

## **The British Conquest of Ebiraland, North Central Nigeria 1886-1917: A Military Interpretation of Sources**

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### **Abstract**

*Since 1999 when democratic governance returned to Nigeria several components of it have been undergoing violent conflicts majorly due to domestic contradictions that have bedeviled the country for long. Kogi Central Senatorial District inhabited mainly by the Ebira people had its share of the violence; indeed, one of the most gruesome in the post 1999 democratic Nigeria. Thus, the need to reinterpret the historical foundation of the current experience. This can only be taken from the British invasion of the area in the late 19th Century. The bid to conquer Ebiraland by the British began in 1860 when the British firm, the National African Company, had become firmly established in the Niger-Benue Confluence area with its headquarters in Lokoja. The British conquest when it finally came in 1903 was gruesome and brutal. It was, simply put, militaristic. Yet as dramatic as the conquest was pursued, it was typically inconclusive, because the Ebira put up resistance to the intervention in their geo-polity for more than one and half decades, marking it out as one of the polities where the British had a difficult task in establishing an ubiquitous colonial control and despotic political economy. This study is therefore about the military manner in which the British conquered Ebiraland, the military manner in which the people resisted the conquest, and indeed how the phenomenon laid the foundation of militarism in the socio-political milieu and material contestations in the area. A study of this kind gives colour to the diversity in the African conquest by the colonialists and the people's resistance to the imposition, especially as it hopes to x-ray the experience of a policy that had no centralized chain of command during the pre-colonial era, or what is generally known in African history as a non-centralized political system. The colour would become more appreciated as the study intends to carry out this survey from the purview of military interpretation of sources away from the usual simplistic and casual examination of economic and socio-political imperatives and ramifications. The outcome will benefit both students and scholars of colonialism, military researchers, political scientists and sociologists. Public administrators, policy makers and military strategists will also find the outcome of this research useful.*

**Key Words:** Colonialism, militarism, conquest, resistance, truculent, independence

### **Introduction**

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the British government began to establish and maintain a colonial state in Nigeria. This ambition which was knitted in exploitation and civilization propagation involved some long processes. It was eventually realized through the employment of carefully designed but dubious measures. As materialistic and civilizational as the motives were, it was expected therefore as it did happen that colonialism was achieved via military imposition, expansion and consolidation.

In the Nigerian areas, resistance and opposition were also military and confrontational though ineffective for many reasons beyond the scope of this work. The bid to conquer Epiraland, like other pre-colonial independent states and principalities in what later became the Northern provinces effectively began in 1860 when the British firm, the National African Company, had become firmly established in the Niger-Benue Confluence area with headquarters at Lokoja. As their well-known stock-in-trade, the British conquest was decisive and brutal. Yet as dramatic as the conquest was pursued, it was typically inconclusive, because the Ebira put up resistance to the intervention in their geo-polity for more than one and half decades, marking it out as one of the polities where the British had a difficult task in establishing an ubiquitous political control and despotic socio-economic order.

A study of this kind gives colour to the diversity in the African conquest by the colonialists and the people's resistance to the imposition. The efforts of most historians have been concentrated on the large centralized pre-colonial polities like the Sokoto caliphate, Benin empire and the Borno sultanate. This study in contrast, brings to the fore the experience of a polity that though organized, had no centralized chain of command during the pre-colonial era, or what has been wrongly termed segmentary society.

Secondly and more importantly, this study is a re-interpretation of sources from military perspective. In the past, scholars of British rule in Nigeria were often looked at the phenomenon simplistically from economic and socio-political imperatives, but the deep rooted nature and the insidiously corrosive manner of the consequences of the British imposition and governance have called for a fresher review of historical materials from military angle. This outcome is hoped to benefit both students and scholars of colonialism among historians, political scientists, sociologists and public administrators.

In Epiraland, which is almost the modern Kogi Central Senatorial District of Kogi State of Nigeria, socio-political violent crises since the colonial era, including recent ones when democracy was returned to Nigeria (1999-2009) could be remotely traced in part to the nature and style of the British invasion and rulership of the area during the period between 1903 and 1960. In essence, while this research hopes to add to the existing literature on the subject matter, it practically intends to complement productively the scientific story of this most debated historical phenomenon. Students and scholars are better equipped with a comprehensive and multidimensional documentation.

### ***Human Geography of the Study area***

Before venturing into the main gist of the work, it is pertinent to identify and situate the study area geographically and socio-politically. The Ebira, who constitutes the focus of this research, are the people of Okene, Okehi, Adavi and Ajaokuta local government areas of Kogi State. The word "Ebira" refers to the people themselves, their language and their geographical location. Using the name of the most popular town of the land, we may refer to them as Ebira Okene. Other Ebira groups are Ebira Igu in Kogi and Koton Karfi local government areas of Kogi State.

