

**“The Girls in Moral Danger”: Child Prostitution and Sexuality in Colonial Lagos, Nigeria, 1930s to 1950<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This essay examines child prostitution as one of the numerous forms of social and sexual networking in the colonial urban space of Lagos, Nigeria between the 1930s and 1950. While adult prostitution otherwise called “prostitution proper” has received scholarly attention, historians, especially of Africa, have yet to pay serious attention to child prostitution. This work is an attempt at looking at the social, legal, economic and even political contradictions associated with the vicissitudes of child prostitution in colonial Lagos. I coin the terminology- “lego-social construct”- to explain the problems of establishing the ages of child prostitutes in Lagos. By identifying how the question of age affects the ways historians write about child prostitution, I argue that scholars need to appreciate that study of child prostitution without a critical examination of relevant historiographical problems such as age and masculine sexuality constitute a serious flaw in the attempt towards unraveling this aspect of human historical past.

**Key words: child, prostitution, sexuality, age, masculinity, slavery, gender.**

*In the year 1945, she asked me to follow her to Ikeja where I shall be better trained. We arrived Ikeja early in 1945 when I was given to a certain army who took my virgin and he paid 3 pounds to this woman, from there I was forced by her to become a harlot. Sir, all the money that I have been gathering from this harlot trade from 1945 is with this woman... I do not claim for all the pounds that I have foolishly worked for her. I want £10 only from her and the three pounds my virgin fee all £13.0.0d...Please sir, ask me and I will tell you how I, a little girl like this will be force to keep three over-sea soldiers at a time.<sup>2</sup>*

**Introduction**

In no period of colonial Nigerian history did the advocates of “morality” direct serious attention to social questions such as crime, divorce, bride-price hysteria, child labor, venereal

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<sup>2</sup> National Archives, Ibadan (hereafter, NAI) COMCOL 1 2844, *Child Prostitution in Lagos 1942-1944*. Alice’s Petition, dated November 21, 1946.

disease, juvenile delinquency,<sup>3</sup> and prostitution to mention but a few, than they did in the six years of the Second World War and the few years that followed it.<sup>4</sup> The conditions that molded the pattern of thought about some of the above-mentioned social questions, were dynamic and multifarious in nature. To some observers who could recount the pattern of social and sexual behavior before the imposition of colonial rule, these social questions and many others epitomized a sort of “un-Africanness and “strangeness.” Other observers, more importantly, the educated elites and officials of the colonial government, felt that these social questions, were inhibiting the consolidation of an African society of “civilized” men and women that they were trying to build. In addressing social problems as an impediment to a “decent society,” British colonial officers were sometimes influenced by certain unscientific notions of race, gender and African sexuality.<sup>5</sup>

Arguably, of all the numerous social questions of this period, child prostitution, the commercial provision of heterosexual labor by female juveniles occupied the most strategic position.<sup>6</sup> Public debates on child prostitution were rooted in “unhealthy” sight of girls who were too young to be placed under what moralists provocatively called “moral danger” and their procurers’ criminality.<sup>7</sup> The above epigraph is an excerpt from a petition written by Rose Ojenughe, a child prostitute, in establishing criminal charges against her procurer, Alice Etovbodua. This petition was later accepted as evidence in a Lagos court on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December that same year. Alice was sentenced to two years in prison for violating sections 222B and 223 sub-sections 1, 2, 3 and 4, of the Criminal Code Ordinance (1944 Amendment) of Nigeria. These sections of the Criminal Code Ordinance prohibit the procurement, defilement, illegal guardianship and allowing an “under age” girl to live and work as a prostitute in a brothel.<sup>8</sup> If the public and institutional responses or reactions to adult prostitution were shrouded in moral, criminal, socio-economic, medical and political contradictions, that of child went beyond all these and extended to the myth or assumption about female juvenile sexuality and masculine oriented deviant sexual behavior such as pedophilia. Child prostitutes were fondly called *piccin*, a word that suggests their physical tenderness and preference for their adult counterparts.

Child prostitution flourished in the major Nigerian urban centers during the 1940s. However, for precision, clarity and critical analysis, we will draw our evidence from Lagos where the phenomenon was most rampant. What were the factors that facilitated the incorporation of

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<sup>3</sup> Laurent Fourchard in a recent study explores the invention of juvenile delinquency in colonial Nigeria. See, Laurent Fourchard, “Lagos and the Invention of Juvenile Delinquency in Nigeria,” *Journal of African History* 46 (2006): 115-137.

<sup>4</sup> This closely related developments: the politics of decolonization, the coming into power of the Labor Party in Britain, the politics of the Cold War and the internationalization of socialism stimulated domestic and international concern about issues of welfare of the people of British colonies in Africa.

<sup>5</sup> A critical appraisal of the manner in which colonial administrators discussed issues related to social questions demonstrates their prejudiced and misguided notion about gender, race and sexuality in Africa. Africans were generally portrayed as “promiscuous,” “over sexed” and incapable of controlling different facets of their sexualities. For the Nigerian case, see, NAI, CSO 26/03338, Vol II. *International Convention for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic and Traffic in Women and Children*, 1913-1925; 1936-1956; NAI, Oyo Prof 1, 1373, *Traffic in Women and Children, Obscene Language etc, Report for the League of Nations*; NAI, CSO 36005, *Traffic in Girls From Nigeria to the Gold Coast Vol. II etc*. A general review of this aspect of Afro-European relations can be found in Megan Vaughan, *Curing their ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 129-154.

<sup>6</sup> I use the words “girls” and “juveniles” interchangeable to show the wide range of terminologies employed in differentiating between child and adult prostitution.

<sup>7</sup> See NAI, COMCOL 1 File No. 2844, *Child Prostitution in Lagos*, D.E Faulkner to Commissioner of Police, July 3, 1943.

<sup>8</sup> For details of the prosecution, see *Ibid*.

juveniles into casual sexual labor? At what period in the history of Nigeria did this begin? In the absence of evidence that suggests its existence in precolonial period,<sup>9</sup> it is difficult to say in absolute and concrete terms when child prostitution started in colonial Lagos.<sup>10</sup> I would like to suggest that it began between the late 1920s and early 1930s. Lagos at this period had emerged as the administrative capital and the economic hub of Africa's most populous country.<sup>11</sup> The early 1930s coincided with the consolidation of all colonial capitalist structures in Lagos and all the features of colonial social urbanization had been firmly established.<sup>12</sup> The phenomenon was only waiting for the social, economic and demographic changes precipitated by the Second World War for it to be placed strategically on the map of contentious public debates.

This work adopts a thematic approach in discussing child prostitution. A cardinal aspect of the study is the discussion of the social, economic, sexual and legal parameters that differentiate adult from child prostitution. This aspect of research on child prostitution is traditionally treated with levity in most literature that treats the subject from Euro-American and African perspectives. The methods adopted in procuring child prostitutes and the myths about female juvenile sexuality are discussed in different but closely weaved sections. The trajectory of race and class in the discourse of child prostitution in Lagos is intriguing, as it gives room for understanding the significance of the "universality" of human sexual behavior –therefore countering the obnoxious notion that African sexualities belong to the category of the "other." In another study, I shall discuss the divergent approaches adopted in prohibiting and regulating child prostitution related activities.

### **Masculinity, Juvenile Sexuality and the Question of age in the Historiography of Child Prostitution**

Social histories of colonial Nigeria are legion, but social histories of prostitution and sexuality are rare to the point of non-availability.<sup>13</sup> Until the appearance of a recent work on the

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<sup>9</sup> The author has yet to come across evidence that suggests the prevalence of child prostitution in precolonial Nigeria.

<sup>10</sup> Different parts of present day Nigeria were incorporated into the vortex of colonialism at different periods. Lagos was the first part of the country to be placed under colonial rule in 1861. The city therefore has longer history of colonial urbanization when compared to most parts of the north, that were conquered by 1903 and several parts of the south especially the southeastern, which did not come under colonial administration until the around 1900. Nigeria became an independent state in 1960.

<sup>11</sup> Colonial official file on this subject was opened in 1942. The general trend in the documentation of subjects in colonial Nigeria and in other parts of Africa where colonial rule flourished is that issues that did not have strong impact on colonial political and administrative status quo were poorly documented. This is the case with several themes like prostitution and child labor that did not attract administrative attention until the Second World War years.

<sup>12</sup> I am identifying child prostitution as a well -entrenched, social, sexual and economic relations. Significant indices include the presence of brothels, and other places where child prostitutes solicited, the method employed in procuring them, and the entire conditions that facilitated demand and supply. These conditions are discussed within the framework of the impact of colonialism on some aspects of traditional practices such as betrothal. Child prostitution is treated as an aspect of urban subculture that was widely known as an "inevitable" social and sexual network in the culturally heterogeneous domain of colonial Lagos.

