



Gunboat Diplomacy and the British Annexation of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria (1836-1885): An Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is located in Southern part of the country and by Nigeria's political arrangement is in the South-South geo-political zone. The region is made up of nine oil-producing states of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. The region is almost the size of England and is dominated by mangrove-lined creeks. The region is an ethnographic watershed made up of ethnic groups such as Ibibio, Efik, Izon, (Ijaw), Itsekiri, Urhobo, Isoko, Kalabari,, Okrika, Andoni, Igbo, Bini, Ogoni and so on. From the 2006 census, the region has a population of about 32 million people. Although many European powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch, French and Germans did business in the region, the footprints of the British remain indelible in the area. Diverse British agents such as the explorers, traders, missionaries and administrators contributed to the annexation of the area as part of the British Empire. One of the potent instruments adopted by the imperialist agents was the gunboat diplomacy which involved the use of superior military capability to bombard and threaten various communities in a bid to extract anti-slave and protection treaties as well as other favourable privileges against the will of the people. The paper examines the process from 1836 when the British traders implemented the first major gunboat diplomatic act and secured a treaty with the Bonny monarch. The discourse ends in 1885, when the British declared a Protectorate over the Oil Rivers, an episode which marked the genesis of the colonization of that part of Nigeria. The present resort to the use of arms by the youths of the oil rich region to press for improved condition appears to be a reenactment of the British militarism in the area. The paper adopts a historical analytical methodology.

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Introduction

In terms of Afro-European relations in what is now Nigeria, the 19th century was markedly different from previous centuries. From the late 15th century when Europeans began trading enterprise with the coastal peoples of Nigeria, until the beginning of the 19th century, a noticeable feature of the relations between them and the people was their complete dependence on the rulers of the coastal people, not only for the security of trade, but also for the safety of their lives and property. Hence, although European commercial activities had some social impact on the people of the coast, they hardly produced any political repercussions in terms of European involvement in Nigerian politics. Throughout the period, the Nigerian coastal rulers remained in control of their own affairs. Indeed, European traders went out of their way to ensure that they were in the good books of the coastal rulers in the interests of both their trade and their lives. The Nigerian rulers and people on their part, desirous of making as much profit as possible from the trade, were equally anxious to maintain peace between themselves and their European clients (Ikime, 1977).

This even tenor of Euro-Nigerian relations was rudely shattered in the 19th century by Britain's decision to put an end to the overseas slave trade. As it is well known, the emergence of industrial revolution in Britain paid high

premium on the use of machine and gradually rendered slave labour less necessary, this influenced Britain's passage of the law against slave trade. Having done that, she proceeded to bully, persuade or bribe other nations to do likewise. Britain realized that the most effective answer to trade in slaves was to find a substitute in palm oil trade. The transition to the palm oil trade led to the growth of British influence in the Niger Delta region particularly due to the frequent commercial squabble between European traders and the coastal middlemen (Ikime, 1977 and Noah, 1980). For instance, the seizure of a Portuguese ship loading slaves within Bonny's territorial waters by a British gunboat was considered a travesty of Bonny's sovereignty by Alali, the ex-regent of Bonny Kingdom, who accordingly ordered the arrest and imprisonment of Tyron, the Captain of the British gunboat as well as other British nationals in Bonny. The scenario triggered the British decision to draft more gunboats into Bonny waters and also using the "show" of force to secure the release of the prisoners. Also, through the gunboat diplomacy, the British secured an agreement to the effect that such an outrage on British subjects would not be repeated. The 1836 agreement contained other clauses which undermined Bonny's sovereignty; hence, Dike (1956) opines that "the 1836 treaty signaled naval power as the new and disintegrating decisive factor in the Delta society.

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Subsequently, similar treaties were to be forced on the Itsekiri and the Efik in the century”.

The appointment of John Beecroft, as a consul to the Bights of Benin and Biafra, was a major step in the process which was to end with the imposition of British rule on what became known as the Niger Coast Protectorate. Beecroft was determined to further the cause of his fellow traders and was a firm believer in the use of force for this purpose. As a diplomat, the instructions he received from the British government were to regulate trade between the British and African traders and to protect British nationals and property, to end the slave trade and introduce “legitimate commerce”. Thus, Beecroft is recognized as the pioneer of British power in Nigeria. (Webster, and Boahen, 1972).