Ebira Toto and Umaisha of Nassarawa (Toto) local government area of Nassarawa State, Ebira Mozum of Bassa local government area of Kogi State, and Ebira Etuno of Igarra District of Akoko-Edo local government area of Edo State. Other Ebira are to be found in Abaji in the Federal Capital Territory and Agatu in Benue State, all in Nigeria. According to Greenberg's classification of African Languages, Ebira speakers belong to the Kwa group of the Niger-Congo family, which also comprises the Nupe, Gbari and Gade (Greenberg 1966). But Hoffman and Bendor-Samuel in their studies of Nigerian languages set up Ebira as a separate entity (Adiva 1985:56-57). Recent in depth research indicates that the Ebira have been part and parcel of what is now generally known as Central Nigeria since 1000 BC (Ohiare 1988).

Studying the various groups in the Niger-Benue Confluence area using historico-linguistic tools, historians rely on its branches like genetic classification, dialectology and glottochronology in which historical time is a core tool of analysis. Though Greenberg attempted to resolve the problem of languages of the Niger-Benue Confluence area; recent historical research by Benneth, Stark, Blench, Williamson and others confirm the antiquity of the human population in the region. They contend that by 4000 B.C, the Benue-Congo proto-language from which most of the languages spoken in this area evolved had already developed. These studies derive Ebira language from the Nupoid group (also called Niger-Kaduna) of languages including Nupe, Gwari and Gade. The Nupoid, according to historical jurists took off from a proto-language described as the Benue-Congo from which other language groups which include the Platoid group also evolved (Benneth 1972, Stark 1992, Williamson 1967).

In terms of archaeology, stone implements recovered by Soper, Davies and Shaw from the Ebira zone, extending from Keffi Nassarawa-Izom westwards to Jebba and further upstream, have been associated with the Sangoan assemblage. The reading from this implements indicates that man have lived in this area as far back as more than forty five thousand years ago. The Ebira zone is also prominent in the pre-historic civilization of the Iron Age generally characterized in Central Nigeria as epitomized by Nok Culture. Even recently in the late last century, the iron-working site of Ife-Ijumu (Kogi State, Nigeria) has been dated to 260 B.C. (Ohiare 1988, Williamson 1967, Beneth 1972). Thus, part of the conclusions that can be derived from all these is that the Ebira as a group existed for a long time in locations within Central Nigeria not too far from where they are located presently.

The Ebira Okene occupy the hilly stretch of land southwest of the Niger-Benue confluence area and share boundaries with the Yoruba-speaking people of Akoko, Owe and Ijumu to the west; the various Akoko-Edo people to the south and south west; the Hausa, Nupe and Ebira groups at Lokoja to the north; and the River Niger to the east. A prominent physical feature of Ebiraland is the conspicuous presence of dissected hills and metaphoric rocks. In addition there are blocks of Metaphoric rocks which enveloped the greater part of the land. Most of the hills rise to a peak of 2000ft and suggested that they probably represent the remnants of an old post of Goindowana pediplain (Clayton 1957).

African laterite and plain which embraces the greater part of Ihima, Okengwe and Ageva are characterized by extensive undulating plains (1200-1400ft). They are studded with smooth rounded rocks of inselbergs. According to Omorua, an anthropologist who conducted extensive field work in the area in the third quarter of the last century, laterite soils are derived from metaphoric rocks of grayish-buff (18 inches) and clayed pan which overlay vascular iron stone (Omorua 1959:1). The depth of the soil varies; ranging from two to three feet to about three inches where the ironstone approaches the surface, as in the Itakpe hills in Adavi district.

There is also the Niger literic plain forming a lower terrace below the higher plains. This is conspicuous in Ajaokuta, Eganyi, Ebiya and part of Adavi in the north and north-east of Ebiraland. Another very important feature is the rim from the highland. This escarpment which extends to Ihima, Eika and part of Ajaokuta widens into a broad zone of dissected hills. The soil formations of the rims are mostly skeletal, consisting of pale brown and orange brown sands and grits. The escarpment contains quartz stones interspersed with pockets of deeper sand wash (Omorua 1959:1-2)

The implications of these features in the historical past and contemporary times are many and diverse. The nature of the topography which is shaped by climatic cycles has affected the relief pattern of Ebiraland. The relief marked out of the dissected peaks with knife-edged ridge, and steep v-shaped valleys. Valleys of this type occur in Okene, Okengwe and Eika towns. Apart from exerting much influence on the climate, the features in part provided security and protection for the ancient Ebira. Thus they resisted external incursions into their geo-polity as in the case of the *Ajinomh jihadist* wars in the 1880s discussed elsewhere (Okene 1990:26-30). Indeed, topography influenced the Ebira sense of militarism.