<sup>13</sup> Why is serious historical research on prostitution coming so late and at a period when Nigerian history had developed into a veritable academic field? This development is explicable in terms of many factors. Perhaps the most readily identifiable one is the unwillingness of scholars to talk about themes related to prostitution, sex and sexuality in public. This problem is not specific to Nigeria and one might agree with Michel Foucault that sex and themes related to sexuality enjoy a serious degree of repression among academics. See, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I: An*

colonial origin of prostitution,<sup>14</sup> prostitution and venereal disease<sup>15</sup> and prostitutes' criminality,<sup>16</sup> anthropologists and sociologists have monopolized discourse on this subject. Sociological and anthropological data on prostitution in Nigeria provide conflicting information about the relationship between prostitution and some socio-cultural practices such as *Karuwanci*, courtesanship, concubinage, ritual sex and exchange of wives.<sup>17</sup> Also, it is only recently that we

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*Introduction* reprint (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). It is also significant to note that the circumstances, which gave birth to academic historical scholarship on Nigeria, have profound effect on the type of history that is written. The greatest impetus for the development of Africa's professional historical studies, which was pioneered by Nigerianists was the need to explore precolonial histories of the peoples of Africa and challenge the unscientific notion that Africans cannot govern themselves and thus had to be colonized. Professional historical studies right from the late 1950s were directed largely to the exploration of the political aspects of African precolonial past. This type of scholarship called (nationalist historiography) provided the needed intellectual weapon for nationalist movement by arguing that Africans had a long history of state and empire formation that predates European encroachment. A good number of historical research continued to be directed towards Africa's precolonial and colonial political past at the detriment of social, labor, military, medical, women's etc histories after colonial disengagement up to the mid 1980s. The pioneers of African history recognized this problem. See among others, E.A Ayandele, "How Truly Nigerian is Our Nigerian History?" *African Notes* 5, no. 2 (1968/69): 19-35; "The Task Before Nigerian Historians Today," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 9, no.4 (1979): 7- 22; Adeile Afigbo, *The Poverty of African Historiography* (Lagos: Afrografika, 1977); J.F.A Ajayi, *In Search of Relevance in the Humanities in Africa* (Lagos: FESTAC Colloquium, 1977) and "A Critique of Themes Preferred by Nigerian Historians," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, Silver Jubilee Edition* (1980): 33-39 among others. In terms of sources and methodology, colonial official data on prostitution and sexuality is scanty and historians who intend to gather large body of archival evidences will be disappointed. This is why newspapers and magazines are important sources. However, working with print media materials takes a lot of time. I worked with them for about three years in order to generate the materials used to write my already cited work. Research on prostitution sometimes requires a multidisciplinary approach and the borrowing of tools and terminologies of analysis from disciplines such as law and the social sciences. Historians who do not like to work with social science oriented methodologies might have problems researching the history of prostitution and sexuality.

<sup>14</sup> See, Saheed Aderinto, "Prostitution and Urban Social Relations," in Hakeem I. Tijani, ed., *Nigeria's Urban History: Past and Present* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2006), 75-98. Benedict Naanen's work, which is perhaps the first historical research on prostitution in Nigeria paid lip service to the analysis of its origin. See Benedict Naanen, "The Itinerant Gold Mines: Prostitution in Cross River Basin of Nigeria, 1930-1950," *African Studies Review* 34, no.2 (1991): 57-79.

<sup>15</sup> Saheed Aderinto, "Urban Threat: Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Colonial Nigeria" A paper presented at the International Conference on African Health and Illness, The University of Texas at Austin, March 26-28, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Saheed Aderinto, "Policing Urban Prostitution: Prostitutes, Crimes, Law and Reformers," in Tijani ed., 99-118.

<sup>17</sup> In my study of the origin of prostitution in Nigeria, I historicized some of the above- mentioned cultural practices and argue that prostitution, a professional identity or role of a female who earned her livelihood through the provision of sexual services emerged in Nigeria as a result of the numerous socio cultural and economic changes brought about by colonialism. This implies that prostitution is one of the long neglected social legacies of colonialism in Nigeria. See Aderinto, "Prostitution and Urban Social Relations," 75-98. For a review of some existing sociological and anthropological research on prostitution, courtesanship and concubinage, see Renee Pittin, "Houses of Women: a Focus on Alternative Life-Styles in Katsina City," in Christine Oppong, ed., *Female and Male in West Africa* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 291-301; Abner

have seen studies on Nigerian migrant prostitutes in a neighboring West African country during the colonial period<sup>18</sup> and adequate reference to the activities of prostitutes in mining camps<sup>19</sup> and military settlements.<sup>20</sup> All these studies have not been able to fill the huge gap in the discourse of prostitution and sexuality in colonial Nigeria. In fact, what we have seen is the birth of a new genre of scholarship, which has been hidden from the “eagle eyes” of professional historical scholarship. Existing studies also focus on adult prostitution otherwise called “prostitution proper,” while the role of children as providers of sexual services during the colonial period of Nigerian history is reduced to footnotes and brief contextual references.

Using age as a variable, adult and child or juvenile are the two types of prostitution. The history of “modern” prostitution is the history of both types.<sup>21</sup> Child and adult prostitution exist side by side in virtually all places where prostitution thrives. Prostitution involves professional provision and consumption of sexual labor.<sup>22</sup> The age factor includes the period in a female’s life when she chooses to begin and stop working as a prostitute. This age bracket is determined by several factors, including but not limited to individual preference, poverty and the extent of state or reformist prohibition of casual sexual labor. Regimentation, a system that involves the control and regulation of prostitution-related activities, payment of tax and compulsory medical inspection of prostitutes seems to be the only means by which societies can officially prohibit the commercial provision and consumption of sexual labor at certain ages and the conditions under which this must take place. The absence of regimentation in most societies criminalizes prostitution and makes the enforcement of laws needed to prevent children from working as prostitutes unrealistic.

A critical appraisal of the large and growing body of *historical* scholarship on prostitution shows that the construction of prostitution is confined predominantly to adult.<sup>23</sup> With

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Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Town* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), 51-71; Jerome Barkow, “The Institution of Courtesanship in The Northern States of Nigeria,” *Geneva Afrique* 10, no. 1 (1971): 59-73; M.G Smith, “The Hausa System of Social Status,” *Africa* 29, no. 3 (July 1959): 239-252; Paul Lovejoy, “Concubinage and the Status of Women Slaves in Early Colonial Northern Nigeria,” *Journal of African History* 29 (1988): 245-266; Victor C. Uchendu “Concubinage Among Ngwa Igbo of Southern Nigeria,” *Africa* 35, no.2 (1965): 187-197.

<sup>18</sup> See, Saheed Aderinto, “Journey to Work: Nigerian Prostitutes in the Gold Coast” Paper presented at the conference on Migration, Movement and Displacement in Africa, University of Texas at Austin, March 24-26, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Saheed Aderinto, “Mines” in Melissa Dittmore ed., *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work Vol. II* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 315-317.

<sup>20</sup> See Saheed Aderinto, “Colonialism and Prostitution in Africa,” in *Ibid Vol. I*, 110-112.

<sup>21</sup> Historians of prostitution agree that “modern” prostitution emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was during this century that debates related to the subject began to take a systematic form. Put differently, prostitution became a subject of scientific and systematic inquiry in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. See for details, Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1987), chapter one.

<sup>22</sup> I do not want to go into the debate on the definitions of prostitution because it is not the main theme of this essay. The crudest definition of prostitution (heterosexual) that cuts across most societies is the exchange of sex for material gratification. All other complex issues, which include the places and circumstances under which prostitution take place are multifaceted. For a brilliant review of all the major definitions see *ibid*, chapter one.

<sup>23</sup> Here, what I have in mind are studies that historicize child prostitution. The largest body of work on this subject has emerged from disciplines such as criminology, clinical sciences, sociology, psychology and social work. These disciplines adopt a similar theoretical framework by looking at juvenile prostitution from the standpoint of crime, exploitation of minors, sex related offences, deviancy and juvenile delinquency. The general orientation is basically social scientific with thin historical evidence. While tools, methodologies, terminologies and data from these

very few exceptions, themes related to the activities of children as prostitutes are often discussed as part of the large body of literature on adult prostitution or as references.<sup>24</sup> Even the works of renowned feminist historians, such as Judith Walkowitz<sup>25</sup> and Luise White<sup>26</sup> provide limited data on child prostitution.<sup>27</sup> The inadequate attention given to the history of child prostitution seems to undermine the prominent position that juveniles occupied as providers of sexual services in the past. One might suggest that the fact that child prostitution did not exist in some societies makes its critical study of “relative” significance. The ratio of adult to child prostitutes is also important. The overwhelming figure of adult to child prostitutes is a likely reason more attention is given to the study of the former. Plausibly, scholars feel that since prostitution (crudely defined) means the sale and consumption of sexual labor, establishing a dichotomy based on age is “unnecessary.”

