

# The Incidences Of Theft Of Railway Metals In Colonial Northern Nigeria

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## Abstract

This study examines the incidences and prevalence of theft of railway metals, the motivation and policing problem it presented to British colonial administration in Northern Nigeria. This is important for a few reasons; issues like these hardly featured in popular literature. Also a look at the prevalence of theft on Nigerian railway will help situate this phenomenon of thefts within the wider railway history. Therefore, this study is an attempt to bring out a neglected aspect of the history of the Nigerian Railway.

Theft of railway metals is one phenomenon of crime which has not received attention in Nigerian railway narratives. The prevalence of this phenomenon presented the British with persistent policing problem which they were not prepared to deal with. Despite the punitive measures at stemming the incidence, it defied policing and persisted on a scale which worried the British. Yet, little is known about this important crime-which was a result of unintended social consequences of railway technology. 'Crimes need to be understood because it is a reaction and response to the state, the economy, and the law'.<sup>1</sup> However, such a study requires a thorough investigation of the material and social conditions as well as the broader forces at work in society at large. Whichever form a crime takes; a study of it affords a better understanding of social order, nature of conflicts, legal system as well as measures of combating it.

This paper is a preliminary analysis of incidences and prevalence of thefts of railway metals on Nigerian railway in Northern Nigeria. For the purpose of clarity, I have used the word metals to refer to 'railway keys and sleepers'. I have also used the two words independently-

where necessary to refer to thefts of such items. A sleeper is a rectangular metal object used as a base for railway tracks. Elsewhere in the world- sleepers are made of wood, due to the tropical nature of Nigerian environment wood sleeper hardly last longer, hence metal sleeper were used. Keys on the other hand, are metal bolts used for tightening the track and sleepers together. This paper is an attempt to understand the motivation and the consequences of thefts of railway metals in Northern Nigeria. An assumption accepted in this paper is that when the British constructed railways, they did so to effect certain changes and behavior. The railways-like any technologies have unstable capacities which are unpredictable. Thus, while working to implements those actions, it created contingencies which often undermine British authority. I will argue that although thefts of railway metals were unintended social consequences of technological innovation, yet they are rooted in economic changes resulting from the arrival of the railway to Northern Nigeria. I will also demonstrate that although, blacksmiths were often alleged for being responsible for the thefts, they did not partake in the thefts, yet they profited from it. Finally, I will also argue that the Nigerian Railway Department was forced into selling large quantities of the scrap metals to blacksmiths when all attempts to stem the theft failed.

## I

Most studies on Nigerian railway have focused exclusively on construction of the railway and its impact on socio-economic activities.<sup>ii</sup> As important as the works are, they overlooked the phenomenon of thefts on the railway. There are also works which commented on the phenomenon of thefts elsewhere. For example, Falola's work on theft is an interesting piece on incidences of theft in colonial Southwestern Nigeria. He analyzes the motivation for thefts, methods of operations, measures of combating it and the response of thieves towards their policing. Falola explicate that theft was motivated by economic factor, stating that most of those who engaged in it were poor, and therefore 'a strong indication that theft was one means of survival'.<sup>iii</sup> Anderson's work on stock theft in colonial Kenya details the social context of stock thefts among the Kalenjin of Kenya. The work illustrates the different notions of theft, arguing that in Kalenjin community stealing from outsiders was considered as an honorable act which does not elicit condemnation from the community. To them stealing from outsiders represents a

form of property accumulation. However, attempt by outsiders to regain back their property were construed as ‘acceptable risk’ and therefore a theft.<sup>iv</sup>

Freund’s theft and social protest among the tin miners of Northern Nigeria is another narrative on theft on the Jos Plateau.<sup>v</sup> Freund explicate that thefts of tin on the Jos Plateau was a result of the declining condition of labourers on the mines. This work is important for our understanding of the motivation and strategy for stealing as well as measures employed in curtailing such excesses. Austen’s work on social bandits and heroic criminals is an interesting piece on notion of crime and criminality in history. However, none of Austen’s categorization of criminality could offer explanation on why ‘natives’ stole railway metals.<sup>vi</sup> Austen has argued that European rule did not give room for much criminal marauding,<sup>vii</sup> and that ‘...railroads were not easily attacked’ and that where ‘major robberies did take place’ they were easily controlled.<sup>viii</sup> This view is not applicable to Northern Nigeria, where all sort of crimes including theft of railway metals surfaced shortly after British conquest of the region. Despite punitive measures, the thefts persisted up to the closing decade of colonial rule in Nigeria, yet British were unable to control it.

