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The Role of Indigenous Collaborators During the Anglo-Ekumeku War of 1898–1911

Daniel Olisa Iweze

Abstract

Towards the later part of the nineteenth century and early part of twentieth century, the British colonial government's attempt at conquering the Western Igbo people and bringing them under her effective imperial control was met with stiff resistance. In order to subdue the people, the British resorted to the use of military force that eventually culminated in the outbreak of Ekumeku War between the British and the people in Asaba hinterland from 1898 to 1911. Extant literature on the British colonial administration's incursion on the Western Igbo area and the peoples' display of patriotic bravery in confronting the superior weaponry of the British troops by prominent historians such as Ohadike and Igbafe overly concentrated on the British conquest and the peoples' resistance movement as exemplified in the Ekumeku movement. These scholars had given marginal attention to the roles played by the indigenous people who were either coerced by the British officials or driven by mundane benefits, cooperated and collaborated with the British in crushing the Ekumeku forces, and assisted them in realizing their economic and political interests. It is against this background that this paper examines the nature of co-operation the British received from the "loyal" local people in the course of establishing their presence in that part of southern Nigeria. The paper further looks at the factors that made locals collaborate with the British by abandoning the popular struggle of their people. The paper assesses the consequences of action of the indigenous collaborators in terms of how they were perceived by their people throughout the period of British colonial control of the area. The paper concludes that the British colonial government's conquest and subsequent colonization of Western Igboland and Nigeria as a whole should not be treated only as one of indigenous traditionalist resistance, but largely an era, when the co-operation and

collaboration of the indigenous people were significant in the British imperial conquest and consolidation of colonialism in that part of southern Nigeria.

Introduction

Colonialism has been depicted as a very violent phenomenon which was imposed on the subjugated peoples of Africa by the imperial powers and was sustained by violent means.¹ History is inundated with instances of how indigenous people responded to the British colonial administration in its attempt to subjugate and extend its imperial control of various states in Africa. With the advent of colonialism in southern Nigeria, various ethnic groups, including the Western Igbo, tried to maintain their independence against the British traders, missionaries, and colonial officials. Violence and diplomatic negotiations characterized the patterns of African responses to British military. African states that adopted violent methods were not prepared to go into diplomatic negotiations with the Europeans, but from the beginning African states engaged the Europeans in prolonged military confrontation on their territories. Some states used diplomacy to negotiate with the British, with the hope of keeping them at arm's length, but, when diplomatic overtures failed, these states resorted to armed resistance.²

Conceptual Clarifications: Resistance and Collaboration

African responses to Europeans conquest and imperial control of the area took the form of resistance and collaboration.³ The concept of resistance connotes "intentions and concrete actions taken to oppose others and refuse to accept their ideas, actions or positions for a variety of reasons, the most common being the perception of the position, claims or actions taken by others as unjust, illegitimate or intolerable attempts at domination. The concrete acts of resistance involved, may or may not be acts of physical violence and extended also to other spheres of human behaviour."⁴ The concept of collaboration is complex and multi-faceted, and therefore, has been defined in different ways. Collaboration denotes a "convergence of interests between colonial states and

individual groups or classes of colonized society.⁵ It is a phenomenon which did not represent consistent loyalty, as the allegiance of groups and individuals shifted as the value of the alliance with the colonial state changed.”⁶

During colonialism, of all the subjugated peoples in Nigeria, the Igbo were the only ethnic group that tenaciously resisted the British imperial control and domination of its territory. It took the British about twenty years of incessant military action before the Igbo geographical area was finally subdued. Among the Igbo who gave the British colonial government stiff resistance were the Western Igbo people, who are represented in the *Ekumeku* war of resistance from 1898 to 1911. The *Ekumeku* movement, at its onset, was individually organized by the various towns and communities in Western Igboland. In 1889, the forces of the Royal Niger Company (RNC) conquered Asaba, revoking its charter and depriving it of its power of control over the Niger territories. By 1900, the British colonial government took over the imperial control of the area which was later renamed the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. In 1902, the people changed from individual and direct confrontation with the British forces and adopted guerrilla warfare tactics. It was this change of tactics that gave rise to the *Ekumeku* resistance movement, which engaged the British forces until 1911, when the *Ekumeku* forces were finally defeated and its warriors captured, killed, or imprisoned.

The *Ekumeku* resistance movement has been studied by eminent historians such as Philip Igbafe⁷ and Don Ohadike.⁸ Other scholars include Isichei, Afigbo, Anene and Tamuno.⁹ These scholars have studied *Ekumeku* as a traditional nationalist resistance movement against the British colonial government's attempt to extend its sphere of influence on the Niger territories in Southern Nigeria. Recent writings of scholars such as Asemine, Emordi and Mohammed¹⁰ have portrayed the *Ekumeku* resistance movement as one of the earliest and rudimentary social movements in Nigeria that was organized by the people of Western Igboland against the British colonial government on the Niger territories in Southern Nigeria. These works have provided us with useful insights on the peoples' resilience, courage, doggedness, and display of traditional patriotism against the British encroachment on their socio-cultural and religious beliefs, and political and economic interests. Despite the corpus of extant literature, the study