There is a general intellectual current in the discourse of child prostitution both in the few works dedicated to the topic and the ones that reference it. This pattern of thought that I call the “sexo-economic exploitation thesis” posits that the relationship between child prostitutes and their procurers is exploitative and in favor of the latter. This thesis also contends that children who work as prostitutes are forcefully coerced and exploited by their procurers who allow men to have sex with them. When child prostitutes willingly submit their bodies to men for sexual liaison it is because they have been initiated into the profession of commercialization of sex and have outgrown the stage that requires force, manipulation or coercion.

While child prostitution signifies exploitation and barbarism, that of adult is pictured differently. Although adult prostitutes might also be placed under conditions akin to those of children, they are capable of enjoying a substantial degree of freedom, both sexually and economically. Adult prostitutes personally or in conjunction with others, locate places where soliciting can best be done and sometimes go through well-organized channels that furnish them

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disciplines are good for historical enquiries, limited historical data undermines their significance as body of literature, which can shed a considerable amount of light into the careers of children as prostitutes in colonial Nigeria. See the following annotated bibliography: B. Joardor, *Prostitution: A Bibliographical Synthesis* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1984) and Vern L. Bullough and Lilli Sentz, ed., *Prostitution: A Guide to Sources, 1960-1990* (New York/London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992).

<sup>24</sup> Works in this category include but not limited to the following: Julius Carlebach, *Juvenile Prostitutes in Nairobi* (Nairobi: East African Institute of Social Research, 1961); R. Barri Flowers, *The Prostitution of Women and Girls* (Jefferson, North Carolina/London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1998); Daniel S. Campagna and Donald L. Poffenberger, *The Sexual Trafficking in Children: An Investigation of the Child Sex Trade* (Dover, Massachusetts: Auburn House Publishing Company, 1988); M. Csapo, “Juvenile Prostitution,” *Canadian Journal of Special Education* 2, no.2 (1986): 145-170; Joseph Gathia, *Child Prostitution in India* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Judith Walkowitz, “Jack the Ripper and the Myth of Male Violence,” *Feminist Studies* 8, no.3 (Fall 1982): 543-574; “The Politics of Prostitution,” *Signs* 6, no.1 (1980); “Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain,” in Ann Snitow Christine Stansell and Sharon Thompson, eds., *Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (London: Virago, 1984), 43-61; with Daniel J. Walkowitz, “We Are Not Beasts of the Field: Prostitution and the Poor in Plymouth and Southampton under the Contagious Disease Act,” in Mary Hartman and Lois Banner, ed., *Clio’s Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

<sup>26</sup> Luise White whose work is currently the *primus inter pares* of academic study of prostitution in Africa allocates six pages to the discussion of child prostitution in colonial Nairobi, Kenya. Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 38 and 154-158.

<sup>27</sup> I am singling out the work of these scholars because their scholarship enjoys a considerable amount of international recognition.

with information about the profession. They set the prices for their services, determine how to invest resources accrued from the job and decide how to interact with their male customers. Such relationships sometimes involve the provision of extra sexual services including but not limited to providing meals and other comforts of home. Adult prostitutes design the mode and pattern of their relations with pimps and other members of the prostitution subculture and with the state and reformists who traditionally make laws to restrict or prohibit their activities and place their economic independence and social and sexual mobility on the line.<sup>28</sup> If adult prostitutes are placed under conditions akin to those of a child, it is because of the legal statutes of prostitution, which criminalize it and make legal redress difficult to seek. Feminists who call for the decriminalization of prostitution-related activities, such as brothel keeping and public soliciting argue that it is only when prostitutes are allowed to work legally that they can be protected against criminals (especially men) who exploit their “deviant” and criminal identities.

The picture of an adult prostitute is that of a female who is in “complete” control of her sexuality while that of a child prostitute represents a female in bondage and servitude. This clear - cut dichotomy between adult and child prostitution is the most important factor that determines the pattern of institutional and reformists’ responses, which are rooted chiefly in criminal, moral/ethical and medical contradictions. While feminists are divided on the contradictions inherent in laws that prohibit adult prostitution and limit the control females have over their sexuality and accumulation of resources, they seem to agree generally that child prostitution epitomizes notoriety because it involves criminal manipulation and exploitation of minors who should be engaged in productive activities such as schooling. Here, child prostitution is considered a form of child labor that receives a sort of universal condemnation.

The argument that child prostitution involves sexual and economic exploitation of minors dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when “modern” thought about prostitution began to take a scientific form. Nineteenth century reformists’ arguments centered on the perceived role of prostitutes in the spread of venereal diseases and “indecentcy.” Serious correlation between prostitution and crime was later drawn in the opening years of the twentieth century, which ushered in a new epoch in the history of universal condemnation of child and adult prostitution. France and Great Britain were convinced that there was an international trade that involved the sale of women and children into “houses of ill-fame” where they were made to work as prostitutes. White Slavery as it was called was carried out within the European continent and between Europe and the Americas. Christian and humanitarian groups during this period also provided evidence of women and girls being procured from Asia and the Middle East and transported to Europe and the United States for prostitution.<sup>29</sup> Agitation to halt the international trafficking in women and girls took a decisive dimension in 1904, when thirteen European countries ratified an agreement called, *The International Convention for the Suppression of White Slave Traffic and Traffic in Women and Children*. The signatories pledged to work together to suppress the White Slave Traffic. The United States was asked to be a signatory to the treaty and the Senate advised ratification in 1905. President Theodore Roosevelt declared it by proclamation in 1908.<sup>30</sup> Most arguments relating to the position of children as prostitutes are structured along this line. Historians, social workers and social scientists readily make reference to the above- mentioned historical development to demonstrate the relationship between patriarchy/ power and the exploitation of minors.

This study does not contest the widely accepted thesis that child prostitution is a form of sexual and economic exploitation. Sexual exploitation of minors is a manifestation of the economic; and apparently, children cannot be exploited economically without being first

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<sup>28</sup> Aderinto, “Policing Urban Prostitution,” 111-112.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1984)

<sup>30</sup> Mark Thomas Connelley, *The Response to Prostitution in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1980), chapter two.

exploited, sexually. The yawning gap that needs to be filled in the current stage of thought about child prostitution is the role that masculine sexuality and venereal disease have played in providing markets for child prostitutes in the past. Here, we are looking at the sexual aspect of prostitution. Prostitution as a subject of academic inquiry is not complete if it is reduced to debates on the relationship between prostitutes and reformists as we read in most of the literature. The sexual aspect of the discourse of child prostitution is the analysis of the factors that facilitated the sexual acts that took place behind closed doors. The men who closed doors to have sex with girls were sometimes informed by a set of assumptions about juvenile sexuality. The masculine-oriented proposition about juvenile sexuality that we are going to discuss placed child prostitution beyond the idea that sexual intercourse is an “inevitable” aspect of human sexual behavior and extended to notions that having sex with one category of female is “better” than another. The demand for sexual labor of children therefore went beyond the factor of manipulation, and economic and sexual exploitation by procurers and male customers. Several unscientific notions that we might also call “taboos” explain why they were preferred by some categories of men. I tell the Nigerian story by looking at some male-dominated domains and posit that juvenile prostitution thrived not only because female children were easy to manipulate but also because of the connection between juvenile and masculine sexuality, and venereal disease.

There are complex problems involved in identifying the ages of children who were prostitutes in the past. This aspect constitutes a serious historiographical problem because of the wide range of interpretations of what constitute “premature” sex. And the question of when a child prostitute becomes an adult is difficult to answer partly because the correlation between sexual maturity and age is not static throughout the world. The work of influential nineteenth century moralists such as Parent -Duchatelet, William Acton and William W. Sanger in France, Great Britain and the United States respectively contains a lot of information about the activities of young girls who worked as prostitutes.<sup>31</sup> All these authors whose nineteenth and early twentieth century works on prostitution serve as reference for contemporary historians are not sophisticated in their discussion of the categorization of prostitutes in accordance with age. Clifford Roe, the greatest hero in the war against trafficking in women and children in early twentieth century United States was not consistent in his use of age in identifying “girls” and “women” who were trafficked for the purpose of prostitution. In his most widely read book, *The Great War on White Slavery*, he narrates how one William Smith procured Ruth, a twenty one year old girl for the purpose of prostitution.<sup>32</sup> In another section of the book, Roe in his characteristically energetic puritan tone, discusses how one Irene Bradley was sentenced to six months in prison for harboring girls below the age of eighteen in “the house of ill- fame.”<sup>33</sup> On both occasions, he calls these girls “child prostitutes” and provides no yardstick for distinguishing between adult and child prostitutes. Since the age of consent for sexual intercourse in most parts of the United States at that time was sixteen, one does not expect Roe to call a twenty-one year old, a child prostitute. Luise White discusses the problems she encountered in establishing the ages of teenage prostitutes in Colonial Nairobi, Kenya. She suggests that many of the Kikuyu girl prostitutes would have been between ten and fifteen at the time of their circumcision, the most reliable means of establishing their ages. However, this method of determining age later became unreliable because by the 1930s women’s circumcision years and names were localized to their homesteads.<sup>34</sup>

The League of Nations, which took over the war against trafficking in women and children from France in 1918 established a dichotomy between under age and adult prostitutes in its annual questionnaire which all signatories to the *Trafficking in Women and Children*

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<sup>31</sup> See, William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects throughout the World* reprint (New York: The Medical Publishing Co., 1921).

