrange diversion of English salt from Burutu to Port Harcourt.

This fact unfortunately was unknown to most traders and consumers alike. Many of the former, following the rejection of the new brands by the latter refused to take delivery of their allo-cations unless they were 100 percent English salt. Since a dealer, according to the distribution arrangement, was not allowed to take fresh deliveries until he showed evidence of collection and proper sale of earlier supplies, there arose an odd situation where there was congestion in warehouses and shortages in markets simulta-neously. As a way out of this morass the administration devised a means of forcing the unpopular brands on the people. Under the arrangement each dealer was compelled to take one bag of Spanish salt for every two bags of the English brand. This tactic helped ameliorate the situation but not without eliciting deep seated but unspoken resentment of the people.

Salt was also imported unbagged as part of the strategy for contained patent flaws is by understanding government's ulterior motives. As we have already noted, the motive behind govern-ment's intervention in the distribution of salt and other essential items was primarily the desire to make some money for the fund-ing of the war, though it flaunted the notion that it sought to protect consumers. As part of this strategy prices of the affected goods were hiked. In the case of salt, a 40 lb bag which attracted a factory price of 6s:2d was raised to 8/-. As for the 90 lb bag, it rose from 12s:6d to 15s:6d. These increases may seem modest and the amount accruing from them insignificant. But when the general price index, the

standard of living and the number of bags invol-ved are taken into consideration, two conclusions became inevit-able. The first is that the increases represented a substantial but unnecessary hike of the cost of living. The second is that since the demand for salt is inelastic (i.e. cannot be significantly varied in response to prices) the arrangement contributed significantly to the funding of the war.

Local Manipulations and Manoeuvres

Many of the indigenous people discovered very early that government had ulterior motives in intervening in the salt trade and so devised ingenious ways of benefitting like the government, from the trade. Many of them seeing the connection between the war and the salt trade often referred government officials to their contributions to the win-the-war efforts while applying for permits to trade in salt. A few examples will suffice here. Messers. I.M. Nwemch and M.N. Igwilo, both traders at Okigwe while applying jointly for a permit informed the D.O. that "since the war began we have been active, doing the best we can to help the British Empire win the war by contributing money, propaganda missions and encouragement of others to do well in defence of freedom, justice and peace". [27] Though the D.O.'s response to this request is not known, he reacted promptly and positively to the request of another group brandishing similar credentials. This was a group of teachers of C.M.S. School Anara represented by their head-master Mr. E.O. Iwuchukwu. The group hinged its request on its willingness to produce palm kernel for export to Britain. They asked for jute bags for packing the kernel and salt for their own use. Approval was promptly granted them to purchase a bag of salt from the Native Authority store Okigwe. Some others based their application for preferential treatment on their contributions to the Red Cross Society which they cleverly saw as being linked directly with the war. To others the performance of the civic duty of payment of tax was enough qualification for a salt permit. Those who made these linkages realised that the tax they paid aided the war efforts. Thus one Sam. O. Anugwom, an Orlu based trader after paying a tax of 6/- petitioned the A.D.O. Orlu informing him of his 'feat' reminding him that such deed of patriotism ought to be rewarded

with a salt permit.

Many 'natives' realising that their produce, especially palm oil and kernel, were of strategic importance to the war efforts attempted to use them to maximum advantage - to obtain salt. Many were prepared to sell them to only produce agents who would pay at least part of the price in salt. Many deserted their erstwhile customers for those who could give them salt. The following excerpt from a letter from one of the affected produce dealers to the D.O. Okigwe aptly sums up the predicament of the dealers "... all my customers complained to me that I do not supply them with salt like other traders, they are of the opinion to run away from me because I do not help them in any way. I can only retain them with the hope that I can promise supplying them with salt every month as other traders do to their customers." [28]

Government officials unfortunately did not see or pretended not to have seen the linkage between palm produce, salt and the war efforts. Staff of the trading companies on the other hand saw this connection and often called attention to it. The firm of John Holt appreciating this linkage sent a number of memos to the D.O. Okigwe advising him to give preferential treatment to produce agents in the allocation of salt. The firm believed that salt reaching local producers through this source would encourage them to pro-duce more. In one such memo the firm recommended one Mr. L.U. Okoro, an Afikpo Road based produce agent of the comp-any, for salt permit. "... to help him in his palm produce purchasing activities". [29] Also making the same point about the linkage, one Richard Nwaokolo, an Abakpa-Okigwe based trader, while applying for allocation of salt noted that "it is with the aid of the said salt that I was able to get good ripe palm nuts for the making of edible oil which I sold to the U.A.C. Aba. Since I get no salt to sell to the palm producers, my trade on palm produce was extremely low." [30]

Many people seeing that government's interest in the salt business was simply to make money devised their own methods of getting part of the action. One such person, L.N. Obioha devised various smart strategies for the exploitation of the situation. He sent countless memos to the D.O.