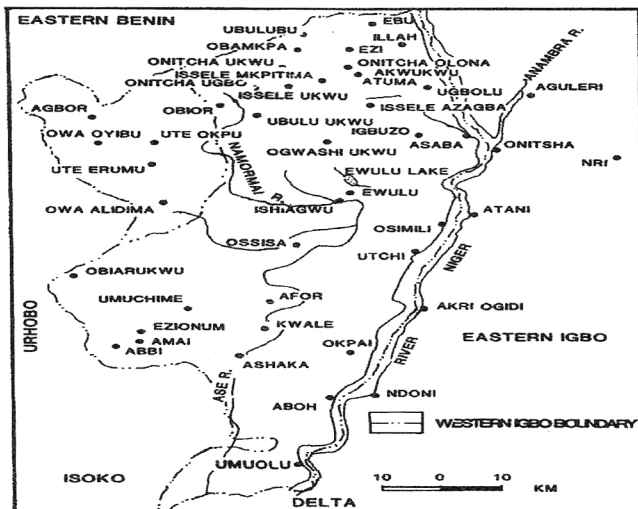
of *Ekumeku* resistance movement is not an over-studied area. Until presently, no work has been comprehensively devoted to the study of the role of indigenous collaborators during and after the Anglo-*Ekumeku* war. This paper is an attempt to fill the gap in the historiography of the *Ekumeku* movement that has often been glossed over or, rather, given only marginal attention by scholars.

Thus, this paper focuses on the pivotal collaborative role of the indigenous people in aiding the British colonial forces and officials in the subjugation and imperial control of their own people. The position represents a paradigm shift from the dominant view in most literature, which contends that the British arms superiority and better war planning strategies were the only major factors that led to the defeat of *Ekumeku* warriors. The analysis of the paper transcends the armed superiority thesis and contends that the local people contributed immensely to the British forces crushing of the *Ekumeku* warriors with relative ease. The categories of local collaborators and the distinctive roles each had played in co-operating with the British colonial government that culminated into the defeat of the *Ekumeku* movement are examined. With the fall of *Ekumeku* at its last stand at Ogwuashi-Uku in 1911, its members, numbering around three hundred, were arrested, tried, and jailed at Calabar. Among them were Chief Ijeh from Issele-Uku and Chief Ibe from Ugbodu.¹¹ Others were chiefs Mordi, Odum, Nwajido and Banoba of Idumuje-Unor.¹² Expectedly, however, the local collaborators were rewarded with appointive posts as warrant chiefs, court clerks, court interpreters, and agents of the British colonial administration.

Geography and People of Western Igboland

Western Igboland occupied the western part of the River Niger. In the pre-colonial period, the Western Igbo people were variously called *ndi Aniocha*, *ndi Ukwuani*, *ndi Ika*, *ndi Odiani*, *ndi Oshimili* and *Umu Ezechima*, which literally means (people of Aniocha, Ukwuani, Ika, Odiani, Oshimili and children of Ezechima) respectively, probably because they spoke the Igbo language and occupied the western part of Igboland. In the colonial era, the area was part of the defunct Asaba and Aboh Divisions of Western Region.¹³ The British called the area Western Igboland ostensibly to differentiate it from the Igbo east of the River Niger.

In the post-colonial period, Western Igboland was administered as Ika Aniocha, Oshimili, and Ndokwa local government areas and was called the Ika Igbo by people of other parts of the Midwest Region (later Midwest State) until the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970.¹⁴ From the attainment of independence in 1960 and through the 1970s, the Western Igbo people, like other ethnic groups in Nigeria, developed a new form of consciousness aimed at seeking and redefining their identity, and they called themselves *Anioma*, which literally means “people who live on the good and prosperous land.”¹⁵ The Western people are Igbo group, but have few distinctive numbers of dialectical and sub-cultural differences. They have developed a contiguous pattern of settlement, which marks them off from their non-Igbo neighbours of Benin, Ishan, Isoko, Urhobo, Ijaw, and Igbo east of the Niger. The Western Igbo area constitutes nine local government areas of the present Delta State. It occupies the northeast part of the State, and it is bounded in on the east by the river Niger, on the south by the Ijaw, on the west by the Urhobo and Isoko, and on the north by Benin and Ishan in Edo State.



Reproduced with permission from Don Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People*. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), 76.

Prelude to British Conquest of Western Igboland

With the abolition of the slave trade in the 1870s and the subsequent transition from the slave trade to the palm oil trade, the local people participated in legitimate trade at the turn of the twentieth century. With the abrogation of the Royal Niger Company (RNC) charter in 1899, the British colonial government took control over the administration of the Niger area, which culminated in the establishment of British colonial administrative capital at Asaba and opened trading posts on the Niger at Idah and Onitsha. The charter gave the RNC power over the Niger territories to dissolve the traditional institutions and signed treaties with the local chiefs, the *Obi*, which made them submit themselves and their subjects to the protection of the Company. The Royal Niger Company's attempt to stop human sacrifice and free slaves in Asaba led to a series of wars and the bombardment of Asaba in 1888 on the pretext that Asaba and other communities in the interiors' continued to practice human sacrifice and slave trading. The conquest of Asaba was followed by the establishment of the Roman Catholic Missions at Asaba and later in other towns such as Issele-Uku, Onicha-Olona, and Ilah.¹⁶