Though essentially a peaceful and highly cultured polity, the Ebira's feeling of security in the hills, caves and blocks of dissected mountains instilled beauty, valour and courage in an average citizen. The Ebira polity was not always afraid to take on aggressors and cross boundary incursions. Furthermore, the features influenced the pattern of the people's technical know-how as it relates to the production of crafts like pottery, dyeing and blacksmithing and of the people instruments of production and destruction such as hoes, cutlasses, spears and bows and arrows. The Ebira were famous in Central Nigeria for the production of these crafts (Barth 1990:510-515; Jones 1969:38). In contemporary times, these features served as a reservoir of the iron-ore deposit now discovered in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century in large quantity in some hills of the land. Itakpe hill in Adavi district alone has an iron-ore deposit estimated at 47 million tons, and above and of more than 60 per cent iron content (Okene 1995:37).

This is meant to provide raw material for the Ajaokuta Iron and Steel industry set up by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Other minerals to be found in substantial commercial quantities in Ebira include marble, limestone, copper, chalk and mica.

### ***Economic and Political Organizations on the Eve of the British Occupation***

The nature of the physical environment influenced not only the land tenure system but also agricultural practices which in fact were the main determination of the people's economy. Agricultural production was geared towards both domestic consumption and exchange. Almost every household, which was the basic unit of production, was involved in farming. Over time the people through production efficiency, division of labour and specialization took advantage of both internal and external economies of scale. By early 19<sup>th</sup> century, realizing its potentialities, the Okengwe district for instance, specialized in the production of beniseed which it traded and exchanged with the groundnuts, the production of which Adavi clan-groups and communities in the immediate north of the land had also become specialized (Okene 1995:79-84).

Apart from fishing and hunting, which complemented farming, the Ebira economy also to a remarkable level, depended on local industries and craft production like palm oil, animal husbandry, iron technology and blacksmithing, textile dyeing, wood carving and basket, mat and raffia weaving. Because of its unique nature, the textiles industry requires a brief discussion. Cotton, the main raw material of the industry, is a crop of antiquity with the Ebira. The Ebira had migrated with the crop and with the knowledge of its production to their present location, the soil of which was fortunately very favourable for its commercial cultivation. An exclusively female preserve, the distinct technique employed by the Ebira textiles producers was vertically mounted single loom system, locally called *Oguntoro*.

According to Brown (1970:60), Ralph Willis (1972:51), Picton and Mack (1979: 17,82). The Ebira cloth weaving had undergone series of styles, patterning and specialization that made it excellent and one of the best in the Western Sudan before the advent of the British rule. In the same vein, Henry Barth noted in 1851 that Ebira woven cloth favourably rivaled those of other areas in terms of pattern, colour, decoration and texture. Indeed, Barth did observe the superiority of the Ebira woven cloth compare to other regions in the Kurmi International Market, Kano when he visited the City during the same period (Bath 1990:511).

Indeed, during the Nigerian Civil War when the Nigerian Army ran short of imported textile materials, the Ebira textile and woven cloth came to the rescue. According to Ahmadu Buruja Adoke who served as a War Correspondence with Second Division of the Nigerian Army commanded by Colonel Murtala Muhammad, Ebira cloth and textile stuff were patronized by the Military to produce Army belts and covering material. The Federal Government of Nigeria was to later patronised the Ebira woven cloth in the immediate post Civil war Nigeria era (Suberu 2008:92-93).

Generally speaking, the settlement pattern of the Ebira in their present location was largely determined by the topography of the area and their migrational groupings. They settled in highly knitted related families, kindreds, clans and clan-groups on several hill tops which include Eikoku-Okenegwe, Okehi, Ukpai and Okerekere. The socio-political institution which became consolidated over time were primarily geared towards the maintenance of discipline, social harmony and peace which were essential ingredients for social relations and economic progress within Ebira ecological zone and in the people's diplomatic relations with other polities. The basis of political organizations of the Ebira started from the family. As the smallest unit, the family consisted of the father, wives, children and grand children. The unit lived in a specially designed *Ohuoje* (compound) while the *Ovovu* (outer compound), was the exclusive use of other people under the custody of the family. These included the family slaves, war or famine refugees on asylum and family labourers. The oldest surviving male was the head of the family. He personified the cultural, clannish and economic heritages as the representative of the ancestors in the family.

Several families who believed they were patrilineally related by blood formed the next political unit of lineage, *abara*. The head was the oldest surviving male of the lineage. Though, his decision was not final as he had to consult with the head of the families that made up the lineage, the chief had prerogative power over the economic activities of the lineage. The lineage land and relics were vested on him and the sylvan produce of the lineage were gathered in his palace annually for distribution to the various member families based on the ancestral law of age grade. Several lineages have survived to the present. These include *Etumi*, *Avi*, *Adovosi*, *Egiri* and *Ogagu*. The clan was the next political unit of the Ebira of this study. Though third in the strata, the clan was the main and most sensitive of all the political units. Each clan had both a prefix in its name of either *Ozi* (i.e children of) or *Ani* (i.e the people of) and a totemic symbol indicating either a sacred object or an animal attached to their clan name.