Among the Africans, Beecroft’s reputation was great. Throughout the Niger Delta, “he is well-known, highly respected, and possess influence such as no white man on the coast has ever obtained” (Dike, 1956). British gunboat diplomacy in the Niger Delta continued under the supervision of various consuls till 1885, when a protectorate was declared over the oil rivers, an act considered as beginning of colonization of the area.

This paper is divided into seven sections. Section one is the introduction, section two discusses the advent of the Europeans in Nigeria, section three examines the British suppression of the Atlantic slave trade and the genesis of gunboat diplomacy in the Niger Delta, section four considers the palm oil commerce and the rise of British influence, section five looks at consular administration and the escalation of gunboat diplomacy, section six considers the entrenchment of the Oil Rivers Protectorate while section seven is the conclusion.

The Advent of the Europeans in Nigeria

The genesis of the contact between the Niger Delta and Europe was in the 16th century. The known continents of the world in ancient times were Africa, Europe and Asia. The European contact with Asia for spices was usually through land routes. But in 1453, the Turks defeated the Europeans and closed the trade routes to Asia. The Portuguese initiated a journey to India by sailing round Africa, instead of the shorter land routes controlled by the Turks. In 1487, Vasco da Gama, successfully sailed round the Cape of Good Hope and landed in India. He returned by the same route with a great profit made out of the sale of spices (Ejituwu, 2010).

The Spaniards who are the neighbours of the Portuguese were excited by the great wealth flowing into Portugal through the spice trade, hence their King, Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella succeeded in getting Christopher Columbus, an Italian, to sail to India using the Western route. Columbus took off from Spain and, going west-wards discovered the West Indies in 1492. Later, Amerigo Vespucci discovered that, in reality what Columbus had discovered was a new continent, the continent of America and instead of spices flowing into Spain; it was silver and gold. Eventually conflict arose between Portugal and Spain following the new discoveries, but Pope Alexander VI stepped in and settled the dispute by dividing the world into two halves, the West for the Spaniards and the East, with Brazil and for the Portuguese. This was by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). However, by the Asiento Agreement of 1660, the Spaniards could trade in the Niger Delta and Brazil, although the two areas belonged to the Portuguese by the Treaty of Tordesillas of 1494 (Ejituwu, 2010).

By the end of the 15th century, the French, English, Danish and other merchant adventurers had joined in the

West African trade, which took the form of peaceful exchanges among equal partners. European goods like cloth, beads, trinkets, hardware, copper and brass bracelets (manillas) arms and cowrie shells were brought in and traded for gold, ivory, pepper, gum ostrich, feathers and slaves through the local chiefs. With the increase in the volume of trade, the Portuguese built the first trading stations (factories) at strategic positions along the coast of Elmina on the Gold Coast, Lagos, Warri, New and Old Calabar among other places. By the 17th century nearly all European nations had joined the trade and the Portuguese had lost their monopoly of the West African (Guinea) trade to the Spaniards. At the beginning of the 17th century, the Dutch forcibly established their presence in the area and built many more fortified trading posts (forts) along the coast, which however, passed into English hands by the end of the century (National Commission for Museum and Monuments, 1986).

The first English ships reached the Bight of Benin in 1553 under the command of Captain Windham. Within the next century, English merchant enterprise, predominantly from the large sea port of Liverpool, established a large and regular system of trade along the coast, backed by Royal Charter Companies e.g. the Royal African Company (1670) and the rising English naval might. While providing huge wealth and opportunities for political and economic expansion for the European nations, the early trade period also had profound effects on the social and economic life of the indigenous communities. It opened wide horizons for oversea trade and contacts and stimulated the development of an export-oriented economic system. It promoted the desire for foreign goods and curiosities and inquisitive quest for knowledge about the outside world. Foreign words, names, manners, mode of dressing and crops were integrated into the local cultural milieu. The African rulers took advantage of the European rivalries and entered into alliances to obtain aid in their own political contests. The 17th and 18th centuries brought dramatic political changes, population and movements and the development of city states based on social differentiation (National Commission for Museum and Monuments, 1986).

The Suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade and the Beginning of Gunboat Diplomacy in the Niger Delta

Any meaningful study of the British annexation of Nigeria, especially Southern Nigeria, should begin with an examination of how the suppression of the overseas slave trade prepared the way for the eventual British occupation (Ikime, 1977). Dike (1956) supports this assertion by noting that: “the history of modern West Africa is largely the history of five centuries of trade with European nations; commerce was the fundamental relationship that bound Africa to Europe”.