The British intensified their political and administrative control by establishing Native Courts, appointing local chiefs as their agents, and establishing Christian mission stations. These apparatus of colonial government were seen by the people as threats to their political and socio-cultural institutions. As a result, young men who wanted to distinguish themselves in war and who were bent on upholding the traditions and cultures of their people decided to join the *Ekumeku* society. The *Ekumeku* treated the local people who were perceived to be agents of the British government, traders, and Christian missionaries 'ruthlessly'.¹⁷

The Origin of the Ekumeku Resistance Movement

After the establishment of a trading post at Asaba by the agents of the RNC based on the supposed treaty it had signed with the chiefs between 1881 and 1883, the RNC attempted to penetrate the rest of Western Igbo area in search of profitable trade, and, at the same time, pretended to exercise some political control over the people. This aroused the deep-rooted hatred of the people for

the British control. As a result, the “league of young men,” the *Otu Ikolobia*, in various villages came together and formed the *Ekumeku* secret organization. It was an underground resistance movement against the British officials, traders, and missionaries, and therefore belongs to the category of African groups who militarily resisted European rule during colonialism. Afigbo describes this militant pattern of response to the British colonial administration as “letting the guns talk first.”¹⁸

In the Western Igbo historical context, the *Ekumeku* war is referred to as “*Aya Ekumeku*.” In the Igbo language, *Aya* means “war”; while *Ekumeku* is an onomatopoeic word connoting “do not talk about it” or “do not reveal it,”¹⁹ which illustrates the secrecy associated with the *Ekumeku* society. The term *Ekumeku* is complex and has been interpreted differently by African historians and British colonial officials. It has been interpreted to mean something “invisible,” “whirlwind,” “devastating, and “uncontrollable”; formed by a “league of young men,” the *Otu-Ikolobia*. It was called a secret society, *Otu-Ochichi*, meaning the “league of the silent ones”; probably because most of its activities were carried out at night. A British colonial officer, Captain Ian Hogg,²⁰ had described it as an “Anti-European Club,” while Father Strub perceived it as “a secret police force-cum-guerrilla band,”²¹ who engaged in “cowardly and sordid” activities. According to Ralph Moor, the High Commissioner, *Ekumeku* warriors were brigands who engaged in nocturnal activities, including robbery, seizures, and other criminal acts, which provoked disorder and lawlessness. *Ekumeku* in its indigenous meaning conveys the idea of something “breathing” or “blowing” or “dispersal.”²² It grew out of a secret society’s young men’s bravery that combined the functions of a secret police and a guerrilla army.²³

The initiation requirement necessary for the recruitment of members may have given rise to the word “*Ekumeku*.” During the period of the *Ekumeku* war, it was taboo for its members to reveal the secrecy regarding its leadership, initiation, operational headquarters, movement, and sources of the society. The movement was organized around prominent chiefs such as Dunkwu, Elumelu, Obiora, Idegwu, Chiejina, Ikemefuna, of Onicha-Olona, and Elikwu, Ofogu, Umejei, and Uwechua of Ibusa. Others were Awunor Ugbo and Obi of Akumazi. Obi of Ubulu-Uku, Nkwo and Mordi of Ubulu-Uku, Onwudiaju of Issele-Azagba and Nzekwe,

Nwabuzo Iyogolo of Ogwuashi-Uku.²⁴ The *Ekumeku* activities were nocturnal with regards to when and where it held its meetings. Only members knew how it was organized and where its operational bases were located. But it was believed that its operational headquarters were located at Ogwuashi-Uku, Issele-Uku, Onicha-Olona, Ubulu-Uku, and Ezi, where it fought its fiercest battles with the British forces.

The *Ekumeku* resistance movement existed in many towns in the Asaba hinterland and neighbouring Afemai, except Asaba itself. The young men wanted to show their prowess in the face of the new challenge imposed by the spread of colonialism and its disruptive effects on their social and political institutions of their society. It adopted guerrilla tactics in their attacks on mission stations and colonial government institutions, and their military exploits extended to the neighbouring Ishan people, who collaborated with the *Ekumeku* warriors by sending reinforcements for the struggle.²⁵

During the British colonial conquest of Africa, the British depended largely on the local people for recruitment of troops, and some local people acted as spies. Others were employed as porters, whose roles contributed greatly to the success of its punitive expeditions. During and after the subjugation of the African people, the British reliance on the local people ensured effective administration of the conquered territories. Lack of adequate personnel and resources compelled the British personnel to seek the co-operation of the local people, since the British could not rule them directly from Britain.

African people displayed various forms of resistance and collaboration individually and collectively in their responses to European imperialist penetration in their various states. In Western Igboland, the indigenous people at the outset vehemently resisted the agents of the Royal Niger Company and later, the British colonialists. But in the course of the struggle, some Western Igbo chiefs, local traders, ordinary people, and even some *Ekumeku* warriors who were hitherto resistant, abandoned the struggle and became collaborators with the British. The humiliating defeat the *Ekumeku* warriors suffered at the hands of the British forces was not only a result of possession of superior arms such as Maxim guns, and better military tactics by the British, but also, the roles played by the indigenous collaborators.

The Role of Indigenous Collaborators

The idea of collaboration with alien invaders came into being based on African experience and exigency of the times, when African leaders saw what befell other states, they thought it to be unwise to engage in armed conflict with the European invaders. They perceived such military engagement as hopeless, as there was no chance of expelling the invading forces, and therefore, they decided to avoid bloodshed and used diplomacy to save themselves and their people.²⁶ African leaders and their subjects who worked with the British colonial government during the military conquest of their states and kingdoms have been described as collaborators.