In his work on Kano Civil War, Fika also commented on thefts of railway keys and measures employed at combating it, yet he glosses over it.<sup>ix</sup> Jaggar’s work on blacksmiths in Kano city analyzes the impact of colonialism on the blacksmithing industry of Kano City.<sup>x</sup> Jaggar detailed the organization of the blacksmiths industry and the challenges it faced following the arrival of railway to Kano. Here as in above, Jaggar overlooked how thefts of railway metals come to serve as alternate raw materials to blacksmiths. In another vein, Jaekel’s work on the Nigerian railway is perhaps the only voluminous work on the Nigerian railway with a chapter on crime and police.<sup>xi</sup> Yet, Jaekel glosses over crime on the railway. A work of this magnitude in three volumes that should have detailed the contours of crimes on the railway devoted only two pages to a crime that plagued the British rule throughout its sojourn in Northern Nigeria.<sup>xii</sup>

Lastly, Ochonu also commented on how the economic meltdown of the 1930s disrupted economic activities which resulted in hardship both for government and its employees. Ochonu cited examples of how economic difficulties resulted in increased crime rates, including thefts

of railway keys and sleepers.<sup>xiii</sup> He stated that the keys-so stolen were sold to Blacksmiths who melted them to produce agricultural tools and household items.<sup>xiv</sup> The prevalence of the theft according to him resulted in replacement of copper keys with steel keys.<sup>xv</sup> However, Ochonu has referred to thefts of the railway keys as a 'new genre of crime' which started only in the 1930s.<sup>xvi</sup> I would argue that thefts of railway keys were a phenomenon that predated the 1930s, it only became more pronounced in the 1930s due to the economic meltdown.

## II

The British conquest of Northern Nigeria early in the twentieth century has disruptive effects on political economy of the region. The sokoto caliphate and other independent political units within the region were submerged and brought under effective British colonial rule, which resulted in their relegation to Native authority position, which accelerated the decline of their prestige. Worst still, they were instructed to carry out reforms which they knew may not be accepted by their subjects. They could not do otherwise, for that was the new responsibility they had sworn to and signed to discharge. The British also introduced a number of reforms in land tenure, currency, taxation, cash crop economy and including transportation. These changes were not without pains, for they had disruptive effects which at times resulted in uprising that undermined British rule.<sup>xvii</sup> This disruption may vary from one place to another and they may be concealed by colonial administration wishing to give impression that all was well. All these had been documented in the literature and therefore need no recapitulation here.<sup>xviii</sup> However, the introduction of modern transport, especially railways had the most disruptive effects on socio-economic activities of the 'natives'.

The idea of constructing railways across the breadth of Northern Nigeria has fascinated the British right from 1900 when they began to conquer the region. The attention of the colonial office in London had been drawn to agricultural potentials, expanse and landlocked nature of the region and the need to transform it by way of modern transport. It was believed that the material

development of the region and elsewhere in non western world depended largely on provision of modern transport, especially railway. The construction of the railway started in 1908 on a rapid pace, leaving behind it traces of its effects wherever it traverses. In 1909 it reached Zaria city, from whence it moved further to Kano city in 1911 and it was finally opened for traffic in 1912. Also in 1911 another stretched from Zaria to the mining centers of Jos and Bukuru on the Plateau. The building of this section of this line was completed in 1915 thereby linking Zaria with the tin mines on the Jos Plateau.<sup>xix</sup>

The opening of the railway in 1912 resulted in significant development which ranges from political change, economic advancement to socio-cultural transformation. It opened the region by way of connecting it to the coastal port. Until this time, contact between Southern Nigeria and the North was quite limited. The railway also resulted in the emergence of new towns along the railway, making some towns important while at the same time resulted in the decline of others. The railway also shrank time and space within and between regions, bringing everywhere within a striking distance of the region and lend to it new economic and strategic significance. By far, the most transformative effect of the railway was in expansion of cash economy, resulting as it did in groundnut boom. Groundnut export from the region amounted to over 10,000 tons in 1912. By 1913-1914 it has increased to about 11,900 tons. The success of the groundnut boom has been explained in part by response to 'new demand', better profits opportunity and the arrival of the railway.<sup>xx</sup>

The railway has been the single most important factor in altering the consumption taste of the 'natives'. The railway increased the spatial interaction between the region and coastal areas in the south, thereby stimulating commercial enterprise and geographical mobility of the people. The railway enhanced inter-regional trade in food stuff and raw materials including European manufactured goods were imported into the region. One important development of this importation was the gradual penetration of European metals or iron into the region's markets, with serious challenges to the indigenous blacksmithing industry. The penetration of these metals coincided with a time of declining raw materials needed in the blacksmithing industry. It was not as if European metals were new in the region, European metals of different types were known to the blacksmiths before the arrival of the railway but on a very small scale. Jaggar has detailed

how blacksmiths imported iron scarps to the region through non-mechanical forms of transport. Despite the shortage of raw materials, blacksmiths were able to keep the industry going by procuring their raw materials from different local sources. The arrival of the railway increased the rate at which the metal penetrates the local markets. The increased was such that it threatened the marketability of the local metals. In view of this, blacksmiths and traders ‘...responded to the new situation by turning their own economic advantage a transportation /communication system which had been developed to evacuate export products’,<sup>xxi</sup> resulting in demand for locally manufactured metals wares, increased expansion in industrial output and in the spatial markets for its outputs as well as increased in number of individuals involved in all stages of the industry.

