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IBO RESISTANCE TO BRITISH COLONIAL POWER

by Diana M. Rosenberg

"We must fight these men and drive them from the land."

"It is already too late," said Obierika sadly. "Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government. If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power? They would go to Umuru and bring the soldiers, and we would be like Abame."

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, p. 161.

Scholars emphasize that the colonial period could not have occurred without assistance and cooperation from Africans. There were those who aided the colonizer and those who fought back. This is also true of the Ibo, a people living along the areas of the Niger, Imo, and Cross Rivers, south to where those waters spill into the Bight of Biafra. The importance of this area for trade cannot be overemphasized.

It is difficult to label a "collaborator" versus a "resister." Obaro Ikime writes:

Anti-British resistance was not always that of a united people. Groups within the same state had varying aims and ambitions, the product of already existing political and other rivalries. . . it is important to warn that it is not easy or altogether meaningful simply to classify the peoples of Southern Nigeria into resisters and collaborators. . . . British conquest meant a breaking of the monopoly which the coastal middle men had enjoyed in the trade of the area. The coastal middlemen knew this. So they sought a way out of the situation. . . those who sided with the British against their fellow Nigerians. . . were not so much lovers of the British as they were lovers of themselves. . . . Basic to peoples' attitudes was also the question of how to survive in the new situation, how to secure the next best.¹

Despite the temerity of labelling what is resistance and what is collaboration, I shall outline various aspects of Ibo resistance and why it emerged.

The more one reads, the more one discovers that there is no starting point. Actions have their roots in the past. The Ibo had trade dealings with the British for three centuries prior to the scramble. This certainly colored their decision-making during the colonial period. I would like to begin by briefly examining a few examples of African resistance prior to the scramble.

One example is the relationship between the Ibo and European missionaries. Ibo communities that welcomed missionaries did so because they thought missionaries were synonymous with trade. They believed missions would bring increased prosperity.² In 1857, Onitsha, a poor state surrounded by enemies along the Niger river, welcomed the missions and trade in hopes of securing arms and improving its diplomatic situation. But after eleven years, hostility developed between Onitsha and the missions, because the traditional rulers realized missionary teachings threatened their authority and the traditions of their society.

Despite the growing hostilities, the impact of the mission stations in the mid-nineteenth century was minimal. After thirty years in Onitsha, the church congregation totalled about four hundred. The population of Onitsha totalled between ten thousand and fifteen thousand. The mission at Asaba baptized twenty people in the first six years of its existence, and at Osomari, the mission baptized ten adults in its first ten years of work.³ Often converts were outcasts. More importantly, the missionaries recognized and respected that they lived and worked in sovereign lands. They did not interfere in indigenous social, religious, and political structures. In Onitsha, human sacrifices continued.⁴

Yet another example of the dimensions of African resistance is seen in trade dealings with Europeans. As mentioned, the Ibo and the British had been trading for centuries, and they traded as equal partners. While that continued in the mid-nineteenth century, the British began to flex their economic muscles, while the Ibo resisted the encroaching restraints on their economic autonomy.

In 1807, the British outlawed slavery. This led to a crisis between the Crown and Bonny in 1836.⁵ The British had decided to take to the seas to stop slave-traders. Without consulting the rulers of Bonny, the British warship H. M. S Trinculo entered the Bonny River and seized four Spanish ships that were trading in slaves. Bonny responded by jailing British traders and the captain of a war ship. The British sent in more war ships. Bonny was forced to sign a treaty in

which it promised not to mistreat any British subject. The treaty also provided that disagreements between Bonny and white traders were to be settled by a committee consisting of representatives of both lands.⁶

The example illustrates how Bonny and British traders were equal. It illustrates indigenous response. It illustrates, as well, the crumbling of the African autonomy decades before the scramble.

Difference in economic interest between the Ibo and the British increasingly ended in violent conflict with the bigger guns winning. In the 1870s British trading factories established at Aboh and Onitsha were attacked. Trading stations were also attacked at Oko, Alenso, and Osomari.⁷ The British responded in a way that would bring them the desired results throughout the colonial period. In 1879, a gunboat, anchored safely off mid-stream, bombarded Onitsha Wharf, destroying the waterside and the inland town. Four years later, Aboh was ravaged after a trade dispute led to an attack on a European trader.⁸

Despite the deterioration in relations, the Ibo held their own. George Goldie's Royal Niger Company was continually frustrated in its failed attempts to probe the hinterland, its influence confined to the borders of the river. The Ibo responded to the British monopoly by producing less for export and devoting more time to producing agricultural products for their own consumption. Goldie responded with blockades against Onitsha. In 1888, the Company attacked Asaba. Half of it was destroyed. In 1889, it attacked Obosi, destroying farms. The British offered a conditional peace. But the people of Obosi refused the concessions the Company demanded.⁹

The examples illustrate a number of points. Resistance occurred long before the scramble; it took both violent and non-violent forms; and, more importantly, the initial conflicts centered around trade, or as a political economist would put it, over the control of resources.