By 1807, Britain had made enough money from the slave trade and the ancillary trades connected with it to enable her to industrialize, and that industrialization gradually rendered slave labour less necessary. One cannot doubt the important role played by the humanitarians, such as Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, Fowell Buxton and so on, in bringing about the actual abolition. These men, were products of the evangelical revival which swept through Britain in the closing years of the 18th century, were those who felt, as Lugard once put it, that Britain had “duty of expiation to perform towards the African” for her part in depopulating and degrading Africa during the centuries that the slave trade lasted. Economic and humanitarian reasons thus, combined to make Britain the leading crusader against

the slave trade (Ikime, 1977, National Commission for Museum and Monuments, 1986).

Through treaties, compensatory subsidies and continuous diplomatic and military pressure, Britain secured the agreement of other nations during the first quarter of the 19th century. According to Ikime (1977), the road to abolition was far from easy. Even in 1807, there were still groups in Britain anxious and eager to continue in the slave trade. If this was true in Britain, it was more so for other European countries and America where the arguments – be they economic or humanitarian – for the suppression of the slave trade had not become equally compelling. This was why Britain had to persuade, bully, or dole out substantial subsidies to some of the European countries. Despite persuasion and subsidies, some of the European and American nations, especially Portugal and Brazil, continued to engage in the slave trade until about 1850. Britain did, however succeed in getting the governments of the various European nations to pass laws which rendered the overseas slave trade illegal. Once these laws were passed, Britain could argue that any European caught engaging in the slave trade was breaking the law. However, laws require physical sanctions to make them effective. Hence, Britain instituted the now famous anti-slave trade naval squadron in West Africa (Ikime, 1977).

Both instruments, (diplomacy and naval force were complementary). The British Foreign Office continued to negotiate treaties banning the trade with nations which had not yet done so, while the Royal Navy enforced the terms of these treaties. In theory, all those nations which either outlawed the slave trade completely or restricted the area in which it could be carried on by their nationals were expected to cooperate with Britain in seizing and bringing to justice those who continued the trade. In practice, it was only Britain that was both able and willing to assign a reasonable naval force to this patrol. However, as long as Britain was not at war with the other nations of Western Europe and America, her gunboat could not capture their slaving ships on the high seas without breaking international law (Ina, 1996).

The British Foreign Office therefore, took pains to negotiate treaties with the chief-trading nations which would give her warships the scope to perform their duties without fear of creating international crisis. Britain thus, got France and Brazil to ban the trade for the nationals and negotiated the Reciprocal Search Treaties with Spain and Portugal under which her warships could halt and search any ship flying the flag of either of these two powers suspected to be carrying slaves. Any ship found to be carrying slaves was to be seized and taken either to Sierra Leone or to some port in America where special courts called Court of Mixed Commission were established to handle such cases. These courts consisted of judges from countries which agreed by treaty to cooperate in this matter (Ina, 1996).

According to Ina (1996) within a very short time it was realised that the Reciprocal Search Treaties failed to give the British Preventive Squadron sufficient scope to deal with slavers because they provided that only ships actually carrying slaves could be seized. But many ships were seen, which, though not carrying slaves at the time were certainly slave ships with equipment for the purpose. To make the naval patrol more effective, the Foreign Office negotiated the equipment treaties which covered this lop-hole. Under these treaties, ships could be caught if they carried equipment used by slave ships. The ineffectiveness of the method of persuasion or force became evident. Many nations refused to cooperate with Britain partly because they suspected that the

British zeal was not only wholly the result of humanitarian intentions, but was also an economic interest. Some of the nations were envious of the British naval power and feared that Britain would misuse rights granted her under the treaties.

The ineffectiveness of the campaign was also due to the inadequacy of gunboats. Britain alone maintained a naval force of any consequence in West Africa, and up to 1830s, the British West African Squadron never had more than seven ships at a time; often it had less, and sometimes it had only two. As these few ships had to watch the entire West African coast, many slave ships were able to escape carrying even more slaves annually from West Africa. It has been noted that not more than 25 per cent of the slavers were caught. Furthermore, not all the ships used in the strenuous watch were suitable. Some of them were old and rotten; while the frigate ships were not only too large and too slow but were handicapped by their masts which were easily seen from long distances by slave ships which immediately and conveniently escaped. Also, the ships engaged in slaving were built to suit the difficult times and were generally very fast (Ina, 1996).

