The Nigerian liquor trade provoked fierce debate: was it advancing development or fashioning an economy based on the unproductive consumption of alcohol? The liquor trade was caught between two prevailing colonial perspectives on African economic development: the Darwinian-based principle that Western civilisation had a duty to protect Africans from all bad external influences, and the civilise-through-trade concept seeking to modernise Africans by exploiting colonies to their fullest potential. Humanitarian concerns and economic interests were entangled. Positive views of the liquor trade claimed its necessity in developing the Nigerian economy. Some admitted that the trade formed a necessary evil, but did not fail to emphasise its role as a transitional currency, promoter of cash-crops-for-export, and a desirable commodity among those with money to spend. Merchants saw commerce as a great civilising agent, with the liquor trade as its most important constituent. On the other hand, liquor trade critics used the temperance equation to further their cause: drinking alcohol was bad, abstinence was good. Arguing that the imposition of ‘a Rum and Gin Civilization’ would be ‘a hydra that devours the natives’, halting useful commerce and hindering economic development, they agitated for Prohibition and a complete restructuring of the colonial economy along alcohol-free lines.¹

A prime motivation for the critics’ to stop the liquor trade came from what they saw as the damaging export of unhealthy alcohol to Nigeria. Was the liquor imported of such poor, even dangerous, quality? In the light of a recent article in this journal by Ayodeji Olukoju, titled Rotgut and Revenue, this paper re-examines the quality of liquor imported into Nigeria during the colonial era.² Whereas Olukoju concludes with a damning indictment of the bad, even dangerous, quality of imported spirits, this paper argues a more positive line by analysing five areas of disputatious argument over liquor quality in the colonial era: the general quality of import liquor, the effect on liquor quality from the extensive practice of diluting spirits; the comparative quality of local liquors; unhealthy substitute alcoholic beverages; and domestically distilled spirits.
**Imported Spirits**

Nigerians had drunk low alcoholic drinks for ages. Liquor consumption was a multi-faceted affair, mixing concerns on personal, communal and ritual levels throughout the lifecycle of many Nigerians: from naming ceremonies, entertaining guests at weddings, chieftaincy instalments and funeral obsequies, to pouring libations to the ancestors. With a huge variety of indigenous liquors to consume, however, Nigerians did not have the knowledge to brew lager beer or distil spirits. Their expertise was restricted to tapping palm wine or fermenting grain beers. The Atlantic slave trade, which encouraged the purchase of slaves with rum and whisky, fostered the fashion for potent imported liquor. When the slave trade ended, the liquor trade continued, reaching large volumes in the second half of the nineteenth century. The demand for imported liquor in Southern Nigeria grew to a large extent in tandem with the growth and expansion of British control over the territory from the 1860s onwards. Liquor was most significant import in terms of volume and value in the colonies of Lagos, Oil Rivers Protectorate, Niger Coast Protectorate and Southern Nigeria, all of which were eventually integrated into the Southern Provinces of Nigeria in 1914.\

Imported drinks did not completely displace local beverages, however; instead they coexisted, complemented and competed with each other. As imported liquor spread inland though the new transport networks, the choice and availability of alcohol increased dramatically. Of course, gin and rum had stronger intoxicating effects than palm wine or grain beer, a fact which critics of the liquor trade continually reminded their opponents as imported alcohol pushed into the Nigerian hinterland, describing concerns over rising palm wine consumption as ‘very much like ignoring the camel and trembling at the gnat’. One thing for sure, a drinker could get drunk on a small amount of imported spirits, but could make up for the weakness of local liquor by imbibing more of it. Such a contrast was turned on its head by critics of the liquor trade, however, inferring that the taste for alcohol was already in place in Nigeria, and the latter’s much more potent strength could reek widespread drunkenness and destruction on the population in the near future.

Spirits can be divided into two classes: potable and non-potable. In the process of distilling potable spirits, non-potable ones are created and these have to be separated off. Were spirits imported into Nigeria drinkable ones or contaminated with non-potable elements? The Good Templars of Lagos felt sure of their life-threatening properties:

spirits imported in such large quantities are of the most inferior quality, and that they are actively injurious that they ought to be labelled ‘POISONS’. And some of them are poisonous enough. It will be remembered that an English firm here, not long ago, im-
ported a kind of Gin into the Colony which was so potent in the
destruction of human life that the natives termed it ‘Erebe’, from
its razor-like action on the liver. How many perished in the interior
by drinking that abominable compound of turpentine and other
stuffs it is impossible to say.6

Adverse opinions on alcohol’s quality contained hard-hitting descriptions
of its poisonous quality. Of course, in one respect, alcohol is a poison, but
its effect depends on the dosage. A drinker cannot take unlimited amounts
of alcohol without dying, but consumed in moderation in a diluted state
it is comparatively innocuous.

