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**THE LEBANESE INVOLVEMENT IN CINEMATOGRAPHY,
HOTEL MANAGEMENT AND POOL BETTING INDUSTRY,
1937-1986**

Peter F. Adebayo

Abstract

As part of their entrepreneurial activities in Lagos, the Lebanese immigrants diversified into Cinematography, Hotel management, Pool betting, Gambling and Casinos businesses. This paper discusses their involvement in the aforementioned business activities in Lagos from 1937 when the Lebanese became involved in cinematography till mid 80s when the down turn of the economy occasioned by the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of Military Government of General Babangida Administration as well as the arrival of home video business with the film industry led to its gradually decline. But hotel management and Pool betting have on the other hand continued to flourish. The methodology for this study is based on historical research comprising of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources involved oral interviews and collection of archival materials while the secondary sources comprises of a rigorous review of existing literature relating to the study. The findings of the study showed that while the Lebanese were no more involved in cinematography and pool betting and hotel management which were taken over by Nigerians as result of the indigenization decrees of the 70s and also the declining interest of Lagosians in going to cinemas- a factor occasioned by the structural adjustment programmes of the mid-80s. The conclusion of the study is that the Lebanese immigrants involvement in these business activities created to some extent socio economic impact on Nigerians society. It is hoped that the study will complement earlier studies on these areas and contribute to foreign involvement in these business activities in Lagos and also the economic history of Lagos.

Keywords: Cinema, Business, Hotel management, Pool betting, Lagos, Nigeria.

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Introduction

The literature dealing with foreign involvement in cinematography, hotel management and pool betting industry are not many in Nigeria despite the fact that foreigners were the real pioneers of these business enterprises. Again, according to Oladipo Olubomehin (2012) even with the local writers who have written on cinematography, the studies have not been done from purely historical perspective. For instance the work of Augustine Enahora on film makers and film making in Nigeria (Enahora, 1989) which sheds light on the problems and prospects of film in Nigeria as well as the role of cinemas in national development lacks historical depth. Also, the essay written by O.O. Adenugba (2007) on the Nigerian motion picture industry discusses how the Nigerian movie industry started and made reference to cinemas but could not give detail account of the history of cinemas business in Nigeria. Similarly, not much has been done by historians on hotel management which till date has become one of area studies along with tourism in some Nigerian Universities. Equally too, the pool betting industry-a cultural import from Britain since 1920s which has grown and became popular among Nigeria's elderly, retired workers, and the unemployed has not received adequate attention. Accordingly, it is against the background of these short comings that this paper discusses the involvement of the Lebanese immigrants in cinematography, hotel management and pool betting in Lagos from 1937 when the first Lebanese man became involved in cinema activities. However before going into a detailed discussion of their activities in the aforementioned areas, it will be appropriate to mention briefly Lebanese activities in Lagos.

A Synopsis of Early Migration and Business Activities in Lagos

The details of early Lebanese migration to Nigeria are exhaustively discussed in Adebayo (2005). One of the most popular source from the Lebanese Embassy claims that Elias Khoury Younes who hails from Humaise, Miziara, North Lebanon, was the first Lebanese to come to Nigeria in Lagos in between 1885 and 1890 settling in Tinubu Square after from Sierra Leone, while trading along the West African Coast (Oral interview with Head of Chancery, Miziara, 2006).

Another anecdotal unknown Arabic source claims that Albark Abou Abdu who arrived Lagos in 1875 from the northern part of Lebanon (Oral interview Raouf Khartoun Kano, 1996). Actually, opinions are divided as to the actual date of first Lebanese to arrive in Lagos. Be that as it may, what is however certain is that by 1890s, there were

already references to men like Michael Elias, Assad Joseph and Elias Minaise who were later to be successful in business activities (Falola, 1990). Generally, migration was organized along family and sub-ethnic lines. New emigrants joined their relations and people from the same area in Lebanon settled in the same place overseas. For instance, virtually all the earliest emigrants in Lagos came from the Christian dominated area of Mizyara in the north while the Muslims came from Jwaya which is in the southern part of Lebanon. These emigrants were later joined by other emigrants from other parts of the world. For instance, Mr Michael Elias joined the immigrants in Lagos from Brazil (*Daily Times*, 1923, p.7). Mr Mohammed El-Khalil came from Mexico (Oral Interview, Faysal El-Khalil, Lagos, 2004). There are still many others who had similar experiences before migrating to Lagos. Of course, wherever they settled their entrepreneurial activities were never hidden.