In addition to the above difficulties was the question of unhealthy conditions which existed along the West African coast and preyed on the lives of the Europeans crew of the preventive squadron. Difficulties also existed in the presentation of evidence before the Court of Mixed Commission whose members were either unsure of their jurisdiction or unwilling to see their own nationals punished. Captured slavers were sent to only Sierra Leone for trial. This meant that even if a ship was caught at the southern most end of West Africa; it had to be taken on a journey of nearly 2,000 miles before it could reach the nearest place of trial. What was worse, the members of the Court of Mixed Commission did not always cooperate. The non-British members carried their national jealousies to the sittings of the court and their intrigues caused delays and led to the acquittal of guilty ships. By 1825, the ineffectiveness of the squadron was such that there was an alarming increase in the trade and the Foreign Office expressed concern that unless the trade was abolished “the flow of British philanthropy into the region would be impeded”. The difficulty of accosting slave ships once on the high seas eventually influenced the decision to move the court from Free Town to Fernando Po. However, the main problem that arose was that Fernando Po was a Spanish Island and not British, and even though the argument for the transfer was a sound decision, financial difficulties led to the abandonment of the proposal (Noah, 1990, 1996).

It should be noted that in 1827, Britain acquired from Spain the right to use Fernando Po as a naval base for the suppression of the slave trade and appointed Colonel Edward Nicolls as the first British Governor of the Island. The stationing of the British navy at Fernando Po was significant, because Nicolls inaugurated the policy of negotiating treaties with the potentates of the Bights of Benin and Biafra as the best means of exterminating slave trade. Fernando Po was near to Calabar, and when in 1842, Calabar chiefs signed the treaty abolishing the trade in slaves; it was not unconnected with the threat posed by the presence of the British navy so close to their waters (Noah, 1990).

The decision by the British to use the naval squadron to undertake a blockade of the major trading ports of the Niger Delta was significant. Indeed, by this act, the old relations between European and Nigerians were torpedoed.

In the first place, British act in stationing her navy in West African waters was itself questionable in the international law that governed relations between European powers. The decision to use that navy to blockade Nigerian ports was even more questionable as it represented a deliberate and, from the African viewpoint, an unprovoked infringement of the sovereignty of the various Nigerian peoples concerned who at no time gave their consent to such a blockade. Nigerian rulers did not take kindly to this violation of their sovereignty. In 1836, a British gunboat seized a Portuguese vessel doing trade in slaves off the port of Bonny. Consequently, the ruler of Bonny directed the arrest and imprisonment of Tyron, the captain of the British gunboat and other British nationals in Bonny for venturing into Bonny's territorial waters without authorization. In earlier times, when European traders did not initiate the gunboat diplomacy, some mutually acceptable solution would have been sought. However, in the present circumstance, the British merely summoned more gunboats and threatened to blow Bonny up unless the prisoners were released. The ruler of Bonny was forced to release the prisoners. From that period till the actual occupation of the Niger Delta, it was no longer "what is right" but "might is right". This was one way in which the British determination to put an end to the slave trade began to prepare the way for the eventual British occupation, by making the indigenous people to lose confidence in themselves in the face of superior military or naval might. (Dike, 1956, Ikime, 1977).

Meanwhile, not only was ruler of Bonny made to release the British nationals, he was forced to sign an agreement to the effect that such outrage on British nationalss would not be repeated. The 1836 agreement contained other clauses as well. Bonny authorities were forbidden to imprison, detain, or in any other way maltreat British nationals. Disputes between the British and Bonny elements were in future to be settled by a mixed committee of English traders and Bonny gentry. The Bonny authorities were to be held responsible for any loss or damage to British property or persons on the Bonny River. If any English man offended a Bonny citizen, he was to be handed over to the captain of his vessel. Bonny authorities were warned that any infringement of any clause of the agreement would qualify them to be declared enemies of Britain, meaning that Bonny would be liable to bombardment (Dike, 1956, Abasiattai, 1997).