<sup>32</sup> Clifford Roe, *The Great War on White Slavery* reprint (New York/ London: Garland Publishing, 1979), 154.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 46.

<sup>34</sup> White, 155.

*Convention* of 1919 were enjoined to complete annually.<sup>35</sup> However, the League did not provide a universal age under which girls were expected to be regarded as child prostitutes. Since the previously mentioned work and others are primary sources contemporary historians of prostitution use in writing about the subject, reconstruction of the history of child prostitution with emphasis on age remains a challenging one.

I use the Nigerian story of child prostitution to offer an interpretation of the careers of child prostitutes by going beyond the “sexo-economic exploitation thesis” and addressing the long neglected, yet imperative aspect of masculine sexuality. While there is a form of universal commonality about human sexuality, it is appropriate to suggest that some Afro- centered patterns of sexuality differ from those that prevail in other parts of the globe. The social and sexual revolution that took place during the colonial period of Nigerian history paved the way for new forms of sexual order- a development which as we will see led to a clash between “traditional” and “modern” pattern of sexualities. A narrative of the historiographical problem of identifying the ages of child prostitutes is provided. Here I argue that to understand the complexities involved in identifying and establishing the ages of child prostitutes, a historical reconstruction must recognize that child prostitution was both a legally and socially constructed phenomenon.

### **Lagos Child Prostitutes: Sources and Methods of Procurement**

Discourses on prostitution and sexuality in colonial Nigeria involve critical intellectual navigation from one aspect of the society to another. Colonial society was characterized by serious transformation from traditional to “modern.” Traditional pattern of sexual behavior went hand in hand with the new/“modern” type that began to emerge as a result of colonialism. What we can identify as “sexual hybridity”- a product of traditional and modern pattern of sexual behavior emerged. Developments during the colonial era affected African sexuality- the provision and consumption of sexual services came through colonial capitalism.<sup>36</sup> Contradictions between colonial legal provisions, which were put in place to protect children, and several cultural practices such as child betrothal, “child marriage” and street hawking came into limelight. The pre-eminence of the institution of slavery and its remnant during the colonial period, the transmutation some aspects of traditional pattern of sexual behavior underwent coupled with the overwhelming influence of patriarchy enhanced the consolidation of a new social and sexual order.

Most of the available evidences relating to the place of birth of child prostitutes indicate that they came from places outside Lagos and were brought to the city as child prostitutes or became child prostitutes after they had worked as girl hawkers, traversing the major streets of Lagos selling wares, or placed under poor parental control. One major non-Nigerian source of child prostitutes is northern Cameroon. A 1935 report on slave trade between northern Cameroon and Nigerian border indicates that the main recruitment area was the Mandara Hill of northern Cameroon which lies west and southwest of Mora and occupied largely by the Wula (Matakum).<sup>37</sup> A factor that contributed to the sustenance of this slave trade was the habit of the Wula who “disposed” their female children for small sums to the Gowa and Ashigashiya of northern Cameroon under the guise of marriage.<sup>38</sup> Girls from this part of modern Cameroon were taken to northern Nigeria where they were incorporated into the large harem of the Sokoto caliphate’s concubines if treated as slaves or as wives in wedlock that were characterized by high degree of

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<sup>35</sup> NAI, CSO 26/03338 Vol. II, *International Convention*.

<sup>36</sup> This sounds very contentious considering the fact that prostitution is popularly identified as the oldest profession on earth. But the focus here is on prostitution (as a form of labor) and not the numerous precolonial forms of sexual behavior such as concubinage, courtesanship, ritual sex and exchange of wives, which have to misguidedly rendered as prostitution. See Aderinto, “Prostitution and Urban Social Relations,” 75-98.

<sup>37</sup> NAI, CSO 26/03338 Vol. II, *International Convention*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

instability. Concubinage was one of the means used to consolidate the aristocratic culture of the Sokoto caliphate, which according to Paul Lovejoy and Jan Hogendorn was the largest slave society in Africa and one of the largest in modern history on the eve of European invasion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>39</sup> Significantly, the continuity of the institution of slavery in northern Nigeria up to the late 1930s allowed the slave traffic to persist. In the early 1940s when the campaign against child prostitution became vigorous in Lagos, it was discovered that some child prostitutes that were reclaimed from their procurers were not Nigerians and had been trafficked from northern Cameroon, through the northern part of the country and through several channels until they finally arrived in Lagos. Some came to Lagos as wives but absconded from their husbands and later co-opted into prostitution. Others had been brought chiefly for the purpose of street trading and other economic activities.<sup>40</sup> As we are going to see in the course of this work, street trading and homelessness made girls to be susceptible to being recruited for prostitution.

In some parts of southern Nigeria, during the colonial period up to the 1940s, there are evidences of slave trading which looks more complex when compared to the northern type. A.E Afigbo in a recent study looks at this theme brilliantly.<sup>41</sup> While the government deliberately allowed slavery to thrive till 1936 in the north, its outright illegalization in the south did not signify a total end. A 1938 report of slavery in some eastern Nigerian provinces identified Obowo, as the “clearing house” where children were procured and taken to Umuahia and finally sold.<sup>42</sup> Nnamdi Azikiwe, one of the heroes of Nigeria’s nationalist movement identified Bonny and Okrika as places where the remnants of slave trade can be found.<sup>43</sup> Personal data of some child prostitutes signifies that they were procured in some of the above- mentioned places and taken to Lagos for the purpose of prostitution.<sup>44</sup> Again, a good number might have been taken to Lagos as laborers in other economic ventures but later passed into the hands of procurers who used them as prostitutes.

Child prostitution also developed within the avarice of child labor, which was chiefly promoted by colonial capitalist formation in the Lagos urban domain. The practice of giving out minors to urban dwellers for formal and informal education or vocational training developed in line with economic growth and capitalism, which brought change in the mode of production and specialization. The introductory epigraph indicates how Alice Etovbodia procured Rose from her parents under the guise that she would be trained in Lagos. Street hawking by children was a prominent type of child labor that attracted serious concern in the 1940s. Apart from providing enabling conditions for luring female juveniles into prostitution, hawking as we are going to see, exposed girls to masculine sexual molestation.<sup>45</sup> The tenuous nature of colonial economic and social structures presented itself in a form of vicious cycle of unending demise because female children frequently changed hands from those who used them as prostitutes to others who employed them as street traders. A *West African Pilot* reporter quotes Mrs. Abayomi, a social welfare officer of the Colony Welfare Service: “...on the statistics in the Welfare office, she based the conclusion that girl-hawkers usually pass into the hands of seasoned prostitutes to learn the trade at a tender age.”<sup>46</sup> Table I provides insight into the relationship between street hawking and the danger that girls were exposed to during this period. Presumably surprised by the conduct of a

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Lovejoy and Jan Hogendorn, *Slow Death for Slavery: The Course of Its Abolition in Northern Nigeria, 1897-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>40</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2600 Vol. II.

<sup>41</sup> A.E Afigbo, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in Southeastern Nigeria, 1885-1950* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> NAI, CSO 26/28994, *Slave Dealing and Child Stealing in Southern Provinces*.

<sup>43</sup> Eastern Nigerian Guardian (ENG), “Slave Traffic in Nigeria” January 2, 1941, 4 and 5.

<sup>44</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844.

<sup>45</sup> (ENG) “Girl Hawkers,” November 24, 1942: 2.