Okigwe asking to be given one favour or the other in relation to the salt business. On February 9, 1942, he wrote the D.O. Okigwe asking to be allowed to collect and sell the entire division's allocation of salt which was on its way to Oguta. When it appeared to him that the request was not likely to be granted he sent in another request asking to be granted the right to transport all Okigwe bound salt from Oguta. Accord-ing to the advice he proffered, "it will cost you less if you grant me the contract of conveying the N.A. salt to Okigwi [Okigwe] than to bring them by the N.A. lorry ... I take produce to Oguta daily and the lorry returns empty. I am willing to convey all your salt at 1/- per mile per trip of 100 bags." [31]

This request was turned down but that did not deter him. On April 4, 1942, he filed in another letter to the same officer asking to be granted what would have amounted to a monopoly of the salt trade in Okigwe. We shall quote a substantial part of the letter under reference not only to demonstrate the man's ingenuity but also the level of anxiety and eagerness of the people to benefit from the salt business.

> I beg to suggest that as the U.A.C. has a large store [which it appears, was handed over to him following the company's withdrawal from Okigwe] with strong locks, that the N.A. salt be handed over to me for storing and selling to the natives accord-ing to the D.O.'s directions. The arrangement shall be that as soon as salt arrives Oguta, I will proceed with my lorry and collect the same on cash pay-ment. The D.O. will be advised immediately who will issue permits to the natives and fix the date they should come and collect their salt on payment of the controlled prices. [32]

The request was turned down by the D.O. who argued that acced-ing to it would amount to granting him a monopoly when it was not in the public interest to do so.

Even people who were not traders saw clearly that the salt crisis presented an excellent opportunity for all, private individuals and government alike, to make money and so they attempted to do so. Some of these started the run for part of the action by pre-tending to be performing civic duties usually in the form of draw-ing attention to flaws in the

distribution arrangement. In one such instance, one Mr. Ifionu, headmaster of C.M.S. Central School, Ezeoke Nsu, in calling attention to what he referred to as discrimi-nation against himself, his teacher colleagues and other stranger elements by indigenes of the area in the distribution of salt, re-commended that permit be given to a woman to sell salt to these special interests. Going a step further, he nominated his wife as dealing with the shortage. The salt was bagged locally. Empty bags for the purpose of bagging the salt were sold at the following prices.

40 lb white cotton bag 8d each
44 lb Heissan bag 9d each
90 lb Heissan bag 1/- each
South African 100 lb bag 6d each
South African 200 lb bag 1/- each.

The prices, subject to the bag being in good condition were sub-tracted from the approved selling prices of the salt when bagged. Customers were required to either bring along the appropriate bag when making purchases and had over same to the dealers or have their supplies emptied into containers and receive rebates accord-ing to the prices listed above.

In Okigwe District, the Native Administration held a small buffer stock which it released into the market in times of extreme scarcity. This was however too small to make any appreciable impact on the demand and supply situation. The police were also empowered to 'arrest' lorries carrying salt and place both lorry and cargo in protective custody and release them only after it had been ascertained from the District Officer that the owner was duly permitted to purchase and/or sell salt.

Perhaps the boldest steps to check sharp practices were those taken by the D.O. Okigwe. This involved monitoring the movement of salt right from the landing port (usually Oguta) through transportation by dealers until they reached retail outlets in village markets. In doing this the D.O. maintained close liaison with the U.A.C Oguta. This link enabled him know when consign-ments meant for Okigwe arrived Oguta. When this happened he issued permits to dealers who took same to Oguta to collect

salt. Each permit allowed the bearer to collect a specified number of bags of salt from U.A.C. Oguta. On selling salt to a dealer, the officer-in-charge collected the permit from him. With this he made periodic returns to the D.O. informing him of the number of bags collected by each and on what day.

Each dealer on collecting his allocation was expected to report to the D.O. Okigwe for instructions as to whom to sell. From a list compiled for him by representatives of the component villages of the district he chose retailers to whom dealers were obliged to sell their salt. Each retailer was entitled to only a bag at a time. Native courts were used as distribution points for per-mits. Each middleman was officially informed of the number of permits issued against his consignment. [15] Before obtaining authori-zation to take fresh deliveries a dealer must submit to the D.O. the exact number of permits issued against his last consignment and which were surrendered to him by retailers before obtaining salt from him. If any discrepancy was observed it was assumed that he had either hoarded the salt or had sold it to unofficial traders or never in fact brought the salt into the district.