Liquor’s cheapness added weight to critics’ arguments. At 4.5d per litre,
bottle and packing included, there was an easy equation for critics to make:
cheap liquor equalled bad quality.7 The Aborigines’ Protection Society
described it as being ‘vastly more pernicious than the vilest stuff supplied
in the worst and lowest English public-houses’.8 Taking up this point, the
trade’s fiercest critic, CMS Bishop Herbert Tugwell, compared the Nigerian
and English liquor trades and concluded that double standards were at play:

How can these spirits do them any good? Three million gallons —
four million gallons of vile spirits which cannot be introduced into
England! You cannot import them here — our Government would
at once seize such spirits and destroy them. Unfit for consumption!
Very well, if unfit for our consumption, why are they not unfit for
the consumption of the Africans?9

One argument over liquor quality centred on imports of German alcohol.
Alcohol was strong liquor. With an average of ninety per cent of absolute
alcohol (57 degrees overproof), individual samples contained up to 98.14
per cent of absolute alcohol. Alcohol was twice as strong as ordinary gin or
whisky; up to 71 per cent of water had to be added to let it down to British
proof strength.10 Importers diluted it into drinkable ‘Gin’ or ‘Rum’ with
water, flavouring, colouring and sweetening matter.11 Alcohol saved on
freight charges; shippers charged the same rates on spirits no matter whe-ther
they were as weak as water or pure alcohol. In the three years after
1901 alcohol imports totalled over a million gallons.12 This did not go
unnoticed by the government: ‘the increased quantity of this exceedingly
strong liquor that was being imported had become very remarkable, not
to say, alarming’.13 Worries about alcohol being ‘not a wholesome beverage’
surfaced in 1902 when Lagos Government Chemist Ralston found a sample
contained ‘the poisonous proportion of 4.4 per cent by weight of fusel
oil’.14 Fusel oil, or amyl alcohol, is a valuable by-product of spirit distillation
which is collected and sold separately, being used, for example, to make
varnish. When drunk in small concentrations, up to about 0.5 per cent, it
was not harmful, but proportions higher than this were dangerous to
health.15
Governor William MacGregor, himself with a scientific background, at once ordered the qualitative analysis of other spirit samples. The results showed that alcohol was ‘noxious impure’ with ‘the highly deleterious ingredient known as fusel oil’. The least impure specimen in the eleven examined (sample 2) still contained a significant proportion of fusel oil as well as being very strong in alcoholic content.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample number</th>
<th>Absolute alcohol</th>
<th>Fusel oil</th>
<th>Sample number</th>
<th>Absolute alcohol</th>
<th>Fusel oil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>83.91</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>77.80</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>81.50</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>75.70</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>59.18</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>89.75</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>74.50</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>66.20</td>
<td>2.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>75.96</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>84.44</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>79.87</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>77.16</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The amount of fusel oil averaged 2.69 per cent in the 11 samples – ‘it was manifestly impossible to allow such dangerous compounds as these to be imported or sold to the public’. So the Government prohibited the importation or sale of liquor containing more than 0.5 per cent of fusel oil in 1903. The law remained a dead letter, however, with no prosecutions whatsoever. Was the fusel oil law not for the sake of enforcement but for good public relations to fend off criticisms from the anti-liquor lobby? Maybe all liquor passed the fusel oil test? It appears that Ralston did not have the apparatus for proper determination of amyl alcohol, and so had to rely on a more inaccurate method of analysis with which he was not entirely familiar. He went over his experiments again later in 1902, and found such a variance in results that he deemed the first set unreliable. Another analysis of spirit samples found the highest concentration of fusel oil to be 0.2 per cent of the total volume, mirroring tests done by a British Government chemist in London in 1897. Therefore all the samples could meet the law’s legal maximum of fusel oil, and so rendered it useless. In fact, the government practically prohibited alcohol by increases in the customs duty, especially by adding burdensome additional charges to overproof spirits. With the additional duty increased to a penny for every degree above fifty degrees Tralles by 1908, pure spirit attracted an eight shillings tariff. This made the import of alcohol uneconomic. Once the customs duties were shaped to favour milder spirits, highly alcoholic spirits faded.
from the import lists: ‘a better class of weaker spirits came to replace most of the poorer stronger spirits imported’.22

Merchants involved in the liquor trade, the colonial government and other proponents of the trade relied on supportive scientific analyses and counter-attacks in newspapers to press home their positive view of the quality of Nigeria’s liquor imports. In her own inimitable way, Mary Kingsley pointed out that ‘down there there was lots of foreign spirits, in England lots of analysts!’23 She had a bottle of Peter’s gin analysed, and with its good quality confirmed, she gave a good reason why it cost so little: ‘this cheapness would suggest, not poison, but water’.24 A Hamburg distiller supplied her with a list of the overheads in making gin: ‘I venture to think the admirable commercial instincts of my German friends has led them to get as much water into the case-gin as is compatible with a selling power’.25 The Lagos Weekly Record agreed, saying the liquor lacked intoxicating effect because of its harmless contents.26 The 1909 Liquor Trade Committee’s own experiments on two hundred and eighteen samples found the spirits ‘clean and well rectified and of fair quality. The majority of the gins are similar to what is sold in ordinary public-houses in this country.’27

**Diluting Spirits**

Strong liquor was not intended to reach the Nigerian drinker until it had been watered down or ‘washed’.28 Sometimes middlemen did the dilution, sometimes the retailers, and occasionally both. No matter who carried out the practice the object remained the same: to defraud the customer and make extra profit. Tin foil capsules commonly found on the spout of liquor bottles could be removed, water added, and then replaced. In 1909, Legislative Council member Kitoyi Ajasa recalled seeing at Ejinrin Market in 1898, ‘people deliberately take the corks out of the bottles, put water into the bottles and replace the capsules, and I believe that is done to this day’.29 In the case of sealing wax stoppers, dilution proved only slightly more troublesome:

The bottles are opened by the native trader by means of two nails or two pieces of flat bamboo inserted on each side of the cork, which is thus gently removed. About a gill of spirit is removed and its place supplied with water. The cork is then replaced. It is held in the fire for a moment till the wax is heated and is then dipped in the sawdust, and appears intact.30

Abiraba blacksmiths made corkscrews specially for diluting purposes.31

Dilution led to spirits sold at the coast having a stronger alcoholic content than those sold in the hinterland. Lagos Governor McCallum thought the process went on to such an extent that spirits became ‘so weak as to do little harm compared with the palm wine of the country’.32 Similar senti-
ments had been expressed by his predecessor, Sir Gilbert Carter: ‘the gin which finds its way into the interior is so adulterated with water that it requires but little further dilution’.\(^{35}\) It was trader John Holt’s experience that any kind of tampering with bottles or demijohns led to selling difficulties, with retailers forced to accept a much lower price than otherwise or face a fight with customers over adulteration.\(^{34}\) While not prone to accept ‘the wild reports of demoralised natives’, Holt wanted the authorities to do all in their power to make sure Nigerians purchased alcoholic beverages of a moderate strength.\(^{35}\)

The government tested a number of spirit samples in various Yorubaland towns in 1897. At Abeokuta, Ibadan, Oyo and Ogbomosho spirits averaged 23, 33.5, 38.5 and 34 per cent underproof respectively. These spirits were ‘far from being powerful’, given the fact those in Britain had an average strength of 10-12 per cent underproof.\(^{36}\) With the alcohol strength similar for both Ibadan and Ogbomosho, a town 100 kilometres further north, the government also took it as evidence destroying the theory that the further into the hinterland spirits went the more dilution took place and the weaker it got.

Others argued there was little doubt that in some cases it reached the consumer still in its highly concentrated ‘cut-throat’ state, however, with really disastrous results.\(^{37}\) Such a case happened in Benin City in 1897. Two inhabitants drank crude spirit without dilution and ‘were consequently in a state of coma for a considerable period and lay like logs’.\(^{38}\) The spirit had been imported into Benin by Yoruba middlemen from Lagos using red coloured two gallon tins, normally diluted into over ten gallons of trade spirit. Moreover, such spirit afforded opportunity for fraud, ‘dishonest dealing and absolute robbery’ in the diluting of it before even getting into the hands of the retailers.\(^{39}\)

The 1909 Liquor Trade Committee took a keen interest in solving the question of whether imported liquor was diluted or kept at full strength for the purposes of sale. It heard a great deal of opinion and came down firmly on the dilution side of the argument, with the watering down often done by unhygienic methods.\(^{40}\) Of fourteen samples of trade spirits purchased in an Abeokuta market by the Lagos Chamber of Commerce, twelve were diluted.\(^{41}\) One Opobo liquor trader said the last people in the line of transmission ‘simply buy water’.\(^{42}\) Some gin was so diluted as to be unsaleable at Onitsha market even when offered at two pence a bottle, while according to a Witt and Busch merchant, rum was always watered down before sale.\(^{43}\) Ibadan petty traders diluted each bottle bought from the big liquor firms in the ratio of one of water to three of alcohol. Even then, the street hawkers watered it down again in the same proportion.\(^{44}\) At Shaki, customers insisted on unadulterated Lagos or Ibadan gin, not the watered down Abeokuta product.\(^{45}\) As a rule, it can be argued that while gin generally remained undiluted from its import state, rum was watered down.
Indigenous Liquors

A constant concern and comparison of the imported liquor trade question in Nigeria was the role played by indigenous liquors. Having to contend with the heat and humidity of the climate lowering their energy reserves, Nigerians from time immemorial have drunk alcoholic beverages to satisfy their craving for stimulants. In some areas of the country, indigenous alcohol was almost a necessity as regards drink given the brackish nature of many streams.46

Palm wine was obtained from the palm oil tree by cutting a hole in the tree trunk just beneath the male inflorescence represented by the bunch of kernel nuts.47 A kini, or hollow wooden stick about the size of a pencil, was stuck into the hole, with its other end pointing like a funnel into an empty bottle or calabash attached around the trunk. Men, never women, collected the palm wine two or three times a day – early morning, midday and evening – the amount of sap collected daily averaged two to three gallons.48 Tappers assisted the fermentation process by adding the ground bark of the iki, edat or atala tree, turning it both purple in colour and stronger in strength.49 They then diluted the wine with up to fifty per cent of water to increase its volume for sale. The quality of the palm wine depended on the amount of water added to the liquid collected from the tree. The more water the poorer the quality. Indeed, government analysis of palm wine from outlying districts bound for Lagosian drinkers found a concoction of two or three bottles of fresh sap, a little ‘old wine’ and then filed to the brim with water with ‘the degree of dilution is the maximum which a thirsty customer will tolerate’ for maximum commercial gain as it was sold by quantity, rarely on merits of quality.50

Tombo palm wine was obtained from a ripe bamboo palm tree by cutting a rectangular hole at the top, under where the branches spread out, preferably under the lowest grown leaf. A small gutter channel, made from a tree branch, was positioned in the hole, and a pot or calabash attached at the other end. The gutter was cleared twice a day. After each evening collection, another panel of bark was removed to aid the next day’s flow. The wine, stronger in strength than palm wine, was mixed with water just like its weaker counterpart.51 Possession of a plot of bamboo palm trees was therefore a highly prized, jealously guarded, piece of property: in area of Bende, Igboland, ‘next to his wives, his tombo farm is native’s most cherished possession’.52