It is obvious that Bonny authorities could only have signed such a document under duress, for the agreement was openly one-sided. While it made provision for protecting the lives and property of British traders, it made no similar provision for the protection of Bonny citizens against the frequent misdeeds of the European traders and sailors. Rather, it denied an essential ingredient of Bonny's sovereignty by requesting that Europeans who committed an offence in Bonny be handed over to European authorities who could decided to take no punitive action against the offended. No one can question Dike (1956 a) conclusion that the "treaty of 1836 signaled naval power as the new and disintegrating (also decisive) factor in Delta society". As will be shown later, similar treaties were to be forced on the Itsekiri and the Efik later in the century (Ikime, 1977).

Partly to cover up her questionable actions like the one cited, the British also began to negotiate some anti-slave treaties with other Niger Delta states such as, Brass, Calabar, and Aboh. These treaties provided that in return for giving up the trade in slaves, the rulers of these states would be paid certain compensation over an agreed number of years.

Usually the agreed compensation was trifling when compared with the revenue hitherto derivable from the slave trade. The British used them as the excuse for bombarding Nigerian states - on the grounds that one or other articles had been broken. These bombardments had the same effect as mentioned above - weakening the Niger Delta states concerned, forcing them to accept the superior might of the British.

The Palm Oil Commerce and the Rise of British Influence in the Niger Delta

Britain realized that the most effective answer to the trade in human cargo was to find a substitute. The substitute was in palm oil trade. By 1840, all the Niger Delta states were fully involved in the palm oil trade. In a number of ways, the trade in palm oil was different from the slave trade which it sought to replace. The palm oil trade required huge capital outlay and a large labour force for the manning of trade canoes, for the actual collection of the oil from the hinterland producers, and for organizing the sale at the coast. The palm oil trade middleman also had to be able to procure a large fleet of canoes to ensure that other traders did not seize his oil on the rivers; he also had to have war canoes to convoy his trade canoes. These had to be properly armed and manned. The raising of capital thus, became a major issue of the trade in palm oil. Fortunately, the system of trade which developed provided the answer. The palm oil trade was organized on a trust system (Webster, and Boahen, 1972, Ikime, 1977, Noah, 1991).

European merchants sought to use the trust system to keep newcomers out of the palm oil trade of the Delta states. But perhaps the greatest source of conflict arose over disagreement on how much oil was outstanding to the European traders. Quite often a European trader and his delta customer failed to agree on this vital question. In such instances it was not uncommon for a European trader to lie in wait for canoes loaded with oil from the hinterland and to seize such canoes to make up for the debt owed him. This practice, which came to be known as "chopping", was one of the greatest sources of conflict between the European traders and their Delta customers, for the European traders did always ensure that the oil he "chopped" belonged to the trader who owed him oil. When he thus "chopped" oil which belonged to a trader not indebted to him, that trader would seek to recoup his loses by attacking and looting the stores of the European merchant. This tendency on the part of the European and Delta traders to take the law into their hands need not surprise anyone. The men involved in the palm oil trade were the same who had been involved in the rough days of the slave trade. While the commodity of trade changed, neither men, methods, nor morality had changed much. These men were thus "palm oil ruffians" as they had been "slave trading ruffians" (Webster, and Boahen, 1972, Ikime, 1977).

Another source of conflict between European supercargoes and Delta traders was that of fixing acceptable prices. This was not an easy affair. The European traders were anxious to make a reasonable margin of profit. In fixing what prices they would pay for palm produce, they had their eyes on prevailing prices in Europe. The Delta traders, not always conversant with prices in Europe, had to do all they could to ensure that they were not cheated. Usually, the Niger Delta traders refused to engage in trade if the prices fell very low. The European traders also tried to use the same weapon, that is, refusal to trade in a bid to bring down the price of oil.

It should be added that one of the developments that accompanied the transition from slave trade to the palm oil

trade was the rise of status of slaves. The slave trade was in many ways the trade of the ruling classes. The various rulers of the Delta states were able to keep a very firm hold on the trade in slaves. The new era was different because success in it needed the establishment of influential contacts with the hinterland producers. The rulers were usually bound by tradition to remain in their capitals and could not make direct contacts with the hinterland. Ironically, it was the slaves, obtained in the first instance from the hinterland, who, especially in the Eastern Niger Delta, became the greatest trading agents in the hinterland. Heads of houses came to depend very much on the trading abilities of their slaves. These slaves were allowed to trade on behalf of their rulers. By this development, there existed in most of the houses of the Eastern Niger Delta, slaves who had become some of the wealthiest elements in the society (Ikime, 1977).