This arrangement was not completely fool-proof. There were a number of flaws perhaps the most glaring of which was the fact that a permit being the final instrument for the purchase of salt contained no provision for a counter signature or thumb print-ing by the rightful owner. It was therefore both possible and easy for the document to be appropriated by a person other than its rightful owner. Among persons who had access to and who could steal them were court messengers, clerks and even court members. They could also fall into the hands of dealers who could use them to appropriate salt and either sell at retail (which brought huge profits) or for outright hoarding.

To keep track of salt transactions the D.O. kept two books. One of them was devoted to middlemen while the other was for retailers. Whenever a middleman was allocated salt, it was record-ed under his name in the first book while entries were also made in the second book against the names of retailers to whom he was obliged to sell the salt. The second

book ensured a fair distribution among all villages for in it were recorded the number of bags allo-cated to a given village at a given time. [16]

A similar system was adopted in Orlu though with a few modifications. One of these was that there, salt meant for each village was dumped at the premises of the Native Court serving it. There, retailers recommended to the A.D.O. by village councils came to collect them. To ensure adequate publicity of the arrival of salt and retailers to whom allocations were made, a list of all allottees was posted on court buildings and was securely protected from rain. The risk of permits falling into wrong hands was very high here since court members were used to send permits to retail-ers. There was nothing in the arrangement to check the possibility of court messengers appropriating the permits for their own use since all that was needed as evidence that a permit had been used was returning it to the A.D.O. through the dealer. The publicising of the arrival of salt and retailers to whom allocations had been made was not enough guarantee given the low level of literacy at the time which almost guaranteed that a defrauded retailer was not likely to find out.

Another difference between the systems adopted by the two districts is that whereas in Okigwe permits were issued to cover completely a dealer's allocation, in Orlu it covered only 70%. There, he was allowed to dispose of the other 30% any way he saw fit. Secondly, whereas salt was sold in markets in Okigwe, it was unlawful to do so in Orlu. Retailers in Orlu were obliged to sell either in their homes or at the village square. This precaution was taken to avoid riotous situations that could result should salt be sold in markets. It was also meant to check prospective buyers who could go to villages other than their own to obtain salt and possibly cause trouble there. Stranger elements, however, suffered under this arrangement. Among these were civil servants, school teachers, traders, and church workers. They were often discriminated against on the argument that they were not bonafide citizens of their host communities. They inundated the A.D.O. with peti-tions regarding their plight but these, unfortunately, for the most part, came to nothing.

For reasons not adequately explained the Isu area of Orlu district

was not included in the distribution scheme outlined above. The excuse given by the A.D.O. was that large quantities of salt entered the area regularly, though illegally. The only effort made by the A.D.O. to monitor the situation there was the maintenance of regular telegraphic contact with the Local Authority, Port Har-court, which usually confirmed that large quantities of salt were being sold to traders of Isu origin by Port Harcourt based firms. Unfortunately very little of this salt was sold in Isu markets. The area merely served as a transit camp for the salt.

In addition to these efforts, officers were encouraged to embark on large scale public 'enlightenment' campaigns. They were required, among other things, to explain to the people the origin of the shortage emphasising the negative impact on supplies, of the sinking of British merchant vessels by the enemy. Medical officers were asked to explain to the people that though salt is an important necessity "... it would require at least six weeks without salt to produce any lessening of physical energy." [17]

Inspite of these efforts the salt situation remained pre-carious throughout the war and for many months afterwards. Cer-tain factors were responsible for this. At the national level the disequilibrium between demand and supply persisted because its root cause - the war remained unresolved. In Okigwe Division, the problem was heightened and worsened above the national level by a combination of adverse factors including its location in a dis-advantaged area as far as communication and the administrative problems which were highlighted at the beginning were concerned.

One simple measure that would have gone a long way in addressing the salt problem was getting the U.A.C. to return to comfort.

Some political officers took their anxiety to ensure adequate supplies to their domain a little too far. The D.O. Onitsha, in a telegram to his opposite number in Okigwe complained bitterly against "... Orlu traders buying up Uburu salt thereby tending to create shortage (in) Agwu Division (whose citizen were unable to compete with high prices offered by Orlu traders). [23] One wonders what the complaining officer expected his colleague to do. As far as was feasible none of them could control prices of

Uburu salt since Uburu was in Afikpo Division of Ogoja Province. Moreover Uburu salt was right from the beginning exempted from price controls.

