

STUDIES **IN IGBO HISTORY**



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**THE BENDE-ONICHA HINTERLAND PATROL 1905-1906:
A STUDY IN BRITISH TACTICAL SHIFT FOR THE
SUBJUGATION OF IGBOLAND**

Ibiang Oden Ewa

Introduction

At the time of its British conquest, Igboland was an archetype of a veritable pre-colonial African society. Its culture, civilisation, traditions, and customs were essentially those of ancient Africa, as they were neither moderated nor directed by Islamic, Christian, or secular Western civilisation. Evidence of its early contact with Europeans is an ancient Roman coin found in Onitsha Market in the 1960s.¹ However, the ramifications of such probable early Igbo contact with Europeans remain indeterminate from such an exiguous evidence as a simple coin.

More ascertainable Igbo contact with Europeans, as pointed out by Elizabeth Isichei, commenced with the exploration of the lower Niger in the early 1830s.² To the lower Niger first came European traders in 1832, followed by the missionaries in 1857.³ But these traders and missionaries carried out their transactions only along the waterways and shores of the River Niger and the Cross River, scarcely venturing into the interior of Igboland, where conditions were not adequately known. Thus, as Emmanuel Ayandele's study indicates, Igbo hinterland "remained in the main out of bounds to [European] missionaries, traders, and administrators until the turn of the [nineteenth] century."⁴

The 1890s were a crucial period in the history of European imperialism in Nigeria. The period was associated with two significant developments. In one respect, it marked the end of the *pas de deux*, which had been a major element in Euro-Nigerian relations from the beginning. In another, it was a period of increasing militarisation of European expansion in Nigeria.⁵ By this time the decision of Britain to embark on the military conquest

of Nigeria was already a *fait accompli*, whose execution was not far off.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the British were in full disposition for the conquest of Igboland, whose political and military conditions were yet to be accurately ascertained. British military plan against Igboland was wrongly rested on their imagination of an Aro empire, which encompassed the Igbo hinterland, with Arochukwu as its seat of power. Relying on this assumption, British strategic objective was to achieve the conquest of Igboland by merely defeating the obstinate and powerful Aro and occupying Arochukwu, believed to be the citadel of Igbo resistance.⁶

The British desire for the conquest of Igboland was probably impelled by the immediate need to open up the hinterland for direct and free trade as well as for the Christian missionary enterprise and colonial administration. With these cardinal objectives in view, the British launched a military expedition against the Aro in December, 1901⁷. The Aro expedition, a most celebrated encounter in the history of the British conquest of Igboland, ended in January, 1902 with the defeat of the Aro and the occupation of Arochukwu by the British.

The British conquistadors were mistaken in thinking that the subjugation of the Aro would be the end of Igbo resistance to British imperialism in Southeastern Nigeria.⁸ Signs that the fall of the Aro was not the end of Igbo resistance came immediately after the occupation of Arochukwu, when the communities in its immediate environs refused to accept British authority until they were forced to reverse their stand by small military detachments, which operated under Lt. Colonel Festing and Captain G. E. Hewet⁹. It turned out then, as Adiele Afigbo puts it, that "the Aro Expedition which had been projected as the war to end all wars in the Igbo and Ibibio interior soon proved to be the beginning."¹⁰ Thus, as they were further faced with an expansive, truculent Igbo hinterland, the British had to shift from the use of classically organised expeditions to the deployment of patrols in their combat against the Igbo people. Why did the British tactical policy change from the use of expeditions to the deployment of

patrols? To what extent did the patrols achieve the objectives for which they were deployed? The aim of this study is simply to address these significant questions, using the Bende-Onicha Hinterland patrol of 1905-1906 as an instance.

Explaining the Shift from Expeditions to Patrols

The tactical shift from the launching of expeditions to the deployment of patrols in the conquest of Igboland came after the Aro Expedition of 1901-1902. At the end of the expedition, the British came to understand that Igboland was not an Aro empire, whose subjects would capitulate to the invader after the defeat of the Aro and the occupation of Arochukwu. As Chieka Ifemesia has written, "...the much-publicised, at the turn of the century (1901-1902), of the Aro oracle *Ibinukpabi*...dramatically announced to the hinterland people the inescapable materialization of the British invaders in their ancestral homeland."¹¹ Thus, after the Aro expedition, rather than place themselves under alien subjection in their homeland, most Igbo communities chose the path of resistance against the British invaders.