Be that as it may, their commercial and entrepreneurial activities which began in Lagos and spread to other parts of Nigeria started with their involvement in the retail and auxiliary trade (Adebayo, 2005). An eyewitness account described their goods as "a collection of odds and ends" consisting of cheap beads and other junks, which they peddled about (see *Daily Times*, May 1921). They supported the small trade with street singing and musical performance to attract alms. They equally engaged in petty trading alongside the women of Lagos in Eastern merchandise of which the most famous was the coral beads for which they found a ready market. At that time the cost of original bead ranged from f1 to f3 while the initial bead was sold for a few pence (see *Daily Times*, 1921:17). The lenders of the coral beads used to cry out "coral, coral" by which name the Lebanese became known not only among the Lagosians but to other people of West African countries (see *Daily Times*, 1921). The details of their entrepreneurial activities as well as their characteristics are well explained in Adebayo (2005) and Mambula (2010). What is however clear is that by the late 1930s they had also began to diversify into other entrepreneurial business activities such as cinematography, hotel management and pools betting, gambling and casinos which are discussed below.

Cinema

As earlier mentioned, Lebanese involvement in cinematography formed part of their entrepreneurial activities when they began to diversify into other economic activities in Lagos and other parts of

Nigeria while penetrating the Lagos and Nigerian economy. Although, it must be stated that the first film screenings in Nigeria was shown at Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos, from August 12 to 22, 1903 (Adegoke, 2012). In that year, Herbert Macaulay, a popular nationalist invited the Balboa and Company to Nigeria. The company had an exhibition tour of 'silent films' on the West African Coast. The success of this effort led to the influx of other European film exhibitors to Nigeria (NAI:COMCOL 1,233/1). Apart from the Glover Memorial and Empire Hall, there were four other halls showing films twice a week in Lagos mainland and one hall each in Ebute Meta and Oshodi by 1921. By this time, cinema had become popular in Lagos with crowds of young and old people usually waiting for the doors of the cinema halls to open (Agbanoma 2007:7 citing Leonard, 1967:159). Indeed the combined efforts of the government and the church encouraged the development of cinema in Lagos in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Christian missionaries used cinemas for religious propaganda while the government, during the First World War, used it as means of raising fund for war relief and for the Red Cross. The government also used the cinema for advertisement purpose. For example, the results of the 1923 Legislative Council election in Lagos were flashed on cinematograph screens (Leonard, 1967: 155 cited in Agbanoma 2007:8). The various military campaigns were brought vividly to the people through cinema exhibitions (*The Time of Lagos*, 1-8 August, 1916, 14 cited in Agbanoma 2007:7).

However, by 1937, In 1937, a Lebanese Rasek Ahmed-al-Khalil (NAI:COMCOL 1,2333 Vol.II) led his community in this line, when he founded the Rex Cinema at Glover Hall Premises in Lagos (NAI:COMCOL 1,2333 Vol.II). His company was also granted the right to use the Glover Hall Lagos, including its Tennis Court Gardens and bar for three nights a week for cinematography shows (Olubomehin, 2012). Later, the West African Pictures Company where he played a leading role established Rex Cinema in Ebutemetta and Royal Cinema, Lagos in the late 1930s and early 1940s (COMCOL,233/Vol.2., *Daily Times*, October,19 1940:7 and 8). In Lagos, the company distributed films to different cinema owners throughout the country. Indeed, the Lebanese played a great role in the distribution of films in Lagos and its environ. They, like the Indians established many films houses in Lagos. The number of cinema houses in Lagos increased from 126,474 in 1931 to 655,246 in 1963 following the expansion embarked upon by West Africa Pictures Company (Olukoju, 1994:35 cited in Sada and Adefolalu, 1975). As a result of this increase, a group of Lebanese

business men, the Mattar brothers, als came into the country in the early 60s to establish their own chain of cinema houses (Akarue,1992:37 cited in Olubomehin, 2012). The Mattar brothers established the Roxy Cinema at Apapa, the Odeon and Central Cinemas at Ebute-Meta, Idera Cinema, Mushin and Plaza Cinema, Lagos. Other cinema houses in Lagos during this period included Sheila, Rainbow Oregie and Glover (*Daily Times*, July 2, 1975:20).