Scholars agreed that it took more force and military superiority rather than persuasion or diplomacy by the British colonialists in the course of establishment of their imperial control in Africa, including our area of study. Although, European military superiority was a major factor, the role of local collaborators was also significant. Sam Ukpabi, a renowned African military historian, has lent credence to the strategic role of African collaborators. He notes that “the colonial army was made up of not only the professional soldiers but also carriers, spies, political agents, scouts and indigenous allies often called “friendlies.”²⁷ Elaborating further, Ukpabi asserts that:

The indigenes ere armed and made to go ahead of the fighting force and to signal the troops of enemy presence in ambushes. The indigenous, friendlies, were recruited from the friendly communities within proximate towns they intend to attack. They at times out-numbered the fighting forces.²⁸

Elizabeth Isichei, a doyen of African history, and who has written extensively on the Europeans' contact with Africa, affirms the role of indigenous people when she posits that “Africans were used to conquer their fellow Africans. The rank and file of the British forces were predominantly Africans.”²⁹ The preponderance of Africans within the rank and file of the colonial armies attests to the fact that Africans played immense role in the conquest of their fellow Africans. The fighting force, West African Frontier Force (WAFF), for example, which was founded by the British

colonial government in 1897, was predominantly Africans in composition and was equipped with modern guns and cannon. The British forces although, inferior in numbers to the African armies, were incomparably better trained and armed. In Western Igbo-land, the RNC constabulary force that attacked Ibusa in January 1898 under the command of Major Arthur Festing comprised 202 African soldiers, 134 carriers, and 8 European officers. Subsequent attacks led by Captain Burdon, on Idumuje-Ugboko, Idumuje-Uno, Akwuku-Igbo, Atuma, Ebu, Ukala-Okpunor and other proximate communities in 1898, had 7 British soldiers, 160 African soldiers, 4 non-commissioned European officers, a medical officer, and many carriers.³⁰

Earlier scholars who studied African resistance to the Europeans' conquest have expressed variants of views on the reasons why the *Ekumeku* movement, which showed so much tenacity and resilience against British colonial penetration of the Western Igbo area, was eventually subdued. Isichei posited that African states fall easy prey to European conquest due to the latter's possession of superior modern firearms and disunity in African states. The arms superiority of Europeans often made some African rulers perceive Europeans an ideal ally to be used against their African traditional enemies, thus in most of the Europeans' military campaigns, the Europeans worked in collaboration with African allies. The British army undeniably had modern sophisticated arms such as Maxim guns, Gatling guns, and heavy artillery at their disposal, while African armies were ill-equipped and had only a few inferior weapons that they complemented with local guns and weapons.³¹ Africans, it should be noted, were either conscripted or willingly joined the British colonial forces as an option and on seeing the futility of resistance they fought against their own people.

Isichei also has attributed the failure of the *Ekumeku* movement largely to the problem of disunity among Western Igbo communities, arguing that the people never succeeded in overcoming their differences because of their allegiance and loyalty to their respective local communities. Igbafe shared Isichei's position on the existence of communal divisions in Western Igboland and argued that the movement failed because the Western Igbo were, by tradition, "very individualistic in attitude which may be derived from their structure in which no one occupied a position of superiority to put the other in a position of subjugation."³² These

scholars failed to appreciate the fact the people did overcome their individualistic and communal sovereignty by forging an alliance among themselves and even beyond with their neighbouring Ishan and Afemai ethnic groups who sent troops in resisting the British invaders. Although *Ekumeku* warriors were poorly armed with simple traditional weapons such as bows, arrows, cutlasses, clubs, and shields, they supplemented the local weapons with the use of charms; whose potency they believed would intervene and repel the British forces. Despite RNC agents and British forces possessing superior arms and training in modern warfare, the role of local collaborators who betrayed the *Ekumeku* resistance movement did hasten the British defeat of the *Ekumeku* movement, contrary to the opinions widely expressed by many scholars such as Isichei, Igbafe, Afigbo, Mordi and Asenime,³³ who have relegated the role of local collaborators to the background.

Typology of Indigenous Collaborators

The indigenous people who collaborated with the British colonial government in the clash with the *Ekumeku* comprised the prominent chiefs, former *Ekumeku* warriors/patrons, warrant chiefs, liberated slaves, Christian converts, local traders, other European sympathizers, (friendly quarters/clans) and Prince Aiguobasimwin of the neighbouring Benin kingdom. The liberated slaves were the earliest category of collaborators, who, after gaining their freedom due to the anti-slavery proclamation of 1903, joined the Christian missions and schools. On graduation from school, they were employed and served as court clerks and court interpreters, spies, and carriers who took part during and after conquest of Western of Igboland.³⁴

Prominent traditional chiefs who renounced the traditional religion of their ancestors and embraced Christianity were another category of collaborators. Among the earliest converts was Obi Egbuna of Issele-Uku, who allocated a portion of land to the Christian missions to build a church in the town. The bombardment of Asaba by the agents of RNC in 1888 frightened Obi Egbuna and his chiefs, and they willingly submitted to the RNC army. Obi Egbuna was disturbed by the heavy military campaign on Asaba, and he expressed his fear to Revered Father Zappa in this way: "I know you are a soldier and that you have brought the

word of God, but that notwithstanding, the white men frightened me.”³⁵ The Obi’s fear was also expressed in other towns and communities in Western Igboland. Frightened by the British gunfire, some communities and towns willingly capitulated without putting up any resistance. For instance, Okpanam, a neighbouring town north of Asaba, was intimidated by the presence of the constabulary forces of the Royal Niger Company and was subdued during the *Ekumeku* War of 1898 as the chiefs of Okpanam were forced to produce eighteen carriers for the British forces led by Fosbery.³⁶