Faulty policies erected by administrations, on occasions, worsened the situation as much as did human inefficiency. It is an accepted economic fact that strict price controls in times of scar-city are bound, at best, to achieve partial success for among other things such controls are bound to trigger-off all manner of sharp practices including hoarding and inflation of price. In view of this, it is reasonable to argue that the policy of intervention with the market forces of demand and supply was doomed to failure right from the beginning. Some high government officials would seem to have known or at least feared this much. This fear or know-ledge was probably at the back of the mind of the Resident Owerri Province when he admitted that all arrangements made to restrict sales had broken down reasonable distribution. The dangers on the way along which the government moved were seen early enough by representatives of the trading companies who took steps to warn political officers accordingly. The following excerpt from a memo from the Manager of John Holt, Aba, to the Resident Owerri Province clearly bears out this assertion. "We have to point out that this distribution by the District Officer, ... seems unnecessary as we and other companies have other [and perhaps more reliable] channels of distribution ..." [24]

It is important to concede here that no policy no matter how well intentioned and articulated, can succeed without the good will and efficiency of its executors. Thus, even if the measures adopted to deal with the salt crisis were 'god-sent' confusion would still have attended their implementation given the level of inefficiency that characterized the system at the time. Some of the problems, especially those of shortages, resulted from the ineffi-ciency of the political officers. Often the officers, out of sheer ineptitude, created administrative bottlenecks that worsened the crisis. There were, for example, occasions when there were firms with stocks of salt for sale, middlemen ready to buy them but no permits to make the transactions legal. This confusion is best illu-strated by the mire in

which the agent of John Holt, Aba, and Mr. L.O. Okoro, produce agent for the company at Afikpo Road, once found themselves. The latter after many futile efforts to get the D.O. Okigwe to issue permits to some salt dealers to pick up salt placed at his disposal at Afikpo Road had to complain in exaspera-tion to the agent to appeal to the D.O. to do his work. According to him "the salt remains 28 bags now and these bags are waisting [sic] badly." [25]

One policy flaw that was exploited by profiteers was the exemption of local i.e. 'Uburu' salt from price controls. The exemption, whatever was its justification, contributed immensely to the lingering crisis. It was an unrealistic policy to have allowed two brands of the same (scarce) commodity to adopt two different methods of price determination - one through strict controls and the other through the forces of demand and supply. 'Uburu' salt, given its mode of price determination attracted much higher prices than the imported type. This put a lot of pressure on the latter and encouraged people to profiteer. The malpractice took the form of moulding imported salt into 'cakes' as if they were the 'Uburu' type. [26]

Perhaps, one way of explaining the making of policies that situation in 1939 that an African staff Mr. J.G. Osuji was the only government staff in the District Office Orlu. He functioned as Court Registrar, District Clerk, Filing Clerk, Interpreter and General Supervisor of the office. 1 Other office duties outside this schedule were handled by a central correspondence clerk, Mr. J.M. Ohiaeri assisted by three Assistant correspondence clerks, and an office messenger. These were Native Administration staff who were made to ... deal with all government as well as all Native Administration correspondence and Office Routine. [2]

The result of this grave shortage of staff was a situation where the head of each district had to "... carry in his head everything which is requiring action". [3] This, as would be expected, created bottlenecks and led to inefficiency. While the above problems would seem to have been festering for some time, their impact was aggravated by Britain's war time policy of more direct government involvement in the management of the economy - a situation which brought upon heads of administrations,

problems that were hitherto none of their concern. The result was dissatisfaction and discontent among the people.

Wartime Shortages of Goods

One of the major consequences of the great war on most African dependencies of the belligerent European nations was an acute shortage of consumer goods. This was caused in part by the concentration of industrial production in Europe towards meeting military needs. Problems also arose from the insecurity that prevailed on the world's major sea lanes when the warring nations took their fighting to these places. They became unsafe for merchant shipping. Part of Britain's strategy for dealing with the dislocations caused her African colonies by the war was more direct government involvement in the economy. This involved the use of large expatriate firms operating in each colony as agents for buying up African produce prices of and demand for which continued to soar as the war progressed. Prices of the commodities were determined by the Ministry of Supply. Also established was a Supply Board which handled the exportation of the commodities. The Board was, in West Africa, under the supervisory control of the West African Produce Marketing Board. [4]

As a matter of policy, prices paid African producers were generally lower than those prevailing in the world market. The difference between the two prices was ploughed into financing Britain's war efforts. The same kind of control was also extended to imports including essential consumer items. This strategy, it is claimed, was adopted to ensure equitable distribution of whatever little of these essentials was available but was actually an overt means of making Africans subsidize Britain's war efforts. While the policy would seem to have achieved its objective as far as making money for government was concerned, it did not score highly on its much vaunted aim of ameliorating the suffering of the people. We intend to demonstrate that though the problem of shortage was real, it was exacerbated by the problems we high-lighted earlier. Our area of study is Okigwe Division which at the time consisted of two districts - Okigwe and Orlu. While Okigwe District was under the administrative control of a District Officer

(D.O.) Orlu was under an Assistant District Officer (A.D.O.) who was under the supervision of the District Officer.