The clearest indication of resistance lies in the fact that by the late 1890s the British were confined to the Delta and Niger regions. They had not penetrated most of Iboland.¹⁰ The pacification of Iboland would be difficult for the British. Individual towns could often be easily conquered, forced to sign treaties, pay fines, rebuild and replant, but there would be scores of other towns to occupy.¹¹

A. E. Afigbo suggests three types of Ibo resistance:¹²

- 1) Those communities unwilling to negotiate with the British and who, from the beginning responded with arms against the British encroachment.

- 2) Those communities that negotiated with the British hoping to hold them off as long as possible, and who resorted to armed resistance when that was no longer possible.
- 3) Those communities which tried to avoid armed encounters, relying on magic and divine help, i.e., oracles.

Many villages used a combination of two or all of the above. These suggestions are not all-inclusive, but they are a good starting point.

Because of the Ibo political and social structure, there were no massive resistance movements. The most well-known inter-community resistance movement was Ekumeku.¹³ It is pronounced, it is said, the way they sounded, and while Ekumeku cannot be translated into English, appropriate synonyms might be "invisible," "whirlwind," "devastating," and "uncontrollable."¹⁴ The movement had its roots in the precolonial era. Clubs and societies were part of the maturation process and acceptance into society.¹⁵ Initially, members joined forces to combat the Royal Niger Company,¹⁶ and membership flourished as resentment to and bitterness for the native court system grew.¹⁷ Igbafe says it can be correctly described as an anti-European club.¹⁸ Each town had its own leader and fought independently, although often side by side.

The British did not understand the movement. They blamed it on a lack of local government control¹⁹ and responded by creating more native courts, the very object of many Ekumeku attacks.²⁰

Members of the Ekumeku did not negotiate with British administration or its agents; they were sworn into secrecy.²¹ Acting independently and working at night, they attacked native court buildings, government rest houses, mission stations, and the homes and livestock of Africans who worked for the British. Confrontations occurred in 1898, 1902, 1904, and finally in 1909-1910, when the movement was crushed.²² In October 1911, Ekumeku members stood trial and were sent to prison en masse. The British established a headquarters in the Asaba hinterland, leading to the consolidation of British rule in the area.

There were also entire communities which showed uncompromising resistance to British colonial rule. One such community was Ezza. Leaders would not negotiate with the British or their messengers. In 1905, the District Officer of the Obubra District, Major Crawford Cockburn, entered Ezza territory escorted by troops. The Ezza and their Achara allies, who Afigbo points out were either persuaded or bullied into joining them, ambushed and killed some of the soldiers. The British sent messengers asking Ezza leaders to meet with

them and state their grievances. The Ezza, who had heard what had happened at Arochuku (to be discussed later), declined the invitation, adding that they were stronger than the Aro, that they had never been ruled by aliens and did not intend to change. They added that if any more emissaries were sent, the Ezza would cut off their heads and return them to the administrator via the towns on friendly terms with him.²³

The British responded the only way they knew would work wonders. The attack began on March 25, 1905. The Ezza used their traditional weapon, the machet. It was over by May 16.²⁴

Another people living near the Cross River—a priority area the British wanted to control in the 1890s—were the Ikwo. Isichei writes, they "fought wars" with the British.²⁵ Conflict began in 1902. Between 1905 and 1914, they fought several skirmishes. The British crushed them sixteen years after the fighting began.²⁶

More often, conflict or cooperation are not such separate dichotomies. There is a give and take between collaborators and resisters. The village group of Afigbo, also along the Cross River, is an example of Afigbo's second pattern of resistance.

Frightened by what had happened at Arochuku, the Afigbo decided it would be better to submit to rather than challenge British rule.²⁷ During the conflict, they sent messages to the British, offering friendship. They also offered land when the British wanted to set up an administrative office. But only months after the defeat of the Aro, the Afigbo had a change of heart. They would not meet with British emissaries, let alone allow the establishment of an administrative office. They attacked their pro-British neighbors so often that the neighbors refused to take messages, fearing attack. At the same time, the Afigbo fortified and guarded major entrances to the town.²⁸

The British attack came on December 28, 1902. Getting information from a nearby town that the Afigbo expected an attack from the front, the British attacked in the rear. The battle took place in open grassland. The big guns won.²⁹

There were also communities that negotiated with British to promote their self-interests. The Aboh community along the Niger River is an example. Aboh's trading partner in the mid-1800s was Brass, near where the Bight of Benin and the Bight of Biafra meet. When Macregor Laird asked to establish a trading station in Aboh in 1857, the Obi agreed, believing he could use the European traders to his advantage and become the middleman of all trade in that area of the Niger. But shortly thereafter, the Obi regretted his decision, because the British were not interested in setting up trading posts just at Aboh. They established trading stations at places where Aboh also received goods—Onitsha and Lokoja—and tried to cut off Aboh from the trade

activity. The Aboh responded by throwing some European traders in jail and looting Laird's trading post, which had to be shut down. In 1862, the British sent a gunboat, but it withdrew without fighting.³⁰

The Aboh success would not continue with Goldie's United Africa Company. When the company bought out the French, the Aboh resented the British effort to establish a monopoly and control prices. They attacked another trading post. This time the British sent a number of gunboats to bombard the town. Hundreds were killed. After 1882, Goldie's company dictated prices and cut off Aboh from its markets. Aboh went into economic decline.³¹

Another example of a negotiator/resister is Jaja. Isichei calls him the greatest Ibo of his time.³² Michael Crowder writes: "He was a man of exceptional ability, combined with a ruthlessness that alone could ensure survival in the cut-throat competition of the palm oil trade."³³ Jaja was a trader par excellence.

