

“500 Children Missing in Lagos”: Child Kidnapping and Public Anxiety in Colonial Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this chapter is a front-page headline of the July 31, 1956, issue of the *West African Pilot*, the best-selling newspaper in 1950s Nigeria.¹ The newspaper reported the arrest of one Lamidi Alabi, accused of kidnapping three children (Ganiyu Adisa, Musibawu Adio, and Asani Afoke, all boys, between the ages of three and four) on July 30 and the tumultuous atmosphere at the Lagos Central Police Station, where he was then held. It was truly a difficult day for the police force, which tried to control a mob of over 5,000, composed of a “surging crowd of angry women” that wanted to lynch the 38-year-old Alabi for committing a dastardly act; among them were “several mothers” who each sought to ascertain that her child was not among the victims.² The riot police, a special security force, had to be called in to get the outburst under control.³ The *Evening Times* reported that traffic at Tinubu Square “came almost to a standstill.”⁴ Alabi’s arrest did not end the public interest in his case. His first court appearance played host to a “record crowd” of “anxious” onlookers whose interest in the saga only increased as the police investigation and criminal proceedings progressed.⁵

This chapter explores the phenomenon of child abduction and public anxiety in colonial Nigeria through examination of newspaper sources supplemented with colonial archival materials. It engages the numerous circumstances under which children lost their freedom to

kidnappers and the responses from the colonial government and Nigerians. Although both the British colonialists and the Nigerian people tended to view the rise in child abduction as a “new” crisis during the 1940s and 1950s, evidence affirms that before the imposition of colonial rule, children in the area that would later be known as Nigeria were regularly seized for a variety of purposes and under myriad circumstances. What is more, this chapter challenges the current popular notion that children in colonial society enjoyed more freedom than their contemporary counterparts, and that child kidnapping is a problem unique to the postcolonial era.⁶ Evidence from the precolonial and colonial eras show that there was no time that Nigerian children were totally immune to losing their freedom—although the frequency, nature, and dynamics of child kidnapping has varied from one part of the country to another. This chapter argues that child abduction in colonial Nigeria represented both continuity and change in the history of violence against often defenseless children.

To understand the anxiety over the disappearance of children we must consider the sociocultural and economic importance of children in African societies. Studies have shown that during both precolonial and imperial times, children formed a significant component of the household workforce and were the primary medium through which skills were transferred from one generation to the next.⁷ They were the most valued asset in many, if not all, Nigerian societies and were central to social stability and the sustenance of the family—one of the most important institutions in Africa. Indeed, as Nathaniel A. Fadipe has noted in the case of the Yoruba, the desire to have children was the primary reason for forming a family.⁸ The presence of children, as Samuel Johnson explained in his classic *History of the Yorubas*, contributed to making divorce “very rare; so rare as to be practically considered as non-existing” in precolonial times.⁹

But the availability of children for the abovementioned sociocultural purposes was regularly threatened by infant death, which was high, not only in Nigeria, but in most parts of Africa. In fact, the introduction of Western medicine and the modernization of maternal care did not put an end to high infant and childhood mortality. In 1942, less than two decades before the end of colonial rule, the Methodist Mission released a report that affirmed that infant mortality rate in some parts of southwestern Nigeria stood at 42 percent.¹⁰ In Lagos, the colonial capital, which had about one-sixth of the modern medical facilities in the whole country, the infant mortality rate was

135 per 1,000 in 1937.¹¹ These statistics were certainly lower than the colony’s actual mortality rate since they were derived from attendance at government-operated clinics.¹² Up to the end of colonial rule, most Nigerians patronized native medical institutions, the practices of which were rarely officially documented. Sanya Onabamiro, the author of one of the earliest books on pediatric medicine in Nigeria published in 1949, emphasized the high rate of child mortality and the cultural perception associated with it: “The degree of uncertainty for a child’s survival is so great that the people are averse to buying anything for a small baby beyond what it needs during the first few days of life. If a young mother were to look ahead and buy a slightly bigger garment or a pair of bangles which would not come into use for the next six months or so, the elder members of the family would frown upon her and accuse her of inviting the wrath of the gods in presuming that the child would be alive in the next six months!”¹³ One can easily imagine, then, why the public would react strongly to the loss of a five-year-old, who had managed to survive infancy.

After providing general insight into the phenomenon of child kidnapping in precolonial and colonial Nigeria, this chapter focuses on Alabi’s case in order to better come to grips with the crisis. The arrest and prosecution of Alabi, a man described as “tall and fierce-looking,” was actually a turning point in the history of child abduction in Nigeria for a number of interrelated reasons (Figure 4.1). First, it was the most publicized child kidnapping case in colonial Lagos, and arguably the whole of Nigeria. Alabi’s trial, which lasted for two months (between July and September), gained wide media publicity. In all, he made five appearances in a special criminal court—few criminal cases lasted beyond two court appearances.¹⁴ Second, the trial took place when child kidnapping had reached an all-time high. Although the titular *West African Pilot* headline conspicuously reads like an exaggeration of events in order to grab readers’ attention and increase sales, a police source told the press that more than 500 children were officially reported missing between the months of May and July 1956 alone.¹⁵ Third, after several years of anxiety about missing children, the public was able to put a face on the mystery of the disappearance of children, and people hoped for a breakthrough in solving the protracted insecurity of minors. And finally, the evidence used for prosecuting the case, aside from opening the eyes of the public to the modus operandi of child kidnappers, confirmed their worries over the alleged use of supernatural charms (*juju*) in child kidnapping and ritual murder.¹⁶



Figure 4.1 The three children kidnapped by Lamidi Alabi. From left, Musibawu Adio, Asani Afoke, and Ganiyu Adisa

Source: *Nigerian Daily Times*, August 1, 1956.