Salt Distribution

Prior to 1941 when the salt shortage assumed crisis proportions, the commodity reached Orlu District from three main sources: (a) the United African Company (U.A.C.) stores at Oguta. The store unfortunately kept no records of customers to whom salt was sold on cash-and-carry basis. Most of the buyers however came from and supplied Orlu and Orsu 'clans' which were the catchment areas of the Oguta station. (b) Expatriate firms and African merchants based at Onitsha. Much of the salt from Okigwe (i.e. re-open its closed shop there). This step was unfortu-nately not taken. In fact the records do not show that any efforts were made to persuade the company to return. This negligence casts serious doubts on the ability of the administrative personnel in the area to properly appraise situations and proffer realistic solutions. They would seem to have been unnerved by this rather simple problem. This would seem to have been the lot of the D.O. Okigwe who in a moment of helplessness regretted that "I have taken a great deal of time and trouble over salt distribution and have had nothing in return but ingratitude and complaints. If these continue, I shall cease to take any interest, shall distribute the salt by methods which give me far less work and trouble and allow you fight among yourselves". 18 This, to say the least, should not be the attitude of an administrator handling a sensitive problem.

Political officers even within the same province worked with little or no coordination of policies and methods. Often times policies and methods adopted by one complicated and made things difficult for the other. A good example of this was the headache caused the D.O. Okigwe by the Local Authority, Port Harcourt. The latter freely issued permits to Isu traders authorising them to bring and sell salt in the division without prior reference to the administrator of the area. While ordinarily there is no reason to fuss over such initiative which helped to improve supplies within the division, the D.O. rightly felt that indiscriminate issuance of permits

complicated rather than ameliorate the situation through indirect encouragement of hoarding. It was to obviate such a pos-sibility that the D.O. advised that "I shall be grateful if until further notice you cease to send traders with permits endorsed by you to sell salt in this division". [19]
Each province, division and district saw itself as a little republic struggling for survival in a hostile world and would not therefore compromise its 'sovereignty' through co-operation and coordination of policies with others. Each therefore approached the salt problem the way it felt that it best suited her interest. None cared a hoot what happened to the other. It was a battle for sur-vival. A good example of this were the efforts made by each pro-vince to restrict the movement of salt across its boarders even where such policies meant starving other provinces or parts thereof of this vital commodity. For example, one of the early steps taken by Onitsha province to cope with the salt problem was embargoing salt 'exports' from her territory. This worsened the situation for Okigwe for it shut-off that portion of the division's supplies that hitherto came from Onitsha.

Perhaps the best illustration of confusion and lack of proper articulation and coordination of policies was the confusion that greeted the implementation of a policy banning the movement of salt by rail. Sometime in 1944 the Resident Owerri Province issued a proclamation to the effect that no person shall move by rail salt of United Kingdom origin except under permit signed by the competent authority. [20] Based on this, the railway authorities clamped a ban on the use of the system for the transportation of salt. This had grave consequences for Okigwe. A report by the Eastern Nigeria Guardian of 2nd November 1942, summarized below, clearly illustrates the confusion and problem caused.

> Salt permits are issued to Ndi Amala [i.e. village council] for the purchase of salt at either Uzuakoli, Umuahia, or Afikpo but the railway authority of the former two stations refused the railment of salt to Okigwi [Okigwe] via Afikpo Road [which was in Ogoja Province] on the grounds that it meant con-travening the rule made that no salt should be trans-ferred from one province to another. [21]

It took the issuance of another proclamation to clear the mess but that after

it had caused the people considerable pain. this source went to the Ndizuogu and Mbanasa 'clans' and (c) Aba and Port Harcourt. Supplies from these places went to the Isu (including Nkwere) area. Much of the salt from the last source came through indigens of Isu (and Nkwere) who settled in large numbers in the urban towns of Aba and Port Harcourt.