While the south had various types of palm wine, cereals provided the basic ingredient for various food-like northern brews fermented without yeast.53 Guinea corn brewed into pito (peto), oti baba, jegoo or burukutu.54 Millet made a beverage stronger in alcoholic content than guinea corn but took a day longer to prepare.55 Brewing maize produced ghia (giya), oti-okaa, oti agbado, yangan or shekete by fermenting it to turn the maize starch into sugar and then into carbonic acid and alcohol.56 This simple fermentation
process, similar to English cidermaking, worked equally well with local fruits, such as over-ripe plaintain (*oti ogede* or *agadagidi*).\(^{57}\)

Anti-liquor trade critics tried to downplay the potency of local brews in order to accept that they would be a better alternative for Nigerians seeking liquid refreshment of an alcoholic nature than imported beverages; Bishop Tugwell, for example, stated:

> These drinks do not, as far as I know, produce any injurious effects on the people's constitution. Some of them do sometimes get drunk over them, but the intoxicating power is generally so little that a large quantity must be taken to produce intoxication. Natives using these speak of them as helpful to the preservation of their health.\(^{58}\)

True, most indigenous liquors have little, if any, intoxicating power, certainly when compared to the potency of imported liquor, but a drinker could make up for this lack of strength by imbibing much more of the local brew. For instance, palm wine had a dual and contradictory nature when its effect on the drinker was analysed: when fresh it is as non-alcoholic as fruit juice, but when left for some time, its alcoholic content rose from nothing to three or four per cent alcohol by volume, a strength comparable with a mild European lager beer brew.\(^{59}\) Various indigenous brews and wines were tested at the insistence of Lagos Governor William MacGregor in 1902 to settle the point over relative alcoholic strengths.

### Table 2: Strength of Various Alcoholic Beverages, Lagos, 1902

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alcoholic beverage</th>
<th>% under proof</th>
<th>% proof spirit</th>
<th>% absolute alcohol by weight</th>
<th>% absolute alcohol by volume</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gin</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>37.11</td>
<td>44.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raphia palm wine</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raphia palm wine*</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elais palm wine*</td>
<td>94.4</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea corn beer*</td>
<td>97.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Readings made after seven days of fermentation.


There were vast differences in potency between indigenous and imported spirits. While bearing in mind that the Government chemist had made mistakes over his analysis of alcohol in the same year, the results in Table 2 clearly indicate that the strongest native beverage registered way below the strength of imported spirits. The fermented palm wine reading of 2.79
per cent absolute alcohol by weight was ‘an inappreciable amount’.\textsuperscript{50} Indigenous liquors were ‘mild exhilarants’ when compared to imported ones, more so when it is known that gin contained the lowest amount of absolute alcohol by weight of the spirits tested in 1902: whisky being 41.07 per cent, brandy 43.21 per cent, rum and ‘alcohol’ 44.36 and 85.46 per cent respectively.\textsuperscript{61}

The 1909 Liquor Trade Committee also got 16 samples of local beverages for analysis by the Principal of the Government Laboratories in London, and found the same results as those of 1902 as regards the variations between the home-made and imported spirits. Native liquors ranged from five to 12.8 per cent proof spirit and gin from 45.8 to 101.7 per cent of proof spirit.\textsuperscript{62} Small amounts of potassium salts were found, but not in deleterious quantities. The higher readings can be explained that MacGregor’s seven day test missed the high point of the native beverages as regards alcoholic strength, which is around 24 to 72 hours after tapping.

The health effects of drinking palm wine depended not only on the alcohol it possessed but also on the amount of unsavoury ingredients it contained. Palm wine left for more than a few days turned sour as the fermentation process becomes a putrefactive one, after turning all the sugars (sucrose and glucose) to alcohol and encouraging the production of acetic acid, a base for vinegar.\textsuperscript{63} Straining palm wine removed most of the flies and vegetable matter, but often this was not done, leaving sediment in the calabashes. The water added to palm wine was often impure. Consequently water-borne diseases may well have been transmitted through drinking watered-down contaminated beverages.

Witnesses differed as to whether the intoxication produced by tombo and the like was of a worse character than the drunkenness caused by drinking imported liquor; for the \textit{Lagos Echo} newspaper, ‘the effect of drinking enormous quantities of palm wine or native beer is no more to be compared to the effects of gin than chalk is to cheese’.\textsuperscript{64} For his part, Tugwell repeated his assertion that indigenous beers and wines were harmless:

\begin{quote}
I have watched them when they have been drinking only palm wine at their feasts, and some of them get drunk, but all appear to be able to get to their work next morning, and not to be suffering from any ill effects.\textsuperscript{65}
\end{quote}

Since it is a medically-proved fact that eating food in the form of solids in grain beer slows the absorption of alcohol in bloodstream, the view that such drinks caused only mild intoxication has a basis in fact. On the other hand, palm wine’s thin liquid consistency would not act as such a block on inebriation. Colonial doctor Ernest Tipper thought \textit{tombo} inspired silliness, not drunkenness, however.\textsuperscript{66} Views like this are only at one end of the spectrum of opinions on the effects of native liquors, regarding them...
as harmless drinks and 'healthy, wholesome and palatable' foods: fresh palm wine is a nutritious drink possessing vitamin B complex. Indeed, in some south-eastern areas like Bonny District and Calabar Province, young girls used the drink as part of their fattening diet for marriage. At Itak in Eket District, the bad food harvest made the locals resort to feeding themselves with *tombo* and were none the worse for it.