This reality was compounded by the fact that Igboland, as other parts of Southeastern Nigeria, presented a unique political terrain, which made it difficult for the British to impose their authority over the land in one swoop of conquest. The multiplicity of autonomous republican communities in the Igbo country meant that almost every village would have to be dealt with independently in order to be brought under British authority. As soon as this fact was known to the British, they discarded the idea of a further Igbo conquest by means of classically organised military expeditions: Such expeditions would be too unwieldy for the kind of disjunctive, particularistic, irregular, and asymmetric warfare Igbo people were going to be engaged in with the British. It was obvious that a more efficient deployment of British troops for warfare in Igboland would have to be achieved under such smaller combat forces as patrols.

The nuances between expeditions and patrols further accounted for the British shift from the former to the latter in the conquest of Igboland. An expedition was a military force often

constituted after rigorous planning and elaborate preparations. The British government, with its various departments such as the Colonial Office, the Foreign Office, the War Office, and the Admiralty as well as the colonial or protectorate government with its top military officers, was usually involved in the planning, constitution, and equipping of an expedition.¹² In the process of planning an expedition, advice and opinions as well as moral and spiritual support were sometimes sought from missionaries and mercantile bodies or agents operating in the region or area against which the expedition was going to be directed.¹³ British public reaction or opinion could also influence the constitution of expeditions as in the case of the expeditions against Benin, Bida, and Kontagora.¹⁴

The planning process relating to expeditions required that the Colonial Office must approve the desirability or necessity of an expedition before it could be constituted. Request for such an approval was usually made by the colonial or protectorate government after consultation with its military officials. The request was forwarded to the Colonial Office in a correspondence, wherein the reasons for the expedition were stated.¹⁵

An expedition was meant to meet the military needs of a most threatening security situation, or conquest of a most powerful state or enemy. Its functional objective could, therefore, be both tactical and strategic. For this reason it could be composed of contingents or troops not only from the British colonial forces in Nigeria and West Africa or other parts of British Africa, but also from any other part of the British world.¹⁶

Coming to patrols, they were simply and basically small versions of expeditions. Unlike an expedition, a patrol did not require all the high profile input and attention of Whitehall to be in place. It was usually planned and constituted by the colonial or protectorate government with its military authorities to meet the local security and military needs of an occupied territory. For this reason, it could be constituted before being brought "to the notice of Whitehall as *fait accompli*".¹⁷ A patrol was not primarily constituted to carry out the fresh conquest of a powerful state or territory, but to effect the pacification of a territory under

subjugation. It was oriented in such a way that in the process of carrying out this function, it could fight small battles or wars against recalcitrant communities. It could also use force or the threat of it to stop real or potential threat to British interests, or crush isolated incidents of continuing resistance to British policies. A patrol's central function, therefore, was to conduct internal security and military operations.

It is obvious from our evaluation of an expedition and a patrol that the planning and constitution process of the former was far more complex and lengthier than that of the latter. An expedition was also costlier to constitute, manage, and sustain than a patrol. Sending an expedition from village to village in Igboland could be a rather cumbersome venture, which would amount to much ado about little. On the other hand, since it could be raised through the initiatives of the colonial officers on the spot, a patrol was easier to put in place than an expedition. Also, because a patrol was a small imitation of an expedition, it could be more easily dispatched from one Igbo village to another with greater striking and manoeuvring capacity than an expedition.

Given its relative advantages of economy, mobility and tactical combat efficiency, a patrol was deemed to be more expeditious, efficient, and effective than an expedition in the conquest of Igboland, where "numerous small expeditions were necessary"¹⁸ and village after village would have to be subdued, occupied, and pacified on its own merit to be brought under British rule. Thus, after the Aro Expedition of 1901-1902, the British made a tactical shift from launching expeditions to dispatching patrols in the subjugation and pacification of the rest of Igbo hinterland. Among the patrols deployed was the Bende-Onicha Hinterland Patrol of 1905-1906, whose operation we are going to examine.