Okigwe District for her part depended for a long time on a small U.A.C. store located in Okigwe township. The store was closed down before the crisis. A trickle came in from Umuahia where such expatriate firms as G.B. Olivant, U.A.C., John Holt, and Miller Brothers had stores. Some of the salt brought into Arondizuogu from Onitsha found their way into Okigwe. Uburu and Okposi, two communities in neighbouring Afikpo Division, renowned for their brine ponds supplied both Orlu and Okigwe with some salt. This came mainly in moulded form. On a compar-ative basis, the crisis of shortage was much more serious in Okigwe than Orlu. Okigwe's problem arose mainly from the fact that she was neither served by large mercantile firms as in the case of Orlu nor was she located on or close to a major railway station as in the case of Umuahia. It is estimated that during the period under review Okigwe district received about two-thirds of her supplies from places outside the Division i.e. Uburu, Okposi, Aba, Umuahia, and Onitsha indirectly. Only the remaining one-third came from within the Division i.e. Oguta in Orlu District. As we shall see later, one of the first panicky steps taken by administrators of the neighbouring divisions in dealing with the crisis was the prohibition of all 'export' of salt from their territory. This hit Okigwe very hard for she was, as far as the salt trade was concerned, a hinterland community. Her problems were worsened by the fact she was, along with Owerri, one of the most populous divisions in the Owerri province. [5]

Though the problem of scarcity was a national one, it would seem to have reached unbearable proportions in Okigwe Division (especially Okigwe District). While at the national level the problem was almost imperceptible (at least during the early stages) it reached a flashpoint in Okigwe (much earlier). The following figures bear out this contention. The average national import of salt during the three years immediately

preceding the war was 13,650 tons per quarter or 4,550 tons per month. Essen-tial requirements on a war time basis was estimated in August 1981 at 17,500 tons per quarter or 4,167 tons per month. How-ever, ascertained stock at hand in that month was 3,946 tons, nearly a full month's supply. This did not include considerable stocks being hoarded. [6] The available stock was unfortunately, not evenly distributed among the various provinces and divisions. In September 1941, Calabar province received about 420 tons. Owerri province with a population of well over 1.5 million recei-ved only 217 tons. 7 Okigwe Division with an estimated population of 512,000 received in June 1942, a meagre 58 tons against a minimum requirement of 278 tons - a quantity which, it was esti-mated, would have given each individual a ration of 1 lb. per month. 8 Even this was still a far cry from what residents of other divisions or provinces got. In Onitsha Province, for example, distribution was based on an estimate of two cups per tax-paying adult per month. [9]

To ensure that salt was available and was sold at reasonable prices, and to check the activities of middlemen who were belie-ved to be hoarding the commodity and profiteering therefrom, some important and far-reaching measures were adopted. Perhaps the most important of these were the adoption of uniform prices for the commodity and the prohibition of hoarding. On the control of hoarding, an appropriate legal framework which required each tier of government to enact an appropriate regulation on which a subordinate one based its making of the relevant rules for its area of jurisdiction was adopted. Section 140 of the Nigeria Gene-ral Defence Regulations of 1941 provided, among other things, for general food control. It empowered the 'Relevant Authority' in the woman to be favoured with the permit. Another teacher in the area, Mr. J.N. Modebelu made a similar recommendation while complaining of a similar problem. One Edward Juruogu of Umunumu-Nsu, while drawing attention to salt racketeering in the above-named community, advised that permits be given to only people of proven integrity. As if following a laid down rule he also recommended his wife for a permit. Court members who were asked to nominate trustworthy persons to be given permits almost as a rule filled the

list with their favourites especially wives. The A.D.O., Orlu, would seem to have foreseen the possi-bility of this happening when he expressed the opinion that "It is doubtful if any of these names are those of genuine salt traders - more likely, most of them are court members' wives". [33] In some instances chiefs indirectly nominated themselves for permits and so became salt traders in addition to their court membership.

More direct and dubious means were employed by some people to benefit from the windfall. Prominent among the devices used were hoarding and inflation of prices. Both retail and 'bag-bag' sales were affected. While the official retail price remained stable and unchanged at one penny per heaped cigarette cupful, it was freely sold above that price. According to T. Nwadinigwe and A. Ejimako34 some retailers in the Mbanasa area used tomato instead of cigarette cups as standard measure. In many places a cigarette cup went for as much as three pence i.e. 300% above the official price. Equally sizeable increases were made on 'bag-bag' sales. A 90 lb bag of English salt which attracted an official selling price of 15s:6d was freely sold for as much as 35/-.

Dealers who were supposed to sell bag-bag to retailers devised means of retailing their supplies 'cup-cup'. This was so because it was very profitable to retail salt. According to one estimate, a retailer who obtained salt at the controlled price and sold strictly according to stipulation could make as much as 6/- per 40 lb bag. Moulded salt brought even greater windfalls. Since price controls did not affect moulded salt, a cup of salt fetched as much as 5d when moulded.