<sup>46</sup> West African Pilot (WAP), “Mrs. Abayomi Attributes Prostitution to Laziness and Undue Gaiety and Unemployment,” August 10, 1944: 1.

procurer or worried about the condition of girls, that were taken from her village, Madam Alice of Abayom, Ogoja Province, wrote a petition to the Commissioner of the Colony, Lagos. The following is an excerpt from a petition dated July 12, 1946:

*I have the honour must respectfully beg to ask if the order was given to Madam Ogudu, of 41 Taiwo street Lagos to trade with girls. Because she used to come here and packed all the girls to Lagos. Once she went with three girls before they were driven from Lagos and one who died by sickness.<sup>47</sup>*

If child prostitutes were procured under the cover of informal training or schooling, a method that appears most rampant was “posted marriage.” Posted marriage involved the corruption of the pre-eminent socio-cultural practice of child betrothal. An appraisal of the discussion of betrothal and bride-price variously called dowry and bride wealth, among the various groups in the Nigerian geographical area by P.A Talbot,<sup>48</sup> N.A Fadipe,<sup>49</sup> and G.T Basden<sup>50</sup> suggest that it was predominantly a sort of transfer of wealth from one family to another and was not an economic transaction, which involved the payment of specific amount for the purpose of marriage. It was embodied in several traditional rites, carried out over a period of time after a verbal pronouncement of betrothal was made and accepted by the families of the prospective bride and bridegroom. The symbolic rather than the economic significance of bride-price informed the thinking of J. R Wilson-Haffenden, who suggests in 1931 that the word should be replaced with “espousal fee” because the transmutation it went through during the colonial period was not at par with the functions it performed in precolonial times.<sup>51</sup>

The transformation betrothal and bride-price experienced during the colonial period can be understood against the backdrop of the penetration of capitalist values and monetized economy of Lagos urban domain. The type of outlook developed out of the rural area’s gradual absorption into the urban system, made the possession of money increasingly essential for local needs. The result was a circular process because there was a demand for consumption goods, which, in turn, could only be met, as a rule, by earning money in the cities.<sup>52</sup> The long process of betrothal was replaced by marriage by “cash in hand.” Since monetary commitment was paramount and gradually replacing a system that was traditionally long and procedural, it was not too difficult for procurers to secure girls from their parents by paying the sum needed for marriage rites. There are copious evidences of how parents gave out their daughters to urban dwellers who had paid their bride-price and were taken to Lagos where they worked as prostitutes. The situation was so tenuous to the extent that all that a procurer required for getting a girl either for marriage or other purposes was sending money order to the villages through post offices. The following statements illuminate the connections between child prostitution and fictitious marriage arrangements:

*Case I: A well-known boma boy heard of the death of his uncle and, remembering that there was a young girl left fatherless, went to the home and persuaded the girl to come to Lagos on the promise that there was a husband waiting for her. She was brought to Lagos, kept in close confinement and*

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<sup>47</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844.

<sup>48</sup> P.A Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria, Vol. II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 112-230.

<sup>49</sup> N.A Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1970), 91-93.

<sup>50</sup> G.T Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, reprint, (London: Frank Cass, 1966), 102.

<sup>51</sup> J.R Wilson- Haffenden, “Espousal Fee: An Alternative Term for “Bride-Price,” *Man* 31(August 1931): 163-164.

<sup>52</sup> This development was also noticed in several parts of Africa other than Nigeria. See for details, Kenneth Little, *African Women in Towns: An Aspect of Africa’s Social Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 15-20.

*prostituted to European sailors. Eventually, she escaped from the man and reported to the police.*

*Case II: A woman of known bad character went to the Urhobo country and so she says paid £10 dowry for a girl to be the wife of a soldier in Lagos. The girl was found living in the woman's house. She proved to be about 12 years of age, with little pubertal development. A soldier appeared and corroborated the woman's story.*

*Case III: A woman of notorious character was found harbouring a girl of 15 in circumstances strongly suggestive of prostitution. The girl was said to be the wife of her brother and £13 was said to have been paid as dowry. Repeated requests to see the alleged husband produced no result although ample time was given. As the woman raised no objection to the repatriation of the girl, and in fact arranged and paid for it herself, it was assumed that the foregoing story was untrue.<sup>53</sup>*

D.E Faulkner, the Colony Welfare Officer's observation further corroborates the profundity of the evidence presented above. The following excerpt is from his 1943 report of Social Welfare Services in Lagos:

*The modus operandi is for a woman, who may be known to them or may even be relative, to approach the parents of a girl with an offer to train her in Lagos or to find a husband for her. Very often, the woman (or man) will actually pay some dowry on the spot, but that is not too always so. The girl is then brought to Lagos and is gradually introduced to the life of a prostitute.<sup>54</sup>*

Closely connected to this is the phenomenon that can be called "bride-price hysteria." Throughout the country, the monetization of marriage reflected in exorbitant bride-price demanded from urban dwellers by their local communities. Men had to work for several years to raise the resources required for marriage rites. Sixty percent of Igbo in Lagos with age ranging from fifteen to thirty- four were young men in search of the high bride- price demanded in their various communities.<sup>55</sup> In fact, it is not illogical to suggest that it was bride- price hysteria that paved the way for the access procurers had to recruiting girls. The more difficult it was for men to raise the resources needed for marriage arrangements, the more they lured after prostitutes who provided the needed sexual services and the easier it was for procurers to recruit girls by paying marriage expenses under the pretext of arranged marriage.<sup>56</sup>

### **The Lego-Social Construct of Child Prostitution in Colonial Lagos**

Sources that give us insight into ages of child prostitutes in Lagos during the period under examination fall into four major categories: newspaper reports or stories, petitions by the public, records produced by the Colony Welfare Service and lastly relevant sections of the Criminal Code Ordinance which were usually published and amended on a periodic basis. The first three categories are collectively categorized as "reformist/moralist" sources. In reformist sources we read phrases and statements such as the use of: "young... young... and small... small... girls as

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<sup>53</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844.

<sup>54</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844, D.E Faulkner, *Report on Child Prostitution in Lagos* dated, July 1, 1943.

<sup>55</sup> P.C Lloyd, *Africa in Social Change: Changing Traditional Societies in the Modern* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 123.

<sup>56</sup> See for instance, Nigerian Spokesman, "The Bride Price Racket," 12 December, 1951: 2.

prostitutes.”<sup>57</sup> Reformists rarely mention ages when they write about child prostitution. How young were these “young... young... girls”? Even when they provide ages, we cannot wholeheartedly trust their figures because their evidence was based on observing child prostitutes and their condition of work, which was generally described as “unethical.” Apparently, these observers had limited or no contact with child prostitutes because prostitution traditionally took place in parts of the city regarded as “unholy.” A petition dated July 10, 1943 will suffice:

*This is a complaint against 3 minor girls by age of 9-10-12 years old that were under a certain old woman by name Madam Ogoudi at 41 Taiwo Street Lagos. These girls they never become up to the age of sexual intercourse which this woman treating by giving them to different a kind of men for sexual intercourse. What moves me to bring my complaint against them is I went there a certain evening by 7.30 pm. I heard a girl voice was crying in the room and to my observation, I discovered that a girl not up to age of haven to do with man is in a room with a certain seamen. So pity I am...*<sup>58</sup>

What is the exact age of: “a girl not up to age of haven to do with man”? This petitioner did not even tell us if he or she spoke with the child prostitute after the sexual encounter.

The Colony Welfare Service spearheaded the cause of abolishing child prostitution in Lagos. According to Laurent Fourchard, the responsibilities of the organization ranged from conducting research on social problems to implementing all government policies, some of which included establishing of juvenile hostels where delinquent juveniles were housed for the purpose of rehabilitation.<sup>59</sup> The records of the Colony Welfare Service provide better insight into the age of child prostitutes because the officers of the Service carried out extensive interviews on the life histories and backgrounds of child prostitutes after they had been repossessed from their procurers. This government establishment needed the ages of child prostitutes to determine the type of rehabilitation program they would go through, and more importantly the criminal charges to be initiated against their procurers.

A limitation of the information obtained by the social welfare officers is that some of the child prostitutes did not know when they were born because in most cases they had no formal education. Some of them were brought to Lagos at a very young age and were not able to recount significant parts of their life histories or give their dates of birth.<sup>60</sup> For instance, Rose Ojengbe whose case was used as the epigraph did not mention her age but said: “I a little girl like this...”<sup>61</sup> How little she was remains a subject of speculation. The attainment of puberty assisted the social welfare officers in determining the ages of child prostitutes; although poor nutrition and genetic factors sometimes retarded sexual and physical developments and maturity. This implies that a twenty year old prostitute due to poor nutrition and genetic factors, may not have developed certain physical features characteristic of adulthood and was therefore occasionally categorized inaccurately as a child by the Colony Welfare Service.

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<sup>57</sup> There are numerous references to child prostitutes as “small...small... girls.” See for instance, WAP “Bribery, Prostitution and theft in Nigeria,” January I, 1943, 2.

<sup>58</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844.

<sup>59</sup> Fourchard, 115-137.

<sup>60</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2600 Vol.II, *Social Welfare, General Questions, Establishment of Welfare Department, 1942-1945*

<sup>61</sup> See the epigraph’s citation.

Tables I, II and III give insight into the relationship between ages of child prostitutes and the insecurity of female juveniles in Lagos:

Cases	No. of victims 1945	No. of victims 1946	Remarks
Absconders	51	40	Children who run away from their homes, parents or guardians, through ill treatment. With one exception these have all been Yorubas and have frequently been interfered with by men.
Homeless girls	N/A	17	---
Prostitutes	15	42	Girls between 8 and 12 definitely known to be prostitutes.
Moral danger	N/A	40	Girls found in brothels who have not yet been used for prostitution; girls living a promiscuous life, children with guardian not exercising proper control so that the children are no longer virgin through about 10 years of age.
Beyond parental control	N/A	15	Usually on sexual ground
Absconding from husbands	N/A	5	Young girls who have been forced to marriage at a very early age.
Suspected child prostitutes	N/A	17	Sometimes en route for the Gold Coast.
Unsuitable homes	N/A	20	Usually young girls coming to live alone with a male relative to housekeep for them.