Operation of Bende-Onicha Hinterland Patrol 1905-1906

The chief objective of this patrol was, according to the official instruction pertaining to it, "to open up and bring generally under control the country lying" between Abakaliki and the southern boundary of Bende and stretching westward to Oguta.¹⁹

The frontiers of the country in question were determined as a horizontal line from Awka to Abakiliki on the north, the Owerri-Bende-Afikpo Road on the south, Awka-Oguta-Owerri Road on the west, and, on the east, a vertical line imagined from Afikpo northward through the Ezza territory to Abakaliki. While keeping in view the broad objective of bringing the country generally under control, the patrol was to take appropriate measures to particularly re-open the Bende-Owerri Road that had been closed and thereby dispose, once and for all, the inhabitants of the territory, through which the road traversed, to the authority of the Southern Nigeria government. The patrol was also required to specifically bring to order the Ahiara and Onicha people who had disallowed the use of their markets by neighbouring towns friendly to the colonial government, and to persuade the Isu, Awo, and Elugu people, who had rejected the authorities of their district commissioners, to reverse their attitude. An additional order, not contained in the manual of instruction, was given to the patrol. The order required the force to deal with the people of Ahiara who, a few days to the commencement of the operation, had brutally murdered a British official, Dr. Stewart, who strayed into their country.²⁰

In line with these requirements, a patrol of 24 British officers, 8 British non-commissioned officers, 711 Nigerian rank and file, 3 political officers, 4 medical officers, two 2.95 inch guns, 6 maxim guns and 280 carriers, was constituted under the command of Major H.M. Trenchard.²¹ The numerical strength of this force was about one quarter of the Aro expeditionary force which, inclusive of 2,334 carriers, stood at 4,107 personnel. The strength was however, about twice higher than that of any other patrol deployed in Igbo hinterland. For operational purposes, Trenchard re-organised this force into two columns. The No.1 column, under his own command, consisted of 7 British officers, 3 British non-commissioned officers, and 325 Nigerian rank and file, 3 political officers, 3 medical officers, two 2.95 inch guns, 3 maxim guns, and 280 carriers. No. 2 column, on the other hand commanded by Captain G.T. Mair, comprised 6 British officers, 2 British non-commissioned officers, 200 Nigerian rank and file, 1 medical officer, and 2 maxim guns. It is conclusive from the

composition of these columns that a part of the force was set aside as reserve.

The No. 1 column advanced in a northwesterly direction from its concentration camp at Bende on 24 November, 1905; while the No. 2 column, which had previously left its base at Awka, took a southeasterly course. Advancing through occasional skirmishes, the two columns eventually converged at a point 25^{1/2} miles northeast of Owerri, near Imo River. On 30 November, 1905, as Trenchard had very recently received the news of Dr. Stewart's death with an additional instruction to conduct a retaliatory operation against the people of Ahiara, he established a base camp on the river for that purpose. The Ahiara operation caused an alteration in the original plan of the area proposed for control, as, owing to it, the control "of the territory lying to the northeast of the Bende-Oka [Awka] Road",²² indicated in the plan, was shelved.

The operation against Ahiara was commenced on 5 December, 1905, when several small columns were dispatched against the town. In spite of the menacing shots from Ahiara snipers, the columns, advancing from the base camps, ravaged Ahiara in most surprising and nocturnal operations against the people in their bush camps, resulting in the killing of many of them. By the last week of February, 1906, the troops had evacuated Ahiara, but not before they had brushed through about 40 miles of territory. However, a detachment of the force was garrisoned in Ahiara to search for and arrest those who were linked with the death of Dr. Stewarts. By mid April, 1906, the search column "had captured all the chief people (280 in number) implicated in the murder of Dr. Stewarts, settled the disturbed area and constructed broad roads through it in different directions".²⁴