On the other hand, others saw them as fairly strong intoxicants capable of producing drunkenness and alcoholism. The general effect of palm wine, for example, was to induce a dazed, fuddled appearance and physical lethargy. As the Alafin of Oyo put it, 'a man who drinks a bowl of beer at Fiditi will not be able to walk to Oyo', only a few miles to the north. This was because a lot of sugar is consumed in drinking the palm wine which is then broken down into carbon dioxide in the stomach; the gas accumulates in the body and is responsible for the inertia and stupor which follows a heavy intake of wine. The other products of palm wine produced in the stomach acted on the kidneys merely as a diuretic.

The sale of palm wine and native beers at roadside places was a common sight, with the products for sale the result of collecting or fermenting more than an individual's needs. Abeokuta's Balogun of the Christians, Durojaiye Sowemimo, expressed dismay at the adulteration of the local drinks by the town's brewers and tappers. In Lagos in 1930, people expressed concern at the unhygienic hawking of palm wine, and called for local bye-laws to prevent contamination of the product sold by the hawkers:

There have been recently a lot of complaints about the filthy condition of the men and women who generally sell Palm Wine at Ebute Metta and about Lagos in dirty Clothes themselves, and with unclean vessels containing the Palm Wine. Is there not a local ordinance to stop this?

At the end of the decade, the situation had not improved: ' [...] bad [sic] and filth with these palm wine centres are replete and which are enough to send one sick'. The Government Analyst tested samples of palm wine sold at Ebute Metta, and found it to be stronger than that sold on Lagos Island, the implication being that the latter place sold palm wine even more adulterated with water than on the mainland. This was an important finding, as the purity of the wine depends on the amount of water added to the tree sap – the more water the poorer the quality.
THE QUALITY OF LIQUOR IN NIGERIA DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

Substitute Alcoholic Beverages

Table 3: Imports of Unenumerated Potable Spirits and Methylated Spirits, Nigeria, 1921-1932 (in gallons and £s)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Unenumerated Potable Spirits</th>
<th>Methylated Spirits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Volume</td>
<td>Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>3,498</td>
<td>9,449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>1,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1923</td>
<td>649</td>
<td>1,036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>2,503</td>
<td>8,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>3,073</td>
<td>9,456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>3,355</td>
<td>10,511</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>3,775</td>
<td>11,239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>5,261</td>
<td>14,587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>5,985</td>
<td>15,859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>4,304</td>
<td>11,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>2,929</td>
<td>8,113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>1,327</td>
<td>6,134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For some beverages consumed in Nigeria, it was not a question of good quality versus bad quality, but a clear fact they were dangerous to drink anyhow. Unorthodox liquids had a good intoxicating effect, were unrestricted in availability, and had the added attraction of being much less expensive than heavily taxed imported liquor. The value of unenumerated potable spirits imported into Nigeria rose fifteen-fold from 1923 to the end of the decade and had up to twenty per alcohol by volume: Alcool de Menthe, Angostura Bitters, Amol, Aletris Cordial, Arenol, Celerina, Kikriki, Swamp Root, Lighting Lung Tonic, Magic Oil and Vogeler’s Curative Compound. But of all these kinds of drinks, alcool de menthe, normally used by the French as a mouthwash, provides the most detailed history of an alcoholic substitute.

In the spirit-drinking south, its consumption was minimal, but in the liquor-prohibited north it was used as a stimulant. Mint tea (shai bi na’ana) was a delicacy which Arabs had popularised among the Hausas, but the bottled variety would have been more convenient to transport and buy, not requiring a garden. The mint taste might have meant that alcohol may not have been either the point or noticed by drinkers. Bottled in three tiny sizes of 0.3, 0.5 and 0.7 gills (a gill is quarter-of-a-pint or 0.142 litres), alcool de menthe could be easily afforded because of its relatively low unit
cost of 1s, 1s 6d and 2s each respectively. Its popularity lasted until the colonial authorities stopped its import in 1929. In that year, the French Company and the Société Compagnie d’Ouest Africaine sold 2,400 and 8,688 two shilling bottles respectively, mainly to Hausas in the north, who purchased ‘alcool de menthe’ more as a substitute for alcohol, as half a teaspoon in a cup of tea adds to the taste and effect of that beverage.’

Ordinarily methylated spirits lit lamps, heated irons, fired spirit stoves and tested palm oil quality. Kano’s Senior Resident Alexander, however, raised concerns over locals drinking methylated spirits in 1925. His warning went unheeded by the government in Lagos, responsible for checking the import of such products going through southern ports, but three years later it instituted a review when the Lagos Committee of the Association of West African Merchants also noted ‘the considerable increase in methylated spirit imports due to human consumption’. The Government Chemist found the methylated spirit imported at three pence customs duty was non-pyridinised, a mixture of ninety-five per cent ethyl alcohol and five per cent wood naphtha, making it in his words ‘not non-potable’, that is, drinkable. Finding a reason for this abnormal state of drinking affairs proved easy: with the spirit duty for much of the 1920s at 25 shillings a gallon, ‘the price of gin being now so high a number of people find in methylated spirit a substitute which we understand is now a popular drink when mixed in a certain proportion with palm wine’.