CHILD KIDNAPPING IN PRECOLONIAL AND COLONIAL NIGERIA

Colonial newspapers tended to report child kidnapping as a “new” problem precipitated by colonial rule. For instance, the *Eastern Nigeria Guardian* editorialized on June 9, 1944, that “kidnapping of children nowadays seems to be a common occurrence.”¹⁷ Even the *West African Pilot*, well respected for its highly informative editorials, branded child kidnapping as a “new menace” in one of its reports on the Alabi saga.¹⁸ However, research has shown that before the imposition of colonial rule, children in the Nigerian geographic area regularly lost their freedom for a variety of reasons. During the era of the transatlantic slave trade, for instance, children were regularly stolen because, in the words of G. Ugo Nwokeji, they were “easier to capture, subdue, confine, or to trick than adults.”¹⁹ Among the earliest documented information about child kidnapping for enslavement came from someone that witnessed it firsthand. Olaudah Equiano

(also known as Gustavus Vassa), an Igbo boy captured around 1756 at the age of 11, narrated the process by which children, himself included, lost their freedom to kidnappers in his classic eighteenth-century memoir:

In this way I grew up till I turned the age of eleven, when an end was put to my happiness in the following manner—Generally, when the grown people in the neighbourhood were gone far in the fields to labour, the children assembles together in some of the neighbour’s premises to play; and commonly some of us used to get up a tree to look out for any assailant, or kidnapper that might come upon us; for they sometimes took these opportunities of our parents’ absence, to attack and carry off as many as they could seize.... One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman go over our walls, and in a moment seized us both; and without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, tied our hands, and ran off with us into the nearest wood; and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for refreshment, and spent the night.²⁰

Equiano changed hands from one African master to another and was subsequently taken to the Americas. He would later walk his way to freedom and become a world traveler and an antislavery advocate. Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther (ca. 1807–91) and King Jaja of Opobo (ca. 1821–91) were two other famous ex-slaves who were seized as children around 1821 and in the 1830s, respectively. While Crowther lost his freedom during a raid at his native Yoruba town of Osogun, Jaja was captured while on an errand for his father in Nkwerre.²¹ But unlike Equiano, who was enslaved in the Americas, Ajayi was fortunate that the Portuguese ship on which he was traveling to the Western Hemisphere was intercepted by the British antislavery force. He was resettled in Freetown, Sierra Leone, where he started a life journey that would later make him the first black Anglican bishop. Jaja was integrated into the domestic slave culture, received his freedom, and went on to become one of the most powerful West African merchants and kings of the second half of the nineteenth century. Although kidnapped children like Jaja regularly formed part of the human cargo to the Americas, more adults were sold into the external slave trade than children. As Paul Lovejoy has shown, the percentage of children sold into slavery from the Nigerian area was 11 percent before 1700; 19.3 percent in the early eighteenth century; and

30 percent in the 1770s. After the 1820s, a period that coincided with the Yoruba civil wars, over 40 percent of the slaves that left what is now Nigeria were child slaves.²²

The primary motives for child kidnapping in the era of the slave trade were economic and social. Although many children were less capable than adults of doing difficult tasks, Olatunji Ojo affirmed, "they were attractive due to ease of exploitation, labor, economic gains, and the prestige (social gain) conferred on their owners."²³ Equiano remarked that one of his African master's family used him "extremely well."²⁴ Child slaves' economic activities, like those of adults, were gendered. While boy slaves were turned to hunting, fishing, farming, and soldiery, the girls were engaged in portage, dyeing, hawking, and cooking, among other vocations and chores.²⁵ Aside from numerous domestic chores, Equiano helped his master to blow bellows in his smithy.²⁶ The social importance of child slaves complemented their economic value. In the first half of the nineteenth century in Lagos, the possession of child slaves, who were usually presented as "gifts" to elites, conferred much respect. Powerful warriors in the hinterlands of Yorubaland were also known for populating their families with children captured during the incessant raids and wars that ravaged the region.²⁷ It was not unusual for such men to address the problem of infertility or infant mortality by acquiring child slaves from other communities. Child slaves might even have been used for human sacrifice—although there is limited information to back this up.