The Catholic mission established in Issele-Uku in 1893 made some progress, and by 1898, it had a quite number of Christian adherents. A variant of the Issele-Ukwu tradition maintained that Obi Egbuna, who was formerly one of the patrons of the *Ekumeku* secret society, used his new status as a convert to defy and render some of the *Ekumeku* war charms impotent. The tradition further believed that Obi Egbuna identified and revealed the identity of the *Ekumeku* members and its planned attacks to the British officials. This led to successful pre-emptive expeditions against his people by the British forces. After the defeat of Onicha-Ugbo and other neighbouring communities by the RNC forces in 1898, the people of Ilah willingly submitted to the RNC forces, giving them with gifts of 400 tubers of yam and 4 bullocks to them.³⁷ This peaceful submission enabled the British to set up a Christian mission in the town, and the town served as a base for punitive expedition on other hostile communities.

Obi Ajufo, a wealthy, prominent chief of Ibusa, was another early convert to the Christian religion. It should be noted that right from the onset, Ibusa town, which bordered Asaba, was opposed to the establishment of European trade and missionary stations. As a result, it had no Christian mission or European trading posts in the town until after its conquest in 1898 by the Royal Niger Company forces. Father Ignatius Hummel pioneered the building of the Christian mission in the town in 1899, and, by 1900, the mission had a number of converts. In 1901, Obi Ajufo renounced the traditional religion of his people and became a Christian convert. His people feared that his conversion to the Christian faith would induce others to join the new religion and they rose against him. They despised him; his wives declared their intentions to divorce him, and his children threatened to kill him if he failed to revert to the traditional religion of his people. The

threats forced Obi Ajufo to seek refuge at the Catholic mission, where he recounted his ordeal to the clerics. He lamented that he received:

... Petitions, insults, curses, the most biting gibes. My ears heard all these. My children declared they would no longer cultivate my farms; the elders threatened me, axe at hand. My wives swore they would all sleep on the public way, outside my gate, so that I might be put to shame. The chiefs of the town have excluded me from the great council because my name no longer speaks the language of our fathers.³⁸

Another prominent collaborator was Chief Onwudiaju Okpabu of Issele-Asagba.³⁹ He was considered to be the greatest traitor of the *Ekumeku* resistance movement and most visible informant to the British officials. He was reported to have sabotaged the movement just like Obi Egbuna by identifying *Ekumeku* leaders and divulging its secrets and war strategies to the British. His covert activities led to the arrest and trial of prominent Issele-Azagba chiefs such as Odiaka, Ugbo, and Odiachi. They were tried for opposing the British colonial government, sentenced to a six-month imprisonment, and jailed in Asaba. Obi Mmakwe Oduma of Akwukwu-Igbo was another collaborator. On seeing what befell other towns such as Ibusa and Issele-Uku, he and some of the Akwukwu-Igbo chiefs willingly submitted to the British officials and pledged their allegiance to the British colonial authorities by renouncing the *Ekumeku* movement.⁴⁰

Another group of indigenous collaborators were the warrant chiefs. They comprised "certain natives whom the British thought were traditional chiefs and who were given certificates of recognition and authority called warrants." The warrant "enabled each of these men to sit in the Native Court from time to time to judge cases. It also empowered him to assume within the community he represented executive and judicial powers which were novel both in degree and traditional scope."⁴¹ Warrant chiefs were nominated from among the local traders who wanted to have trade direct trade links with the British agents. Others were drawn from the former slaves and ordinary persons in the society. The Warrant chiefs were stooges who the British colonial officers used to ensure effective administrative control of the numerous independent

political units in Western Igboland. The Native Courts served as an aspect of local government administration, and the warrant chiefs were responsible to the British officials who enforced the laws through the Native Courts. The Warrant chiefs wielded unbridled powers by making by-laws, regulating local affairs, and summoning offenders to appear before them. The people were appalled by their corrupt practices and arbitrary dispensation of justice and despised them.⁴²

Another group of local chiefs who collaborated with the British colonial government, not for their own selfish gains, but rather, as an option in order to save their communities from the British attacks and these chiefs had been given a distinct label by a historian as “benevolent collaborators.”⁴³ A prominent chief who displayed this ambivalent attitude was Chief Ikemefuna, the *Iyasele*, or prime minister of Onicha-Olona. The town comprised six quarters namely: Idumuoji, Ishiekpe, Ogbekenu, Ogbeobi, Umuolo, and Agba. While the British perceived the three quarters of Idumuoji, Ishiekpe, and Ogbekenu as “hostile,” they considered the other three—Ogbeobi, Umuolo, and Agba—as “friendly” quarters. The Idumuoji, Ishiekpe, and Ogbekenu quarters that were designated as hostile, allied with the *Ekumeku* warriors to fight the British forces in Onicha-Olona. In the course of the war, Wildenhen Fosbery, the commissioner for Central Division, in his attempt to establish a Native Council at Onicha-Olona, appointed Ikemefuna as spokesperson of the “friendly quarters” to nominate persons to the proposed Native Council. Ikemefuna failed to get nominees and informed Fosbery that all the chiefs had refused to be nominated, and instead wanted representatives to be sent from each quarter of Onicha-Olona. Fosbery became apprehensive when no representative came forward, and he sent another message to Ikemefuna to convene a meeting. But Ikemefuna informed Fosbery that the chiefs would not attend, and when he was sent for, Ikemefuna and some chiefs of his quarters fled. His flight with some friendly chiefs baffled Fosbery, who decided to probe the events. Fosbery’s investigation revealed that the “friendly chiefs” had no knowledge of the proposed Native Council or nominations and were never informed by Ikemefuna about a meeting. The chiefs informed Fosbery that Ikemefuna and Ogbekenu quarters were hostile to the British.