Substantial quantities of salt were brought into the Isu area from such places as Aba and Port Harcourt. It was, as we noted earlier, based on the belief that such salt that came into the area would be consumed locally as little or no attention was paid to salt distribution in the area. This hope was a vain one, for the area merely served as a transit station from where salt was 're-exported' to other areas. According to an anonymous petitioner some of the salt was 're-exported' to places as distant as the Ngwa and Ibibio areas and Utakwo near Owerri. In these places a 90 lb bag of salt fetched as much as three pounds. This claim is partly confirmed by the

A.D.O. Orlu who agreed that "rumour has it that cyclists from as far as Aba and Itu buy it secretly at very high prices...". [35]

Important and influential persons within society sometimes confiscated permits and or supplies meant for communities or families. One Alozie Nwaoke, family head of Umuokoroma Amoji, Umuokoro-Umuariam in Obowo, allegedly collected money from his people for the supply of salt, got supplied, but refused to distribute the commodity. It is alleged that he sold the salt to another family at a huge profit. 36 A woman Wikpeghe Jerry Echeruo who had earlier been convicted and fined five pounds for profiteering allegedly used her father's connections to obtain a new permit under the name Chiaka Jerry. She allegedly continued business as usual with the new permit. [37]

Government would certainly have been a lot more success-ful in managing the crisis if firm and deterrent action were taken against those seen to be infringing the law. Unfortunately, nothing of the sort happened. Only very few people, from available records, ever went on trial for breaking the law on salt trading. Even these got very light sentences that could not deter either themselves or like-minded people bent on breaking the law,

Among the few was one Amos Ihekwoaba who was tried by Mr. Brown, A.D.O., under the Limited Powers Provision, on 6/12/41. He was found guilty and fined ten pounds or in the alternative was to go to jail for four months. One Isaac of Abiriba quarters Umu-ahia who allegedly sold salt at Ehime Mbano without due authority got a surprisingly light punishment (if that could be called punish-ment at all). The nine bags of salt involved (he claimed they were eleven) were seized along with an old lantern. The salt was sold at the rate of 7/- per bag and the proceeds along with the lantern returned to him. Law enforcement agents, for their part, preferred to look the other way while the rampage raged. As some petition-ers noted with apparent disgust and indignation, "ever since the crisis began no court messenger from Mbanasa has brought up any profiteer for trial, although

the court messengers have often come in contact with these profiteers." [38]

Cases that came to the knowledge of high government offi-cials were treated with the same degree of levity. A clear example was that of one Jeremiah Agie who allegedly collected fifty 40 lb bags of salt from an undisclosed company and location and went underground ostensibly to sell them at inflated prices, The records do not indicate that any action was taken against this man even though his crime was known to the Inspector of Police, Umuahia, who communicated his opposite number in Orlu in whose territory the offence was committed. [39] There are also no records of action taken against an unnamed salt dealer in Umuarka-Orlu who alle-gedly collected twenty 40 lb bags of salt from Messers Niger Co. Ltd., Oguta, sold ten bags right there at Oguta at an inflated price of 13/- per bag and "... distributed the rest to his family and friends who are supposed to be profiteering with the same." [40]

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has shown clearly that though shortages of essential goods especially imported ones during World War II were real, given the situation prevailing then, they were made worse in certain places by administrative problems. In the case of the salt crisis in the Okigwe Division of Eastern Nigeria, the problem of shortages was worsened by acute manpower pro-blems (of inadequate numbers and very frequent changes of key administrative personnel). These ensured that whatever little of this very vital commodity was available did not always get to the people when the need was greatest. The loopholes created by the administrative problems highlighted above were exploited by smart local traders to reap huge profits (through hoarding and inflation of prices) at the expense of consumers. In spite of the hardship occasioned by this, the people (as far as the records show) never took the laws into their hands through rioting or other violent activities. They would seem to have borne the hardship as part of their contribution to Britain's war efforts and in the

hope that a better deal would come their way after the war.

References

1. See File No. OR/C245 ORLDIST 3/1/284 - Handing Over Notes of Mr. G.H.L. Guise Esq. A.D.O. Orlu to Mr. S.P.L. Beaumont, A.D.O. Orlu February 1939 p. 16). National Archives Enugu (N.A.E.)

