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The Hammock and the Colonial Journey of Conquest

Reminiscences of British Colonialism among the West Niger-Igbo of Nigeria

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The Beginning

Igboland, particularly east of the River Niger has quite a few navigable rivers, of which the Niger forms the major artery of communication. The others include the Anambra, which is a tributary of the Niger, the Ezu, which connects to the Anambra; the Ebonyi, which flows into the Cross River; and the Imo which drains into the Bonny Creek of the Niger Delta. The same could be said of the Igboland lying west of the Niger, except that the few navigable rivers that flow from the hinterland not only lie within the Niger Delta basin, but cover short courses before gravitating into the Niger. These include the *Adofi, Umomi, Oboshi, Ubu, and Iyioji.*

Most of these rivers, apart from running through the geo-periphery of Igboland form part of the web of tributaries of the Niger, thereby eventually draining into the Atlantic Ocean. Thus the greater part of Igbo land are left without the utility of river transport. In other words, the bulk of the numerous over-land travel networks connecting the various communities of independent petty village group states were undertaken by foot and head-porterage, since the use of such beasts of burden as horses and donkeys were unknown among the people.

This is not, however, to say that the use of these animals as means of transportation was entirely unknown to the Igbo. The fact is that

even though they were fully aware of the animal's utility as beasts of burden, the prevailing circumstances could not permit their use for such. The dominant rainforest vegetation of Igboland with its often winding narrow tracks which are often infested with thick and outgrown shrubs and tree branches was not suitable for the use of such highly mobile beasts of burden. Moreover, such high density forest terrain could also afford less effective defence against sudden attacks by such wild animals as leopards, tigers, elephants and wild pigs on the beasts of burden and their riders.

The second factor is the prevalence of the highly deadly sleeping sickness disease *trypanosomiasis*, which kills these animals within a very short time. This no doubt is taken as another major reason for the non-domestication of these non-resistant savannah species of animals in the forest zone of which Igboland forms a part. Thus such animals even when brought into Igboland for other purposes did not often last long. They sooner or later died of sleeping-sickness infections.

But this is not to say that the Igbo never made use of these animals for other purposes. In fact horses and donkeys when available are important sources of protein like the cattle to the people. Most importantly however the use of the horse as a symbol of socio-political title status and the use of the tail as part regalia of high social dignity among the Northern and West Niger Igbo subgroups.

Socio-political statues among most Igbo sub-groups are based mainly on a form of graduated social title system generically known as *Ozo*. The horse is symbolic of the highest status of the title system among the Nkanu, Nsukka, and Aguleri groups of communities, and the Illah of West Niger Igbo. Here, the slaughtering of horse forms a principal requirement for anyone initiating into the apex *Ozo* title known variously as *Otigbu-Enyinya* and *Ogbu-Enyinya* (Horse-killer).

Such a titled man, when dead, equally required a good number of horses as part of the requirements for his traditional burial rites. Such horses were thereafter shared among the surviving members of the title society. Among these people therefore horses served different purposes other than that of being used as a means of transportation.

Such was the situation in Igboland as it relates to the use of donkeys and horses as means of transportation before and at the early

period of colonialism. The early European visitors, who were not used to trekking long distances, found it therefore incomprehensible for them to get adapted to it, after several attempts to introduce these animals into Igboland had failed. Thus it became necessary to find an alternative means of confronting the problem.

It was in answer to this ominous situation that the idea of converting the hammock from a stationary apparatus of leisure into that of a mobile train powered by human energy became necessary. Thus, the hammock was to become identified with a symbol of British colonialism. But the introduction of the hammock was not accepted by the people hook, line and sinker; hence it was trailed by accounts of strong resistance and subsequent British policy of enforcement. The reasons for resistance ranged from the prevailing security situation of the period to associated customary interpretation of the idea of carrying a living and healthy person.

Travel in pre-colonial Nigeria in general and Igboland in particular was fraught with enormous danger. The danger of being caught by hostile neighbours and killed or sold into slavery, or even by slave raiders themselves. There was equally the danger of being caught by neighbours and used for human sacrifice. There was also the danger of being caught by cannibals and having one's different body parts distributed in different soup-pots and eaten as beef or any other edible animal. Again there was the danger of having one's head chopped off by head-hunters for the purpose of rituals of title-taking. All these constituted inhibiting factors for long distance travels among pre-colonial Igbo people in particular and Nigeria in general. The incidence of slavery was the most prevalent. A victim of slavery could be lucky enough to either end up as a domestic servant or being sold to *Potokri people,* the Igbo term for Portuguese slave traders then.