Battling for political control of Bonny until civil war started, Jaja left and founded Opobo, where he cut off Bonny from its richest oil-producing areas and reigned as King Jaja.³⁴ The British dropped Bonny to trade with Opobo. Jaja, like the other Delta rulers, was most concerned with controlling trade in his state. He had excellent connections to the Ibo hinterland, assuring a regular supply of oil. He dictated his own price and even shipped directly to Britain.³⁵

In 1884-85, the British consul Hewett asked Jaja to sign a protection treaty. Jaja omitted a clause calling for free trade. He also wanted to know what "protectorate" meant. The consul assured him in writing that all it meant was that Jaja could not enter into agreements with other foreign powers. Jaja agreed.³⁶

Two years later, British traders tried to encroach into the Ibo hinterland, but Jaja prevented them from dealing directly with his suppliers. Indeed, the suppliers had learned not to do so. In 1881, Jaja made an example of the Kwa Ibo of Ibuno. His forces plundered and burned several villages, destroying crops and stores of food, taking prisoners and executing hundreds.³⁷

When British traders complained to the Consul, Harry Johnston, about Jaja's control of trade, Johnston sailed to Opobo aboard the H. M. S. Goshawk, where he summoned Jaja for a meeting. King Jaja declined. Johnston promised he would be free to go afterwards, and Jaja went. But aboard the ship, Johnston informed Jaja that he would have to stand trial in Accra or go back to shore and have his town bombarded. The same Jaja, who had been awarded a sword by Queen Victoria for aiding the British against the Ashanti, was found guilty of blockading trade, deported to the Gold Coast, and then to the West Indies where he died in 1891.³⁸

The British traders rejoiced at the prospect of Jaja's fall bringing them greater profits, but, as Isichei says, "they burnt their fingers."³⁹ They could not match wits with African traders, who had knowledge of the local customs and languages, not to mention good will. By 1893, the British traders had given up.⁴⁰

The third type of resistance suggested by Afigbo is the seeking of divine intervention. Oracles played an important part, not only in Ibo religious life, but also in political, social, and economic life.⁴¹ The Ibo sought advice from the oracles for solutions to problems, especially those problems proving too difficult to settle between families or among elders. The oracles served as the final courts of appeal. The Ibo also consulted oracles before starting war. They served as an institution for coping with crisis, and certainly as a vehicle for coping with colonial rule, bringing social solidarity.⁴²

In the Owerri province, an oracle with far-reaching influence was Ogbunorie or Ihiafor. Ogbunorie signified truth and justice, the spirit of action.⁴³ The oracle inspired confidence among the Ibo. It bound them together, giving them strength to face the British. The Ibo made pilgrimages to Ogbunorie to relieve anxiety, restore social equilibrium, and to drive out the evil power.⁴⁴ In short, Ogbunorie was a base for colonial resistance. This social solidarity also disrupted the palm oil trade.⁴⁵

The British decided this affront to their power had to be stopped. In September 1910, soldiers set out from Owerri in search of the oracle. They did not know its location. They returned the following month, having accomplished nothing, finding most towns deserted when they arrived. No doubt the Ibo believed their inability to find the oracle was due to the gods. Meanwhile, the administrator in Onitsha sent help. On December 12, soldiers set out again. As they searched for the oracle, they destroyed town after town—Akata, Amiri, Omuma, Atta, Amaimo, and Obowo. The British troops destroyed farms and homes, seized livestock, and took hostages, often elders.⁴⁶

In February, they arrived at Ezumoha, which Captain Abrose, one of the leaders of the expedition, called a "friendly town," because troops met no armed resistance. But no one would tell them the location of Ogbunorie. After ill-spent hours of talks, the expedition set out from the market place, still in search of the oracle which was supposed to be guarded by crocodiles with gold anklets. "They had become outright fortune hunters," Ekechi states.⁴⁷ They found the crocodiles and shot them, but there were no gold anklets. Nearby they found a cave. Inside they found an altar made of skulls, which they burned. They also arrested two elders, said to be head priests of the oracle, and took them to Onitsha for trial. It is not known what happened to them.⁴⁸ No

doubt the British considered the expedition successful. The Ibo, outraged by the destruction, said it caused the gods to withdraw their protection from the land.⁴⁹

