

From Protection to Production? The development of nuclear technology in Nigeria (1950s-70s)

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Abstract

In July 2022, Professor Abdullahi Mati (head of the Nuclear Power Plant Directorate of the Nigeria Atomic Energy Commission) was invited by a Nigerian think-tank to speak on the role which nuclear power could play in meeting Nigeria's electricity needs. Concern about power generation seems justified in a country whose constant black outs affect work, leisure, and family life daily.

More surprising was the apparent consensus around the safety of nuclear power, and the sometimes simplistic economic and political arguments put forward in such a high-profile forum. For the historian, the discursive parallels with the 1960s and 1970s are striking. Not only do these parallels raise questions about the possibility for Nigeria to conduct an informed energy policy, but they also point to the limits of researching and teaching nuclear history on the African continent.

Based on primary material from France, Britain, and mostly Nigeria, this paper shows that Nigerian conversations about developing nuclear technology can be traced back to the mid-1950s (not to the 1970s, as commonly believed). From a focus on hazards arising from the use of X-rays in the country, Nigerian concerns about radioactive risk took on huge proportions on the eve of independence, when France announced its plan to test nuclear weapons in the Sahara. On one level, the Saharan tests allowed Nigeria to rival Ghana in African politics. On another, they intensified Nigerian scientists' quest to acquire autonomous capability for radiation protection and to apply internationally-produced arguments about nuclear safety to Nigeria's local ecology (fig. 1).

The paper reveals the effects of colonization and the Cold War on Nigerian nuclear science, as well as the ambitions of Nigerian elites, scientists, and civil society to participate in global debates about nuclear safety, and to use nuclear technology for medicine, agriculture, industry, and power generation.

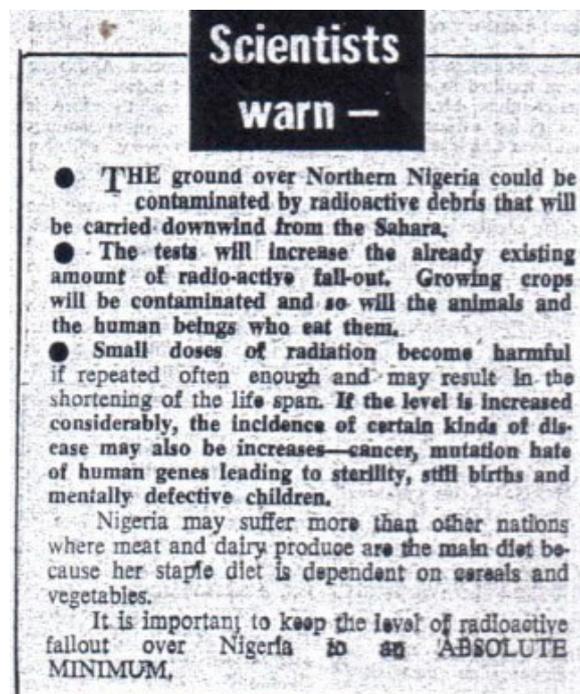


Fig. 1: Newspaper cutting from Nigeria's Sunday Times, July 12, 1959, ASI 165, Premier's Office, Kaduna Archives, Nigeria