**How Britain Marauded Benin Kingdom – The Great Benin Wall And Moat Appreciation Society.**

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Extracts from the web site

**Introduction**

The violence and brutality that characterized the conquest and establishment of colonial rule over Benin Kingdom showed to the colonized populace the extreme lengths to which the colonizing power would go to enforce it’s dictate and punish infringements by those opposed to it. Consequently, from the time of conquest and into the earlier years of colonial rule many chose to flee or emigrate. Since these emigrations were very disruptive of effective administration, labour mobilization, and tax collection, it is not surprising that the administration not only frowned at it, but also responded with violence in an attempt to check it.

This also chapter examines the interface of colonial violence, together with process used to establish colonial administrative apparatus on the one hand, and the use of migration as a resistance strategy on the other. It shows how Beni peasants outsmarted the administration for a long period during colonial rule and how fugitive communities produced by these migrations managed to escape the reach of the colonial administration and survived for almost four decades until 1935/6 in the Benin rainforest.

**Violence and the Foundations of Colonial Rule In Benin**

The 1897 ambush and killing of a British Consular party by Benin Chiefs provided the much needed pretext for the long planned invasion of Benin though it was termed a “punitive” expedition. The fierce Benin resistance and the extreme violence of the conquest set the tone for the subsequent violence that was to characterize the establishment of British colonial rule. With the capture of the city on 17th February 1897 after five days of fighting, the conquering army went about destroying various quarters of the city suspected to belong to Chiefs believed to have participated in the ambush and/or involved in “fetish” practices. In the process, a supposedly “accidental” fire burnt the palace and adjoining quarters.

The pursuit of Oba Ovonramwen and Chiefs who left the city before it’s fall provided another opportunity for violence against the people.

A report of 18th March, 1897, confirmed the killing of the headman of Orio for attempting to escape, while being forced to guard officials to the king’s hideout. In the same report, a new town to which the king was said to have recently escaped from, and the town of Amofia were destroyed.

In another report, Ebeikhinmwin, one of the heroes of Benin resistance to invasion was summarily executed after he was betrayed by another chief.

Captain Roupell reported burning down two villages and collecting their livestock during his pursuit of a chief on 23 April 1897. Such wholescale violence terrorized the people and made their situation and admitted with some regret that the chiefs were “afraid of the whiteman… It was a pity to have burnt their houses”.  As a result, he resorted to cajolery and blackmail that succeeded in making many chiefs and, later on, the Oba the submitted himself to the colonial officials.

The Oba and some of the chiefs were tried, and the Oba later deported to Calabar, while some of the chiefs were executed in September 1897.

The continued resistance of Chiefs Ologbosere, Ebohon and Oviawe ensured the continuation of this orgy of violence against communities in areas where they are based. According to Robert Home, “The Benin territories expedition… was one of the hardest bush campaigns ever fought in British west Africa.

The resistance took the form of subversive activities against the new government in Benin. The Chiefs continued to govern their areas of Jurisdiction in defiance of the colonial power. Ologbosere in charge of Ehor, Ebohon in charge of Okemue and Oviawe in charge of Igieduma and Uhi. They stopped people in these communities from going to Benin to pledge allegiance to the new government. British symbols of authority like flags, outpost and rest houses were destroyed.

Furthermore, spies were used to keep track of what the new government was up to.

Despite early effort of the British officials in Benin to reconcile them to the new government, these chiefs adamantly maintained their non-cooperative attitude.

The result was a reconnaissance in the territories of Ologbose and Abohun of May 1898 and “Benin Territories Expedition of 20th April to 16th May 1899, which ended their resistance to British rule.

Atrocities committed by the British expeditionary force in these communities were worse than earlier ones. This was because according to Galway, “So long as they (Chiefs) are at large, so long will the prestige of the government hang in the balance”.

The pursuit of the chiefs between 1897 and 1899 became a seasonal affair that trailed by an orgy of violence and destruction. Reports of the reconnaissance of these communities in 1898 by Ag Resident, R.K.Granvile, confirmed the burning and destruction of the towns of Eko Ologbosere, Ovbi-Ehor, Isure and Okemue.