Britain's gradual conquest of "Nigeria" from the second half of the nineteenth century did not put an immediate end to either domestic or international slave trade and slavery—despite the fact that the British used the need to stamp out trafficking in human cargo as a justification for imposition of imperial rule.²⁸ Although slave exporting to the Americas ceased by the late nineteenth century, there was evidence that children were being stolen and sold to the island of Fernando Po, in a manner similar to the kidnappings of the precolonial period.²⁹ Up to the late 1940s, the remnant of domestic slavery and servitude, including pawnship, existed to varying degrees in parts of southern and northern Nigeria.³⁰ Government archives, court documents, and newspaper propaganda reveal that the boundary between kidnapping for "slavery" and "domestic" work or "marriage" was blurred.³¹ This prompted antagonists of child kidnapping to brand all circumstances that compelled people to lose their freedom as "slavery." New methods of child stealing emerged apparently in response to new social and economic developments under colonial rule.³² Sensing the difficulty

of outright kidnapping of children, child slavers were "buying" children under the guise of betrothal.³³ In 1944 the *Eastern Nigeria Guardian* reported that the Calabar High Court sentenced some slavers to seven years in prison for posing as schoolteachers to lure boys from their parents and sell them into slavery in the Cross River.³⁴ A "fact-finding" and confidential report by the acting secretary of the Southern Provinces depicted the elaborate network of child abduction in parts of southeastern Nigeria in a November 1933 report:

During May 1933, I held a meeting of all the Head of Towns in the Obowo Area, and discussed this matter [child stealing] with them. They vociferously affirmed that slave dealing and child stealing was much too prevalent, and admitted that Obowo (Abadaba) was a sort of clearing centre where the parties are collected before being taken to Umuahia to be sold. The system appears to be that children are stolen from areas South West of Obowo in this Division or from the Northeastern area of the Owerri Division; pass through agents in Obowo and are then hustled over the Imo River to Umuokpara in Bende Division. From Umuokpara they are taken to Item, Umuahia or Uzuakoli, and thence usually into the Obubra area where they are adopted by childless families. The disposal of children to Okrika and the Creeks is now less prevalent than formerly, as the presence of Constables on the railway train makes the venture too hazardous.³⁵

If precolonial documentation did not give critical insight into kidnapping for the purpose of ritual murder, colonial records do. By the 1930s, cases of kidnapping of children for ritual purposes "are reported to be occurring at frequent intervals" in places like Ikorodu a lagoon town to the east of Lagos and other parts of modern southwestern Nigeria.³⁶ On January 11, 1939, the *West African Pilot* reported the gory story of a five-year-old girl who was abducted in Imusin District of Ijebu Province on December 25, 1938, while on errand for her parents.³⁷ Her corpse showing missing eyes and private parts was recovered on December 31. The public experience further anguish when the story of another abducted girl was reported three days later. Alaba, also while running errand for her parents in Ife Division, went missing. Her corpse showed missing breast was found 60 feet from the road path.³⁸ Ritual killing, through the *Oro* cult, which some Yoruba towns were known for, was bad not only because it involved the depriving of people of their right to life, but also because it showcased the "barbaric," "savage" culture that colonial enlightenment was supposed to help eradicate.³⁹ A 1943 editorial in the *West African Pilot* attempted to politicize kidnapping in Ikorodu

when it noted that the public “naturally have become very apprehensive,” and wondered that “if people within the stone’s throw of the Government headquarters cannot move about freely and feel safe,” then “those in far-away corners of the country” might suffer a worse fate.⁴⁰ Petitions by parents who lost their children to kidnappers in Ikorodu reflect the humanitarian crisis of the era. On December 29, 1945, Amos Oshinowo Shopitan petitioned the commissioner of the colony, the head of the British authority in Lagos, about his missing son (Babafemi) who he suspected was stolen by Ikorodu traditionalists for “secret inoculation,” “juju making,” or “bad medicine.” Two-year-old Babafemi was playing on his father’s verandah on December 20 when he was abducted.⁴¹

Aside from being sacrificed, abducted children, especially girls in places like Lagos, were often raped. While some victims made it home after the horrific ordeal, others like Badiaran (ten) and Olawunmi Olusanya (11) could not—their lifeless bodies showing signs of assaults were recovered from a public park and the Race Course, respectively, after they went missing.⁴² In big cities like Lagos, hawking exposed girls to the danger of being kidnapped, sexually molested, or drawn into a prostitution network. For instance, Badiaran and Olusanya were girl hawkers. Yet, not all abductors of girls simply wanted to rape their abductees.⁴³ In one case, a man named Lamina seized Bintu (a 14-year-old girl) of Osogbo “because he could not get marriage money.” After living with Lamina for six years and having two children together, Bintu returned to Ibadan in 1938 where she had been kidnapped and recounted her ordeal to the native authority police.⁴⁴