Olaudah Equiano, the Igbo freed slave author and abolitionist, and his sister was lucky enough to be sold into slavery rather than being eaten as meat or immolated for sacrifices (Edwards, 1996). The same is also the case of the millions of members of African descent whose descendants now paint the faces of Europe and the Americas black. Descendants of some domestic slaves who although treated as part of the society, but remained in danger of being called up to be used as beasts of sacrifices, survived today as full citizens of the society, thanks to British intervention.

Ironically some of these domestic-based slaves were much luckier to rise to stardom through the dint of hard-work and spirited adventurism, like the case of king Jaja of Opobo, who evolved from being a domestic slave to become one of the most powerful kings in the Niger Delta at the dawn of British conquest of Nigeria (Cookey, 1974). Equally, some of these domestic slaves who defiantly embraced Christianity and the accruing Western education were to give rise to those families who subsequently became the pioneers of Christian missionary activities and western education.

The cases of cannibalism and human sacrifice were even more dangerous than one being sold into slavery, and quite a number of slaves were bought and kept for the purpose of sacrifice to deities or used for burial rites. Picturing this chaotic situation E. A. Ayandele wrote this concerning the Yoruba city of Abeokuta:

> The records make it abundantly clear that in spite of their moralistic professions the Egba remained until 1891 slave-holders, slave dealers and slave-hunters. In fact human sacrifice was performed publicly in Abeokuta their capital as late as 1887. (Ayandele, 1966, p. 6)

Ayandele went further to narrate how the Ijebu sacrificed 200 men and women on the eve of British invasion in propitiation of their deities to enable them defeat the invading British forces (Ayandele, 1966, p. 6).

But it was one of the the S.M.A Missionary agents among the West Niger Igbo, the Reverend Father M. Friedrich that gave an eye-witness account of the high level of cruelty which attended the practice of human sacrifice among the people. Reporting on this manner of human sacrifice at the turn of the 20th century in the town of Igbuzo, presently spelt Ibusa, in West- Niger Igboland, which incidentally is the present author's hometown, the Roman Catholic Missionary wrote in French:

> C'est le signal de la derniere cruaute que la plume ait ecrite sur l'histoire des peoples. Les jeunes gens, echauffes par le vin de palme, se precipitant sur les eclaves, spectateurs inconscients de la scene, pour les pousser au lieu leur supplice. Un premier esclave est couche sur l'akpu et

> le maitre de la ceremonie lui tranch la tele des que le sang coule, des cris percepts de contentemeutse repercutent dans l'assistance et une danse effrence se mele aux cris. La tete de l'esclave roule par terr au millieu du vacarme indescriptible; son corps est enfoui au pied de l'akpu tandis que son chef est plaute sur un piquet pour satisfaire les instincts sauvages des paiens. On amene ensiute des autres esclaves. Helas! quelle mort cruelle les attend! La tombe du chef est prete. Son cadaver est place en evidence. Quelquefois il est deja en decomposition. Les esprits des assistants sont echauffes car il s'agit maintenant du grand acte de 'a ceremonce. Au milieu du tumulte general on pousse I' un de esclaves dans la tombe, on met le cadavre dessus et le second esclave encore par-dessus; puis on recouvre le tout avec la terre et la fosse est comblee (P.M. Fredrich, 1907, pp. 103-4).

While human sacrifice was widespread among the Igbo of the West Niger like in the case of their Edo and Yoruba neighbours to the west, cannibalism held sway among the East Niger Igbo and their Ijaw and Efik/Ibbibio neighhours. Professor Ayandele once described the Okrika people of the Ijaw ethnic group as "Veritable cannibals" (Ayandele, 1966, p. 90). Even at Brass, another Ijaw town, Ayandele wrote that the British High Commissioner Johnston,

> Was bewildered to discover that the zealous Christian converts of Brass felt no twinges of conscience when in 1885 they ate their human enemies, and that all the punishment Archdeacon Crowther prescribed to the cannibals was deprivation of Holy sacrament for sometime. (Ayandele, 1966, p. 211)

This was the state of affairs in pre-colonial Southern Nigeria that made traveling for the ordinary people unsafe. The imposition of the *Pax Britannica* was to gradually erode these fears and the attendant dangers. But it did not disappear at a blow. And even when the fear of being enslaved or eaten as beef gradually disappeared, it was substituted with another fear, the fear of the Hammock, carrying the White man on the hammock over a long distance.

