***A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE NATIVES OF THE NIGER COAST PROTECTORATE***

The Demise of an African Businessman

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As many Arab and European merchants had learned to their sorrow, Africans were astute and resourceful businesspeople, more than able to hold their own and press an advantage in complex commercial dealings. Unfortunately, one result of European imperialism was that African traders and entrepreneurs were forced out of business or relegated to secondary roles as employees who took orders from the European boss. When independence came after World War II, the absence of an experienced African managerial and entrepreneurial class was an obstacle to economic development in the new African states.

The following selection, written in 1899 by the French traveler and explorer de Cardi after a visit to West Africa, tells the story of JaJa, of the Anna Pepple clan in Bonny, an area on the Niger delta in modern Nigeria that for centuries had been a place where Africans sold slaves to European agents. After abolition of the slave trade, palm oil, used in Europe for lubrication, soap making, and various industrial processes, became the major item of trade. As had been true with slaves, palm oil was collected away from the coast and transported to African middlemen who sold it to Europeans.

JaJa began life as a slave but as asuccessful young businessman was able to buy his freedom while he was in his 20s. Then in 1860 he was given the job of reviving the Anna Pepple clan's commercial enterprises and paying off its debts to Europeans. Again he was successful. In the competitive and rapidly changing business environment of the Niger delta, JaJa became head of a major trading house and a powerful man in the region. When the prospect of assuming political power over Bonny faded because of his conflict with the Manilla Pepple clan, he founded and became king of the state of Opobo. He consistently outmaneuvered his African rivals and European Customers and established a near monopoly in the palm oil trade. When in 1885 the Congress of Berlin proclaimed freedom of trade on the Niger and Great Britain established a protectorate over the region, JaJa resisted British infringement on his commercial empire. But this was a game he could not win. For his refusal to abide by the new British regulations he was fined and exiled to the British West Indies, where he died in 1889.

***~~QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS~~***

~~1. What caused the conflict between the Anna Pepple clan under JaJa and the Manilla Pepple clan under Oko Jumbo?~~

~~2. JaJa lost the war with Oko Jumbo but ended up in a stronger position than ever. How did he accomplish this.~~

~~3. How did European traders attempt to break JaJa's control over the palm oil trade? What was JaJa's response?~~

~~4. On the basis of JaJa's career, what inferences can be drawn about the institution of slavery in the Niger delta?~~

~~5. What might have been the reason for the relatively harsh punishment of JaJa in 1887?~~

~~6. What guesses can you make about commercial relationships on the Niger delta after the deportation of JaJa?~~

Two years after JaJa was placed at the head of the House the late Elolly's debts were all cleared off, no white trader having been detained beyond the date JaJa had promised the late chief's debts should be paid by. In consideration to the prompt manner in which JaJa had paid up, he received from each merchant with whom the late chief had dealt a present varying from five to ten percent on the amount paid.

From this date JaJa never looked back, becoming the most popular chief in Bonny among the white men, and the idol of his own people but looked upon with jealousy by the Manilla Pepple House, to which belonged the successful slave, Oko Jumbo, who was now, both in riches and power, the equal of JaJa, though never his equal in popularity among the Europeans.

The demon of jealousy was at work, and in the private councils of the Manilla House after it was decided that JaJa must be pulled down, but the only means of doing it was a civil war. The risks of this Oko Jumbo did not care to face, since although the Oko Jumbo party was more numerous, each side was equally supplied with big guns and rifles up to a short time before the end of 1868, when two European traders, on their way home, picked up a number of old 32 lb. carronades1 at Sierra Leone, and shipped the same down to Oko Jumbo. This sudden accession of war material, of course, put him in a position to provoke JaJa, and he cast about for a *causa belli*,2 but JaJa was an astute diplomat, and managed to steer clear of all his opponent's pitfalls. A very small matter is often seized upon by natives as a means to provoke a war, and in this case the cause of quarrel was found in "that a woman of the Anna Pepple House had drawn water from some pond belonging to the Manilla Pepple House." This was thought quite sufficient. A most insulting message was sent to JaJa, intimating that the time had come when nothing but a fight could settle their differences. His reply was characteristic of the man; he reminded them that he had no wish to fight, was not prepared, and, furthermore, that neither he, nor they, had paid their debts to the Europeans. The latter part of the message was too much for an irascible, one-eyed old fighting chief named Jack Wilson Pepple, so off he marched to his own house, and fired the first round shot into the Anna Pepple part of the town, and civil war was commenced.

The Anna Pepple House was not slow to reply, but JaJa knew he was over-matched, both in guns and numbers of fighting men, so he only kept up a semblance of a fight sufficiently long to allow him to make it retreat to a small town called Tombo, in the next creek to the Bonny creek, only about three miles from Bonny by water, less by land.