One result of this development was the decline in blacksmithing; rural mining and smelting activities, thereby making trade in this raw materials a sort of urban based which was a reversal of the traditional relations where they depended on village smithers and long distance traders.<sup>xxii</sup> In other word, the railway reversed the relationships between rural smiths and city smiths. Rural smiths come to depend more and more on city smiths for their raw materials, including charcoal while at the same time disposing some of their products.<sup>xxiii</sup> Given the paucity of documented archival records on blacksmithing activities across the region, it is difficult to give statistical figure on the quantities of imported iron metals, the challenges and coping strategies of the blacksmiths. However, one colonial report pictured how exploitation of charcoal wood resulted in depletion of forested land reserves in Zaria province. The report further stated noted that the charcoal woods were consumed by Kano and Katsina markets.<sup>xxiv</sup> Elsewhere in Nigeria, it has equally been proved that the railway resulted in the decline of indigenous industries. Callaway and Mabogunje have commented on how the importation of European manufactured goods resulted in the decline of indigenous industries.<sup>xxv</sup>

### III

Before we proceeds further let us briefly look at the blacksmithing industry. The blacksmithing and smelting had being important occupation and industries in Northern Nigeria and elsewhere in Nigeria. Both industries were important for producing tools and implements needed for domestic or household, agricultural and military use. They had sufficiently continued

to cater for needs of the society, until increased desiccating climatic shift and widespread deforestation resulting from exploitation of woods over centuries of iron smelting which threatened the survival of the industry.<sup>xxvi</sup> This environmental exploitation could not have been limited to enclosed industrial areas but have been part of a regional phenomenon.<sup>xxvii</sup> Climatic evidence for the later Iron Age centuries also suggests the onset of drier conditions in the nineteenth century. ‘...the last millennium should be viewed as a longer period of severe change’ coupled with intermittent centuries of drop in rainfall ‘would have severely slowed the natural rate of replacement of species and re-establishment of the original forest already exploited’.<sup>xxviii</sup> The pressure for charcoal would have demanded the eventual exploitation of younger species, thus interfering with replacement of cut trees leading to rapid deterioration of soil and soil erosion problem. More so, there was also shortage of raw materials (such as iron ore deposits, hardwood for making charcoal, water and clay for building smelting furnaces) for smelting activities. It was in the face of this declining condition that the penetration of European metals comes to provide alternative raw materials to the blacksmithing industry. The penetration of European metals resulting from arrival of the railway rescued the industry which had been concerned with dwindling forest reserved.<sup>xxix</sup>

The imported metals did not just become popular to the blacksmithing over night, it has been pointed out that its popularity was as a result of reduction in proportion of time spent in making charcoal for forging metal. The variations in labor inputs, amount of time and labour expended also determine prices of smiting products.<sup>xxx</sup> In other word, the more labour and time expended in producing a particular product the higher the price of such product, and also the lower the number of labour and time the lower the price. The European metal also was quite cheaper which explains its popularity among the blacksmiths. Aside the question of price, the local iron is also durable when compared to the European metals. Implements made from it last longer than those from European metals.<sup>xxxi</sup> Given the available options open to the blacksmiths, in the face of threat to their means of livelihood, it is not surprising to see why they opted for cheaper raw materials.

#### IV

The arrival of railway in Kano gradually attracted large number of people to urban and peri-urban railway towns that were emerging in response to groundnut trade. One important development of this period was the growing migration of people from across Nigeria to the new emerging centres of groundnut production. New people brought with them new ideas and new values. This development did not occur without problem; the most striking symptom of this problem was the virtual ‘epidemic’ of petty crimes such as thefts of goods and money, telegraph line<sup>xxxii</sup> including theft of tin on the mines<sup>xxxiii</sup> which surfaced around these urban railway towns like Kano, Zaria and Jos, as well as the peri-urban centres of the region. For example, Christellow and Fika have commented on these incidences of crimes in Kano emirate following the arrival of the railway.<sup>xxxiv</sup> That is not to say that crime did not exist in pre-British era. On the contrary, there were crimes but on a limited scale, its prevalence on a scale was as a result of British colonialism and most importantly, the arrival of railway.

While the British were busy policing these petty thefts, a new form of theft in the form of railway metals reared its head. This new thefts troubled the British more than any other form of crime; thereby presenting them with problem of policing which they were not ready to deal with. The magnitude of these thefts varies from one geographical location to another, and I will demonstrate that the thefts were prevalent in the provinces of Kano and Zaria compared to other provinces in Northern Nigeria. The first reference to theft of railway keys appeared to have being in Zaria province in 1914 when ‘natives’ of Dumbi village on the main line and Rahama along the Bauchi light railway were arrested and convicted for theft of railway keys. About 35 people were arrested and convicted for the theft at the end of the investigations.<sup>xxxv</sup> Given the number of people convicted and the attention the case attracted, one would have expect to know whether the metals were recovered or not, the quantity at stake, the status of the culprits, their motivation for stealing the metals and most importantly who were they. This is important considering that blacksmiths were usually suspected for the theft. Perhaps this could have assisted in stemming further thefts of the railway metals. Yet, the provincial governor called for severe penalties against offenders. The native administration was also called upon to keep watchful eyes on blacksmiths huts along the line.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Whether the incidence of 1914 and the threat of extreme



punishment had any impact on the mind of the natives is not clear. If it does events of the next few years indicates the ineffectuality of the threat. By 1915, it is clear that thefts of railway metals were becoming rather common, and officials complained of the difficulty in apprehending culprits. At the end of investigation about 27 'natives' were arrested and convicted, here too the report did not indicate the quantity of metals involved. It appeared that the British were looking for ways to hold the native administration responsible for the thefts. One would expect that given the existence of railway police, they should have been mobilized to patrol the length of the railway, yet the machinery of the native authority was elicited in the fight against this phenomenon of thefts of railway metals.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