The West Niger Igbo and the British Conquest

Among the West Niger Igbo, the nature of long distant travels is summed up in this Igbo saying, *Wa adieji ofu ubosi eje Idu;* meaning that one does not travel to Idu (Benin City) in one day. In fact, in those days, it took on average of seven-day journey on foot over a winding bushy track for one to travel from Asaba at the West bank of the River Niger, to Benin city, the seat of the all-powerful Oba of Benin kingdom, the great potentate then over the whole territory of West Niger Igboland.

Today, this same journey, which covers a distance of about 120 kilometres, takes an average of one hour thirty minutes to cover. Obviously, such distant journeys were undertaken on occasions and not on regular basis. They were also undertaken in groups and the travellers well-armed in defence against hostile neighbours, slave-raiders or head-hunters.

The conquest of the West Niger Igbo by the British was piece-meal, but their revolt was spontaneous. This elicited several pacification expeditions by the Colonial forces, which also meant the use of several natives from among those communities already pacified as carriers for the army.

Among the carriers, some were to carry goods while others were to carry the White Officers on the hammock. In the process some of the carriers were killed and did not return home. Those towns who agreed to provide the carriers for the White man were branded as collaborators. On the other hand, those who refused to provide were treated as enemies of the White man and had their rulers severely punished.

The people were therefore faced with either revolting against the superior powers of the White man in support of their besieged kinsmen and face the dire consequences, or accept the fact that they were a conquered people willing to do the biddings of their conquerors. At the end the latter option prevailed, that practice of levying young men by the various towns became a standing official policy of the colonial administration.

Describing the humiliating pattern of enforcing the carriers policy on the people, Dr Felix Nwanze Obi wrote:

> A British officer wanting to make a journey within the territory however near or distant the destination might

> be, would not go on foot neither would he use any of the beasts of burden. Natives were commandeered and compelled to carry him on their heads in hammocks and they must do that extremely careful. If they showed any discomfort with their human load, and tried to assuage the pain by shifting the pressure to another spot, thus causing a slight jolt to the man on top of their heads, the consequent penalty was a good flogging by the officer, or at his orders, with his gun at the ready both against the carriers and the man ordered to carry out the punishment should he refuse. (Obi, 1976, p. 6)

Dr Nwanze Obi further reported how in 1888 one of the carriers from Asaba, his hometown, was blown to pieces on the orders of a British Officer for refusing to go further on a journey to Igbuzo (Ibusa), for fear of his safety. As he put it:

> In 1888 when on such a journey the carriers traveling with the officer of the Royal Niger company to Igbuzo, from Asaba refused to go further for reasons of their safety one of the British officers ordered the first of the natives to speak, to be blown to pieces with explosive bullets, so as to teach the rest of the party a lesson. This incident was described and referred to in his letter dated March 22nd 1888 by Rev. H. Johnson, to Bishop Crowder. (Obi, 1976, p. 68)

Thus, just as Asaba people were used as carriers to Ibusa, so Ibusa people were used to carry the Whiteman and his loads to other towns. *Obi* Egbuna Ofili, a local Red-cap Chief from Ibusa, then 87 years old, reported in 1987 that during the British intervention in Ogwashi-Uku kingship dispute of 1909 many Ibusa people died in the process of doing the job of carriers for the British (Obi Egbuna Ofili, 1987).

Under this state of chaos arising from the dangers of carrying the Whiteman and his load, many able-bodied young men, those within the *Okwulagwe* age-set, which is the work-force age–set among the West Niger Igbo began to flee into the bush, resolving rather unwillingly to reside in their farmlands which were located miles

away from the town in order to avert being conscripted as White-man's carriers.

The wealthy ones or those whose parents were rich had to take the *Ogbuu* title, a position which exempts such men from manual labour, irrespective of their age. Those who had come of age and could afford the high cost of *Eze*-title (Red-cap chief) did that in order to again avert being drafted as carriers. This was to give rise to a temporary shortage of young men needed to carry the hammock. Following this apparent shortage, the British officials were to devise another means to get these young men back into their carrier duty.

The first policy was to restrict the number and frequency of young men taking such traditional titles that exempted them from manual labour or acting as carriers. Among the towns where these titles were highly developed, and where there were no traditional monarchs to deal directly with the British, of which Asaba and Ibusa, the policy aimed principally at restricting the number of people initiating into the prestigious Red-cap *Eze* title. Among these communities whose socio-political framework was republican in structure, the *Eze title* acted as the social spring-board to political influence and leadership.