By far the most written about Ibo oracle destroyed by the British is the Aro Chukwu. The Aro expedition and the events preceding and succeeding it are a complex microcosm of the Anglo-Ibo experience, containing religious, social, political, and economic dimensions. In his article in *Tarikh*, Afigbo classifies the Aro, a subgroup of the Ibo, under the second type of resistance, those who negotiated, then resorted to armed struggle.⁵⁰ But I have included it here not only because of the Aro Chukwu, but because the expedition is a wonderful example of the complexities of collaboration and resistance. Afigbo provides a poignant example of the Aro as collaborator, who, as Ikime says, "were not so much lovers of the British as they were lovers of themselves," and to which he adds:

The Aro in particular put their knowledge of [the] areas to profitable use. In places they would inspire fear in the elders and induce them to run away. They would then take pay from the British officer to ferret out the chiefs; and when these chiefs got warrants these same Aro agents took money from them for helping to make them big chiefs.⁵¹

Crowder also illustrates the hegemony of the Aro:

The supply of slaves to the Delta ports was controlled by the Aro of Arochuku, and in a land of politically decentralized people, they maintained a highly complex and centralized system of trade, coupled with religious-political domination. The power of the Aro . . . was based on the universal respect of the peoples of Eastern Nigeria for their oracle known as Long Juju, which was said to be Chukwu, the Ibo supreme deity. Thus the Aro, who controlled the oracle which resided in a cave in their territory, commanded great respect among Ibo and the Delta states. . . one could now travel in the company of a recognized Aro agent, a guarantee of safe conduct. The Aro colonies were sited on the main trading routes, and along them passed slaves for the Delta ports. The Delta rulers found the oracle a convenient buttress to community discipline.⁵²

Thus, conflict between the British and the Aro was based on religious, social, political, and first and foremost, economic grounds. From a social/political standpoint, the Aro Chukwu threatened the warrant chief

system as the means for seeking justice.⁵³ Crowder emphasizes this point:

The British government could obviously not tolerate the oracle's continued existence, not only because it encouraged slave trading, but because it represented a rival source of authority.⁵⁴

In economic terms, the British envisioned domination in the territory between the Niger and Cross Rivers (a rich palm oil producing area) and the Aro posed the greatest obstacle to that goal. The Aro struggled to preserve their privileged trading position.⁵⁵ As Afigbo sums it up:

Stripped to the core, it [the Aro Expedition] was an economic war fought out by two groups each of whom held tenaciously to opposing economic doctrines and practices.⁵⁶

From the Aro point of view, the British were attempting to change the rules of the trading game. The British, no longer content to stay at the coast, wanted to probe the hinterland, deal directly with suppliers, and increase profits. The British attempt to force out the Aro middlemen culminated in the Aro expedition.⁵⁷

High Commissioner Sir Ralph Moor began planning the attack in 1899. Things moved slowly due in part to a lack of soldiers. There were six goals of the battle plan: to stop the slave trade; to abolish the Long Juju; to "open the country to civilization"; to promote legitimate trade; to introduce British currency; and to establish a labor market.⁵⁸ The Aro struck before the British did. They carried out an attack at Obegu, one of the towns friendly with the British. Water casks set up for use by British troops were destroyed. Hundreds were killed.⁵⁹

The British offensive started on two fronts. It included seventy-four European officers and 3,464 African soldiers.⁶⁰ On December 24, 1901, Colonel A. F. Montanaro and his forces reached Aro Chukwu. High Commissioner Ralph Moor reported that the forces met with little resistance. Montanaro blew up Aro Chukwu. But Aro Chukwu's influence was not blown up with it. As Afigbo explains:

In 1912 the Protectorate Government found to its dismay that the oracle had been revived, and was compelled to take steps to crush it again. It was one thing to blow up the oracular ravine and clear the grove and another thing to convince the surrounding people that any man could actually "blow up" Chukwu (God). . . . The fact is that the two opposing forces

were operating on different planes—the spiritual and the material—and never met.⁶¹

The expedition was successful in one sense—it destroyed the Aro's position as middleman in the hinterland.⁶² Getting the Aro to accept British currency did not go as well. History professor Levi Onyemuche Amadi writes about the British problems replacing the Ibo currencies of manillas and cowries. He attributes the failure not to resistance so much as to British bungling.⁶³ The British banned the importation of manillas (the currency in palm oil trade) in 1902,⁶⁴ and cowries two years later,⁶⁵ although they were still permitted to circulate as legal tenders. However, the British did not provide replacement currency. The coins were not minted until December 1907.⁶⁶ The Ibo used cowries for buying domestic products, but not for commercial business. Nonetheless, cowries and manillas became scarce. That often made transactions difficult, if not impossible. In Aba, officials discovered counterfeit coins being circulated.⁶⁷

I doubt the only reason the Ibo failed to adopt coin currency was because of British bungling. The Ibo likely distrusted the new coins because of who provided them. It is an example of resistance that doesn't fit into Afigbo's categories. The Ahiara expedition is another example of the complexity of Ibo response to British imperialism.