This brings to mind the place of railway police in the whole drama of policing railway infrastructures. I will argue that the railway police were quite inadequate in number to be able effectively police the extent of the railway. For example, the strength of the railway police in Northern Nigeria stands as at 1919 stood at 56 as shown in Table 1. These police were further divided on the railway routes. It is not clear what criteria were employed in posting the police. It is also clear that some section of the railway had more police than the others. It is also quite unlikely that the police so posted were physically available at their various stations. Evidences from available records indicated the non availability of railway police across stations, much less the train stations. This was the critical situation in which the railway police found itself, which was the more reason why pressure was mounted on the native authority police to carry out duties meant for the railway police. However, given the spate of arrest and convictions, one would have expected at least a drop in thieving of the railway materials. Whether the British also thought the problem was something they could curtail by mere policing and convictions they misunderstood and underrated the capability of the natives. Instead of addressing itself to solving the problem, the British were busy dissipating energy on policing measures.

Table1: Railway police on Northern Nigeria railways in 1919<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Railway routes	Number of Police
Offa–Jebba	10
Jebba-Minna	11
Minna–Baro	4
Kaduna Junction and North	4
Rahama-Bukuru	20
Dangora-Kano	7

This brings to mind the question of why the theft was prevalent despite punitive measures. The thefts could not have continued without a ready market for the stolen metals. I will presume that the markets are not limited to the immediate proximity of the environment where the thefts took place, but stretched far into the interior including the urban areas. As an afterthought measure, railway workers were also involved in policing the railway -after all they were suspected also of being involved in the thefts, but for lack of evidence the British could not otherwise. This involvement of railway workers was being applauded for reducing thefts, for there was no single case of thefts in 1916. In that same year alone, about 70 railway camps were visited and searched to prevent the undesirables from settling therein'.<sup>xxxix</sup> If the British thought they could find the railway workers culpable they were wrong, for nothing was discovered to suggest otherwise. However, two people who were not railway workers were found in one of those camps, and they were ejected out of the camp when no '...fault ...could be found' against them.<sup>xl</sup> It appeared as if the British and the Nigerian Railway Department were looking for ways of holding somebody or group responsible for the thefts, for both proposed different measures. For example; the Nigerian Railway Department proposed a sort of collective punishment as a way of stemming the theft the railway metals. Seen from this proposal, all railway camp where a theft takes place will pay half cost of the materials stolen.<sup>xli</sup> Not only have the British proposed

to blame native administration, especially the village heads for thefts which they knew nothing about, but they had also taken the liberty to fix punishment on village heads under whose jurisdiction the thefts took place.<sup>xlii</sup>

The threat of punishment exerted considerable pressure on African communities. This pressure was felt most actively by railway workers and the village heads who were required to provide information on thefts of railway metals and movement of iron metals in their domains. Their function was crucial because railway police were limited in number and in strength. A successful investigation however, depended not upon the railway or native authority police, but also upon the cooperation of village heads. By placing the onus of responsibility for the investigation of railway thefts on the village heads the burden of fostering African public opinion against railway thefts was passed to the village heads, should he fail to provide assistance in the detection and prevention of theft, or should areas under his jurisdiction continue to feature in thefts of railway metals, then a punishment could be levied against them. How effectual are these measures? Whether or not the measures were helpful in Zaria is not clear, for records of the following years are silence about practicality of the proposal.<sup>xliii</sup>

While the authorities in Zaria were busy dissipating energy on their strategies, the thieves had learned to become more covert in their activities by devising new method of evading the telescopic arm of the law. The way and manner the thefts were carried out really frustrated British efforts. This frustration came out clearly in one annual report. The report pictured how the thefts were carried out ‘...first on one section of the line, then on another and in consequence it is extremely difficult to catch the thieves’.<sup>xliiv</sup> The report also noted how stolen railway metals were found in place like Katsina where the railway had not reached. According to the report, a railway keys could be obtained at 1/-each in Katsina in 1917 against three pence in Zaria.<sup>xlv</sup> This further suggests the incentives for the thefts, giving the impression that the farther the metals were marketed the better the profits. This rate at which the metals spread alarmed the British and it was suggested that a reward may be offered for information that may lead to arrest of people found stealing or in possession of railway keys.<sup>xlvi</sup>