The Nigeria Legislative Council meeting of 27 September 1930 wanted to stop ‘this obnoxious and dangerous trade’. The solution was fiscal. The customs duty on methylated spirits jumped 140-fold to 35 shillings a gallon. Given the public health threat the drinking of methylated spirits posed, a Lagos Daily News editorial called the move ‘very properly’ motivated. In the view of the administration the new import regime worked: ‘increased duty, designed to prevent the drinking of these deleterious spirits by natives, has been effective’. In the first nine months of 1930, before the passing of the bill, Nigeria imported 14,480 gallons of methylated spirits; in the last three months of the year, with the new customs regime, the amount dropped to a mere 805 gallons. Table 3 reveals the subsequent collapsed commercial sales of methylated spirits, especially when compared to official government usage. But soon afterwards, liquor-seeking Nigerians no longer relied on imports or dangerous substitutes; they manufactured it themselves.

Domestically Distilled Alcohol

In the early 1930s Nigerians distilled their own spirits, a practice brought from America. Distillation equipment proved simple: a kerosene tin, a water pot and a couple of lengths of metal piping. Its wide availability, cheapness, Made in Nigeria patriotic appeal, and the economic downturn of the era
combined to propel illicitly distilled liquor (ogororo) into the economic and social life of the country.86 With these factors prevailing for the rest of the decade, home-made spirits took hold, and a rapid transfer of technology took place across the country from the south: ‘it has spread all over the country to such an extent that there is hardly a Province that can plead absolute innocence of this evil’.87 It brought alcohol within reach of all Nigerians, instead of the previous situation where gin was the beverage of mainly chiefs and traders. Class distinctions can also be ascertained from the attitudes struck to drinking ogororo. For the poorer classes of Nigerian society, illicit liquor retained its constant attractions of fiery nature and cheapness. But at the other end of the social scale, nobody imbibed ogororo if they could afford imported gin. Snobbery attached itself to this type of drink: ‘I doubt if an Ondo [man] would admit to his friend that he could consume a gin inferior to Gordons’.88 By 1936, the supply of illicit gin at funerals and marriage ceremonies became ‘not quite the thing to do’.89 Ogororo was seen as ‘poor stuff, denoting a low taste’. Imported gin acquired a better reputation, impressing on middle-class Nigerians its power ‘to be good for the body’.90

Taking up this last point, one of the most frequent uses of ogororo was as medicine. People of Warri mixed it with local herbs and drank the concoction as such, while Delta fishermen took it to counteract chills and pneumonia.91 This mainly explains the preponderance of ogororo drinking among the Waterside people when compared to the inland peoples like the Yoruba and Igbo. Ironically, far from acknowledging the harmful nature of illicit spirits, ‘many people purchase it in the genuine belief that it is of medicinal value for rheumatism, colds and similar compounds’.92 Illicit gin appeared detrimental to health, however. Government chemists found serious metallic contamination in spirits analysed, so much so that the metal of the condensing apparatus could be ascertained. Copper gave chronic poisoning, while the later use of lead piping constituted an even ‘graver menace to health’.93 The effect of an unlimited supply of crude alcohol on the population raised grave health concerns, as Soku Madu of Aba worried over the consumption of ‘8,000 gallons per day of this Dreadfull [sic] liquor which is very injurious and dangerous to the human health’.94 Such anxieties provided a basis with which the colonial government could initially attack illicit gin. People attending the Sabagria Court heard succinct colonial pronouncements, ‘this crude liquor has very bad effects making people go blind, become paralysed, and incapable of producing children’.95 A circular distributed at Agbor on 20 September 1932 listed illicit gin’s noxious side-effects in the following shock phrases: ‘it is a poison’, ‘it causes a wild state of drunkenness leading to death or insanity’, and ‘it can lead to loss of use of legs, wasting away, total blindness and impotence’.96 These blunt warnings seemed medically sound: large doses of illicit gin could cause insanity, even death. Smaller amounts taken over a longer period of time could lead to peripheral neuritis (losing the use of the legs);
gastro-enteritis (damage to the stomach lining); optic-neuritis (blindness); urethritis and prostatitis (sterility); and an increased risk of tuberculosis. No matter the damning medical evidence associated with ‘raw and unwholesome concoctions’, however, the facts had to be carefully garnered: where illicit distillation was rife, the above facts were loudly broadcast, but discretion prevailed in areas where the practice was unknown or in its infancy because to give such publicity would only promote the offence. But as the years passed, and the anticipated public health disasters did not materialise, colonial officers re-examined their warnings and concluded that illicit gin was not poisonous after all.