Ekechi writes that after the blowing up of Aro Chukwu, the British concluded they had shattered Ibo resistance.⁶⁸ Yet following the murder of Dr. Stewart, which led to the Ahiara Expedition, the British still met rigorous, stubborn resistance.

Dr. Stewart was travelling to Calabar, where he was to serve as a medical officer in the military. He left Owerri on November 16, 1905, but never reached his destination. He travelled on his bicycle through the Mbaise village group, where, Ekechi writes, he was mistaken for the District Commissioner⁶⁹ and/or thought to be a ghost because he was white and had no toes, that is, he wore shoes. People whom Ekechi interviewed told him that Dr. Stewart arrived at Ezinihitte via the rival town of Udo.⁷⁰ The people of Ezinihitte arrested Dr. Stewart, but could not understand his language. One person Ekechi interviewed told him it sounded like "Chi, chi, chi; chi, chi, chi." A person from Udo who interpreted for the doctor translated, "Egbuo ala efuo; ahaa ala efuo," that is, "If you kill me you are in trouble. If you spare me you are in trouble."⁷¹ "This," Ekechi surmises, "is most likely a misinterpretation."⁷² The point is the dynamic between the Ezinihitte and Udo villages must not be missed.

The Ezinihitte people took Dr. Stewart to the neighboring villages, and then to Afor Ukwu Onicha, the central market place. His

bicycle was hung from a tree. He was beaten to death and dismembered with the villages sharing the body parts.⁷³ One of the villages, Ahiara, received a leg. They held a parade. Ekechi's sources told him the parade was in reaction to the British arrest of village elders.⁷⁴

Ekechi speculates that the administration learned of Dr. Stewart's fate from sources in Udo. The Ahiara had also apparently learned of an impending British assault. They had dug trenches around the village, and when the British attack started on December 7, they fired back. The British had to retreat. They gathered reinforcements; many were the traditional foes of the Ahiara. They launched another offensive, burning barns, homes, and crops, and seizing livestock. The Ahiara surrendered. Residents of neighboring areas had fled, but were pursued by the British and their support staff. The British guns won out. Ekechi adds that the military operations coincided with efforts to occupy the hinterland.⁷⁵

The British also shut down Afor Ukwu Onicha, jailed village leaders, and set up a Native Court near Ezinihitte. The Warrant Chiefs, including one from Udo, were former slaves.⁷⁶ Ibo resistance continued. They did not obey the chiefs. They attacked many court messengers and chased them out of town. The Native Court established near Ezinihitte had to be shut down, and a new court opened at Nguru, a rival community of Ahiara, in 1909.⁷⁷ Matters did not improve for the British. Soldiers had to continually patrol certain villages, burning homes and crops, and sometimes seizing animals and selling them elsewhere. In 1914, the people, surmising the British were busy fighting a world war, cleared and reopened Afor Ukwu Onicha, which had been overgrown with bush. The government learned the market had reopened two years later. The messengers they sent to meet with Onicha leaders to inquire about this were chased from town. The British responded with the guns and rapacity again, burning villages until the people were forced to surrender.⁷⁸

Ekechi alludes to a problem Afigbo addresses in further detail: the debacle of establishing a chief system in Iboland. Resistance to indirect rule was due in part to the fact that the warrant chiefs usurped traditional authority in society—the elders and the popular assembly—and also due to corruption among the ignominious chiefs and their court messengers.

The British named chiefs where no chiefs had been before. As Afigbo puts it:

Each of these peoples was split into a large number of tiny, politically equivalent and autonomous units. Though none of these units was either isolated or self-sufficient, each had its

own name, its own land, its own shrines and religious ceremonies, its own markets, warriors, political institutions and all those other attributes which would enable it to pursue its own way in the event of estrangement from its neighbours.⁷⁹

Also for the Ibo, law, politics, and religion were inseparable parts of the social structure. The warrant chief system offended and angered the gods. Again, Afigbo:

There was . . . the absence of clear distinction, or even of an attempt to distinguish, between the political and the religious in the governmental process. As a result both types of politics, law-making and its enforcement, for instance, were both political and religious in character. The autonomous unit amongst these peoples was not just a state in the secular western sense of the word but a sort of spiritual union of the living, the dead, and the gods traditionally associated with the particular piece of territory in question.⁸⁰

Afigbo goes on to say:

The conclusion which emerges from the whole analysis is that at the time British rule was imposed on the Ibo and their neighbours no community east of the Niger had a leader who could be made, without doing violence to the traditional constitution, to fulfil the role of a chief.⁸¹

And what did the British think?