When Fosbery was convinced that Ikemefuna and his quarters were hostile, they demanded that the chiefs produce Ikemefuna within two days or face the wrath of a punitive British expedition. This threat forced Ikemefuna and the other chiefs to surrender themselves to Fosbery the following day, and they were arrested, tried, and jailed in Asaba for resisting the British colonial government. It should be noted that Chief Ikemefuna and his kinsmen from the Ogbekenu quarters' timely defection to the side of the British was deliberate. They wanted to save their quarters, Ogbekenu, from being destroyed by the British troops. This was not to be, because in the 1902 Anglo-*Ekumeku* war at Onicha-Olona was invaded, and Ogbekenu and other two hostile quarters were destroyed. After the invasion, Fosbery nominated some men from the "friendly quarters" into a Native Court. They pledged to end the lingering Anglo-*Ekumeku* conflict and promised to hand over chief Dunkwu, a prominent *Ekumeku* leader, to the British.⁴⁴ The appointed chiefs in the native council got their powers by their allegiance to Fosbery, while chiefs Ikemefuna, Dunkwu, Elumelu and others from the "unfriendly quarters" were labelled as "hostile."

The British officials also cast the hostile chiefs of Onicha-Olona as "*Ekumeku* chiefs" because of their stiff opposition to the native council and warrant chief systems. In defiance of the British colonialists, the "*Ekumeku* chiefs" established their own court in the town, which the British designated as the "*Ekumeku* court." In apparent derision of the British colonial system, the chiefs elected and elevated their own to the rank of a "district commissioner" and provided him with coterie of "court messengers" and trappings equivalent to that of colonial personnel. The "*Ekumeku* chiefs" arrested some warrant chiefs and others who nursed "European sympathies" and arraigned them before the "*Ekumeku* court." They were all found guilty of showing disloyalty to the community by serving the British officials and were to be executed by firing squad, but the timely arrival and intervention of British colonial government's troops saved the convicted collaborators from being shot.⁴⁵ A prominent Onicha-Olona chief articulated their opposition to British colonial government when he sarcastically and sternly warned the local collaborators:

As the white man has come suddenly upon us, as if it were from the skies so we have equally suddenly, and now people will have to carry water for us instead, for the white man and those people friendly to him are to be driven into the sea, the white man being unable to exist inland from the waters.⁴⁶

In addition to the indigenous collaborators from Western Igboland, the convert role of Prince Aiguobasimwin helped the British in the defeat of the *Ekumeku*. In its failings to crush the *Ekumeku* movement after a series of military onslaughts, the British turned to Benin, ostensibly to explore her age-long historic relations with the Western Igbo people, and found an ally in the person of Prince Aiguobasimwin of Benin kingdom.⁴⁷ He accompanied the British officials during the tour of some Western Igbo towns considered to be the strongholds of the *Ekumeku* movement in 1906 on the pretext of making “peace” and strengthening the political and diplomatic ties between Benin and Western Igbo communities. During the visit, he held secret meetings with some Western Igbo chiefs and patrons of the *Ekumeku* movement, such as Chief Onwuadiaju of Issele-Azagba. Prince Aiguobasimwin was reported to have reminded the Western Igbo chiefs of the invincibility of the British imperial power and the experience and humiliating defeat the Benin kingdom had suffered during the British conquest in 1897.⁴⁸ The visit yielded positive results for the British officials, as it produced local collaborators who betrayed the *Ekumeku* movement. Among the collaborators were Chief Onwuadiaju of Issele-Azagba and Obi Mmakwe Oduma of Akwukwu-Igbo. The two prominent chiefs were friends of Prince Aiguobasimwin whose collaborative roles have been noted elsewhere in this paper.

Prince Aiguobasimwin’s clandestine activities were borne out of his desperation to be an ally of the British colonial government during the period of political interregnum in Benin kingdom. He believed that his friendship with the British would boost his chances of succeeding his father as the Oba of Benin. Prince Aiguobasimwin also wanted to exploit the window of opportunity provided by the British colonial officials to assert and entrench his pre-eminence in the kingdom when he eventually assumed to the throne of the Oba of Benin.⁴⁹ His actions were dictated by the exigencies of the time as he was an egomaniac, who was concerned

with political self-preservation and survival. His plans eventually came to fruition as the British helped him to the throne and was crowned as Oba Eweka II of the Benin kingdom.