Conclusion

The question of liquor quality aroused a good deal of misconceptions and rhetorical hyperbole. If the critics of liquor quality could determine that Nigerians were suffering grievously from a noxious import then the whole rationale of their opponents’ arguments would receive a severe and lasting handicap. With so much evidence presented by critical observers of the poor, even dangerous, quality of the liquor imported into Nigeria, the counter-arguments of proponents in favour of the good quality of the trade’s alcohol depended on a mixture of scientific analyses and merchants defending their involvement in the trade. With so much revenue dependent on a flourishing liquor trade, the colonial government tried to help matters the latter group by setting up analytical experiments and giving strong public rebuffs to the critics of the trade. Ultimately, it was Nigerian drinkers who had the last say on the subject. Those objecting to the trade labelled it all poisonous without even tasting a drop, while those drinking the alcoholic beverages seemed not to have cared too much. In fact, it seems likely that most imported liquor was of high quality, with a few exceptions to prove the rule.

Importing alcohol into Nigeria around the turn of the century was motivated by the commercial advantages on saving freight costs and supplying a section of the drinking population wanting strong spirits. But, in doing so, merchants left themselves open to the charge that alcohol was adulterated with poisonous substances like fusel oil and simply too strong to drink neat. Unsatisfactory scientific qualitative analyses of alcohol by colonial chemists led to heated arguments based on false facts, and did not show the colonial administration in a very good light. With hindsight, they went to a great deal of trouble to pass a law which looked foolish and had no basis in scientific fact. Nevertheless, the specific example of a colony like Nigeria help to fill out the general finding of those historians like Suzanne Miers who have studied the international context of the liquor trade that at the heart of imperial concerns was a desire to get an orderly reduction in African spirit consumption by making liquor weaker, dearer and harder.
to purchase.\textsuperscript{99} The vagaries of diluting liquor led to a great deal of variability in the strength of spirit purchased by drinkers, anywhere between pure alcohol and water.

Critics of the liquor trade always downplayed the potency of local brews and accentuated their purity in contrast to imported beverages in order to argue that the latter were impure, of poor quality, even harmful to human health, and therefore should be banned outright. Olukoju shares similar views to these critics not proven case. Indigenous alcohol could be pure and relatively alcohol-free, but it could equally contain impurities and have an alcoholic content comparable to Western-style lager beers. In either case, the danger to human health was minimal.

Substitute alcoholic beverages appeared in the 1920s when the high cost of imported liquor contrasted with cheaper, more available liquids like \textit{alcool de menthe} and methylated spirits. An outright ban and a massive increase in the customs duty successfully stopped consumption of both of these drinks. Drinkers had to find alternative ways to achieve alcoholic stimulation. In fact, within a couple of years, the phenomenon of cheap, illicitly distilled alcohol grew rapidly in the south to replace both imported liquor and substitute alcoholic drinks. To Nigerians, they drank \textit{ogogoro}; for the colonial authorities, they tried to control illicit gin. Whatever angle is taken on the subject, the phenomenon represents the beginning of the end for most of the trade in imported liquor and the start of a Nigerian-based alcohol industry. It also showed once again that colonial fears over dangerous domestic and imported spirits were unfounded. Taken in moderation, alcoholic beverages provided stimulation to Nigerian drinkers, not danger.
Notes

6 ‘The Importation of Ardent Spirits into the Colony’, Lagos Times and Gold Coast Advertiser, 13 April 1881, 2.
9 Native Races and Liquor Traffic United Committee (NRLTUC), Speech of the Right Reverend Bishop Tugwell at the Annual Meeting of the NRLTUC, 7 May 1908 (London 1908) 6.
13 Lagos Annual Report (1903) 38.
15 H. Strachan, Minutes, question 776, 22; C. Proctor, Minutes, questions 16,087-16,088, 398.
16 Lagos Annual Report (1903) 38.
17 Ibid.
18 Lagos Ordinance no. 3 of 1903 to Provide for the Sale of Food in a Pure State and for the Prevention of the Adulteration Thereof, clause 4(b).
20 Proctor, Minutes, questions 16,141, 16,158, 399-400.
21 PRO, CO 520/55, Lord Elgin, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Britain, to L.H. Nott, Secretary, NRLTUC, 15 April 1908; Olukoju does not mention alcohol as the reason for the introduction of differential rates. Olukoju, ‘Rotgut’, 70-71.
22 PRO, CO 520/101, Memorandum by T.F. Burrowes, Controller of Customs, Southern Nigeria, 1, in Sir W. Egerton, Governor, Southern Nigeria, to L.V. Harcourt, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Britain, 21 February 1911.
25 Ibid., 550.
28 H. Waller, *Trafficking in Liquor with the Natives of Africa* (London 1887) 8.
32 Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan (NAI), Chief Secretary's Office, Lagos (CSO) 1/1/20, Sir H.E. McCallum, Governor, Lagos, to Chamberlain, 6 October 1897.
34 PRO, CO 147/147, John Holt and Company to Chamberlain, 20 July 1899.
35 Rhodes House Library, Oxford, John Holt Papers, MSS.Afr.s.1525, Box 9, file 1, Holt to Chamberlain, 13 May 1899.
36 NAI, CSO 1/1/18, G.C. Denton, Governor, Lagos, to Chamberlain, 10 April 1897.
37 ‘The Deputation on the Liquor Traffic to His Excellency the Governor’, *Lagos Standard*, 14 June 1899, 3.
38 PRO, CO 147/138, Sir R.D.R. Moor, Commissioner and Consul-General, Niger Coast Protectorate, to Sir G.T. Carter, Governor, Lagos, 9 November 1897.
39 PRO, CO 147/125, Moor to Carter, 8 September 1897; PRO, CO 444/3, Moor to Chamberlain, 3 November 1899.
42 Chief C. Gam, *Minutes*, questions 12,524-12,525, 311.
48 ‘The Uses of the Oil Palm’, *West Africa*, 14 May 1904, 485; M.M. Green, *Igbo Village Affairs* (London 1947) 35, 175. In one area the average consumption of palm wine among 200 people surveyed was 167 grams per head per day; some men drank a dozen pints a week: J.M. Dalziel, *The Useful Plants of West Tropical Africa* (London 1937) 506.
50 NAE, Chief Secretary, Enugu (CSE) 12/1/317, A.B. Hobson, Government Analyst, to D. Alexander, Director of Medical and Sanitary Services, 29 July 1926.
59 ‘Is Fermented Palm Wine Alcoholic?’, Nigerian Chronicle, 5 March 1909, 2; A. Pratt, Minutes, questions 570-573, 15.