The British and local authorities adopted varied methods for policing child abduction: several slavery ordinances, criminal codes, and local measures criminalized child seizing for slavery, pawnship, or other purposes.⁴⁵ Depending on the circumstances of the crime, people accused of child stealing were usually tried in a magistrate court.⁴⁶ Serious cases, like that of Alabi, were prosecuted in special criminal courts. New amendments to the Native Authority Ordinances focused on protecting children from being stolen under the guise of betrothal, as Attorney General G. L. Howe explained ahead of the passing of the bill in 1942.⁴⁷ Punishment for kidnapping cases varied widely and seemed to be influenced by location, the age and gender of the child victim, and the purpose of the abduction. While Jimoh Adefalu, who had three previous convictions, was sentenced to nine months in prison for abducting Latifu Karimu (male, age six) of Lagos in June 1941, another kidnaper of an 11-year-old girl was sentenced

to seven years in prison in late 1941.⁴⁸ “His punishment is just and we are not sorry for him,” the *West African Pilot* editorialized about the case.⁴⁹ It went on to comment on the anticipated outcome of long sentences in serving as a deterrent to kidnapping: “We only hope that his fate will be a warning to others who possess the same propensity. If they do not take warning, they will be their own judges.”⁵⁰ It would appear that courts imposed higher punishments for the kidnapping of girls than boys. In another case, the highly famed Justice O. Jibowu sentenced Yesufu Alfa to seven years in prison and twelve strokes of the cane for abducting Ibidun Ajose (female, age ten) while she was on an errand for her aunt around Iddo, Lagos, on October 4, 1941. From Iddo, Alfa removed Ajose to Idiroko, where she was kept probably to be married later. On October 19, someone who knew Ajose spotted her and reported to the police.⁵¹

Aside from criminal prosecutions, the policing of kidnapping was enhanced through community surveillance. In Abeokuta, the native authorities asked residents to report “strange people with children” to the police.⁵² When a child went missing, the town crier went round the community announcing the situation and providing a verbal description of the missing child. When ten-year-old Tinuola Ojo, who was sent out by her guardian to hawk coconut, went missing in November 1935, the Awujale (king) of Ijebuland directed his “bell man” “to ask anybody who knows about it to report to the police station without delay.”⁵³ In addition, communities would dispatch search parties. On rare occasions, such parties were able to recover stolen children. This was so in the case of Kokumo, a one-year-old boy who was kidnapped when he was besides his sleeping mother on the night of May 24, 1930, in Ibefun (Ijebu Province)—a community that residents affirmed was notorious for both adult and child kidnapping.⁵⁴ A search party succeeded in recovering Kokumo in the backyard of one Kesiro by 2:00 a.m., just a few hours after he was declared missing. The police and Kokumo’s parents believed that the kidnapper decided to dump the child as the search party ransacked the neighborhood.⁵⁵ Kokumo might never have been recovered had his mother slept through the night. In Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta, notices of missing children were occasionally published in the newspapers.⁵⁶ Such notices like that of 13-year-old Gabriel Oluwole Idowu Bankole, who went missing on April 21, 1943, in Abeokuta while helping his parents to hawk kerosene, contained information about physical appearance, complexion, and who to contact if found.⁵⁷

Table 4.1 Police description of a missing child

<i>Name</i>	<i>Lawrence Okeke of Ihara Abeokuta</i>
Age	About 10
Height	3 feet, 9 inches
Marks	Nil
Complexion	Dark
Shoulder	Big
Eye balls	Big
Nose	Big
Neck	Short
Mouth	Big
Head	Big

Source: Commissioner of Police to the District Officer, Iharo, October 30, 1934, National Archives Ibadan, Ije Prof, J. 811 vol. 1.

Although most missing children were kidnapped by adults, it would appear that a good number were runaways. Colonial archives give insight into how children ran away from home to escape punishment from parents and guardians. Such children, including those that lived on the streets, were occasionally classified as "missing" or "kidnapped." On May 23, 1939, the press reported the disappearance of eight-year-old Ojo Fatorisha of Yaba, Lagos. Four days after he was declared missing, Elizabeth Awoyomi, the wife of Fatorisha's uncle, spotted him among 20 delinquent "Omojeka" boys under the Carter Bridge.⁵⁸ Upon seeing Awoyomi, Fatorisha "ran under the bridge and disappeared." Awoyomi then approached the chief of the gang, described as a "huge looking man," who demanded a six pence's worth of cigarettes for the boy's release. After this condition was met, the process of recovering Fatorisha revealed the underworld life of criminal gangs in 1930s Lagos: "He [the chief] signaled to all his boys numbering about 20, who arrived at the spot from various corners. At the chief's command, the boys began a march past, whilst the lady [Awoyomi] engaged in a review of them in search of Ojo. When the boy was discovered, the chief ordered him out of the group and handed him to the lady. The rest then melted away to their respective corners."⁵⁹ The newspaper, which reported the case, did not establish if Fatorisha was kidnapped by the Omojeka gang; however, several runaway children did find refuge in the underclass world of petty criminals.