In the past, a clan name and a totemic eulogy served as identification marks for the various migrational groups or parties. In the same vein totemic eulogies and prefixes could be historically used to trace how clans migrated, evolved and developed over the period of time. The head of each of the clans, many of which have also survived to the present was the oldest surviving male. His power was nominal as he administered through consultation. Nevertheless, he was considered the representative of the ancestors in the clan. He therefore executed sanctions and controls over its members. These were thought to emanate from the ancestors who watched over the affairs of the people from the world of the ancestral spirits.

The largest socio-political unit among the Ebira was the clan-group locally called *Ekura*. About six of such clan-groups survive to the present. They are *Okengwe, Okehi, Adavi, Eika, Ihima, and Eganyi*. Though each was self autonomous, they however related on issues of common concern. The head of each was Chief-Priest, *Ohinoy-ete*. Each group was made up of several clans believed to have distant patrilineal blood ties. For instance, the Okengwe group comprised of *Akuta, Ehimozoko, Avi, Esusu, Ogu, Asuwe, Omoye, Omovi, Eira and Adobe*. The Chief-Priest consulted the heads of the clans on any serious matter affecting the group. In addition, he administered justice in conjunction with his deputy, *Ohireba*, and the council of elders of the group.

Despite the obvious limitation to his authority, the Chief- Priest was the highest spiritual and socio-political head of the clan-group. He was believed to have a daily communication with the ancestors. He ministered to, and indeed mustered the earth shrine to solicit for fertility, adequate rainfall and good harvest. He exercised sanctions and ensured control, discipline, and compliance with the societal norms and rules. He was vested with the interpretation of the ancient ancestral laws through divination, sacrifices, exposure, knowledge and experience. Through these, the six Chief-Priests in close cooperation, consultation and communion with one another were able to administer justice and maintain the society of Ebira in relative social harmony uptill the eve of the British invasion in 1903.

### ***The British Interest in Northern Nigeria***

The British and indeed the European contact with the various groups in Northern Nigeria dates back to the early exploration across the Sahara Desert. Through trading, particularly the trans-Sahara trade, the British became aware of some of the polities of Northern Nigeria. This was infact a reason for the dispatch of the various expeditions and voyages of exploration. But it was only in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that the British became more interested in developing a close commercial relationship with the Niger-Benue territory where their traders had been operating. By the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British firm, the National African Company (NAC), had outflanked other European competitors in the Niger-Benue trade (Blindloss & Co. 1968:297).

In fact, so intense were the rivalry, jealousy and suspicions among the competitive commercial European firms over acquisition of special territorial concessions in Africa that the Berlin West African Conference was convened to settle issues and to design new rules of acquisition game. The Conference, which took place from November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1884 to February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1885 tried to bring some forms of discipline and sanity to a situation that looked as though it might rapidly get out of hand. With no African present, the rules for the partition of West Africa into units that were to become the basis of modern nations were determined.

Understandably, geographical adjustment and allocation took into consideration the guidelines that had been set by the activities of European traders, missionaries and administrators in the eighty-old years since the official abolition of slave trade (Crowther 1976:63). With her firms already established in part of the region, what later becomes Northern Nigeria was assigned to Britain under the terms of the Berlin Conference. Convinced by the prospect of commercial and material gain in the Niger-Benue trade and indeed the entire Northern Nigeria, the British Government began to encourage its trading firm to consolidate its control over the region.

Through dubious treaties with some of the indigenous chiefs and community leaders, the company, which had by 1886 metamorphosed into the Royal Niger Company (RNC), obtained a charter to administer the territories claimed. In an apparent attempt to consolidate its hold on the trade of the region, to ward off other European rivals and to foist its civilization on the area, the company commenced military conquest of Northern Nigeria, beginning with the states bordering the Niger-Benue confluence area. This marked the end of the independence of the indigenous communities of the region. By 1900, when Lugard formally took control of British affairs in Northern Nigeria, a large number of polities, especially in the Niger-Benue confluence area, had been incorporated into the British Empire through military highhandedness. These included Ibi, Donga (1885), Bida, Ilorin (1897) and Wase (1898).

### ***The British conquest of Ebiraland***

The situation which finally culminated in the forceful occupation of Ebiraland in 1903 by the British imperial power began to unfold when in 1886 Goldie secured the seal of the British Privy Council for his company to become the Royal Niger Company (Suleiman 1992:86-95). During the same period, Lokoja, a confluence town bordering Ebira which had nevertheless been the abode of the various British officials became strengthened as the operational military base of the company, and it was here that the violent conquest of other areas of the North was to be organized and executed. However, this was not to be the first time an organized invasion was plotted against the Ebira. Between 1865 and 1880, the Ebira had successfully engaged the Sokoto jihadists who sought to make them vassals of the Caliphate conglomerate. For several reasons which are beyond the scope of this research, the *Ajinomoh* jihadists as the Sokoto jihad organized from Ilorin and Bida against Ebiraland was called by the people, were engaged and severally forced to retreat.