The government believed the "chaos reigned" throughout the Eastern Provinces and that this derived from the lack of a means of adjusting disputes arising between village and village, tribe and tribe. Not surprisingly, therefore, it saw the institution of a Native Court as the introduction of sanity into a deranged society.⁸²

Chalk it up to British ignorance, but for the Ibo this was a nadir, a threat to everything they cherished, valued, and respected.⁸³

The British established the native court system for a number of reasons: it was cheap, it required fewer Europeans who still succumbed to the environment, and the chiefs could act as buffers between the native population and the British administrator. Court locations were arbitrary, often established near water sources. The British often

appointed collaborators and/or former slaves as chiefs. Compounding this, when the British demanded the Ibo "chief" come forward, the Ibo, knowing that village leaders were often imprisoned, would push forth slaves, or volunteers would step forward to protect the elders. These volunteers, and in the worst case scenario, slaves, received warrants.⁸⁴

This is truly only the tip of the iceberg in examining problems between the British and Ibo systems of justice/government. A whole paper could be written on this topic alone, and, indeed, Afigbo has beaten me to it. But a paper on Ibo resistance must address the warrant chief system, and I have highlighted the most basic points. The quotes and examples suffice to show the gross miscalculation by the British, and why in many cases the Ibo had no choice but to resist, because they viewed their whole way of life at risk.

Hand in hand with indirect rule is the issue of taxation, and with it is the women's riot of 1929, which brought about the fall of the warrant chief system in Southeastern Nigeria. As with oracles, the issue of taxation raised dilemmas with political, social, economic, and religious dimensions. Indeed, taxation, the Ibo believed, threatened their very existence. In fact, the concept of taxation was so foreign interpreters could not translate the word. It was understood as tax on head or tax on land. The Ibo could not rationalize why a free man had to pay a ransom on his head, or on the land which belonged to the earth goddess.⁸⁵ Also, while the Ibo believed it was alright to tax the Hausa, because the Hausa had been conquered, the Ibo were not a conquered people.⁸⁶ From a social and religious perspective, the Ibo believed it was dangerous to count men. A man counts what he owns—his wives, his cattle, his yams—but you don't count men, because counting reminded death that the population had grown.⁸⁷ I mentioned the economic factor while writing about the destruction of Aro Chukwu. Taxes had to be paid in British currency. At times the Ibo offered themselves or family members as laborers to someone who could pay the tax. They asked the Assistant District Commissioner not to punish them for doing so.⁸⁸

Reports abound on how people avoided paying taxes; even the warrant chiefs sensed the colonial administrators were about to open a Pandora's Box. In the first year the tax was imposed, the chiefs offered to surrender their caps rather than have anything to do with the tax.⁸⁹ But despite problems in 1928, the government collected more than it expected, largely due to the use of police and courts to enforce the tax laws, and also because some of the chiefs paid from their own savings rather than try to collect from their constituents.⁹⁰

What happened in 1929 would be the ruin of the warrant chief system. The Acting District Officer in Bende, John Cook, informed the

chiefs that he wanted more detailed records for tax purposes. He added as an aside that the count had nothing to do with a tax on women, but apparently the chiefs heard "tax" and "women" in the same sentence, and got the opposite idea.⁹¹ The Ibo believed a woman who was counted would be unable to bear children, and therefore the census was a truculent and real threat to their very existence.

Warrant Chief Okugo of Oloko wanted nothing to do with the counting of women. He sent a mission worker, Mark Emeruwa, to do the task. Emeruwa had no problems until he entered the compound of Ojim where he saw one of Ojim's wives, Nwanyeruwa, near her hut preparing her palm oil. "Was your mother ever counted?" she asked.⁹² Things escalated from there with Nwanyeruwa and Emeruwa going for one another's throat, and Nwanyeruwa getting palm oil all over Emeruwa's white mission clothes. She ran to a nearby village and announced to a group of women that the moment of dread had arrived—the counter of women was among them.⁹³

That is how the women's riots, which spread over much of Southeastern Nigeria, began. The women called it Ogu Umuwanye, meaning "women's war." As Afigbo puts it,

The riot was an assertion by the people that no cultural group, no matter what high notions it might have about its civilization, could be good enough to rule another cultural group. The British were therefore invited to go back to their country so that the people would resume the control of their own destiny.⁹⁴

For the record, the women set fire to nine courts, destroyed three others, and damaged four more. They looted the homes of court clerks and even property of the Niger Company. They chased chiefs from the courts and beat them. This grassroots movement par excellence grew with women in villages wanting to join sending palm leaves. Women also died. The British did not stop firing the sanguinary guns just because the troublemakers were female.

In gathering material for *The Warrant Chiefs*, Afigbo interviewed former court clerk Mbabuike Ogujiofo, who told him the following:

Because the government succeeded in collecting the first year's tax without any serious trouble, in 1929 it gave the order that women should be counted as the first step to taxing them. Captain Cook, a very stupid man who was D. O. at Bende, at once tried to conduct this count and precipitated the Women's

Riot. Other wiser D. O.s refused to conduct the count, but then Captain Cook wanted promotion.