Table I. Source: NAI, COMCOL 1, 2600 Vol. II, Social Welfare, General Questions, Establishment of Social Welfare Department, 1942-1945.

The last genre of sources that provides insight into the ages of child prostitutes are sections of the Criminal Code Ordinance where anti-prostitution laws are stipulated. The Criminal Code Ordinance provides a sharp dichotomy between two categories of females: “woman” and “under age.” Up till 1958, an under age female in Nigeria was a female below the age of thirteen.<sup>62</sup> This implies that a brothel keeper or a procurer cannot be charged under sections 222, 222A (1) and (2) and 22B (1) and (2) of the Criminal Code if he or she allowed a female above the age of thirteen to live and work as a prostitute in a brothel. Meanwhile, a procurer could be criminally charged for violating the provisions of sections 223 and 224, which prohibit the procuring of both under age girls and women.<sup>63</sup> Also, a female above the age of thirteen, who of her own volition became a prostitute cannot be called a child prostitute and could be charged for violating some anti-prostitution laws such as public soliciting and living on immoral earning. Under the 1943 *Children and Young Person Ordinance*, the Colony Welfare Service through the

<sup>62</sup> Annual Volume of the Laws of Nigeria, Legislation enacted during 1944 (Lagos: Government Printer, 1945), 234.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 234.

police had the power to initiate criminal charges against a procurer.<sup>64</sup> Of course the police were still needed to present the accused and case for hearing at the court of law while the social welfare officers provided professional guides needed for prosecution. It is important to note that available evidence from the period under examination does not suggest that girls willingly became prostitutes; rather, the social welfare officers provide information about how some girls due to poor maltreatment by their parents or guardians ran away from homes and became prostitutes.

There is also information on how children learn to prostitute. The process is simply described as apprenticeship and training under the direction and supervision of adult prostitutes.<sup>65</sup> Donald Faulkner, the Colony Welfare Officer appears “scientific” in his description of how a child prostitute becomes a professional adult prostitute:

*The girl is then brought to Lagos and is gradually introduced to the life of a prostitute. At first, being fresh and virginal and she fetches a good price but gradually she ages, venereal disease leaves its mark and she becomes the hardened harlot, who in a few years will be bringing young girls herself to Lagos...There are no husbands for provincial girls in Lagos. If a young man wants a wife he does not seek her in a brothel, he goes to his own country and makes arrangement for himself with the parents of a respectable girl.<sup>66</sup>*

The shortcoming of the age of consent for sexual intercourse is that it is only useful when criminal charges were brought against a procurer or when an arrested prostitute is charged to court. The methods and extent of enforcement of anti-prostitution laws determine the nature and reliability of data. Since the police infrequently kept personal records of arrested prostitutes, it is difficult to identify the extent of criminal charges established against child prostitution related activities and, importantly the ages and number of child prostitutes who received justice under the rule of law.<sup>67</sup> Girls whose ages fell between sixteen and eighteen years were still categorized as child prostitutes by the Social Welfare Service.<sup>68</sup> And there is little guarantee that reformers who wrote about the: “young... young... and small... small... girls” knew the dichotomy between an “under age” and “adult” female as stipulated in the Criminal Code Ordinance.

One episode that exposed the complexity of colonial anti-prostitution laws was the debate on fixing of age of consent for sexual activity. It is here that we see a clash between “tradition” and “modernity.” As we have seen, betrothal and fictitious marriage arrangements were some of the methods adopted for procuring child prostitutes. The popularity of these methods informed the proposal made by the Social Welfare Service and Nigerian educated elites that the government should pass laws to criminalize child betrothal, child marriage, and fix bride-price at a certain amount.<sup>69</sup> A critical breakdown of the implication of the proposed law is that marriage and or sex with a female below sixteen would attract criminal charges.

Various parties protested in accordance with interests, which cut across economic, political, social and sexual boundaries. Colonial government persistently mentioned the remnant of slave trade and lied to the League and United Nations that the problem of Nigeria was not prostitution but how to deal with the nefarious slave traders. This argument was needed to legitimize the humanitarian disposition of the British at a time when the wave of nationalist agitation was becoming difficult to contain. Urban migrant workers who backed the introduction of “regulated” bride-price felt that the huge resources demanded by their families in the villages limited their

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<sup>64</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2786, “Children and Young Person Ordinance,” 1943-1946.

<sup>65</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844, Faulkner.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> See, Aderinto, “Policing Urban Prostitution,” 115.

<sup>68</sup> See, NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844.

<sup>69</sup> Aderinto, “Policing Urban Prostitution,” 110-113.

goal of marrying at the desired time. The native authorities that represented traditional values fervently protested and presented arguments aimed at preserving the customs of their ancestors.<sup>70</sup> In Nigerian customary law, a practice like “child marriage” seems not to exist, and indeed might be one of the numerous lexicons introduced by the British to demonstrate their apathy for some aspects of African sexuality. Marriage is a rite of passage that is performed at the traditionally accepted period. In some Nigerian societies, the appearance of a female’s first menstruation indicates her sexual maturity and readiness for full marriage arrangements.<sup>71</sup> Since traditional authorities more importantly in the rural areas received honor and respect through the possession of a harem of young wives and through the collection of bride- price, laws fixing the age at which a girl cannot be given out in marriage would constitute a blow to their traditional and economic influence.<sup>72</sup> The proposed anti-prostitution laws aimed at regulating betrothal age and bride- price were seen not so much as the best means of preventing and abolishing child prostitution, but as an attempt at regulating African sexuality. Due to the controversial nature of the politics of sex, there was no time in the history of colonial Nigeria that a common ground on how to deal with the problems of prostitution was reached. It is appropriate to argue that while the subject of debate was “prostitution,” the issues negotiated, concurred with cultural nationalism and the protection of individual/collective socio-political, sexual as well as economic interests.<sup>73</sup>

From the foregoing, the categorization of prostitution in accordance with age was both socially and legally constructed. While social construction such as the ones we read in newspapers and those documented by the Social Welfare Service, provides information about the physical, sexual and emotional tenderness of juvenile prostitutes, exploitation and the entire drama relating to the prostitution subculture, the legal construction provides the legal machinery for understanding the differences between “under age” and “adult” females and for establishing criminal charges against procurers. The legal-social construct, in spite of its limitations provides an insight into the ages of juvenile prostitutes and the complexity of researching prostitution.

### **Masculinity, Venereal Disease and Child Prostitution**

As previously mentioned, socio- economic and legal analysis of the differences between child and adult prostitution only explain the aspects of exploitation of female juveniles by adults and the attendant criminality. It does not explain the myths about juvenile sexuality, which included factors that created sexual demand for child prostitutes. Contemporary research on child prostitution in European and North American social sciences has focused on the role masculine-oriented deviant sexual behavior such as pedophilia play in allowing molestation of minors to thrive.<sup>74</sup> Since academic research on sexual aspects of masculinity in colonial and post-independent Nigeria is still in its infancy, it is difficult to determine the extent of this “deviant” sexual behavior-though there are copious evidences of sexual molestation of female children by men in Lagos.<sup>75</sup> One of the most significant positions held by those who called for the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 110-113

<sup>71</sup> As obtainable among the Hausa.

<sup>72</sup> Oral evidence, Mr Akanji Adedeji of Ibadan (age 80+) interview conducted on July 18, 2005.

<sup>73</sup> I am currently developing this argument into an essay.

<sup>74</sup> See for instance, G.M Caplain, “The Fact of Life about Teenage Prostitution” *Crime and Delinquent* 30, no.1 (January, 1984): 69-74.