Despite the considerable obstruction caused by the Jihadist activities in the land, the Ebira of Okene, Eganyi and Eika Ohizeni, principal towns of Ebiraland which were not so much devastated by the *Ajinomoh* Jihadists, carried on their trade and commercial transactions with the Royal Niger Company in Lokoja and Ajaokuta. Trading in articles like palm oil and kernels, cotton and beniseed, which were much needed by British firms, and profiting from the favourable terms of trade, the Royal Niger Company soon carved out Ebiraland in 1890 as falling within the company's territorial jurisdiction (NAK. Lokoprof, 213). But the presence of the Ilorin and Bida Jihadists in the territories immediately bordering Lokoja to the south and north to RNC, persistently jeopardized and offset the free flow of trade and the commercial system.

This offset was unacceptable to the Royal Niger Company which opportunistic economic glee was unquenchable. The company quickly set up a fort in Kabba, adjacent to Ebiraland to the west, under Captain Turner, an officer of the Royal Niger Constabulary (Willis 1972:51). The fort served as a military base and raw material collection centre. Hiding under the pretext of ensuring free movement of trade in the region, the Royal Niger Company annexed Bida and Ilorin in 1898. The conquest of these two areas obviously should be seen within the general context of British imperialism and indeed the militarisation of the colonial expropriation and annexation of areas of Northern region.

The collapse of Bida and Ilorin in the face of the Royal Niger Company's superior tactics, strategy and mercenaries was greeted with marked apprehension and consternation in Ebiraland. Like their encounter with the *Ajinomoh* Jihadists, the Ebira thought they would be able to fight and protect their territorial integrity from the company's onslaught and imposition of its own terms of trade. The opening up of the interior from Lokoja was a fundamental factor in the economic aggregation of the British. Opening up the interior, the British felt, was the only way they could guarantee constant and cheap supply of raw materials and other products. Eventually when Frederick Lugard took over from the Royal Niger Company in 1900 as a commissioned agent of the British administration in Northern Nigeria, the question of physical occupation of the interior areas and linking them up directly with the maritime business was uppermost in his programmes.

It is thus not surprising and indeed due to deliberate design, that in the same year Lugard sent two of his assistants, Captain Beddoes and Lieutenant Grant with eight rank and files, to Ebiraland to negotiate the ceding of the land to the British (Willis 1972:47). However, the mission of Captain Beddoes and Company was not successful as the Ohindase Avogude Okomanyi refused to grant the British their request. As the most powerful clan-group chief of the land at the time, Avogude of the Okengwe clan-group insisted on equal terms of commerce and reciprocal civilization relationship with the British.

He nevertheless promised them, on behalf of the Ebira people, free access to trade and reciprocal social relations (Aviniwa, Ihima, Eku 1994). In addition, Avogude, a patriarch, introduced Beddoes and his team to some of the leading men of Ebira. They included Agidi Ukako, Owudah Adidi, Atta Omadivi, Achegidi Okino, Agbo, Echimakere Ihima and Adai Oricha. The leading men of Ebira were divided as to what should be the Ebira relationship with the British. While Achegido Okino, Agbo, Oricha and the delegates from Ihima and Eika advocated frontal confrontation and therefore took up an uncompromising stand against the British, Atta Omadivi, Owudah Adidi, Akpata Ihima and company, realizing what could be achieved in terms of material and social influences from the new order, decided to compromise, and invariably made a deal with the British (Badamasuyi, Onipe, Atta).



While the anti-British elements saw the stand of Omadivi and company as a sell out. Atta Omadivi and company were said to have used their *eva*, divination and through their experience in *Ako* raiding business discovered early enough the military strength of the British and therefore the futility of resistance (Eku, Atta, Onipe). The anti-British elements nevertheless, won the day. In their abhorrence of, and disdain for the alien negotiators they attacked Captain Beddoes' team and forced them to retreat to their fort in Kabba. In the same vein, the group also

With the conquest of Ebiraland, the British quickly consigned it into a district of Kabba Division under the supervision of O. Howard and Malcolm. The two British officers immediately "recognized" all the Ebira notables that had conspired with them in the occupation of Ebiraland. They included, understandably, Atta Omadivi, as the "District "Head" of Ebiraland, and Akpata Ihima, Owudah Adidi and in 1910 Ozigizigi Opoh as "Headmen" of Ihima, Eika and Obehira respectively.

### ***Resistance to the Establishment of British Administration and Economic Regime***

Though the British had conquered Ebiraland in 1903 through a naked show of power characterized by brutality and coercion, by 1916 it was yet to evolve a colonially envisaged centralized political economy in the area. This was due to several reasons. The fundamental factor should be located in part in the determination of the Ebira not to recognize the alien system. The naked show of power of May 1903 had only engendered social disorderliness and political disequilibrium in which according to Mr. Greaves, the then Division Officer, (D.O.) each segment of the social system became suspicious of other segments and of the British invaders. Mr. Greaves captured the mood of this period when he noted that "not each community, not each district, or town but each family was a law to itself" (NAK Lokoprof 16).