ALABI THE KIDNAPPER AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Lamidi Alabi was a native of Ilorin in northern Yorubaland. After attending elementary school in his native town, he moved to Lagos around 1935 to join the band of men who specialized in selling groundnuts at Ita Faji market in Lagos. In 1952 Alabi returned home for marriage. But his marriage soon failed. This sketchy information about Alabi recorded by the police during his imprisonment does not provide any clue into the motivation for the crime he committed. It also does not establish if he was working in concert with an elaborate network of kidnappers within Nigeria or beyond. When Alabi was arrested behind a public toilet on Massey Street on July 30, 1956, he refused to give police his name and kept mute throughout his detainment, first at Tinubu Police Station, and later at the Central Police Station. He finally gave his name, age, and place of birth during his first court appearance on July 31, a day after he was arrested. Alabi "walked into the dock with his agbada [dress] flowing behind him" the *Evening Times* reported, his face "partly covered in the crook of his arms." After a short proceeding at the magistrate court, which included the formal pronouncement of charges of "fraudulently and unlawfully detaining," and "intent to deprive" parents of their children, the presiding judge (J. A. Cole) decided that Alabi should undergo criminal assizes, a special criminal court that met periodically. As one would expect, the court premises were filled with a crowd hoping to catch a glimpse of the kidnapper, who had suddenly attained a notorious celebrity status. The press reported the frenzied atmosphere at the court noting especially the feminine aspect of the public outrage: "The angry mothers made as if to mob Alabi but the police were prepared for the occasion and the women turned their anger against the police."⁶⁰ It took the effort of more than twenty cops to protect Alabi from the angry mob.⁶¹ So disorderly was the court that ten people were arrested for causing a breach of public peace.

When the criminal assizes resumed on August 15, ten witnesses testified against Alabi. The first witness, Rhoda Asaba, told the court that sensing Alabi was a kidnapper, she exclaimed, "Ah baba." She said Alabi then attacked her verbally and cursed her parents. Asaba testified that she called the attention of the second witness, Jarinatu Ajoke, who peeped over her home fence and saw Alabi applying some black powder on the eyes of Asani, one of the kidnapped children.⁶² Ajoke remembered seeing a white powder, *juju*, and piece of cloth

spread on the floor that would later become a crime scene.⁶³ Ajoke claimed she was frightened and alerted Aderibigbe Oluwo, a sanitary officer of the Lagos Town Council, who also testified seeing the *juju*. It was Oluwo who telephoned the police, thus preventing Alabi from being lynched by a mob that gathered as the news spread round the town. Another witness, Falilatu Aduke, a trader at Ebute Metta, testified hearing one of the children exclaim “Don’t rub it [powder] on my eyes, baba” while she was using the public toilet, located behind the spot Alabi was preparing to transport the children.⁶⁴ Witness Moriatsu Ajike, who took custody of one of the rescued children (her grandson Ganiyu) when his parents divorced, informed the court the boy was playing outside with other children when he suddenly disappeared—and that she “did not at any time give Alabi instruction to look after” her grandchild.⁶⁵ All the parents of the children affirmed that they neither knew the kidnapper nor placed their children under his care. In all, about 17 witnesses testified against Alabi. The three kidnapped boys also appeared in the court. When the presiding judge asked the government prosecutor, Crown Counsel Gloria Jackson, if she wanted to tender the children as an exhibit, a question that created laughter in the courtroom, she replied, “No, Your Worship. I only want the witness to identify them.”⁶⁶

The women’s testimony that they saw a white cloth and black powder corroborated that of Subinspector Elliot Henry, who officially arrested Alabi at the crime scene and searched him. Other items recovered from Alabi that would later help the prosecution in establishing his criminality included a dried head of a bird, a native sponge and chalk, five sheets of paper inscribed in Arabic, one gold-colored finger ring, some black powder wrapped in paper, a circular mirror, a razor blade, and 13 matchsticks. However, the most incriminating item recovered from Alabi was a wooden box measuring about four feet long, three feet wide, and four feet high. At the time of his arrest, one of the children had been placed in the box, which Alabi allegedly wanted to use to transport the children to an unknown destination (Figure 4.2). In establishing Alabi’s offense, the prosecution relied on a “simple” demonstration of crime. In the first place, Alabi’s possession of three children who were not his or related to him and a box in which the children could have been concealed established a crime of abduction. He could not explain why he had the children in his possession. But the prosecution could not logically connect other exhibits (especially the *juju*) recovered from him to the crime.

To solve this problem, Jackson called in two native doctors, Aladi Ishola and Arowolo Abiodun, to testify during the September 7

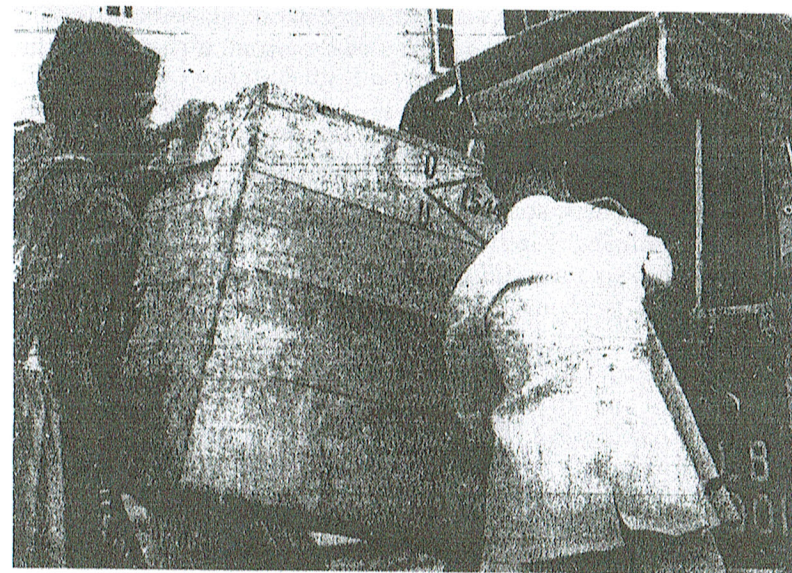


Figure 4.2 A wooden box. One of the exhibits recovered from Lamidi Alabi

Source: *Nigerian Daily Times*, July 31, 1956.