King Dappa Pepple of Bonny proposed a treaty which would put an end to the trust system and to remove the source of conflict which was the justification for naval interference in the affairs of Bonny. However, on the advice of the British traders, the commander of the naval squadron refused to entertain such a treaty. The king also signed an anti-slave treaty by which she agreed to give up the export of slaves in return of 2,000 Dollars a year for five years. This treaty was never ratified and the promised compensation was not paid. In 1841, another such treaty was signed, with the compensation fixed at 10,000 Dollars a year for five years. Once again the promised compensation was not paid. Meanwhile, rulers in Calabar which had signed similar treaties were being paid the agreed compensation. Naturally, King Pepple felt insulted, and relations between him and the British traders deteriorated. In 1844, war broke out between Bonny and the English traders. Once again another anti-slave treaty was signed with the compensation fixed at 2,000 Dollars a year for five years; however, the compensation was not paid. Hence, King Pepple naturally remained anti-British (Ikime, 1977).

It was not only in Bonny that conflict was developing between the Niger Delta traders and European supercargoes. In the Itsekiri kingdom in the late 1840s, similar tensions developed. Soon after the death of Olu Akengbuwa in 1848, the factories of some European firms were looted by aggrieved Iteskiri traders. The European traders in the Itsekiri kingdom like their counterparts in Bonny, sent memoranda to Britain requesting the government to take steps to ensure the protection of their lives and property. It was in response to this request that Lord Palmerston, the British Foreign Secretary at the time, who was committed to promoting British prestige overseas, who viewed that British trade in the Niger Delta had developed to a volume and value which justified protection, decided to protect the lives and the property of British subjects in the Bights of Benin and Biafra. Consequently, Palmetsron appointed John Beecroft as the first British consul for the area on the 30th of June, 1849 (Webster, and Boahen, 1972).

Consular Administration and the Escalation of Gunboat Diplomacy in the Niger Delta Region

John Beecroft had been in Fernando Po since 1829, and over the years acquired knowledge and diplomatic influence over the area he was appointed consul. For instance in 1836, he ascended the Cross River up to a point 120 miles from Old Calabar, studying the commercial possibilities of its basin. Again in 1840, he entered Benin through the Benin River, proving that it was merely a large inlet of sea, and not; as had been confidently stated, the principal mouth of the River

Niger. Subsequently, he commanded other expeditions up the Cross River which greatly increased his knowledge of the Nigerian hinterland and some African chiefs on the coast began to suspect the motives of his frequent incursions into the area of their influence. Even his friends, the rulers of Calabar, were not without their suspicions. During his ascent to the Cross River in 1841, King Eyamba of Duke Town, Calabar, was genuinely alarmed at his activities. According to Beecroft's account, the king "expressed his apprehension that our explorations of the river (i.e. the Cross River) would lead to consequences injurious to the trade of his town; and said, "I hear your country don spoil West Indies. I think he want come spoil our country all same (sic)". Beecroft assured him that his aim was purely scientific, not political, and stated "we only want to see where the water of the Cross river came from" (Noah, 1980, Oku, 1989).

In the later part of the 1840s, Beecroft's influence was widespread. It became the acceptable custom for initiators of new enterprises to seek his guidance. Missionaries, leaders of expeditions to the interior, naval Officers attached to the "humanitarian squadron" and the British and Spanish governments looked to him for leadership (Dike, 1956). Soon after his appointment, he received letters of complaints from British traders in the Itsekiri kingdom as well as Bonny. The Bonny traders complained that the king had stopped all trade as a consequence of the non-payment of the compensation promised him. Beecroft visited Bonny in 1850 in a man-of-war and invited the king to go on board to settle the "palaver" between him and the European traders. King Pepple refused to dialogue with him. The action displeased the consul (Noah, 1980).