When Frederick Lugard took charge of colonial affairs in the Northern Provinces in 1900, he formed the West African Frontier Forces (WAFF) out of the existing constabularies. Various detachments of WAFF were ultimately engaged in suppressing revolts of the Ebira people. Thus one detachment of the WAFF was made to patrol Ebiraland up to the Afanmai area of the present Edo State. In addition, the British constantly sent military and police escorts either to secure free traffic for its touring officers or to suppress uprisings (NAK, Lokoprof 14). The presence of such security personnel was abhorred to say the least, and consequently resisted by the people for some time.

This became significant when the British imposed their alien taxation in 1904 and insisted that such taxes be paid in British sterling from 1909 (NAK, SN P4636). From then onward, the question of taxation hardened the people the more to resist British rule. In other words, the issue of taxation became knitted with resentment necessitating riots and uprisings against alien occupation. Also the British had used excessive military method to occupy Ebiraland, they were unable to hold fort. The methods of Ebira resistance were diverse and knitted in historical milieu. The various *ekura* organized themselves independently. The anti-British elements in each community as Oganinana, Okengwen, Okene, Eganyi, Utenyi- Ajaokuta identified themselves and came as distinct district military groups to safeguard their independence. In addition, they constantly raided into enemy lines (i.e British soldiers). This was particularly effective during the night. The Ebira anti-British resistance also widely made use of espionage and spies camouflaged into the British enemy lines and reported what they saw to the main groups.

Well, as time went by, informants of the British mercenaries were able to fish out spies to the invaders. According to Aviniwa, such spies were uncovered in Eganyi by the British African soldiers stationed in the market. Such uncovered spies were coerced to disclose the hiding places and *modus operandi* and *vivendi* of the resistance groups. The abodes of the resistance groups were usually at the hill tops and caves of mountains which as analysed above characterized the climatic environments and topographical physics of Ebira. However, the British were convinced invaders and determined conquerors. In addition, the British had superior weapons, testable tactics and strategies.

Moreso, their soldiers were better trained and directed by mostly superior and experienced officers who were employed and paid to do the job. As in most occupied areas, the British troops, as put succinctly by Ashafa (2009:61) harassed, demoralized and paralised resistance with the use of artillery firing some shots, particularly at night. Infact just a shot by the British Maxim gun burned cluster of houses at Okeneba, a former capital of Okene in the 1903 invasion. The British also had constant supplies of weapons, logistics and support of well-focused and ambitious local notables. All these secured them success.

### *Chronicles of Resistance*

A good example of Ebira resistance to British hegemony was the Okene riot of 1903. The town had just been made the second headquarters (after Kabba town) of Kabba Division under Mr Groom as officer in charge. Anti-British elements armed with dangerous weapons of poisoned arrows and cutlasses drove Mr Groom away from their land. The British in Lokoja had to send an escort of thirty soldiers under M.A Blackwood in order to reopen Okene (Willis 1972:47). In fact, the Ebira also attacked Blackwood's escort, which resulted in a bloody encounter between the two parties. It was only when Lt Shott reinforced the first group with additional fifty soldiers that Okene people were defeated.

At the same period, Mr Lang with armed policemen organized a military campaign against Adavi-Odu for what the British subjectively called their "truculence". In Eika where the village head, Owudah Adidi, lost control, the people in 1910 attacked five police constables with poisoned arrows and seized their handcuffs. The police retaliation was brutal and decisive. They raided the village in the middle of the night burning several homes and homesteads to recover their lost items (NAK Lokoprof 16).

Despite the persistence of Ebira revolts against the British and their alien system, and the conviction of the latter that the former were "timid" and "suspicious of changes", the British could not abandon Ebiraland. This was because, according to M.A. Blackwood, the then A.D.O., "the people are good agriculturalists and traders" (NAK Lokoprof 23). When the First World War broke out in 1914, the various districts and villages of the land used the opportunity to throw off the yoke of British imperialism by refusing to pay taxes. The understanding of the Ebira of Ohizenyi, Ipaku, Eganyi and Ikuehi villages was that with the outbreak of the war, the British would pack their loads and leave. Local town criers quickly rallied round, mustering enough will and courage to announce to the people to disregard British taxes.

Meetings, mostly nocturnal, were held. Open revolts were ordered by local champions and disgruntled clan heads against British imposition and the then emerging colonial despotism. The British acted quickly by arresting those they were able to lay their hands among the leaders of the uprisings (NAK Lokoprof 23). In 1919, Mr Greaves, the Resident of Kabba province, was worried about the constant complaints of the Ebira of Ihima, Kuroko and Eganyi areas as to why "should they pay taxes here when they don't pay in Southern protectorates" (NAK Lokoprof 17).