session of the criminal assizes. After examining the black powder, Ishola told the court that it was a charm meant to hypnotize the kids and render them unconscious until they arrived where they would be used in ritual medicine. He believed that Alabi was working with a group of “dangerous medicine men” who specialized in using human parts for money rituals. According to him, boys below the age of ten, when used for sacrifice, “produce more spirit money” than older ones. Abiodun’s testimony did not contradict his professional colleague. He went further to establish that the gold-colored finger ring recovered from Alabi had a magical power: “If he [Alabi] wears the ring and holds someone in the hand, that person will lose his mind, become speechless and follow Alabi anywhere he wishes.” This testimony about the efficacy of the gold ring corroborated the conduct of the children when they were recovered from Alabi. The boys could not talk and remained docile until a day after they were rescued. Ishola and Abiodun could not decipher the Arabic writing. However, they were convinced that it was also *juju* meant to aid Alabi in his illegal act. When asked why Alabi refused to disclose why he kidnapped the kids and what he intended to do with them, Ishola explicated that

people who make “dangerous medicine” swear an oath that could make them die or “turn them into a mad person” if they reveal the identity of their accomplices.

The use of native doctors and healers in criminal proceedings predates the 1950s.⁶⁷ Although the colonial government and some African elites such as Dr. Kofoworola Abayomi tended to look down at these practitioners, accusing them of “uncivilized” practices capable of jeopardizing Nigeria’s quest toward modernity, the native doctors at various times did help the British criminal justice system to solve cases involving *juju*, which conventional police methods of crime detection and science could not decipher.⁶⁸ Dr. Oguntola Odunbaku Sapara, a renowned neotraditionalist, who was trained in both Western and traditional medicine, helped the colonial government to punish *Sopona* (Yoruba god of smallpox) worshippers who were often accused of medical racketeering for deliberately giving people smallpox and then providing the treatment.⁶⁹ In Alabi’s case, Ishola and Abiodun were not only helping the society and the court to solve the mystery of the disappearance of the children, but they appeared to be seizing the opportunity to clear themselves of the accusation that they were responsible for human sacrifice.

Alabi’s conduct throughout his five court appearances confirmed Ishola and Abiodun’s affirmation that he had sworn a blood oath that would prevent him from revealing his accomplices. He did not ask for legal representation, pleaded not guilty during the trial, and did not defend himself in any logical manner. His mood was also inconsistent. Occasionally, he would wave to the angry crowd that booed him. At other times, he would put on a fierce face or appeared “quite unconcerned.”⁷⁰ During detention, he stripped himself naked and had to be provided with clothing. At the August hearing, the defendant, dressed in a “half-torn sapara native gown,” shouted from the dock that he “was ready to spend even twenty years in custody.”⁷¹ When asked if he actually kidnapped the children, he replied, “Only God will save me.”⁷² Alabi’s attitude suggested that he was not mentally stable to undergo criminal proceedings, but the prosecution believed he was merely attempting to claim insanity to escape justice. Of interest is the exchange between Alabi and the Subinspector Henry during cross-examination by Jackson:

ALABI: If I screamed and stripped myself naked like a crazy man did I fight anyone or beat you up? Was it not true that you wanted to extract a confession from me?

ELLIOT HENRY: I did not.

ALABI (addressing the magistrate): He was not the only one who tried. They wanted me to say who it was that sent me to kidnap the children and I told them that I never kidnapped any children.

MAGISTRATE: Was that so?

ELLIOT HENRY: Not true, Your Worship.

ALABI: Was it not true that I told you that I was weeping because of my fate?