2. See File No. 952 OKIDIST 11/1/408 - Annual Report [of Okigwe Division], 1939, p. 8. N.A.E.

3. OR/C/245 ORLDIST 3/1/284 op. cit. p. 25.

4. Michael Crowther, *West Africa Under Colonial Rule* (London/Benin, Hutchinson/Ethiope, 1968) p. 493.

5. See memo. No. 1095/44 titled Salt Hunger in Okigwe Division of 12th September, 1941, from District Officer Okigwe to Resident Owerri Province, in File No. 1095 vol. 1 OKIDIST 11/1/448. "Control and Distribution of salt 1941," p. 44, N.A.E.

6. See memo. No. OW 4792/53 of Sept. 13, 1941 titled "Control and Distribution of Salt" from Resident Owerri Province to The District Officer, Okigwe in *Ibid.* p. 55.

7. Memo No. 4792/139 from Resident Owerri Province to Food Controller, Lagos in *Ibid* p. 145.

8. This weight is slightly more than a cigarette cupful.

9. File No. 1094 Vol. I Okidist 11/1/448 Loc. Cit. p. 57.

10. See document titled Defence Regulations Including the Nigeria General

Defence Regulations, 1941 and Other Miscellaneous Regulations." File No. MISF 121 p. 128, N.A.E.

11. *Ibid* pp. 130-131.

12. Okidist 11/1/448 op. cit p. 57.

13. 1095 Vol. II Okidist 11/1/449 Control and distribution of salt 1941-43 p. 754, N.A.E.

14. Okidist 11/1/448 op cit. pp. 297-298.

15. permits to buy salt from dealers contained the following information: (a) Name of Middleman (b) Name and village of retailer (c) Date (d) Size of bag to be collected.

16. File No. 1095 Vol. I Okidist 11/1/448 op cit. p. 341.

17. Minutes of meeting of Resident Owerri Province, Mr. E.N. Nylius, with his District Officers at Owerri, 27th September 1941. See File No. 1095 Vol. I OKIDIST 11/1/448 N.A.E., pp. 100 - 102.

18. File No. OR/C/871 Vol. II Oridist 3/1/378 - Shortage of Salt, N.A.E. p. 347.

19. 1095 Okidist 11/1/449 op.cit. p. 452.

20. The order was titled Movement of Salt (Owerri Province) Order, 1944. It was made under the Nigeria General Defence Regulation 1941, as amended by Regulation No. 4 of 1942.

21. See 1095 Okidist 11/1/450 p. 965 for a cutting of the said newspaper.

22. This telegram is quoted in memo No. OW 4792/53 of 15th September 1941, titled Control and Distribution of salt from Resident Owerri Province to D.O, Okigwe, Okidist 11/1/448 Loc. cit p. 55.

23. *Ibid.*

24. See Memo No. SL/975-50 of 5/11/41 from John Holt Port Harcourt to Resident Owerri Province, in *Ibid.* p. 285.

25. See Memo of Sept. 27, 1944 from Mr. L.O. Okoro, produce agent for John Holt, Afikpo Road to Venture Agent John Holt Aba. Okidist 11/1/450 p. 957.
26. Uburu salt was sold mainly in moulded form.

27. See petition dated 14/8/42 from I.M. Nwemch and M.N. Igwilo to the District Officer Okigwe in Okidist 11/1/449 p. 607.

28. Petition from A.C. Anyaogu to D.O. Okigwe dated 25/6/44 Okidist 11/1/450 p. 926.

29. See Memo Ref. No. LSR/864 of 10th August 1944 from John Holt Aba to D.O. Okigwe - Okidist 11/1/450 p. 938A N.A.E.

30. Okidist 11/1/449 p. 615.

31. See *Ibid* p. 401.
32. *Ibid* p. 467.
33. See File No. OR/C/871A ORLDIST 3/1/376 - Salt Distri-bution and Control of Salt Prices 1941 p. 85 N.A.E.

34. Petition of 30/12/41 from T. Nwadinigwe and A. Ejimako to A.D.O. Orlu. OR/C/871 Vol. II Orldist 3/1/378 - Shortage of salt 1941-42 - pp. 309 - 311.

35. Okidist 11/1/448 p.

36. 36. See petition from "Konkwo Ibenam and followers to D.O. Okigwe - Okidist 11/1/448 pp. 221 - 222.

37. The lady's father Chief Joseph Okorie of Akokwa was, reputedly, a very influential and well connected man. See petition by Ejimako and Nwadinigwe op. cit.

38. *Ibid*.

39. See Memo No. 11.17/31/40/57 of 21-3-42 from Inspector of Police Umuahia to A.D.O. Orlu. Orldist 3/1/378 p. 120.

40. See Ibid pp. 53 - 54.