From here he was in a better position to parley with his opponents, and make terms if possible, but he soon saw that no arrangement less than the complete humiliation of himself and his people was going to satisfy his enemies. In the meantime, JaJa had been studying a masterly plan of retreat from Tombo Town to a river called the Ekomtoro. . .

Once in this river, by fortifying two or three points he would be able to completely turn the tables on his enemies by barring their way to the Eboe markets, but to get there he would have to pass one, if not two, fortified points held by the Manilla Pepple people. Besides this, what would his position be when there, if he could not get any white men there to trade with? Luckily for him, there dropped from the clouds the very man he wanted. This was a trader named Charley, who had been in the Bonny River some years before, and was now established on his own account. At an interview with JaJa, that did not last half an hour, the whole plan of campaign was arranged. Charley confided the scheme to his friend, Archie McEachan, who decided to join him. Thus JaJa had the certainty of support in his new home if he could only get there, and get there he did.

Being shortly after joined by these two white traders trade was opened in the Ekomtoro, and on Christmas Day, 1870, Ekomtoro was named the Opobo River, after Opobo, the founder of the town of "Grand Bonny," as Bonny men call their mud and thatch capital.

The tables were now turned with a vengeance, and JaJa remained the master of the position, and for several years kept the Bonny men out of the Eboe and Qua markets, eventually agreeing to have the differences between himself and the Manilla Pepple people settled by the arbitration of the New Calabar and the Okrika chiefs with Commodore Commerell and Mr. Charles Livingstone, Her Britannic Majesty's Consul as referees.3

Evidently the arbitrators considered that JaJa was in no way to blame for the civil war that had taken place in Bonny, for in the division of the markets that had been common property when JaJa and his people had formed an integral part of the Bonny nation, the greater part wits given to JaJa and his right to remain where he had established himself fully recognized.

Immediately on this settlement being agreed upon, Her Britannic Majesty's Consul entered into a commercial treaty with JaJa recognizing him as King of Opobo. This treaty was signed January 4th, 1873, the deed of arbitration having been signed the day previous.

Opobo became, under King JaJa's firm rule, one of the largest exporting centers of palm oil in the delta, and for years King JaJa enjoyed a not undeserved popularity among the white traders who visited his river, but a time came when the price for palm oil fell to such a low figure in England that the European firms established in Opobo could not make both ends meet, so they intimated to King JaJa that they were going to reduce the price paid in the river, to which he replied by shipping large quantities of his oil to England, allowing his people only to sell a portion of their produce to the white men. The latter now formulated a scheme among themselves to divide equally whatever produce came into the river, and thus do away with competition among themselves. JaJa found that sending his oil to England was not quite so lucrative as he could wish, owing to the length of time it took to get his returns back, namely, about three months at the earliest, while by selling in the river he could turn over his money three or four times during that period. He therefore tried several means to break the white men's combination, at last hitting Upon the bright idea of offering the whole of the river's trade to one English house. . . . His bait took with one of the European traders; the latter could not resist the golden vision of the yellow grease thus displayed before him by the astute JaJa, who metaphorically dangled before his eyes hundreds of canoes laden with the coveted palm oil. A bargain was struck, and one . . . morning the other white traders in the river woke up to the fact that their combination was at an end, for on taking their morning spy round the river through their binoculars . . . they saw a fleet of over a hundred canoes round the renegade's wharf, and for nearly two years this trader scooped all the trade. The fat was fairly in the fire now, and the other white traders sent a notice to Jaja that they intended to go to his markets. Jaja replied that he held a treaty, signed in 1873, by . . . Her Britannic Majesty's Consul, that empowered him to stop any white traders from establishing factories anywhere above Hippopotamus Creek, and under which he was empowered to stop and hold any vessel for a fine of one hundred puncheons' of oil. In June, 1885, the traders applied to the consul, Mr. White, who informed King Jaja that the Protectorate treaty meant freedom of navigation and trade. . . .

In the meantime, clouds had been gathering round the head of King JaJa. His wonderful success since 1870 had gradually obscured his former keen perception of how far his rights as a petty African king would be recognized by the English Government under the new order of things just being inaugurated in the Oil Rivers; honestly believing that in signing the Protectorate treaty of December 19th, 1884, he had retained the right given him by the commercial treaty of 1873 to keep white men from proceeding to his markets, he got himself entangled in a number of disputes which culminated in his being taken out of the Opobo River in September, 1887, by Her Britannic Majesty's Consul, Mr. H. H. Johnston, and conveyed to Accra,7 where he was tried before Admiral Sir Hunt Grubbe, who condemned him to five years' deportation to the West Indies, making him an allowance of about £800 per annum and returning a fine of thirty puncheons of palm oil, value about £450.

Poor Jaja did not live to return to his country and his people whom he loved so well, and whose condition he had done so much to improve, though at times his rule often became despotic.