When the Anglo-Benin complicity against the Western Igbo became glaring and the people realized that the British had used Prince Aiguobasimwin as a camouflage to spy and infiltrate the *Ekumeku* movement, some chiefs of Western Igbo towns decided to sever diplomatic ties with Benin royalty. The Obis of Onicha-Olona and Ejeme-Aniogor were said to have stopped their customary annual visits to Benin. Others such as Isheagu, Nsukwa, and Agbor kingdoms, in their reactions to the Benin royalty's ignominious collusion with the British in annihilating the *Ekumeku* movement in 1911, severed both diplomatic and bilateral relations with her.⁵⁰ This diplomatic row between Western Igbo and Benin was a major factor that shaped relations between the two in the years that followed.

After the defeat of the *Ekumeku* warriors in September of 1910, the British colonial government enacted the "Unlawful Society Ordinance" in October of 1910, which outlawed the *Ekumeku* movement and forbade the people from carrying guns, except when going to farm. The ordinance not only found the people guilty for the insurgency, but also weakened the resolve of the *Ekumeku* resisters and undermined the peoples' existing traditional means of dispensing justice.⁵¹ With the fall of *Ekumeku*, the headquarters of the Asaba district was transferred from Asaba to Ogwuashi-Uku, ostensibly to ensure an effective pacification of the conquered areas. As a consequence of the defeat of the *Ekumeku*, Western Igboland was balkanized by the British into two—Asaba and Aboh Divisions—and joined with their neighbours, who were given political precedence over them. Asaba Division was placed under the rule of the Benin province, and the Aboh Division came under Delta province rule.

Western Igbo towns such as Ogwuashi-Uku, Ubulu-Uku, Issele-Uku, and Onicha-Olona, where the British colonial government had fought fierce battles with the *Ekumeku* warriors, later became the administrative headquarters of the British colonial administration and great centres of Christian missionary activities in the colonial period.⁵² By 1910, eight Native Courts were established in the area at Asaba, Ogwuashi-Uku, Ibusa, Issele-Uku, Ukunzu, Ubulu-Uku, and Onicha-Olona which was the largest

in the southern Nigeria area. The British justified the establishment of the courts because they considered the area as the most “unquiet and troublesome” districts where “there were perpetual disturbance and opposition to British rule.”⁵³

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the role of the indigenous collaborators during the Anglo-*Ekumeku* conflict of 1898-1911 and showed that *Ekumeku* was one of the greatest resistance movements the British colonial government had encountered in colonized parts of sub-Saharan Africa. With the advent of colonialism, Western Igbo people, at the outset, resisted the British colonial government. In the course of the struggle, local traders, liberated slaves, Christian converts, prominent chiefs, former *Ekumeku* warriors and ordinary persons became dissenters and collaborated with the British to subdue their own people. This ambivalent display of loyalty to the *Ekumeku* movement, and later to the agents of the Royal Niger Company and British colonial government, was due to the precarious situation in which the people found themselves at that time. As beneficiaries of the British colonial administration, the collaborators were used to lay the foundation for the British colonization of the area. The local collaborators were appointed as warrant chiefs, court interpreters, messengers and others were recruited as soldiers, spies and porters, and even a Benin Prince, Aigubasimwin, who the British helped to the throne of Benin Kingdom, while the uncompromising, hostile *Ekumeku* warriors and chiefs were either arrested, killed, or jailed.

This paper has demonstrated that despite the British arms superiority, the role of the indigenous collaborators was crucial in the defeat of the *Ekumeku* and subsequent subjugation of the people. It was not the lack of unity among the people as espoused by some historians and scholars. Knowing the *Ekumeku* warriors operated under local leaders/commanders in their respective communities and towns buttresses the fact that the people actually succeeded in overcoming their primordial loyalties and collectively engaged the British colonial forces. Despite the defeat of the *Ekumeku* by the British forces, the Western Igbo people still cherish their bravery and patriotic fervour. Isichei articulated the resilience of the *Ekumeku* when she opined that “the *Ekumeku*

failed, but the Western Igbo treasure their memory as an imperishable legacy.”⁵⁴ Isichei further asserted that “the Western Ibo continue to cherish the memory of the *Ekumeku*, of those select men, brave, courageous, with military prowess; such as Dunkun Isusu of Onicha-Olona, and Nwadiojo of Issele Mkpitima.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Talbot captured the gallantry and heroic exploits of *Ekumeku* warriors in this way: “the dogged resistance of *Ekumeku* made it to be the stoutest warriors in the course of the British occupation of Nigeria area.”⁵⁶ The *Ekumeku* remains the earliest and greatest traditional resistance movement in Igboland, which the British colonialists found difficult to subdue despite a series of punitive expeditions, incessant persecutions, and imprisonment by the Native Courts that spanned over a decade. It was from the *Ekumeku* resistance movement that other Nigerian and African states such as the Aro in Eastern Igboland, the Mau Mau of Kenya in East Africa, and others drew their inspiration to ferociously and collectively resist the British colonialists at the turn of the twentieth century.