63 Oluwole, Minutes, questions 1,662-1,663, 46; E. Obafemi, Minutes, question 3,525, 89; Hartley, The Oil Palm, 545-546.

64 ‘Editorial’, Lagos Echo, 6 July 1895, 2.

65 Tugwell, Minutes, question 976, 27.

66 Tipper, Minutes, questions 5,583-5,586, 140.


68 W.T.G. Lawson, Minutes, question 4,481, 116.

69 Chief D.J. Henshaw, Minutes, questions 11,297-11,299, 277.

70 W.A. Ross, Minutes, question 5,205, 133.


74 NAI, Commissioner of the Colony’s Office (COMCOL) 1/520/S.1, A.B. Hobson, Government Analyst, 15 August 1933, in R.E. Foulger, Commissioner of Police, Colony, to G.M. Falk, Commissioner of the Colony, 17 August 1933.

75 NAI, COMCOL 1/947, W.K. Duncombe, Comptroller of Customs, to G. Hemmant, Chief Secretary to the Government, 17 June 1930. The same phenomenon had occurred on a smaller scale with the drinking of perfume in Lagos in the 1890s: NAI, CSO 1/1/28, MacGregor to Chamberlain, 27 December 1899. Meanwhile, ‘lavender water with its 47 per cent alcoholic content was said to be the most popular’ substitute alcoholic beverage in German Kamerun: H. Rudin, Germans in the Cameroons, 1884-1914 (New Haven 1938) 388.

76 NAI, COMCOL 1/947, Duncombe to Hemmant, 17 June 1930.

77 NAI, COMCOL 1/947, J.T. Spender, Commissioner of Police, to C.T. Lawrence, Administrator of the Colony, 12 July 1930.

78 NAI, Liquor Traffic by Alexander, 17 December 1925, 1. A generation earlier, Constance Larymore had expressed a similar worry: ‘The servants will be found absolutely omnivorous over kerosene oil; they spill it, they light the kitchen fire with it, and I have heard a despairing bachelor housekeeper declare that they drink it, so rapidly does it disappear!’, Larymore, A Resident’s Wife (London 1908) 199 (emphasis in the original).


80 Analyst Department Annual Report (1928) 5.


83 Order-in-Council no. 51 of 1930 Made under the Customs Tariff Ordinance, clause 1(13).

84 ‘Amendments to the Customs Tariff’, 1.

85 NAI, CSO 1/32/108, Hemmant, Deputy Governor, Nigeria, to Lord Passfield, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Britain, 8 August 1931.

86 NAE, Owerri and Rivers Provincial Office (RIVPROF) 2/1/15, Report on Illicit Distillation in Degema Division, September 1932 to February 1933 by C.W. Clark, Assistant Commissioner of Police, Owerri Province, 1 March 1933, 4.

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88 NAI, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ibadan (IBMINHOME) 1/26, P.R. Foulkes, District Officer, Ondo, in G.G. Harris, Acting Resident, Ondo Province, to Kelly, 15 July 1937.
89 NAE, RIVPROF 2/1/16, T.H. Wilson, Senior Commissioner of Police, Owerri Province, to H.C. Stevenson, Resident, Owerri Province, 23 July 1936.
91 NAI, Okitipupa Divisional Office (OKITIDIV) 1/2/OWC.3, R.A. Vosper, District Officer, Okitipupa, to F.B. Carr, Acting Resident, Ondo Province, 26 February 1935; NAI, IBMINHOME 1/26, J. Wann, Resident, Ijebu Province, to E.J.G. Kelly, Secretary, Southern Provinces, 19 August 1936.
92 NAE, RIVPROF 2/1/17, P.B. Hebbert, District Officer, Degema, to Carr, Resident, Owerri Province, 30 December 1938.
93 Analyst Department Annual Reports, 1932-1935.
94 NAE, Aba District Office (ABADIST) 14/1/169, S.T. Madu, Aba, to C.J. Pleass, District Officer, Aba, 8 December 1932.
95 NAE, Brass District Office (BRASSDIST) 10/1/80, E.N.C. Dickinson, Assistant District Officer, Brass, to Native Court, Sabagreia, 16 February 1932.
96 NAI, ASADIV 1/AD.199, I.N. Hill, District Officer, Asaba, to J.M. Simpson, Assistant District Officer, Agbor, 22 September 1932.
97 NAI, IBMINHOME 1/21, W.E. Hunt, Secretary, Southern Provinces, to Nigeria Residents, 9 December 1931.