While the operation against Ahiara was on, the force was reinforced with 2 British officers, 1 British non-commissioned officer, 122 Nigerian rank and file; and one maxim gun. This increased to three the number of columns advanced on the Awo country in a parallel formation. They concentrated on the vicinities before closing in on Awo, which was eventually occupied against very feeble opposition. While one column was left in Awo to

effect the submission of the people, a second column advanced on 14 March, 1906 against Okporo and Eziana. In this move the column was remarkably resisted at Okporo, where the enemy charged right up to the troops. More profound was the resistance encountered at Ngodo, where the people, armed "with sniper rifles, cap guns and wooden shields, came on in great numbers, but fled after a few rounds from the artillery"²⁵. Meanwhile, the third column made a reverse movement on the territory through which Awo was penetrated in what seemed a mop up operation at Eziana on 14 March, 1906. The next day the entire force, with the exception of the column stationed at Awo, which left on 10 April, 1906, withdrew to the base camp against a miniscule resistance on the way.

The regiment suffered casualties, which included 5 British officers wounded, 1 Nigerian soldier killed, and 58 wounded. However, Major Trenchard and Captain Mair were each awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.

Appraising the Achievements of the Patrol

The building of colonial infrastructure, which trailed the accomplishment of the military operations in the Bende-Onicha hinterland, was an indication that the Bende-Onicha Hinterland patrol had some measure of success in opening up and bringing the Bende-Onicha interior under British control. The entire area was opened, including the Bende-Owerri Road, whose passage had been in contention between users who were deemed to be friendly with the British and those who were resisting them. More roads were cut across barriers and frontiers. The roads afforded both the colonial civil and military authorities "a greater measure of political and military control" over the region.²⁶ The Imo River was cleared for more communal activity along its way.²⁷ The road and river works were carried out by means of commercial labour in accordance with the Roads and Creeks (River) Proclamation of 1903.²⁸ Indeed, the establishment of initial colonial infrastructure and administration went hand in hand with military conquest.²⁹ Thus, as the patrol brought more territory under British control, district officers, civil police, and court officials followed and were

posted where they were needed for purposes of colonial administration and the enforcement of law, peace, and order. Through the instrumentality of its military might, the patrol greatly subdued the hinterland and quickened its acquiescence in British control. By the time it ended operation in April, 1906, the patrol had imposed order in a country engulfed in trepidation, tumult, confusion and conflict since the turn of the 19th century.

However, no sooner had the patrol ended its operations than some of its gains suffered some reversal. As events soon proved, the enthronement of British authority in the Bende-Onicha hinterland by the patrol was but a facile achievement. Igbo resistance was not really fully crushed. Much of what the patrol saw or recorded as submission to British authority was a cloak, put up by the Igbo people to preempt the onslaught of the invaders. The general attitude of the Igbo to the British invaders after the lessons learnt from their initial encounters with the British forces was centred on passivity, subterfuge, and feigned complaisance, which Afigbo has aptly explained in the following passage:

The fact is that after the first few bitter lessons of direct opposition to the British, the people learnt how to deal with the British. On the approach of military columns they would assemble in their market places with music and dancing as well as with food and water for the troops. The white political officer and the troops would enjoy the 'wild' dancing and singing, pay for the livestock and water and pass on to the next village convinced that the people in question had learnt their lesson. But as soon as this happened the latter would return to the same attitude of defiance convinced that their medicine men had successfully blindfolded the white men.³⁰

In the circumstance, many Igbo communities continued to resist British presence even after they had surrendered to British authority. Johnson Asiegbu notes that "between 1908 and 1918 further conflicts between the various communities in Mbaise and

the local British administration arose over the establishment or imposition of the native court, especially at Nguru and Ahiara.³¹ Again in 1914, the people of Onicha-Mbaise wrote a petition to the colonial government, requesting the reopening of their Afor Market, whose sitting the government had prohibited since 1905. In 1916, after waiting in vain for response from the government, the people decided to clear the Afor Market place, which had been overgrown with bush, while still awaiting government response.³² For this singular act, the colonial government sent another patrol, known as the Nguru Patrol, to deal with the situation in November, 1916.³³