Among those towns operating monarchical system of government, the enforcement of the Hammock policy was less difficult, since it was easier to hold the monarch responsible for any transgression by members of his community. This was not the case with the towns of Asaba, and Ibusa which did not have strong central leadership structure like such towns on their western fringe as Ogwashi-Uku, Ubulu-Uku-Uku, Iselle-Uku and Agbor, among others where strong monarchical leaderships exist.

In Asaba this involved imposing a permit levy on all intending *Eze t*itle-takers in order to discourage people by way of making it more expensive. The levy was first put at two shillings per a person and later increased to two pounds when the former amount did not appear to make adequate impact (Obi, 1976, p. 68).

The second policy was to try to impose traditional monarchy on the people of Asaba, Ibusa, Okpanam, and Okwe, the towns where traditional Igbo republicanism held sway. In 1923, the British authorities ordered these four towns to immediately elect their respective kings and present to the British authorities for confirmation. In their reactions, the people of Ibusa, Okpanam and Okwe defiantly

presented their *Diokpa* - the traditional ceremonial heads of the towns to the authorities as their kings. Only Asaba adhered strictly to the orders and subsequently introduced the *Asagba* Paramount title as the traditional king of the town in 1925.

Among the West Niger Igbo, the title of *Diokpa,* variously known as *Okpala* or *Okpala- Ukwu* as the case may be, is held by the oldest man in a family, village or town, who remains the *de juri* head of the particular level of government. At the town level, like the cases of Ibusa, Okpanam and Okwe, the *Diokpa* of the respective towns hold the status of a ceremonial king, who rules the town through the Council of elders and chiefs, and age-grade associations.

In other words, the position of *Diokpa is* customarily *occupied by* the oldest male surviving descendant at every level of Igbo kinship structure - from the extended family, through the village, town, to the clan. In such a situation therefore, effective political powers often rested on the Council of Elders, Chiefs, title and age-grade societies, and decisions often by consensus

Under such circumstance the implementation of colonial policies was cumbersome and slow, unlike in those towns with centralized anchor of leadership represented by their kings. The British was therefore convinced that the only possible solution to this was to cause these communities to elect kings.

The third policy was the change of the original practice of employing the same set carriers from one particular town to go through several towns in journeys that covered several communities. This was to avoid the incidence of attacks on the carriers by members of rival communities often on their way back home. In dealing with this policy, the traveling British officials would send messages beforehand of his plan to travel to particular communities and requested all the towns lying on the route of his destination to levy carriers for the purpose of carrying him and his luggage. Each community concerned with the orders would therefore summon a meeting of the leaders at which the carriers were selected. Often, in order to ensure equity, it was either that the carriers were selected from the constituting villages of the town at a time, or the villages were made to provide the whole group of men for a particular journey in turns.

The pattern of carrying out the duty involved having each set of carriers from the attending communities to wait at the respective borders of their towns at where the hammock and the associated

luggage were handed over in the manner of a relay-race team handing over the baton. This policy was to persist until the introduction of motor cars.

It should be noted that this policy of converting the Black African natives to beasts of burden was not restricted to the British colonial officials alone. The early missionaries themselves, who professed equality of all human kinds, were equally enthralled by the mere act of being carried in hammocks. In a foot note to his work, Nwanze Obi reveals this paradox of conflicting policy of the sword and Bible in these words.

> The missionaries themselves, also enjoyed the same ride on the Africans' heads. The ever too professed virtues of long-suffering, humility and service to those ministered unto, were not applicable to the relations between the missionaries and the African natives. In dispatch No 18 of 5th December, 1898, Section 3, for example, we find that more hammock men were required for carrying Rev. T.J. Denis of the Onitsha mission station. (Obi, 1976, p. 67).

In speaking of the many signs of British imperial power among the Igbo, particular the West Niger Igbo people, one cannot avoid to mention the hammock. In fact, among these people, the idea of carrying a living and healthy human being on the head as if he is a commodity or object was incomprehensible.

Only the dead, lame, or those unable to walk as a result of injury or sickness were meant to be carried in that manner. Even the sick and the lame among the people were carried on the back instead of being carried on the head like the dead or luggage.

To the people therefore, the idea of carrying a healthy, living human being was a taboo. Part of this taboo revolves round the idea that carrying such a person as if dead portends bad omen of inviting sudden death for both the person being carried and the carrier. To the people also, this practice not only made them appear as accomplices to this customary crime, but also debased them to the status of beasts of burdens. It was one of the many obnoxious traditions of the Whiteman which the Igbo were made to live with. This was the first reaction to the introduction of the hammock, before the fear of the danger of facing death in the process came into force.

Thus, far from being the Whiteman's burden, colonialism seen through the spectacle of the hammock became, in one respect the Black man's burden.

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