Beecroft was better prepared to use his position as the consul to lay the foundation of British authority in the Niger Delta. In the process, however, bombardment, cajolery and direct intervention in the internal affairs of the area was often employed to achieve the desired goal. It was in this way that Beecroft intervened in the problem of Old Calabar following the revolt of the Bloodmen in 1851. The preaching of the missionaries had inspired slaves in Efik society with intense desire for freedom. As a result, some run-away slaves in a plantation formed themselves into a political organization called the "Bloodmen", with the objective of protecting its members against the repressive measures of the *ekpe* society. When some of their members were arrested by the *ekpe* in Duke Town in 1851, the Bloodmen rose in revolt and threatened to destroy the town unless their members were released. The European traders fearing a stoppage of trade which might result from impending threat to peace, appealed to the consul to intervene. He effected a settlement through a treaty which restricted the authority of *ekpe* society (Webster and Boahen, 1972, Oku, 1989). In the same year, prompted by the missionaries, he had sought to restrict the activities of the *Ekpe* Society. In 1852, Beecroft presided over the election of the successor of King Archibong and thereby assumed the role of a kingmaker (Noah, 1990).

Earlier in 1849, Rev. Samuel Edgerley of the Presbyterian Mission in Calabar, entered the Old Town "palaver house" (the palaver house was a small town hall where all matters affecting the city state were discussed and laws enacted) and indiscreetly broke the sacred drum. His explanation for this impudence was that an *ekpe* had flogged a school boy going through the town ringing the school bell which was intended to summon the youth to school. Rev. Hope Waddell, the leader of the missionary team in Calabar mediated and apologized for Edgerley's action though he still

placed the blame of *ekpe* men of the Old Town. As a way of avoiding future confrontation, he offered a peace formula to the effect that the *ekpe* bell should retire when the school bell was ringing and the vice-versa (Noah, 1980).

Rev. Edgerley, who had had the support of the supercargoes as well as an assurance of a gunboat, was bent on creating more and deeper confrontation. In 1854, Old Town charged him with sacrilege because he had broken an egg in the *Anansa* shrine. His overbearing attitude had aroused the anger of the people to the extent that they followed him “from the beach to his home” brandishing sticks and cutlasses. Edgerley was quick to interpret this action as constituting a threat to his personal safety and in a meeting that he summoned to listen to Old Town charges; he sought to conceal his guilt by introducing irrelevant matters (Noah, 1980). The supercargoes saw the trial differently. To them, it was an insult that a white man should be arraigned before a court with Africans presiding and they resolved that Old Town affairs would be decided by a man-of-war. In January 1855, the supercargoes had come with a *casus belli* to the effect that several people were immolated in 1854, following the death of Willy Tom Robins, King of Old Town. That action violated the treaty of 1850, which prohibited human sacrifices. As pointed out by the so-called human sacrifices did not involve the actual sacrifice of human beings. What was involved was that upon the death of anybody of importance, “suspects” would be subjected to oath by *esere* bean since most deaths were attributed to witchcraft. The missionaries took the view that those who died as a result of such oaths had been sacrificed, since they believed the *esere* seed to be poisonous. The supercargoes proceeded and invited the gunboat *Antelope* with Captain Young commanding. When the gunboat arrived with Lyslager, the Acting Consul, the supercargoes presented a prepared statement against the people of Old Town and invited Edgerley as their witness. Eventually, the town was bombarded by the gunboat (Noah, 1980).

In Itsekiri area, the scenario was the same. In 1850, Beecroft visited the Benin river. His aim in visiting the Benin River was twofold – to obtain redress and get the Itsekiri to elect a new Olu in the hope that he would keep a firm grip on his people and prevent a recurrence of the looting of British factory. While he was in the district, the people of the town of Bobi, led by their chief Tsanomi, attacked and looted Horsefall’s factory. Beecroft was filed with great indignation. In a note to the naval authorities, he requested that a gunboat be sent to the Benin River to inflict appropriate punishment. He was determined to leave no doubts as to the power and authority which the consul could bring to bear on these perennial disputes between white traders and the Niger Delta peoples. The gunboat requested for did arrive, and Beecroft proceeded to bombard and burn down Bobi (Ikime, 1968)