It is significant to note that many Lebanese participants in the film industry at that time because it was a lucrative business and made fortunes because in early the 20th century the film industry was still relatively a new industry in Nigerian notably and was controlled by foreigners such as the Syrians, the Lebanese and the Indians (Personal interview, Emile Abdallah, Lagos, 1990,). The cinematography provided another form of night entertainment as most of the films were shown at night. Indeed the cinematographic business found a ready market in Lagos especially among the youths, rich and middle income earners of people who took interest in watching fights such as Karate on the screen. Some of the Lebanese owned film houses in Lagos are Roxy Cinema at Apapa, Central and Odeon Cinema house at Ebute Metta in Lagos. The Lebanese also spread their ownership of cinema houses to Northern Nigeria where Fuad George son of Ferris George pioneered in this business, by establishing the Rex Cinema in Kano in 1938 (Interview with George Abedi, Kano, 1996). Patrick T. Solomon is also credited to have started this trade in Eastern Nigeria by opening the Postal Cinema in Calabar in 1939 (Misra, 1985). We now turn to hotel management.

Hotel Management

With respect to Restaurant and hotel industry, information from my fieldwork and archival source have shown that Lebanese interests in this field have been quite substantial (Personal communication with messrs Ali Fawaz, Kamal Ali Boustani, Mohaamed Hammed, Lagos, 18 June, 2005, COMCOL 5, 244/II). In Lagos, for instance, Palm Tree Hotel along Apapa Road, Royal Hotel in Lagos Central, Ambassador and Niger Palace Hotel in Yaba, Ex-Celesior Hotel also in Yaba and Gondola Club were run by the Lebanese. Earlier in the late 50s, Lebanese restaurant specialist Mr. Mansour Mouin had run Club Bangatalle in 1958 and five other restaurants in Lagos that were later closed down (Personal interview, Mansour, Lagos, 2015). He, however, went to establish the elegant and magnificent restaurant La Scala (Adebayo, 2005). The restaurant is next to Onikan Stadium on Lagos

Island. Also in the late sixties, precisely in 1968, Mr. George Sarkis opened the first restaurant on Awolowo Road, Baccus Stereo Club at 59 Awolowo Road, and it was a place for hosting international dignitaries (Adebayo, 2005).

Other important restaurant run by the Lebanese include Tam Tam and Tabriz. There have in fact arisen many other Lebanese Restaurants in Lagos Island such as Al-Basha, and Double 4 all situated on the ever-busy Awolowo Road in Ikoyi (Adebayo, 2005). There is also the lagoon restaurant situated in Victoria Island, Lagos and it owned by a member of Chagouri family. There is also the Essential hotel at Apapa. In Northern Nigeria, Salim Habis is reported to have founded the Coronation Bar and Restaurant in Kano, which offered da lux class services in imported food and beverages, while in Eastern Nigeria, the Solomon family ventured in this business as well (Misra, 1985). In all Lebanese involvement in hotel management in Lagos has given leverage to the city in the development of tourism as they provided an enabling environment and accommodation for international tourists in Lagos.

Their pioneering efforts in hotel management and tourism has enabled Nigeria to see as many developing countries have done to turn to tourism development and the hotel industry business as a way to acquire financial resources necessary for economic growth and restructuring, employment possibilities and regional development (Hall, 2008). The importance of hospitality role in regional development is confirmed by the example of Hungary. This country has selected a mixed route to enter international capital and management, simultaneously opening the way for the development of own relevant international expertise in hospitality and tourism industry.

Alongside the hotel business the Lebanese were equally involved in storage trade in 1959. In that year, Automatic Restaurant and Cold Store (Nig.) Ltd. and Associated Entertainment Ltd., were officially registered, and their capital investments amount to £10,000 and £20,000 respectively. (Nigerian Trade Journal, 1977) The latter company operated under Lebanese Nigerian Collaboration.

Proximal to the Hotel and Restaurant business was the operation of Casinos. The Lebanese were popular for operating gambling machines in both the hotels and restaurants run by them and the Europeans. The Lebanese and Syrian businessmen dominated the Casino game in Lagos and in fact extended the running of this business to the interior especially in the North. It was common among the people of Lagos in 60s and 70s to talk about winning 'Kora' if they

won jack pots. (Adebayo, 2005) The gambling machines used in the business were imported from Europe into Nigeria by the Lebanese to provide entertainment, thereby boosting their hotel business. This tactics paid off because the hotel business got more patrons with the introduction of gambling machines.