The patrol operated against the Onicha-Mbaise people and their immediate surrounding villages in Owerri Division and Bende Province up to 1918. In his study of the Eastern provinces under colonial rule, Afigbo further indicates that from 1908 to 1917, scores and scores of military units were dispatched in Igboland to subdue villages which still demonstrated that they were independent of the colonial government, and that in 1915 alone, 11 small expeditions were deployed. What was more, "by 1917 troops of the protectorate were still marching up and down Igboland conquering violent, and overawing passive resisters."³⁴ Isichei also states that "the years from 1905 to 1914 were crowded with incidents of individual hostility" in Ikwo against the British.³⁵ She further notes that the resistance of the Ezza, who were neighbours to the Ikwo, was not crushed until 1918.³⁶

It is evident, from the foregoing, that the Bende-Onicha Hinterland Patrol fell short of expectation in the realisation of its avowed objectives. It can be said that the bestiality and high-handed manner with which the patrol generally conducted its military operation must have incensed the Igbo people against the British. The people's indignation was expressed in the recrudescence of opposition and resistance that spread across the region after 1906, thus warranting the dispatch of another patrol, the Nguru Patrol, to re-do the job that was supposed to have been accomplished by the Bende-Onicha Hinterland Patrol.

Whatever its shortcomings, the Bende-Onicha Hinterland Patrol must be accorded credit for pioneering the conquest and

pacification of the Bende-Onicha interior. It blazed the trail and laid the foundation for the beginning of British colonial administration in the farther interior of Igboland. To this extent, it justified the British tactical shift from the deployment of expeditions to the use of patrols in the subjugation of Igboland.

Conclusion

Despite its early commercial links with the outside world, Igbo hinterland remained insulated from any direct contact with Europeans until its British conquest in the first quarter of the 20th century. Its first direct contact with Europeans came in a manner the Igbo people never imagined or prepared for – the British military conquest.

Even the British who took the initiative of direct military confrontation with the Igbo never fully prepared for it, as they did not sufficiently understand Igboland and how to go about its conquest. Thus, after imagining that Igboland was an Aro empire, which could be collapsed in one tidal military move, they set up an expedition, the Aro Expedition of 1901-1902, against the Aro. After defeating the Aro and occupying Arochukwu, the British discovered that there was no such a thing as an Aro-led Igbo empire. Rather, they realised that there were numerous other Igbo polities or autonomous villages, each of which would require a separate military operation to subdue. It turned out, therefore, that the fall of the Aro was just the beginning of British conquest of Igboland. Faced with this reality, and the need for more mobile and efficient military forces than expeditions, the British made a tactical shift from the use of expeditions to the deployment of patrols in order to combat the numerous Igbo polities to submission.

Among the patrols constituted for that purpose was the Bende-Onicha Hinterland Patrol of 1905-1906. The patrol's area of operation was the Bende-Onicha interior, which extended westward to Oguta. By April, 1906, the patrol had brought the area under British control. But barely two years after the withdrawal of the patrol from the region, the people generally reversed from

British control and made secondary moves to re-gain the loss of their sovereignty.

To check this development, the British dispatched another patrol, the Nguru Patrol, to effect the re-conquest of the truculent villages or communities in the region. This then would mean that the Bende-Onicha Hinterland Patrol did not completely achieve its main objective of bringing the Bende-Onicha interior under firm British control. Otherwise, the Nguru Patrol would not have been dispatched to re-assert British control in the region.

In spite of its lapses, the Bende-Onicha Hinterland Patrol should be credited with the primary conquest of the Bende-Onicha hinterland. It was also the pathfinder for British colonial administration in the region. Its success in this regard vindicated the wisdom in British tactical shift from the use of expeditions to the deployment of patrols in the conquest and pacification of Igboland. Indeed, the use of patrols remained the best tactical option throughout the British conquest of Igboland.

End Notes

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15. CO 445/13, Lugard to Colonial Office, 27 December, 1900. This source conveys, for example, Lord Lugard's request, with reasons, for Colonial Office's approval of an expedition against Kontagora and Bida, to be launched in 1901.
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