Beecroft also displayed a diplomatic tact by conducting an election in which he appointed an Itsekiri and gave him the title of the “Governor” of the Benin River. The major purpose was the “Governor” to protect the interest of the British traders in Itsekiri territory. One of the first things that the “Governor” did was to sign an agreement with Beecroft aimed at regulating the commercial relations between the Itsekiri and the British traders. The document was one sided because the first clause provided that the detention or molestation of any white trader on shore “under any pretence whatever” would be regarded as an offence against her Britannic Majesty and would involve the sending of a man-of-war to “protect British subjects and property”; a refined

way of threatening that a gunboat would be sent to mete out fiery justice. Article 5 made it obligatory for the white traders to pay the traditional comey (charges for trading right) before commencing trade. But, according to the provisions of Article 4, if for some reason, the Governor refused to accept the comey when offered; the white traders could go on with the trade. Article 5 imposed a fine of one puncheon of oil per day on every “100 tons of Register” on the Itsekiri in the event of the trade of any vessel being stopped “upon any pretence whatever” once the comey had been paid. Article 8 summed up the purpose of the agreement:

Whereas several boats have been plundered and lives sacrificed, it is deemed just and right, that such aggressions, and depredations, committed upon British subjects and property crossing the Bar or otherwise within the limits of the chief of the River Benin dominions shall be satisfactorily adjusted by the said chief (Ikime, 1968: 24).

As the territories of the “said chief” were not defined in the agreement, the way was left open for the “Governor” to be held responsible for adjusting “act of aggression” committed in areas over which he had no *de facto* jurisdiction. While every provision was made to protect the Europeans against the Africans, no provision was made to protect the Africans. The Governor was expected to punish his people if they destroyed property belonging to the European traders. However, when the reverse was the case, the “Governor” had no powers to act. In fact, the turbulence of the age was partly due to this kind of agreement. Despite the obvious unfairness of the agreement, however, it remained the only instrument duly signed and executed which guided Afro-British relations in the Benin River during the period up to 1866, when a new but equally one-sided agreement was signed. Not even the “protection” treaty signed by Nana and other leading Itsekiri citizens in 1884 corrected the elements of injustice noticeable in the 1851 agreement (Ikime, 1968).

British Declaration of Protectorate Administration in the Niger Delta

The Berlin West African Conference of 1884-85 was in many ways a turning point in the history of British relations with the communities of the Niger districts. Hitherto, a vague and un-defined form of British Consular authority was exercised in the affairs of the indigenous inhabitants of the Niger Delta. The Berlin Conference secured for Britain, international recognition and her paramontcy of interest in the district (Anene, 1966).

In 1885, Britain proclaimed a protectorate over the Niger District and placed it under the consular jurisdiction of the Foreign Office in London. With the declaration of the Oil Rivers Protectorate over the Niger District, the whole of Eastern Nigeria had in law become part of British colonial Empire (Ina, 1991). Henceforth, the British became interested in the hinterland of the region; consequently she devised strategies that aided her penetration of the hinterland despite the resistance of the indigenous people.

Conclusion

Before the 19th century, contact between European traders and the trading communities of the Niger Delta was limited to the bare minimum needed for trading. The Europeans maintained no factories ashore and the trading vessels which visited these rivers sought to remain there for as short a time as possible. The influence upon the development of these trading states was mainly economic in character. The development of the overseas slave trade brought increased

wealth to the whole region with its increased dependence upon overseas imports. This wealth also gave the more favourably situated coastal states the superior arms they needed to complete their local monopoly of this trade (Jones, 1963).

In their negotiations with the Niger Delta states, European trading vessels were at a disadvantage. They were competing against each other and they could not afford to wait. A prolonged stay in the Bight of Biafra resulted in heavy mortality among their crew from deadly tropical diseases. With the nineteenth century conditions changed, the governments of Niger Delta states had to reckon with a gradual increasing interference in their tropical affairs by the Europeans and the British government. First was the abolition of the slave trade and naval blockade of the West African coast, which became increasingly effective until it brought the slave trade from the Bight of Biafra to an end. Then came the use of the British navy to support the rights of British palm oil traders, and to obtain the signature of treaties fixing the conditions of "legitimate commerce". To supervise these interests more adequately, the British moved the headquarters of the naval squadron to Fernando Po and appointed John Beecroft as the consul to protect British interest in the Bights of Benin and Biafra. The palm oil trade witnessed the introduction of the trust system which gave birth to the Court of Equity. Trade dispute and scramble from competing European powers such as France and Germany for sphere of influence in the area resulted in the declaration of the protectorate administration after Berlin Conference of 1884-85. Undoubtedly, the British gunboat diplomacy facilitated the entrenchment of colonialism in the Niger Delta and also exposed the people of the area to the policy of the use of force to achieve ones ends.

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