WITNESS: You did not tell me that.⁷³

On September 11, 1956, after two months of criminal proceedings and several court appearances, Alabi was finally sentenced to five years in prison.⁷⁴ The decision of the presiding judge, G. L. Jobbling, was based on the circumstances surrounding the initial arrest: “The three children were found with the accused in suspicious circumstances and that constituted a good case against the accused.”⁷⁵ The judge also considered the testimonies of the native doctors that helped to unveil Alabi’s alleged association with ritualists. Although the prosecution achieved its primary goal of securing a criminal conviction and prison sentence for Alabi, it did not succeed in gaining any useful information about other accomplices or the alleged underground criminal gangs of child kidnappers. Be that as it may, the saga suggests that people of his character existed in large number across the country, perpetuating heinous crimes against children, the future of the nation. While the *Daily Service* described such people as “a ring of heartless men to whom the anguish of a mother means nothing,” a *West African Pilot* editorial believed that Alabi “must be a member of a well-organized ring” of criminals possibly operating within and outside the country.⁷⁶ Alabi’s case represented a paradox: On the one hand, three children escaped captivity or death and a criminal was temporarily removed from the public; on the other hand, it fed the public panic over the use of supernatural powers in kidnapping. The exhibit of the wooden box where Alabi allegedly planned to conceal the children and the charms, while educating the public about the underworld of child kidnapping, served to amplify the sense of vulnerability and fear, felt by both adults and children, of being deprived of their freedom. It also introduced ethnicity into the crisis and stigmatized people categorized as “foreigner” as the “ring leaders” of kidnappers in Lagos. A petition written by “Representative of Lagos Women” to the government of Nigeria, aside from feminizing the agony of kidnapping, clearly blamed Hausa and Ilorin people for the spate of child stealing in the city:

All women in Lagos and the mainland have great unrest of mind and they feel gravely concerned about the common practice of kidnapping

of children.... The women appeal to the Chief Administering Officer as follows:

- (a) There should be more special men and women employed on secret police or detective about this matter
- (b) That severe punishment like life jail be administered to the concerned criminals of this type
- (c) That the Emir of Ilorin and other northern Emirs be contacted for a thorough search of their emirates for missing children and that they should warn their people
- (d) That the headmasters and headmistress of schools be advised to be more vigilant about the protection of children during session and break.⁷⁷

POLITICIZING CHILD KIDNAPPING: LAGOS NEWSPAPERS AND CRITICS OF COLONIALISM

Justice Jobbling's ruling on Alabi's case was well received in the press. Columnists and editorials praised the judiciary for the professional manner in which the case was handled and the length of the prison sentence.⁷⁸ However, not all critics thought the sentence was long enough. The *Daily Service* editorial of September 13, 1956, urged a longer sentence for Alabi and thought that "only the inflictment of the severest punishment" would serve as a deterrent to kidnapping.⁷⁹ It justified its position by equating murder with kidnapping and comparing the agony of the two: "A man who has the nerve to kidnap other people's children is as good as a murderer. Indeed, a child murdered does not give his mother as great and continuous pain and anxiety as a child kidnapped. In one case, the mother knows that her child is dead; in the other she does not know whether he is dead or living."⁸⁰ This editorial's comparative insight into the agonies of murder and kidnapping found similar expression in a Yoruba saying that probably dates back to the colonial era or earlier: *Omo eni ku ya ju omo eni nu lo* (It is better for one's child to be dead than for it to be missing).

Aside from reporting the court proceedings, the press used Alabi's case to further highlight the failure of policing (Figure 4.3). While it was common for the nationalist newspapers to capitalize on socio-political and economic problems to lambast the colonialists for not doing enough for Nigerians, the editors and leading columnists gave a new definition to the problem of crime and insecurity by insisting that child kidnapping reflected the absence of "intelligent" policing in the country. All colonial subjects regardless of gender and social class



Figure 4.3 Lamidi Alabi

Source: *Nigerian Daily Times*, July 31, 1956.

deserved protection by the police. However, the newspaper pictured children as individuals who deserved better protection because of their "innocence," vulnerability, and defenselessness. Kidnapping deprived innocent children of a good childhood by reducing their freedom and placing them under excess parental supervision because of the fear of being seized. One contributor, Kayode Abiona, described the impact of kidnapping on children's education. He noted that some parents refused to send their children to school if they could not be accompanied by adults.⁸¹ Another contributor even rendered a psychological effect of the Alabi saga on children: "mention of Alabi's name is enough to put fear into children."⁸²

Columnists also attempted to reveal the disconnection between the public representation of the incidence of child kidnapping and the official data released by the police. The subtitle of a leader in the *Sunday Times* of October 14, 1956, vividly captured the different perspectives between the public and government interpretation of the escalating wave of child kidnapping: "Kidnapping: Is this wicked crime spreading

in Nigeria? Yes, says the man in the street. No say the police."⁸³ To back up its claim about police ineptitude toward reported cases of kidnapping, the report cited the case of a man whose daughter was kidnapped in April 1956. After several months of "living on the door step" of the police station, the man, described as a carpenter and "barely literate," wrote to the chief secretary to the government accusing the police of refusing to arrest the main suspect who had previously been charged with indecent assault on underage children.⁸⁴ An editorial in the *Daily Service* satirized the poor attitude of the police toward public anxiety about kidnapping: "Oh no my dear man there's no organised kidnapping going on in this country. The ones you read in your newspapers are all isolated cases. They aren't being run by any ring or gang."⁸⁵ In a bid to pressure the government to improve public security, the press also exposed what they considered as contradictory information about the incidence of child kidnapping released by the colonial administration. While a "reliable" police source told newspaper reporters that more than 500 children were missing in Lagos between the months of May and July 1956, chief secretary to the government Sir Ralph Grey released another report in April 1957 indicating that 711 children were confirmed missing between 1952 and 1957.⁸⁶