It appears as if British did not have organized mechanism for dealing with case of this nature, for they devised different measure for different thefts, hence, the thefts persisted without with little arrest. My hunch is that the metals changes hand from the railway corridor and far into the interior of the region. Some of the iron may have also been converted into tools or something else which explain why implicating exhibits were hardly found during police raids. Elsewhere in Africa, it has been pointed out that cattle thieves' even forged brand on cattle's to avoid being detected.<sup>xlvi</sup> It is also unlikely that villagers who were experiencing shortage of farm implements would report cases of thefts or its arrival in their community. This does not imply that the thefts were perpetrated without being caught. Between 1917 and 1918, 69 people were arrested and convicted for offences which ranged from theft and receipt of railway keys and sleepers. While 23 of these cases were heard in 1917,<sup>xlvi</sup> the remaining 46 were heard in 1918.<sup>xlvi</sup> As usual, the Native authority and their police were called upon to be watchful of blacksmiths. There appeared to be relative diminution in theft of railway metals, the Zaria province annual report for 1920 noted how the activities of native authority police had reduced thefts of railway metals. The report also noted how impossible it was for them to traverse the extent of the railway in the light of limited number of the police.<sup>1</sup>

## V

By 1920s there appears to be a recrudescence in this phenomenon of thefts of railway metals in Northern Nigeria. It also appears that the thieves have also perfected their act by devising different means of stealing. The phenomenon has generated serious debate between the Secretary of Northern Province and the Provincial Residents. The correspondence shows how thefts of railways materials dominated government agenda. What can be gleaned from this long correspondence is the ingenuity of the thieves in carrying out their activities and the frustration and helplessness of the British in stemming or apprehending the thieves. Whether the British were aware that the theft was caused by economic factor is not clear. British officials who happened to know solution to the problem never failed to express their opinion on how best to tackle the problem. It is unlikely that such officers were ever heard.

One important point of disagreement in the correspondence is the question of culpability of the natives in thefts of railway materials, given that blacksmith were usually suspected for being responsible for the thefts. The Lieutenant Governor of Lokoja particularly opposed to this idea of allegation, noting that 'I have in many cases when in Kano found that what the Railway assumed to be done by the populace was done by their gangs' and not the blacksmiths. As a measure to stem the problem he suggested the importation of iron to be distributed to the public at cheaper price.<sup>li</sup> It is interesting to note that some of the senior officials know the cause of the thefts and they never failed to express it whenever the opportunity presented itself. It also appeared from these accumulated correspondence that not all cases of thefts can be considered as thefts in the real sense of the word. For example, while reporting on thefts of railway metals in his province the Resident of Bauchi Province noted that 'the very notion of the train is apt to loosen the keys and these keys are ready for any passer by to pick up'.<sup>lii</sup> Similar opinion was later expressed by the Resident of Zaria province. According to him '... the keys were loosened after the passing of a heavy train and sometimes dislodged. The theft occurs almost immediately as the keys makes excellent hoes and axe heads'.<sup>liii</sup> This perspectives is important, for it means that most of what the authority referred to as thefts may after all have been a case of loosened keys picked up on the railway. This is not attempt to shift blame away from the 'natives' but two important things can be understood from the correspondence and other records consulted. The incidences of loosed keys after the passing of a heavy trains and the existence of large unserviceable railway materials which were no longer useful to the Nigerian railway Department combined together to provide surplus materials to the smiting industry.

The incentives to steal the metals remained high and opportunity were considerable. The correspondence also expressed concern over the increased rate at which railway metals were stolen and the difficulties involved in apprehending offenders. In 1921 the District Engineer of Zaria Province reported 'the serious loss of keys and what is even more serious –the thefts of steel sleepers from under the track'. About six sleepers were reported to have been stolen.<sup>liv</sup> What worried the District Engineer most was not the number of sleepers, but the new method of stealing. 'The method employed appears to have been to hammer the sleepers downwards with a heavy piece of wood until the lugs were forced open'.<sup>lv</sup> The District Engineer further reported

other cases of thefts. The report noted ‘two robberies of steel sleepers stacked at Dutchin Wai station and other section of the railway. The report also noted losses of thousands of railway keys on the Baro-Kano main line and several thousands to be replaced. The report estimated ‘...the number of keys to be replaced on this section is 12,500 and on the Kano section 1200’.<sup>lvi</sup> The report further added that over 10,000 keys have been replaced on the Dangora and Kano sections’ since the beginning of 1921, and that further 25,000 keys were ordered for the same section of the line.<sup>lvii</sup> At the end of the whole investigations about nine people were arrested and convicted (including railway workers). Evidence from 1924 annual report on Kano province provided additional figure on top of what has been replaced based on thefts perpetrated in 1921,<sup>lviii</sup> as shown in Table 2. At the end of the whole investigation about nine people were arrested and convicted including railway workers.

Table 2: Description of stolen railway metals and locations<sup>lix</sup>

Year	Description of items	Location	Quantity
1921	Railway sleeper	Duchin wai	29
1921	Railway keys	Kano-Dangora	3,636 <sup>lx</sup>
1921	Railway keys	Baro-Kano	-