Meanwhile, throughout 1914, there were riots, protests or what the official reports termed "general unrest" in Adavi district (NAK Lokoprof 24). At Nagazi, a prominent village of the district, the people sang in the market places to the effect that there were to be no more taxes for the British. But more worrying and disturbing to the British was the mobility of powerful Okengwe notables dubbed by the British as "trouble makers" and "truculent elements", which enabled them to move from their district to others to mobilize the people against British governance. The British soon reasoned that the only way to deter the Ebira from uprisings was to station the armed police forces on the land permanently. This move started in August 1915 when the Kabba divisional police headquarters was transferred from Kabba to Okene. It was finally achieved in mid 1916 when the last batches of policemen were moved to Okene.

What seems to be the last main uprising of the people against the annexation of their land by aliens came in November 1960. This month about thirteen years after the British had physically occupied Ebiraland, Major Ellias, an Assistant Commissioner of Police, had to use force against the people of Eganyi when they declared their district independent of British rule; this was quickly followed by those of Eika Ohizenyi, Ihima (Ogboro), Adavi-Odu and other smaller settlements (NAK Lokoprof 23, 24).

The British believed that these people were under the influence of the Okengwe group whose leaders included Okino, Omaku, Ogagu Eire and Onipe. It is not surprising that the British accused the Okengwe group of leading the Ebira against the colonial order. It should be mentioned here that by 1850 the Okengwe group had emerged as the torchbearer of the entire Ebira people. Its principal town, Okene, had also developed as the leading town of the land. Several factors account for this development. The first was that one of the most powerful clan-group chiefs of the Okengwe, Ohindase Avogude Okomanyi, resided and died in Okene. Unlike his predecessors, Avogude moved the seat of the throne at coronation from the main Okengwe town to Okene. As a powerful chief believed to have magical powers, his relocation to Okene attracted people not only from the Okengwe group but also from the other groups to Okene.



So famous and influential was Ohindase Obanyi, as he was generally called to distinguish him from his predecessors that all the Ebira groups had rallied round him during the Jihadist incursion. Secondly, during the Jihadist war in Ebira, the Okengwe Generals led by Ohindase not only prevented the Jihadists from entering into the district, but they also led the various military groups that remarkably thwarted the efforts of the Jihadists in other parts of Ebiraland.

As the war raged on, the enterprising Okengwe farmers and traders like their counterparts in Eganyi carried on their economic activities with minimum interruption. Two advantages could be noticed here. As a “safe heaven”, the Ebira of other clan-groups and Ebira neighbours like the Owe, Imorga, Ogori, Igbede and Afanmai migrated to Okene. This led to increase population necessary for both the growth of ideas and economic system. The second advantage was that the Okene people were able to carry on their trade and other commercial activities with other Ebira, their neighbours and the Royal Niger Company (RNC) at Lokoja and Ajaokuta. They became wealthier than other Ebira groups. Even in the contemporary time, most non-Okengwe groups and individuals who have become either politically or financially important have done so largely through Okene.

Thus, the Okengwe group had become socially and economically sophisticated enough to know the evil of alien occupation. The British charge of their spearheading the Ebira resistance movements and revolts should be viewed from these perspectives. Meanwhile, the concentration of the police in Okene and the constant harassment of the people helped to secure submission of the Ebira to the British. Since the policemen were mandated to pursue offenders down into the villages and the hinterland, the Ebira soon came to appreciate the power and strength of the new order. Put simply, the overwhelming presence of security personnel traumatized the people and ultimately coerced them into submission especially as the fighters had no place to run for cover.

The British was everywhere in Kabba, Lokoja, Ajaokuta and Afanmai. The report of the A.D.O. on this matter is valid. It states that, “the stationing of police at Okene has had a very salutary effect on Ebira...the truculents have nowhere to go...” (NAK Lokoprof 23). Apart from the people’s refusal to recognize the British order in Ebira as discussed above, two other factors are important in explaining the inability of the British to establish an organized political economy between 1903 and 1916. The early British administrative policy was predicated on the false assumption that every polity in the Northern region was either centralized or at least had tasted the hierarchical suzerainty of the Sokoto Caliphate. The consequence of this assumption was that almost all ordinances and decrees of governance were formulated to suit the emirate system (NAK Lokoprof 18).

Thus until early 1916, the British did not have any organized policy of administration for the non centralized states of Northern provinces. In addition, the caliber of the British agent in Okene also prevented the British from acting spontaneously on the serious matter of governance. Though he had been well-known to the people as courageous before 1903, Atta Omadivi being a British loyal ally was not recognized beyond his immediate locality, Okene. Other district chiefs and village heads, particularly those of Eika, Ihima, Adidi and Akpata respectively, considered themselves of equal status in British service with Omadivi, and therefore refused to recognize his central role. They dealt with the British political officer directly.