<sup>75</sup> WAP “Man who assaulted girl age 11 years gets one month in jail” July 15, 1938: 2; “Young girl of five years is found dastardly murdered,” January 11, 1939: 3; “Young girl is murdered in bush and her breasts removed,” January 14, 1939: 1; Nigerian Spokesman “Man rapes girl of 11,” May 4, 1951: 1; Daily Service “Eleven –Year Old Girl Hawker Found Dead in Public Garden,” June 21, 1946: 3; “Street Hawking by Young Girls,” June 20, 1946: 3; “Man who assaulted young girl receives 3 months,” August 19, 1941: 3, Daily Times, “Moral Dangers in the Community,” November 24, 1944. All these stories provide evidences of sexual molestation and murder of girls all below the age of 15 during the 1930s and 1940s.

introduction of laws to prohibit street hawking by female juveniles was the high degree of insecurity that involved masculine sexual molestation. However, the phenomenon must have been facilitated by several factors that placed female juveniles on social and sexual insecurity, those that made children available for labor, and the general nature of Lagos's urban domain which was and still characterized by a multiplicity of values. Oged Macaulay, the son of Herbert Macaulay, the father of the nationalist movement in Nigeria, after observing the relationship between juvenile sexual molestation and prostitution opined:

*In view of the revelation by my friend, Faulkner, it is incumbent on the government to legalize prostitution and the existence of public or private brothels in this country. So that our young girls may be free from the clutches of these "God forsaken" brutes who are responsible for the seduction of young innocent girls between the age of 3 and 15.*<sup>76</sup>

Tables II and III provide more insight into the sexual insecurity of female juveniles in Lagos in 1944:

Cases	No. of victims	Remarks
Raped	1	----
Unlawfully carnally known	2	One of them, age 5 had venereal disease
Child prostitutes	34	Formally in custody of adult prostitutes
Runs away from maltreatment by guardian	13	9 of them had venereal disease
Beyond parental control	3	One of them age 13 had venereal disease
Girls in moral danger	2	One of them, age 13 was found pregnant
Girl hawkers	1	Age 11, found not to be virgin

Table II. Source: NAI, COMCOL 1, 2600 Vol. II, Social Welfare, General Questions, Establishment of Social Welfare Department, 1942-1945.

Cases	No. of victims	Ages
Seduced	46	3-11
Treated for venereal disease	21	3-11
Criminally assaulted	46	3-11
Seduced	59	11-15
Treated for venereal disease	47	11-15

Table III. Source: The Daily Comet, *Oged Macaulay Suggests Licensing of Prostitution*, November 30, 1944, 1.

Closely connected and of greater importance was the proposition that sexual intercourse with virgins or girls in their teens was capable of curing some venereal diseases. This assumption might have allowed pedophilia to thrive in Lagos. It is significant to note that child prostitution reached its peak at a time when venereal diseases constituted a serious medical and social panic in Lagos and the entire country.<sup>77</sup> The preponderance of venereal diseases such as Gonorrhoea,

<sup>76</sup> The Daily Comet "Oged Macaulay Suggests Licensing of Prostitution," November 30, 1944: 1 and 4.

<sup>77</sup> NAI, MH54/si/vol I, *Venereal Diseases- Legislation for Control of*, 1943.

Syphilis, *Climatic bubo* and Chancroid led to the promulgation of the *Venereal Disease Ordinance in 1943* and the establishment of three Venereal Disease Clinics in Lagos.<sup>78</sup> The Social Welfare Service's records give insight into the frequency in which child prostitutes admitted into the girls' hostel were treated for venereal diseases.<sup>79</sup> In its 1945 report, the establishment mentioned that fifteen percent of the female who attended the Venereal Disease Clinics between the months of May and August were juveniles whose ages were thirteen and below.<sup>80</sup> Dr. Olorunnibe, a medical practitioner with the Social Welfare Service in a very affirmative statement opined thus: "Let that erroneous idea that to cure gonorrhoea, a man must have relations with a girl under 14 be abolished immediately."<sup>81</sup>

The provision and consumption of sexual labor can best be appreciated within the framework of urban socialization and the general character of the "moral regions" of Lagos.<sup>82</sup> A 1946 field note of three European social welfare officers in some "moral regions" of Lagos best illuminates the interaction between social urbanization and child prostitution. Disguised as potential customers of juvenile sexual labor, these three researchers moved from one "moral region" to another taking note of the extent of child prostitution in four different locations. The first location was Seven Seas Hotel where they met a woman who had in her control, some child prostitutes. In the room provided for the researchers were two beds in cubicles, placed on the floor and surrounded by several young child prostitutes. On request, they were presented with two child prostitutes with ages ranging from fourteen to fifteen. The second location was a traveler's inn with twelve girls, ages fifteen to twenty-four. In a journalistic manner, the researchers wrote: "...two of the youngest girls immediately came forward to sit on men's knees and had obviously been trained how to behave."<sup>83</sup> The researchers asked for two virgins and the woman in charge promised to make them available the following day. The third location was a house located behind Seven Seas Hotel. They met a woman of about thirty years of age and asked for a fourteen year old girl prostitute. The woman answered that two young virgins would be available for the following day as they had to be fetched from outside. The last location was the Crystal Garden Club where they saw a lot of adult prostitutes. When the researchers asked a taxi driver if he would take them to a place where they could get *piccin*; he answered yes: "...and immediately others came forward offering to take us to where we can get small *piccin* as late as twelve midnight."<sup>84</sup> The social welfare officers submit:

*No man would have any difficulty in being provided with a girl of any age, virgin if desired. The young girls all undressed to show the men their breasts to prove their age. Some of the girls appeared passive: others enjoyed themselves and were evidently being used to being given money and cigarette. The usual price appears to be about 10/- and more for a virgin. These places are patronized by European Seamen....*<sup>85</sup>

Another prominent "moral region" where child prostitution thrived in Lagos was military settlements and camps. The history of the colonial military force dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which showcased the subjugation of the various peoples of the Nigerian geographical

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1 2600, Social Welfare.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> This statement is an excerpt from the communiqué issued at the end of a Public Meeting organized by the Social Welfare Department. Present at the meeting were officials of the Colony Welfare Service, Lagos. See WAP "Mrs. Abayomi Attributes," 1.

<sup>82</sup> Moral region is a term euphemistically used to describe places where crime, prostitution and other urban-based social problems take place. Another closely related word is "red light district."

<sup>83</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844, *Report on Child Prostitution*, 1944.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

area. With the consolidation of colonial structure of capitalism and the outbreak of the two World Wars, the activities of the West African Frontier Force (WAFF) intensified in the military camps in Lagos and the entire country. Military settlement based prostitution became rampant at the outbreak of the Second World War. Activities of prostitutes were adequately pronounced in parts of Lagos such as Surulere, Ijora, Cumberland, Ikoyi and Yaba where military barracks, quarters and camps were located during the Second World War.<sup>86</sup> The significance of the Second World War in providing a conducive environment for child prostitution is best summed up in this excerpt from the report of the Colony Welfare Office:

*War has brought to Lagos, many strangers, African and European, Soldiers, Sailors, and Civilians and their spending power has caused the rapid development of facilities for drinking, dancing and other less respectable social amenities. One of the most disquieting aspects of the situation thus created is the trafficking of young girls for the purpose of prostitution. These girls, mostly about the age of twelve years are not usually Yorubas but appear to be mainly Ibos, Efiks and Sobos.*<sup>87</sup>

Although the sexual character of human beings is fluid and dynamic, the stress traditionally connected with soldiery might have created an environment that made the sexual labor of prostitutes indispensable around military settlements. As demonstrated in a recent study, Nigerian prostitutes who settled near military camps in Lagos and other parts of the country were fondly called “ammunition wives,” a name that suggests their indispensability.<sup>88</sup> In 1947, officers of the Colony Welfare Service rescued eighty-two juveniles who had been working as child prostitutes in brothels and military camps.<sup>89</sup> All official records from the Federal Ministry of Health and the Nigerian Regiment of the WAFF provide alarming information about the role of prostitutes in the spread of venereal disease among the military. The establishment of a “controlled brothel” for the military and European seamen was proposed as a way to help reduce the incidence of venereal disease among this class of men.<sup>90</sup> Alexander Paterson, the European administrator who wrote the report that gave birth to the establishment of Social Welfare Service mentioned the role of the men of the WAFF in the spread of venereal disease and prostitution.<sup>91</sup> In 1942, the yearly percentage of incidence of venereal disease among the African troop of the WAFF was 43.2%, a figure that was higher than other common diseases such as malaria.<sup>92</sup>

The connection between venereal disease and the assumptions about juvenile sexuality were factor, which must have contributed greatly in making military settlements an important “moral region” of child prostitution. Coincidentally, the highest demand for child prostitutes came from men of the Nigerian Regiment of WAFF and European seamen- two categories of people among whom the incidence of venereal disease was highest.<sup>93</sup> Plausibly, child prostitution thrived because of a proposition that sexual intercourse with minors was capable of reducing the risk of contracting venereal disease since their adult counterparts were presumed to have been having sex for longer periods or/and that it was a panacea for curing sexually transmitted diseases. Returning

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<sup>86</sup> NAI, M.H Fed, 220/24/T *Prevalence of Venereal Disease in Lagos, 1940-51.*

<sup>87</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2600.

<sup>88</sup> Aderinto, “Colonialism and Prostitution in Africa,” 110-112.

<sup>89</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844.

<sup>90</sup> Aderinto, “Colonialism and Prostitution in Africa,” 110-112.

<sup>91</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2600, *Social Welfare in the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria: A Report to His Excellency, the Governor of Nigeria, 1942.*

<sup>92</sup> NAI, MH54/si/vol I.