As previously noted, the press tended to ascribe all situations that deprived people of their freedom to "slavery" in order to embarrass the colonialists for not living up to their professed mission of introducing civilization by stamping out human trafficking. Alabi's case provided another opportunity for the press to resuscitate this age-old political attack. A September 13, 1956, editorial in the *West African Pilot* informed the public about the rumored existence of a "slave market" in certain parts of the country (Benin, for instance), where kidnapped children were taken to. News stories with such headlines as "Slave Dealer Jailed" and "Slave Market?" drew parallels between the barbaric era of the transatlantic slave trade and the modern age that was supposed to be "progressive" and civilized.⁸⁷ Some contributors shared in the sentiments of the newspaper editorials that a slave market existed somewhere in Nigeria. One Sam Adesanya opened his write-up with a question: "Is there a slave market somewhere in Nigeria?"⁸⁸ Yet others like E. Okafor did "not wish to suggest that slavery in our midst is being resuscitated once again or...that there must have been a ready market somewhere."⁸⁹

At the center of every debate or controversy that child kidnapping generated was a search for a solution. Some commentators proposed a preventive solution, asking that parents and guardians increase supervision of children and stop the practice of employing them in

hawking, which increased their susceptibility to being kidnapped. One suggestion asked children not to associate with or solicit help from people they do not know: "One way to stop children being kidnapped," Kolawole Ajanaku wrote, "is to tell those of them who go to school never again to gather round Idumota or Oyingbo to beg every car owner to give them lifts to school. Who knows where the ride may end?"⁹⁰ Other suggestions included enhanced cooperation between the police and the public in establishing the identity of missing children and promptly reporting cases.⁹¹ Parents were also advised to keep photographs of their children because lack of photos and "poor description of [missing] children have always been an obstruction" to police investigation.⁹² One contributor, Robert Olu Ogundelu, wanted the criminal code ordinance to be reviewed to allow life imprisonment for child kidnapping.⁹³ Other recommendations included "Interrogating men and women suspected or seen with children on Trains (b) Combing the Motor Parks and looking for suspects (c) Visiting the Ferry and Wharf daily to question suspects (d) closely checking highways and roads leading to townships or inhabiting areas (e) Challenging anyone with a load of an extraordinary size (f) Looking for and assisting stray children."⁹⁴

CONCLUSION

This chapter's main focus is the phenomenon of child kidnapping in colonial Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the Alabi saga. This criminal case was the most notorious child kidnapping episode in colonial Lagos, and arguably the whole of Nigeria. It exposed the public to the modus operandi of child kidnappers and helped put a human face on the mystery of the disappearance of children. We argue that child kidnapping under colonial rule represented change as well as continuity in the history of violence against children. Although the nationalists newspapers tended to paint child abduction as a "new" development peculiar to the 1940s and 1950s, precolonial history demonstrates that children frequently lost their freedom to kidnappers, especially during the transatlantic slave trade. Children were the greatest asset of any Nigerian family—which goes a long way to explaining the intense public anxiety over their disappearance and the helplessness of the police.

Alabi's case did not end the crisis of insecurity of children in Lagos or any part of colonial Nigeria. During and after his arraignment, children were kidnapped.⁹⁵ On September 6, 1956, a Lagos magistrate court sentenced another native of Ilorin named Kujere Hausa,

described as a "ferocious-looking man," to 18 months in prison for attempting to kidnap four-year-old Alani Olonode. Similarly, on November 8, 50-year-old Gwandu Garuba was arraigned in Lagos for kidnapping four Ibadan boys and transporting them to the Obalande area of Lagos.⁹⁶ On February 4, 1957, Raufu Sanni, who had 17 previous convictions, was sentenced to four years in prison for kidnapping 16-month-old Bola Kamson.⁹⁷

NOTES

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7. Mary Smith, *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Moslem Hausa* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), 37–55; N. A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, ed. with an introduction by F. O. Okediji and O. O. Okediji (Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1970), 147–57.
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11. Ibid., 3–4.
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13. Ibid., 154.
14. The dates of court appearances were July 31, August 15 and 17, and September 10 and 11.
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18. "A New Menace" (editorial), *West African Pilot*, September 13, 1956.
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31. For samples of court cases on child kidnapping, see *ibid.*, appendix 5, "Proceedings in the Case of Alackwe and Chikeye of Ngodo"; appendix 6, "Proceedings in the Case of Nnadi of Umunkwor"; and appendix 7, "Proceedings in the Case of Osu Ajoku of Ogwa"—153–82. See also, from the *West African Pilot*: "Offence of Child Stealing," January 2, 1942; "Kidnapping or What?"; "The 'Nigerian Eastern Mail' Alleges Slavery in Oron," January 21, 1939; "Pawning and Forced Labour," September 4, 1942.
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58. "Lost Yoruba Boy Is Found after 4 Days," *West African Pilot*, May 30, 1939.
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61. "Three Boxed Children Reunited."
62. "Seven Testify against Alleged Kidnaper."
63. "Kidnapping Charge: Court Told of Powder Charm."
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