As we proceed into the 1920s, it appeared that the theft was on the increased. Jaeckel reported large quantity of thefts large railway keys in the whole of the Northern Nigeria in 1922. In another report on Kano province, large quantities of railway keys were again reported stolen in the province within a period of three years as shown in Table 3. The disappointment of the officials in Kano came out clearly in the report, the report noted that; ‘raids on suspected blacksmiths quarters, and other efforts have all proved equally ineffectual and abortive and the only remedy would seem to be the extensive sale of the scrape-iron ... to local dealers.’<sup>lxi</sup> These appeared to have been perhaps the largest thefts of railway materials, showing at the same time

also the availability and scope of markets for the railway metals. When these items were added to those of 1921 above- including the replaced and yet to be replaced items it would amount to large quantity of items. How much was it in cash is what is not clear. How much of these were consumed internally and how much were exported outside the immediate environment is something that has not yet been unravel. While officials in Kano were dissipating energy on the ineffectuality of their measures, large thefts of railway keys were reported stolen in Zaria province in 1925. This particular theft according to the report represented a disquietingly large percentage of stolen metals in Northern Nigeria as a whole.<sup>lxii</sup> Elsewhere in the region there were cases of iron thefts on tin mines on Jos Plateau. Freund has said of how ‘... iron tools were stolen with alacrity than tin’.<sup>lxiii</sup> This was said to be as a result of have caused by British ban on iron smelting.<sup>lxiv</sup>

Table 3: Description of stolen railway keys and locations<sup>lxv</sup>

Year	Description of items	Location	Quantity
1922	Railway keys	Northern Nigeria as whole	84,899 <sup>lxvi</sup>
1922	“	Kano province	1,030
1923	“	“	1,013
1924	“	“	2180
1925	“	Zaria province	3,200

## VI

By 1930s the whole things has escalated to places where previously there were no cases of the thefts. Events of the period also show the culpability of railway workers, and the

innovativeness of the thieves which bit the imagination of the British. Ochonu has commented on how the economic meltdown forced people into 'criminality' and he noted that railway workers including the retired ones were involved in the thefts.<sup>lxvii</sup> In this paper I will provide further evidences which had been overlooked in Ochonu's work. In February, 1930 the Resident of Benue Province reported the prevalence of thefts of railway keys in his domain. His worries came out clearly on how such incidence was 'leading to attempt to remove sleepers from the railway line-a highly dangerous preceding'.<sup>lxviii</sup> This shows how desperate thieves could go to get what they want not minding how the lives of others was threatened by their actions. As with most arrest it was difficult getting information that could lead to arrest of the thieves the Resident proposed the following options; (a) that all blacksmiths must registered at the district where they carried out their activities, failure of which may attract six months imprisonment. (b) All blacksmiths must report their consignment of iron as received and sources; failure would render the offender liable to a fine no exceeding £10. (c) Native authorities would also arrange to inspect all forges at frequent interval. Wether this was implemented or not is not clear, for records could not be found to confirm its practicability.

However, the most important thefts case of the year involved railway workers convicted for stealing railway keys. Two railway workers namely Rex and Egbedeka Onuweji were arrested for offences ranging from stealing large quantity of railway keys and for receiving stolen goods.<sup>lxix</sup> This arrest appeared to have been the most popular arrest of the year, for it attracted serious attention within official circle. What happened next after their arrest is something that was not clear. Ochonu has also cited example of how member of a group were arrested and convicted for stealing railway keys in Lafia area in 1931.<sup>lxx</sup> Failure of punitive measures to stem the incidences of thefts resulted in replacement of, copper keys with the steel keys. This too, did little to stem the tide, for while replacement was taking place in one section of the line other sections were attacked. Inspections on the line revealed that many keys were missing, many were loose that they could be removed by hand and others were lying at the side of the line.<sup>lxxi</sup>

As we proceed to the middle of the 1930s through the 1940s there appears to be dearth of evidence on thefts of railway keys. That does not imply that it has stopped completely. On the contrary, the record further shows that Kafanchan-Zonkwa and Kamuru line in Zaria province



were besieged by thieves, resulting in thefts ranging from railway keys and fishplates along these routes and elsewhere in the province in 1946<sup>lxxii</sup> and 1947.<sup>lxxiii</sup> As usual, there were problems apprehending culprits and it was suggested that the line be patrolled for a month. There was also 'periodical raids on the neighboring villages' thinking that it might serve as deterrent.<sup>lxxiv</sup> In view of the danger poses by these thefts, railway police on special assignment from other districts were deployed to Kafanchan-Zonkwa and Kamuru line to patrol the railway. By the time the patrol team completed its assignment they could not apprehend nor find anybody wanting for the thefts. However, between ending of 1948 and early 1949 about 18 cases of thefts were reported along the Kafanchan line.<sup>lxxv</sup>

It is important to state that while the British arrest and convict offenders, thefts of railway metals continued on a scale beyond the control of the British colonial administration. Because of the dismal failure in stemming the theft and the difficulties in apprehending offenders, it appeared that the government may after all re-consider its position by finally distributing the scrap of the railway metals to blacksmiths. This is surprising given that a number of British officials had in the past expressed the opinion that the scrap railway materials or cheap iron may be imported and distributed to blacksmiths as a way of stemming the thefts.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Perhaps the British could not make any sense out of those suggestions. It is not clear why the British is changing her mind about distributing the scrap metals at this time.

The first concrete step towards distributing the scrap materials to blacksmiths started in 1952. The distribution of the materials attracted the attention of the 'natives', especially the blacksmiths whose response to the sales of scarps was immediate. When it was announced that sales of scarp materials would commence, there was large requests for the railway metals across the Northern Nigeria. It would appear as if the problem was peculiar to the region alone. The railway did not distribute the scrap directly to blacksmiths, instead it distribute it through the Native Authority who redistribute it to blacksmiths. It is also clear from evidence that demand for the scrap metals also came from both the cities and peripheries. The table 4 below gives details of quantities of scrap metals supplied across the Northern provinces in 1954-1955. The figure also includes supplies to the smaller emirates in each of the provinces.