<sup>93</sup> The connection between prostitution and military camps is well represented in the literature on prostitution in Africa and other parts of the world. See among others, Katharine Hyung-Sun, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in US.-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

to Rose Ojenugbe's case, she mentioned in her petition that her procurer, Madam Alice Etovbodua, forced her to have sex with three "over- sea soldiers" and that she contacted venereal diseases from these men.

The port of Lagos handled most of the country's international trade and served as the main international gateway to the nation.<sup>94</sup> Seamen, especially the foreign proceeded to popular hotels such as the Seven Sea and the Crystal Garden Club, both in Apapa and brothels and cinema houses where prostitutes normally solicited when their ships docked. The role of port facilities in the development of prostitution in Lagos caught the attention of the Commissioner of Police when he asserted in 1944 that: "...prostitution, brothels, the *boma boys* and allied problems have thrived both before and during the war because, primarily, Lagos is a reasonable busy port."<sup>95</sup> Aside the military, European seamen were also persistently accused by the public for helping child prostitution to thrive. Constable Ajani, a policeman who was sent on a fact-finding mission to Apapa reported that European seamen had strong "love" for girls in their teens.<sup>96</sup> The petitioner who wrote to the police about the activities of Madam Ogoudi of 41, Taiwo Street, Lagos, mentioned that the woman gave the girls to a seaman for sexual liaison. Another petitioner wrote:

*I have honour must respectively to remind you about the case of one Affiong Bassey of Onibudu Lane Lagos whose report came to you some gone by months, stated that there are two girls in her possession who she term to be her slave...She is a professioner prostitutes and she is training those girls by her profession, to meet the easy anxiety of white sailors as she makes it a daily work...*<sup>97</sup>

It is important to note that the nature of seafaring that took sailors away from the coast for several months coupled with the fact that they were believed to be economically buoyant are likely factors that allowed them to be one of the most well known customers of child prostitutes. The Port Welfare Service in most of its reports was worried about the prevalence of venereal disease among seamen and attributed this to their promiscuous lifestyle. There were suggestions that "free women" should not be allowed to establish physical contact with European seamen.<sup>98</sup> It seems that the Nigerian case was not too different from the rest of the world. The opening years of the 1940s saw serious international concern about the prevalence of venereal disease among seamen. Nigeria also acceded to, and implemented a host of international agreements aimed at halting the prevalence of venereal disease among this class of men.<sup>99</sup>

The sexual services of child prostitutes were available in several parts of Lagos. The "moral regions" that we have identified were the ones where adequate evidences are available. Also, there is no sharp dichotomy between the places where child and adult prostitutes solicited since both types of prostitution belonged to the same subculture and since adult prostitutes mostly served as procurers of their younger counterparts. Determining the ratio of adult to child prostitutes is difficult because of the fragmentary nature of sources that we have for reconstructing the history of prostitution and sexuality in colonial Nigeria. Also, we do not have access to the level of capitalist accumulation through child prostitution because proceeds from prostitution related activities, as a result of their illegal status, belonged to the off the book sector of the colonial economy. Suffice it to say that the fact that it flourished is an indication of its

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<sup>94</sup>See Ayodeji Olukoju, *The Liverpool of West Africa: The Dynamics and Impact of Maritime Trade in Lagos, 1900-1950* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2004).

<sup>95</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 43399, *Employment of Women in the Police Force 1944*.

<sup>96</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844, Officer Alani's Report.

<sup>97</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2844 *Petition on Child Prostitution* dated January 14 1945 and signed by one Mr. Jimoh.

<sup>98</sup> NAI, COMCOL 1, 2608/S.3 *Port Welfare Committee, 1945*.

<sup>99</sup> NAI, M.H Fed, 220/24/SI, *British Federation Against Venereal Disease, 1940-1950*.

profitability. Suggestively, it would not have developed into a prominent socio-sexual and economic relations if it were not associated with accumulation of resources.

## Conclusion

One major hurdle historians of prostitution and sexuality face is the secrecy that is associated with sexual behavior. Secrecy creates a sort of historical fluidity that historians contend with whenever they try to unveil sexual aspects of human past. Observations recorded, as historical evidences, are sometimes shadow or caricature of actual events that historians might not have access to. All aspects of the past that historians explore have their own limitations. The limitations inherent in historical studies of prostitution and sexuality should therefore be treated as one of the numerous challenges professional historical studies confront. Noticeably, we have employed several models: social, legal and economic, to discuss the vicissitudes of child prostitution and sexuality in the urban domain of Lagos in the 1940s and 1950s. None of these variables solely explain the complexity associated with the careers of juvenile prostitutes. We have seen the interplay of class and race, which constitute a historiographical problem when viewed against the backdrop of the fact that these aspects of child prostitution provide a tool for appreciating some historical parallels.

The major contending issues as we have seen are the notoriety and criminality involved in the employment of minors as prostitutes. Some important aspects of prostitution, which include the accumulation and investment of resources, attracted little or no attention because the economic transactions between prostitutes and their clients belonged to the off- the- book sector of the colonial capitalist economy. Throughout the colonial period, no attempt was made to consider the multiplier effect of the flow of cash from men who paid for sexual services to prostitutes who collected money for the services rendered. In contemporary Nigeria, the trafficking in girls for the purpose of prostitution has always been discussed, as a new development presumably because all generations write their own history. And developments since the beginning of this century tend to point to child prostitution as a fall out of say, economic crises caused by the Structural Adjustment Program, among others. This historical reconstruction of child prostitution demonstrates that most of the issues that are sometimes seen as emerging, suddenly like volcanoes have a long history. However, campaign against child prostitution without enquiries into the past, reflects the poor disposition of Nigerian policy makers to Nigerian history. All knowledge is historical. Historians, as a result of their professional training have the “exclusive” right of linking the past with the present.

The current dynamics of child prostitution bears serious resemblance with the historical ones. Interestingly, girls are still being trafficked for the purpose of prostitution through fictitious marriage arrangements and promises of good education and training in urban areas and outside the country. Domestic slave trade and slavery, as methods of recruiting child prostitutes in the past have disappeared. Poverty and lack of education are conditions that tend to make children available for prostitution in a way similar to the situation obtainable among the ethnic groups of northern Cameroon in the 1930s and 1940s. Human sexuality is capable of undergoing continuity and change. Suggestively, men still patronize juvenile prostitutes partly because of the assumptions already discussed- so that in the present age of a possible HIV/AIDS pandemic, demand for child prostitutes is facilitated by the proposition that sexual intercourse is a sure means of getting rid of or securing a protection against venereal disease. The fear of venereal disease has always played a dominant role in providing demand for child prostitutes.<sup>100</sup>

The incidence of child prostitution is soaring higher as the country languishes in economic strangulation. Population increase, emergence of more urban centers, rural and urban poverty and lack of sense of social welfarism on the part of post-independent governments are conditions, which allow child prostitution to be adequately entrenched in the social and sexual

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<sup>100</sup> This is based on my fieldwork in some brothels in Lagos and Ibadan between 2003 and 2005.

aspects of contemporary Nigerian society. It seems that Nigerians have lived with a lot of social questions to the extent that their effects on development and social transformations are adequately down-played or not recognized at all. Development is predominantly addressed in terms of advancement in economic and technological statuses of the country while social questions which represent a sort of vicious cycle and directly or indirectly affect the economy of the country are treated with levity by policy makers.

A work in progress that explores the methods adopted by the colonial government in ameliorating the problem of child prostitution, demonstrates that the early 1940s is the most important period in the history of anti-prostitution laws in Nigeria.<sup>101</sup> The largest chunk of anti-prostitution laws were either made or amended during this period. One of the most significant developments of the period was the promulgation of the *Children and Young Persons Ordinance of 1943*. Between the early 1940s and 2003, it is apparent that the Nigerian government did not make serious efforts towards implementing laws against trafficking in women and children for the purpose of prostitution and other illegal means. The establishment of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons and Other Related Matters (NAPTIP) and the passing of the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act in 2003 by the Senate of Nigeria are giant strides towards reducing the incidence of prostitution in the country. With the exception of sections relating to international trafficking of women and girls to Europe, most of the sections in the new Law were drawn largely from chapter twenty-one (offences against morality) of the Criminal Code Cap 77, 1990, which came into existence during the early 1940s.<sup>102</sup> Again, this indicates the importance of the early 1940s in the history of institutional response to social questions such as prostitution and child labor.

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<sup>101</sup> Saheed Aderinto, "Keeping them Away from Troubles: Juveniles and Social Welfare Service in Lagos," Work in progress, 2007.

<sup>102</sup> See for instance, sections 214 to 227. I arrived at this conclusion by comparing the "Criminal Code Cap. 77 Laws of the Federation, 1990" with all the laws passed in Nigeria between 1940 and 1946. Colonial laws are available under the collection, "Annual Volumes of Laws Made during the Years, 1940-1945."