The British appointed Omadivi, because, according to them, “he had always been most loyal to the government” (NAK Lokoprof 25). But more poignantly, by 1916 Omadivi, who was about 120 years old, had become increasingly “unsuitable to take active control of the Ebira” (NAK Lokoprof 25). The incapacitation of Omadivi did not only slow down activities in Ebiraland, it in fact, hampered the effective British colonial governance in the area. In January 1917, Atta Omadivi died and the British were set to reorganize its administration in Ebiraland. Ohindase Adano was appointed as the D.H. of Ebira although the British did not trust him; they had to nevertheless, appoint him the District Head of Ebira because, according to J.C Walker, the A.D.O. “he had always been promised since 1902 that he shall be made the D.H” (NAK Lokoprof 15).

Apart from the credibility question placed over his head by the British, Adano was not accepted by the chiefs of the remaining clan-groups, especially Obobanyi, Adeika and Asema of Ihima, Eika and Adavi respectively, who felt that one of the clan-group chiefs was being imposed on them. It was therefore easy for the colonial government to find excuses to dismiss him in November of the same year for what they termed administrative and judicial corruption. In November 1917 the British appointed Ibrahim Ohuruoiza, later known as Atta Ibrahim, as the D.H. of Ebira Native Authority. A number of factors that go beyond the scope of this paper were responsible for the appointment (Okene 1990:130,133).

One point worth mentioning is that with this appointment, the British began to put Ebiraland on an organized polity which as discussed above had been very much lacking. The colonial authority began to fashion what they considered a sound colonial economy in which the Native Treasury (N.T) was central as an organ of colonial exploitation.

Atta Ibrahim was youthful (about thirty years old), energetic, intelligent and a loyal ally of the British colonial administration. He had been tested and trusted in the various services as an interpreter and tax collector to the British before this appointment (Eku, Atta, Onipe: NAK Lokoprof 25). Relying on the coercive apparatus of the British, which included the police, prison and N.A Courts, Atta Ibrahim was powerful and influential. He was also overzealous. Atta's N.A was the kind in which the chief was the focal point through which the orders and wishes of the British were seen to have emanated. His central power was accentuated in the very early period of his reign when in the same year of his installation the British started to implement all the judicial and fiscal ordinances which gave the chief a sweeping dictatorial status.

So enormous was the position conferred on him that the Atta was authorised to imprison any person whose activities he considered a threat to the N.A without recourse to even the highly criticized established colonial judiciary processes (Okene 1998:123/131). In essence, Atta Ibrahim like all local agents of the British administration benefited from the despotic nature of the colonial establishment. It should also be stated here that with the coming of Atta Ibrahim, sustained opposition to British occupation of the land ended and a new method of resistance was initiated. However, this is outside the scope of this study.

### **Conclusion**

The general pattern used by the British to dominate Northern Nigeria was military conquest. In some areas, conquests were preceded by fictitious signing of agreements and treaties. But within the general pattern of piecemeal conquest were other noticeable styles necessitated by the local peculiarities of the concerned polity. While in the centralized states, especially the former emirates of the Sokoto Caliphate like Kontagora, Zaria, Bauchi and Kano, a devastating singular military onslaught was enough to coerce the polities into submission, in Ebiraland the British had to contend with incessant and persistent opposition which lasted a decade and half.

While the established centralized and hierarchical administrative structures of, for instance, Zaria and Kano enabled the British to instantly extend their political control, the lack of a centralized order of command and chains of control in Ebiraland before the advent of the British compounded colonial conquest and occupation. Also, in order to resist the British occupation of their land, the Ebira resistance elements ironically used military methods to fight for their interest.

The military style of resistance was thus, instituted in the socio-political milieu of Ebira. Even after the appointment of Atta Ibrahim, a man of enormous courage, achievements and energy, militarism still characterized the mode of Ebira protests. This method featured in Oivo Aremoh crises in 1925-27, 1951 pre-independent protest, 1979 elections violence and the recent political unrests (2001-2009).

In the final analysis, that Ebiraland succumbed to British occupational force could be explained from many angles. The British had superior fire power. Their maxim-guns were the type the Ebira never comprehended. Ebira bows, arrows, machets and clubs were not comparable to the British firearms. The bombardment for example of Okeneba in Okene from the valley of the present *Ireba*, instantly put cluster of houses on fire. The Ebira opposition efforts were also uncoordinated as each group was a distinct military detachment fighting for its community interest and independence.

This was in contrast to the Ebira defence strategy used during the *Ajinomoh* Jihadist war. There were also serious divisions among the leaders, causing serious cleavages which the British favourably exploited. Divide-and-rule was to be stock-in-trade of British administration in Northern provinces and indeed in Nigeria.

Finally, the British had a goal to pursue and were determined to execute their imperialistic agenda. They had made up their minds to establish a colonial state of Northern Nigeria. Ebiraland was a part though an important segment of the larger region.

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