The women attacked the chiefs because they believed that if the chiefs had not agreed to the suggestions the government would not have introduced taxation. The women also seized the opportunity of the riot to revenge themselves on the chiefs for past oppressions. . .the white men sacrificed the chiefs in order to save their faces.⁹⁵

The women's riot erupted after decades of British overrule and decades of Ibo resistance. Though the downtrodden showed great patience without necessarily being supine, counting and taxation surely became the last straw that broke the camel's back, the culmination of years of suppressed anger, hostility, and threat to all things the Ibo held dear.

In this paper, I have tried not only to illustrate different dimensions of resistance, but, more importantly, give a sense of the dynamic that led to resistance, a sense of the Ibo mindset. I found the events leading up to confrontation more fascinating than the confrontation itself. On a personal note, while I accept that the recording of history is the story of who controls the resources, I also have an optimistic, hopelessly romantic view of the ultimate good of humankind, that in the end, the good will win out, that there will no longer be a struggle for control of resources, but an equitable sharing of them. (We are a long way off from that end.) Surely, Aro resistance is an example of fighting over money and power, and the members of the Ekumeku continued an old social structure in a new way, but the women who took part in the women's riots had a bigger picture in mind.

I hope I have also succeeded at hinting at the collaboration. If there is one thing I have learned in researching this paper, it is that there are no easy formulas, that there are few blacks and whites. Nor do I believe there are easy answers to the questions of long-term effects of colonial rule and resistance to it, and whether resistance was worth it. Perhaps Achebe gives us a clue:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and *we have fallen apart* (Things Fall Apart, p. 162. Emphasis added).

NOTES

¹Obaro Ikime, "Colonial Conquest and Resistance in Southern Nigeria," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 6, December, 1972, pp. 269-70.

²Elizabeth Isichei, *The Ibo People and the Europeans* (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 101. Isichei writes that some communities emphasized the importance of children learning numbers and letters to keep books on trade dealings with the Europeans.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 101-104.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵Obaro Ikime, "Colonial Conquest and African Resistance in the Niger Delta States," *Tarikh*, 4, 1973, p. 2. While Isichei refers to Bonny as an Ibo community, A. E. Afigbo and Michael Crowder distinguish Bonny as an Ijo community. The Ibo and Ijo were neighbors, having similar political, social and religious structures. See Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs* (New York: Humanities Press, 1972), pp. 1-36. They also had similar dealings with the British. I cite this case because it is the best I have come across as an illustration of the continuum of resistance.

⁶Ikime, *Ibid.*, p. 2. Also see previously cited article by same in *The Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, pp. 262-63.

⁷Isichei, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 108-9.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 110. I shall go into more detail about this attack later.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 115-120.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹¹*Loc. Cit.*

¹²A. E. Afigbo, "Patterns of Resistance to British Conquest," *Tarikh*, 4, 1973, p. 14.

¹³My sources for the Ekumeku movement are Afigbo, Isichei, and also Philip A. Igbafe, "Western Society and its Resistance to British Rule: The Ekumeku Movement, 1898-1911," *Journal of African History*, 12, 1971, pp. 441-459.

¹⁴Afigbo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁵Igbafe, *Op. Cit.*, p. 442.

¹⁶Afigbo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 15; Isichei, *Op. Cit.*, p. 140; Igbafe, *Ibid.*, p. 444.

¹⁷Igbafe, *Loc. Cit.*

¹⁸*Loc. Cit.*

¹⁹Afigbo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 15.

²⁰Igbafe, *Op. Cit.*, p. 441.

²¹Igbafe says the most notable were known for their defiant and daring exploits: Dunkwu, Elumelu, Idegwu, and Chiejina of Onitsha-Olona; Nwabuzo Iyogolo of Ogwashi-Uku, Awuno Ubgo, the Obi of Akumazi; Nwoko of Ubuluku, Mordi of Ubuluku, one of the best marksmen, and Onwuadiju of Issele-Azagba who later became an informant for the British, identifying Ekumeku leaders and revealing their plans, *Ibid.*, p. 444.

²²On the 1898 confrontation see Igbafe, *Ibid.*, pp. 443-444, and Isichei, *Op. Cit.*, p. 140, who writes after the initial successes where the Ekumeku controlled the

Asaba hinterland, the neighboring Ishan peoples supplied reinforcements to help. On the 1902 confrontation see Igbafe, *Ibid.*, pp. 448-9; 1904, *Ibid.*, pp. 450-51; and on the 1909-1910 confrontation, which lasted seven months, *Ibid.* pp. 452-454.

²³Afigbo, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 16-17.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 17.

²⁵Isichei, *Op. Cit.*, p. 136.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 137.

²⁷Afigbo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 19.

²⁸*Loc. Cit.*

²⁹*Loc. Cit.*

³⁰Ikime, *Op. Cit.*, pp.5-6.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 6.

³²Isichei, *Op. Cit.*, p. 125.

³³Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 161.