Table 4: Details of scrap metals supplied to Northern Provinces in 1954-1955.<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Province	Quantity
Adamawa	4,048
Bauchi	4,400
Borno	1,000
Ilorin	1,650
Kebbi	3,310
Kano	10,730
Katsina	1,420
Niger	1,380
Plateau	1,850
Sokoto	2,760
Zaria	1,600

## VII

This paper has offered a preliminary explanation about the unintended consequences of railway on indigenous African industry and how people reacted to changes to their source of livelihood. It shows that when people were faced with problem that threatened their livelihood they tend to devised alternative means of livelihood, which may be 'legal or illegal' depending on societal definition of what constitute good or bad. Where an action was considered bad and an alternative means were not put in place, people may continue with it regardless of punishment and conviction as seen from the theft of railway metals. The paper has also pointed out that the prevalence of the thefts was as a result of ready made markets for the products. The markets as I have pointed out stretched up to the interior and the city, this I have not able to prove. It is also clear from the paper that despite the allegations against blacksmiths for being responsible for the thefts no single blacksmith was arrested and convicted and if they were, the reports never mentioned it.

The paper further exposes the chaotic nature of British colonial legal system. It shows how thefts of railway metals presented the British with problem of amending its ordinances to accommodate cases of thefts of railway materials. Perhaps they never thought of this while planning for the railway and when the various railway ordinances were made; a situation which forced the British into contemplating with several options of stemming the problem. It also shows the desperation in British attempts to make the 'natives' responsible for the thefts, they started by proposing that village heads should be held responsible for offences committed by their subjects. The records show that this particular idea occupied British mind up to 1930s. This idea was based on the assumption that a village heads that was aware of shortage of hoes and other tools in his village is unlikely to report the arrival of iron in his village even if he suspects it to be stolen from the railway. But none of the records has shown the culpability of the village heads. It is also not clear whether or not the proposal was indeed implemented. If it was there was no evidence to suggest its implementation. The paper has also shown that railway workers were indeed involved in the thefts. It is also clear that the idea to imposed collective punishment on them failed, for there was no record to suggest its workability.

The paper also exposes the ineffectiveness of the police, especially the railway police in stemming thefts of railway metals. It has shows the inadequate of the strength of railway police by pointing out that they could not fight a menacing problem like this and hence, their reliance on the native authority police. The native authority police too like the railway police were not spared. As seen from the paper, the native authority was grudgingly allowed to police the railway in the absence of any available choice. Overall, while the shortage of raw materials lasted, thefts of railway materials persisted resulting in arrest of several natives. The problem was not solved but the British had to bow to pressure into selling the scrap materials to the blacksmith. I proposed that new research on Nigerian railway should focus on crime on the railway, one in which the common people enters the picture from the perspective of the railway.

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<sup>ii</sup>T. N. Tamuno, "Genesis of the Nigerian Railway I" *Nigerian Magazine*, 83. (1964), 279-292. "Genesis of the Nigerian Railway II" *Nigerian Magazine*, 84. (1964): 31-43, W. Oyemakinde, "Railway Construction and Operation in Nigeria, 1850-1911: Labor Problems and Economic Impact" *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, III, no. 2 (1974): 303-324, O. Oshin, "Railway and Urbanization" in Toyin Falola and Steven J. Salm (eds.) *Nigerian Cities* (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press Inc, 2004):

<sup>iii</sup>T. Falola, 3.

<sup>iv</sup>D. Anderson, Stock "Theft and Moral Economy in Colonial Kenya" *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 56/4, (1986): 399-415

<sup>v</sup>B. Freund, "Theft and Social Protest Among the Tin Miners of Northern Nigeria" Being a paper presented at a Symposium organized by the African Studies Program, held at University of Illinois, April 21-24<sup>th</sup>, 1982. 1-21.

<sup>vi</sup>R. A. Austen, 'Social Bandits and Other Heroic Criminals: History, Myth, and Early Modernization in Africa and the West' Being a paper presented at a Symposium organized by the African Studies Program, held at University of Illinois, April 21-24<sup>th</sup>, 1982, 1-29,

<sup>vii</sup>R. A. Austen, 8

<sup>viii</sup>R. A. Austen, 15

<sup>ix</sup>A. M. Fika, *Kano Civil war and British over Rule 1882-1940*, (Ibadan, University Press, 1978) 204-205.

<sup>x</sup>P. J. Jaggard, *The Blacksmiths of Kano City: A Study in Tradition, Innovation and Entrepreneurship in Twentieth Century*, (Koln: Rudiger Koppe Verlag: 1994)

<sup>xi</sup>F. Jaekel, *The History of the Nigerian Railway*. 3 vols. (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 1997)

<sup>xii</sup>F. Jaekel, *The History of the Nigerian Railway: Organization, Structure and Related Matters*. Vol. 3, 348-349.