The situation was made worse for the people of the area by the rivalry between the Niger coast Protectorate administration, which had conquered Benin and the Royal Niger Company administration, which was laying claims to part of the territory.

In January 1898 the town of Erua was burnt by the RNC, which was trying to annex these areas through the encouragement of the rebel chief to whom they were supplying arms.

The expedition of 1899 was even more violent as the reconnaissance troops reported their destruction of every community on their way to the territory of the rebel chiefs.

In the rebel territory itself, the rebuilt towns of Okemue and Eko Ologobse were again destroyed and all houses levelled to the ground, while the towns of Ekpon, Idumere, Udo and Ugiamwen, Oviawares camp, and parts of Igbanke were reported to have been destroyed in the expedition between 20th April and 11th May.

Their farms were burnt and troops were stationed in Okemue.

Oviawe died from injuries, while Ologbosere and Ebohon were captured by the local people and handed over to the officials in June to save them from further violence and starvation arising for the burning of their farms. Chief Ologbosere was “tried”, sentenced and executed shortly after and this put an end to the armed resistance.

The British success in squelching armed resistance by these chiefs was facilitated by the help of some Benin Chiefs who were said to have been co-opted into the administration with the promise that they would be placed in charge of the various towns to be covered by the expedition.

The instruction of the troops during the uprising of 1906 was “in the event of natives not complying with the instruction….the villages concerned will be considered unfriendly and dealt with accordingly.”

In 1906, the people of Owa had attacked the Forest Guard sent to instruct them to tap rubber and for this a section of their town was burnt by troops as punishment in addition to a fine.

Earlier in late 1905, troops had visited Urhonigbe to enforce collection of tributes. However, the end of armed resistance did not stop the use of violence against the people. It seems to have been a deliberate policy to continue to terrorize the people into total submission.

The colonial officials, painted a negative image of the people as bloodthirsty, whilst they maintained their rampaging troops in the territory at the same time.

They were withdrawn in 1904, returned 1906, and were thereafter deployed at will until the First World War.

The incessant use of military force terrorized the populace and instilled the fear of the Europeans and their agents in the people.

The European became synonymous with violence and the people summarized their experience of this time in the proverb: Ebo gha re, Evben re [The European arrives, trouble alights.]

The severity of colonial official retaliation registered in the people’s psyche.

Henceforth, punishment among the Edo that was considered to be extreme was declaimed by the proverbial query: Te ime gbe Ovbiebo? [Did I kill a European?] This proverb expresses the peoples’ execration of the barbarity of British violence that can be likened to killing a fly with a sledgehammer.

With such wanton violence on the part of the British, confronting the colonial administration was therefore discounted as a resistance strategy; instead many people deserted their communities to seek refuge in relative safety elsewhere from the reach of Europeans.

While much has been documented about the general oppression and exploitation of the colonized during the colonial rule by colonial officials and their agents, very little seems to be written about the cruelty of particular colonial officials, which was also seriously felt by the helpless peasantry.

A combination of personal psychological make-up of the officials, prevailing racist ethos and the negative stereotypical depiction of particular African peoples by Europeans-like the Benin people who were depicted as blood thirsty and their capital city dubbed The City of Blood-in many instances produced great acts of cruelty. Oral sources and written document attest to the cruelty of certain colonial officials. To name a few:

* Captain Roupell
* Acting Resident Granville
* Officers of the Niger coast Protectorate administration
* Officials of the Royal Niger Company

“Okhaemwen Ologbose Irabor continued his resistance of the British occupiers. It was a resistance that lasted two years during which the Benin war commander:

* defeated the Royal Niger Company private army at Okemue;
* prevented the British penetration of the hinterland; and
* the European traders from establishing trading posts in Benin City.

Eventually with the help of their collaborators, in May 1899 the British captured Ologbose Irabor.

As expected the British occupiers, in their usual kangaroo court proceedings, the Ologbose of Benin was found guilty of being the chief instigator and perpetrator of the Benin `Massacre’.

On June 27 1899 he was hanged for defending his land against a group of marauding British thieves who hands were covered with blood and hearts fill with evil intentions”.