Notes

- 1 Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Igbo People* (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1976), 119.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 J.M. Ayuba, “Resistance to British Rule in Central Nigeria During the Colonial Period,” in *Colonialism and the Transition to Modernity in Africa*, ed. Joseph Mangut & Terhembra Wuam (eds.), *Colonialism and the Transition to Modernity in Africa* (Lapai, Ibrahim Babaginda University Press, 2012), 52.
- 4 W. Beinart & C. Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa* (London: 1987), 28-29 as cited in J.M. Ayuba, “Resistance to British Rule. . .,” 61.
- 5 Ayuba, “Resistance to British Rule,” 60.
- 6 Ibid., 61.
- 7 Philip Igbafe, “Western Igbo Society and Its Resistance to British Rule: The Ekumeku Movement, 1898-1911,” *Journal of African History* 12, no. 3 (1973): 441-459.
- 8 Don Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement: Western Igbo Resistance to the British Conquest of Nigeria, 1883-1914* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1991)
- 9 See Tekena Tamono, *The Evolution of Nigerian State: The Southern Phase, 1898-1914* (London: Longman, 1972), Adiele Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Ibadan: Oxford University, Press, 1981), Elizabeth

Isichei, *The Ibo People and the Europeans: the Genesis of a Relationship to 1906* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1973); Joseph Anene, *Southern Nigeria in Transition, 1885-1906* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

¹⁰ Jude Asenime, "The Manifestation of Social Movement in Asaba District: A Case Study of the Ekumeku and Anioma Movements, C1898-2008," (Paper presented at 54th Annual Congress of Historical Society of Nigeria held at the Nassarawa State University, Keffi, 8-10 March, 2001), E.C. Emordi, "Factoring the Potentials of Ekwumekwu Movement, 1896-1911, for Contemporary Nigeria," in Joseph Mangut & Terhemba Wuam(eds.), *Colonialism and the Transition to Modernity in Africa*, ed. Joseph Mangut & Terhemba Wuam (Lapai, Ibrahim Babaginda University Press, 2012), Habu Mohammed, *Civil Society Organizations and Democratization in Nigeria: The Politics of Struggle for Human Rights*, (Ibadan: Kraft Books Ltd., 2010), 16.

¹¹ Interview with Paul Opone, 38 years, Lecturer, Delta State University, Abraka, interview with author on 25 April, 2013.

¹² Emordi, "Factoring the Potentials of *Ekwumekwu*," 36.

¹³ Daniel Iweze, "Post Civil War Reconstruction Programme in Western Igboland, Nigeria, 1970-1991" (PhD Dissertation, University of Nigeria, Nsukka 2013), 3.

¹⁴ Egodi Uchendu, *Anioma Women and the Nigerian Civil War* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2007), 16.

¹⁵ Don Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), xvi.

¹⁶ Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History*, 68.

¹⁷ Adiele Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (Ibadan: Oxford University, Press, 1981), 296-297.

¹⁸ Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 296.

¹⁹ Andre Uweh, "The Western Igbo Resistance of The British Occupation of Nigeria" Culled from <http://www.articlesbase.com/culture-articles/ekumeku-war-of-the-anioma-people-2316537.html> accessed on 26 April, 2012.

²⁰ Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 296. See also Tamuno, *The Evolution of Nigerian State*, 139.

²¹ Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement*, 103.

²² G.T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* (London: Frank Cass, 1966), 205.

²³ Isichei, *A History of Igbo People*, 139-140.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Elizabeth Isichei, *The Ibo and the Europeans: The Genesis of a Relationship to 1906*. (London: Faber & Faber, 1973).

²⁷ Sam Ukpabi, *Strands in Nigerian Military History* (Zaria, Gaskiya Corporation Ltd, 1986), 104.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 104-105.

²⁹ Elizabeth Isichei, *History of West Africa Since 1800* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1977), 179-180.

- ³⁰ Johnson Asigbu, *Nigeria and its British Invaders, 1851-1920: A Thematic Documentary History*, (Enugu, Nok Publishers, 1984), 268-269. See also Felix Elechi, *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 46-47, as cited in Emordi, "Factoring the Potentials of *Ekumekwu*," 35-36.
- ³¹ Michael Crowder, *West African Resistance* (London: Longman, 1971), 134-135.
- ³² Philip Igbafe, "Western Igbo Society," 458.
- ³³ See Igbafe, Isichei, Afigbo, Asenime and Mordi.
- ³⁴ Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History*, 133.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ohadike, *The Ekumeku Movement*, 103.
- ³⁷ Asiegbu, *Nigeria and its British Invaders*, 266.
- ³⁸ Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History*, 133.
- ³⁹ Emordi, "Factoring the Potentials of *Ekumekwu*."
- ⁴⁰ See Paul Opone, "Western Igbo-Benin Relations During Colonial Rule: Changing Pattern of Inter-Group Relations, 1888-1949" (PhD Thesis, Department of History & International Studies, Delta State University, Abraka, 2015).
- ⁴¹ A. E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1891-1929* (London: Longman), 6.
- ⁴² Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History*, 156.
- ⁴³ Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), as cited in Don Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History*, 158.
- ⁴⁴ Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History*, 158.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 133.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 156
- ⁴⁷ Interview with Paul Opone, Lecturer in the Department of History & International Studies, Delta State University, Abraka, interview with author on 27 April, 2013.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Igbafe, "Western Igbo Society," 454-456.
- ⁵² Interview with Jude Asenime, Lecturer in the Department of History & International Studies, Delta State University, Abraka, interview with author on 24 April, 2013.
- ⁵³ Ohadike, *Anioma: A Social History*, 164.
- ⁵⁴ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Igbo People*, 133.
- ⁵⁵ Isichei, *The Ibo People and the Europeans: The Genesis of a Relationship to 1906*. (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1973), 142.
- ⁵⁶ P.A. Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, Vol. iii, (London: Frank Cass, 1969), 82.