One Lebanese William Kar Kar, operated the Lido Night Club at Idi-Oro on the way to Mushin. (Misra, 1985) Later on, he also acquired Club 21 night-Club at Apapa. The Phoenicia and Bagatelle Night Clubs at Victoria Island (Lagos) were also run by the Lebanese. In Kano, a Lebanese Anthony Dad is reported to have founded the first Casino in the city in 1959. (Misra, 1985)

Most of the Night Clubs owned by the Lebanese in Lagos provide food and drinks as well musical and dancing entertainment. One peculiar aspect of the Lebanese owned night clubs was the running of the 'cabaret' in which dancers were naked. (Adebayo, 2005) Some of the renowned Lebanese night clubs are situated at Apapa, Yaba, Mushin and Lagos Island etc. It is significant to note that some Nigerians who later went into hotel management attested to the experience they derived from the Lebanese whom they served (Adebayo, 2005). We now move to Pool betting Industry.

Pool Betting Industry

In Nigeria, pools-betting had apparently been established in the 1950s by the British Pools Companies. The companies included Little Trent (Fixed Odds), Murphy, G.I.C. Sherman, Empire Copes and Soccer (Fishwick, 1989). The Pools Promoters companies mentioned above formed the Pools Promoters Association (PPA) in 1934 in Great Britain for the sole purpose of the economic protection of its members. But the imminent problems that plagued the (PPA) compelled Sherman's Pools Company to secede from it in 1948.

However, the various British Pools companies in their bid to institute pools-betting as a legitimate economic activity in Nigeria advanced various techniques of recruitment of clients. For instance, more personal methods of recruitment were used. These firms, which had their origins in conventional book-making such as Shermans, could make use of existing networks of clients and agents. Existing promoters might also consciously or unconsciously encourage friends, relatives or workmates to take up the pools (Fishwick, 1989).

Another controversial method of recruiting clients was the practice of sending pools - coupons to addresses as unsolicited mails. Through this method, networks of stakers were built up. Most of the agents

had a host of regular customers. Clients were thus recruited by these agents with specialized knowledge of locality. The various British Pools companies operating in Nigeria had their respective sole agents in the various areas. For instance, the late A.A. Ohiri was Shermans (Nigeria) Pools sole agent for Benin City and Mid-West areas. His office was situated at No. 19 Ibiwe Street, Benin City (Nnadede, 1990). Indeed, the recruitment of the pools collectors in Nigeria opened another epoch in Pools-Betting in the country, because prior to the recruitment of the local agents, the Punters staked and posted their coupons to Britain through the Express Mail on individual basis (Nnadede, 1990). There is no doubt that the system was not formally organized, hence, the need to recruit and appoint the local agents to carry out the business. But Pools-Betting became an industry consequent upon the establishment of the Niger Pools Company (Niger Pools) in the 1960s (See *Daily Times*, 20th June, 1963, p.14). This is because its establishment accentuated the proliferation of other new local pools Companies in the various parts of the country in the 1960s. The company had its registered Head Office at No.15 Ijora Cause Way, Lagos. Its Chairman was Chief M.N. Ngochukwu while Mr Peter Odumody was the Deputy Managing Director of the company (Nnadede, 1990). The company was granted license to operate pools business in the following states:

Niger Pools' Areas of Operation

States	Licence Numbers
Lagos	P.00276
Western	000191
Mid-Western	000082
Rivers	P.1000006
Northern	194
South-Eastern	11
Eastern-Central	Not indicated (N.I)

There was also Face to Face Million Dollar Pools that had its Head Office at No.112, Western Avenue, Surulere, and Lagos. The company was granted license to carry on pools betting transaction in the following states (Nnadede, 1990):

Face-to-Face Pools Areas of Operation

States	Licence Numbers
Lagos	P.010
Western	000264

Mid-Western	000125
Rivers	P.10000032
Kaduna	971
South-Eastern	25

Among the local ones, the prominent Lebanese Pools agent was that of J. K. (JOHN KHAWAM) Pools. The company had its Head Office at No.2 Oboko Street, Onitsha, Anambra State. With Mr. John Khalil Khawam as its director. The company was granted licenses to operate pools business in the following states (Oral interview, Khawam, Lagos, 2005).