³⁴Crowder, p. 162. Also Ikime, writing in *Tarikh*, *Op. Cit.* p. 4. The political structure of Opobo, as in Bonny, was what Afigbo labels a "constitutional village monarchy" (See *The Warrant Chiefs*, p. 16). Afigbo emphasizes that the difference between constitutional village monarchies and what he calls democratic village republics must not be taken too far. They were both essentially democratic, with councils and elders. But he points out that the political systems of communities which had immense trade dealings with the British evolved to encourage and improve trade, and, thus, the community's welfare. Jaja was a leader of such a community.

³⁵Ikime, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 8-9. Again, economic concerns are paramount.

³⁶Crowder, *Op. Cit.*, p. 177.

³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 177-8.

³⁸*Ibid.* p. 179. See also Ikime, *Op. Cit.*, p. 10.

³⁹Isichei, *Op. Cit.*, p. 126.

⁴⁰*Loc. Cit.*

⁴¹Felix K. Ekechi, "The British Assault on Ogbunurie Oracle in Eastern Nigeria," *Journal of African Studies*, 14, Summer 1987, p. 71.

⁴²*Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 71 & 75.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵⁰Afigbo, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 17-18.

⁵¹Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*, p. 72.

⁵²Crowder, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 72-73.

⁵³Afigbo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 7.

⁵⁴Crowder, *Op. Cit.*, p. 204.

⁵⁵A. E. Afigbo, "The Aro Expedition of 1901-1902," *Odu*, 7, April, 1972, pp. 3-4. All other footnotes citing Afigbo on the Aro expedition refer to this article unless otherwise stated.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 8-11.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁰Isichei, *Op. Cit.*, p. 132.

⁶¹Afigbo, *Op. Cit.*, p. 20.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶³Levi Onyemuche Amadi, "Change from Old Currencies to Modern European Currency in Eastern Nigeria: A Classic Example of Administrative Bungles and their Consequences," *Transafrican Journal of History*, 15, 1986, p. 18.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶⁶*Loc. Cit.*

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 22-24. Amadi points out that because of the demand for coins instead of cowries, cowries lost value, and this complicated the process of paying debts, because the debtor in some cases now wanted payment for five times the original loan. Taxes, of course, had to be paid in European currency. People who did not have coins had to work for those who could pay their taxes. He says this added to the causes of the 1929 tax protests, which I shall address later.

⁶⁸Felix K. Ekechi, "Igbo Response to British Imperialism: The Episode of Dr. Stewart and the Ahiara Expedition, 1905-1916," *Journal of African Studies*, 1, Summer 1974, p. 145. The Ezza, the Ikwo, and the Ekumeku movements are examples disproving the administration's conclusion.

⁶⁹*Ibid.* p. 147. This is relevant because the D. C., H. M. Douglas, had an uncontrollable temper and used to beat Africans, according to people Ekechi interviewed.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 148. This too is extremely important. Udo is said to have been founded by the eldest son of Onicha who had been expelled from Onicha and sold into slavery.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁷²*Loc. Cit.*

⁷³*Loc. Cit.* While Ekechi does not suggest it, perhaps because those people he interviewed might not acknowledge it, I would put forth that it is not irrelevant to keep in mind that Dr. Stewart was on his way to assist troops involved in pacification exercises.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 151-153.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 154-55.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 156-57. Ekechi also writes that in 1913, the villages had hired a lawyer to petition the British to reopen the market. But when an administration official

showed up at Onicha, only the Warrant Chiefs were there to greet him. Needless to say, the market did not reopen.

⁷⁹Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*, p. 7. Further references to Afigbo refer to this book unless otherwise stated.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p. 17. I was also able to more fully understand justice in Ibo society by reading Otonti Nduka's "The Traditional Concept of Justice Among the Ibo of South-Eastern Nigeria," *Odu*, 15, July 1977, pp. 91-101 and John P. C. Nzomiwu, "Toward an Understanding of the Igbo Traditional Perception of Justice," *Journal of African Studies*, 15, Spring/Summer 1988, pp. 33-38. Afigbo points out also that the Ibo often thought the courts were too lenient. For instance, under Ibo justice, a cattle thief could be killed, or, in some cases, would be adorned with empty snail shells, paraded at the local market, and subjected to ridicule. Imprisonment, compared to this punishment, seems mild. The example is cited from Afigbo, "Revolution and Reaction in Eastern Nigeria, 1900-1929," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 3, December 1966, p. 555.

⁸¹Afigbo, p. 34.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁸⁴Afigbo deals extensively with this. I have mentioned only a few of the problems to make a point. See specifically, Afigbo, pp. 57-69.

⁸⁵A. E. Afigbo, "Revolution and Reaction in Eastern Nigeria, 1900-1929," *Op. Cit.*, p. 551.

⁸⁶Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs*, p. 228.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 233-235.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 236. In his article in *The Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Afigbo explains that Cook had a credibility problem. Three years earlier, another British official had told the Oloko and Ayaba clans that the head count had nothing to do with taxation. He lied.

⁹²Afigbo, *Ibid.*, p. 553.

⁹³*Ibid.*, pp. 553-554.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 556.

⁹⁵*The Warrant Chiefs*, p. 318.