<sup>xiii</sup>M. Ochonu, *Colonial Meltdown: Northern Nigeria in the Great Depression* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009)

<sup>xiv</sup>M. Ochonu, 81.

<sup>xv</sup>M. Ochonu, 82.

<sup>xvi</sup>M. Ochonu, 82

<sup>xvii</sup>For example see: A. M. Fika, 204.

<sup>xviii</sup>For detail on this see: O. Ikime, "The Establishment of Indirect Rule in Northern Nigeria" *Tarikh*, 3/3, (1969/71): 1-15. O. Ikime, "Reconsidering Indirect Rule: The Nigerian Example" *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, 4/3, (1968): 421-438. A. Fika

<sup>xix</sup>B. Freund, 6.

<sup>xx</sup>For details see, J. S. Hogendorn, *Nigeria Groundnut Exports: Origin and Early Development*, (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1978), F. A. Okediji, "An Economic History of Hausa Fulani Emirates of Northern Nigeria: 1900-1939" (PhD. thesis, Indiana University).

<sup>xxi</sup>P. J. Jaggar, 24-25.

<sup>xxii</sup>P. J. Jaggar, 28.

<sup>xxiii</sup>P. J. Jaggar, 28-29.

<sup>xxiv</sup>NAK ZARPROF 694/1920, Zaria Province Annual Report for 1920-1921.

<sup>xxv</sup>As cited in P. J. Jaggar, 28-29.

<sup>xxvi</sup>C. L. Goucher, "Iron is Iron 'Til it is Rust: Trade and Ecology in the Decline of West Africa Iron-Smelting" *The Journal of African History*, 22/2 (1981): 180, L. M. Pole, 'Decline or Survival? Iron Production in West Africa from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth' *The Journal of African History*, 23/4 (1982): 503-513

<sup>xxvii</sup>C. L. Goucher, 183.

<sup>xxviii</sup>C. L. Goucher, 183.

<sup>xxix</sup>C. L. Goucher, 180, Also see R. A. Austen and D. Headrick, "The Role of Technology in the African Past" *African Studies Review*, vol. 26, (Sep-Dec., 1983), 167

<sup>xxx</sup>L. M. Pole, 504, R. A. Austen and D. Headrick, 167.

<sup>xxxi</sup>L. M. Pole, 510-511.

<sup>xxxii</sup>Fika, 141, 202-203

<sup>xxxiii</sup>National Archives Kaduna (hereafter referred to as NAK) NAK ZARPOF 622/1912, Zaria Province Annual Report for 1911, B. Freund, 9-10

<sup>xxxiv</sup>A. Chistellow, *Thus Ruled Emir Abbas: Selected Cases from the Records of the Emir of Kano Judicial Council*, (East Lansing: Michigan University Press, 1994), "Property and Theft in Kano at the Dawn of the groundnut boom" *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, XX, (1987): 228/30, 237-243.

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<sup>xxxvi</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2561/1914

<sup>xxxvii</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2562/1915, Zaria Province Annual Report 1915.

<sup>xxxviii</sup>F. Jaekel, 351.

<sup>xxxix</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2561/1916, Zaria Province annual Report for 1916

NAK ZARPROF 2561/1916, Zaria Province annual Report for 1916<sup>xl</sup>

<sup>xli</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2561/1916.

<sup>xlj</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2561/1916.

<sup>xljii</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2561/1916.

<sup>xliv</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2475/1917, Zaria Province Annual Report 1917

<sup>xlvi</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2475/1917.

<sup>xlvi</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2475/1917

<sup>xlvi</sup>D. Anderson, Stock.

<sup>xlviii</sup>NAK ZARPROF 2475/1917.

<sup>xlix</sup>NAK ZARPROF 163/1919, Zaria Province Annual Report 1918

<sup>l</sup>NAK ZARPROF 694/1920, Zaria Province Annual Report 1920.

<sup>li</sup>NAK SNP 17/2 11959, Railway Ordinance 1920 orders on Council applying...

<sup>lii</sup>NAK SNP 17/2 11959

<sup>liii</sup>NAK ZARPROF 570.

<sup>liv</sup>NAK SNP 17/2 11959.

<sup>lv</sup>NAK SNP 17/2 11959.

<sup>lvi</sup>NAK SNP 17/2 11959.

<sup>lvii</sup>NAK SNP 17/2 11959.

<sup>lviii</sup>KSHCB SNP/9/12/1924 Kano Province Annual Report File 635.

<sup>lix</sup>NAK SNP 17/2 11959.

<sup>lx</sup>KSHCB SNP/9/12/1924 Kano Province Annual Report File 635.

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<sup>lxii</sup>NAK 2572/1925, Zaria Province Annual Report for 1925

<sup>lxiii</sup>B. Freund, 11.

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<sup>lxvi</sup>F. Jaekel, 348.

<sup>lxvii</sup>M. E. Ochon, 79-85.

<sup>lxviii</sup>NAK SNP 17/2 11959.

<sup>lxix</sup>NAK SNP 17/2 11959.

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<sup>lxxvii</sup>NAK RLY/15 Distribution of Scrap Sleepers by Nigerian Railway Corporation, 1954-57.