J. K. Pools Areas of Operation

States	Licence Numbers
Kwara	000080
Lagos	000017
Western	Not indicated
Rivers	Not indicated
Northern	Not indicated
South-Eastern	Not indicated
East-Central	Not indicated

There were many other Lebanese Pools Agent in both Lagos Island and other area of Lagos. But a Lebanese man Mr. Joseph Taktourk claimed that he introduced pools betting in Ibadan and Lagos. (Oral Interview, Taktourk, 2005) In fact, the following local pools companies that existed in Lagos in the 1960s also included that of the Lebanese.

The Local Pools Companies That Existed In Lagos by the 1960s

OSOBA POOLS LTD.
 FERREIRA POOLS LTD.
 AFRO POOLS LTD.
 LAGOS AND COLONY POOLS LTD.
 OVERSEAS LEAGUES POOLS LTD.
 PREMIER POOLS LTD.
 GORDONS POOLS LTD.
 NORTHERN POOLS LTD.
 AMBASSADOR POOLS LTD.
 VENUE POOLS LTD.
 CITY GIRL POOLS LTD.
 LION (FIXED ODDS) POOLS LTD.

PAN-AFRICAN POOLS LTD.
 SUN FLOWER POOLS LTD.
 MAI-ZAMBURA POOLS LTD.
 2X (FIXED ODDS) POOLS LTD.
 KENTURKY POOLS LTD.
 ROCKY POOLS LTD.
 DIANA POOLS LTD.
 VICTORY (WA) POOLS LTD.
 M & B POOLS LTD.
 7 MOON (FIXED ODDS) POOLS LTD.

Other local pools companies that sprang up after 1960 and subsequent years were Apollo Pools in Western Avenue, Ojuelegba, Fortunate Pools Ikorodu, Naira Pools, and Rita Pools also in Lagos. The Lebanese of course, operated clandestinely in some of these pools houses in both Lagos Island and other parts of Lagos. For instance, in Agege, a Lebanese, Abdalla Jamil was found operating a pools business and making money out of it. Other types of betting include fixed-odds-betting, sports betting, parimutuel betting and arbitrage betting.

It is interesting to note that pool betting still exists today in our society especially in commercial cities with spots lovers clamoring to their transistor radios to get details of the results of matches played in both overseas and elsewhere. Other pool betting games are The gamblers risked their money on their ability to forecast the results of matches played across all divisions of English, Spanish, German and other football leagues. The matches were detailed on coupon sheets. Local gamblers were wagering in football pools for decades, though racking up more losses than winnings

Conclusion

In this study, we have briefly discussed the Lebanese immigrants' economic activities in the commercial nerve centre of Nigeria-Lagos, covering cinematography, hotel management and pool betting industry. We have seen that the Lebanese involvement in cinematography enabled them to provide recreational activities to both the rich and middle income people. Indeed, the cinemas provided an important outlet for the people to 'ease off' tension especially in a busy city like Lagos and other commercial cities where they existed. As part of its socializing effect, it has also been said that cinemas 'provided a common fund of knowledge which enables the viewers

to operate as effective members of societies they live' (Agbanoma, 2007:45). This evidently helps to foster social cohesion and awareness thereby permitting active involvement in public life. Cinemas have also played an important role in fostering and promoting Nigerian cultural heritage particularly since the post-colonial period.

In the same vein, the hotel industry has equally enhanced hospitality and tourism industry not only in Lagos but also in other commercial cities and towns in Nigeria. The Lebanese immigrants being one of the pioneers in the industry were able to train and inculcate the virtues of the business on some Nigerians who later went into the hospitality business. It is therefore not surprising that some of our big time hotels such as the Eko Merian Hotel and Ogbodu Ranch Hotels in Cross Rivers State are being managed by the Lebanese.

The impact of the various enterprises is reflected in the fact that the three establishments discussed have provided employment opportunities to many people in Lagos. However, the Pool betting industry which has been taken over by Nigerians have continued to flourish not only in Lagos but also in many commercial cities such as Ibadan, Kaduna, Port Harcourt, Calabar and other towns in the country. Other types of betting that continue to attract gamblers are fixed-odds betting, sports betting, parimutuel betting and arbitrage betting.

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