

## Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Esan People of Benin Province of Nigeria

Joseph Inegbenedho Osagie<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Ph.D. Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, Benin, Nigeria.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 5 January 2014; accepted 16 April 2014

Published online 20 April 2014

### Abstract

The Esan (Anglicised Ishan) kingdoms, like other states, kingdoms and empires in the territory known today as Nigeria were conquered and brought under colonial rule by the British between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. With aforementioned conquests, colonial rule was imposed on the people. The people however, did not submit to foreign rule without resistance. This chapter examines the resistance by the people of Esan, in spite of their crude weapons, when confronted by superior and better trained forces.

From the onset of their wars of conquest, the British officials underestimated the strength and strategy of African military forces. It was therefore, not surprising that, Captain A.T. Jones, who was commissioned in 1861, by the administration of the newly acquired British Colony of Lagos to report on the army of the Egba, remarked that the pre-colonial African military forces, were nothing but “irregular marching and skirmishing of the barbarous horde” (Ade Ajayi & Smith, 1971, p.139). However, the European forces were to be confronted by these “barbarous horde” for more than twenty-five years before they could bring most of the hitherto independent states and kingdoms under colonial rule.

Over the years, the military confrontations between the Europeans and the centralized states such as Benin, Sokoto, Madinka among others, have been given much attention by scholars. On the other hand, the confrontations between the foreign invading forces and the non-centralized or segmentary societies have unfortunately, been relegated to the background. It is

noteworthy that the non-centralised societies, offered equal, if not stiffer resistances than the centralised states to European occupation. Any wonder then that Crowder writes that, “the segmentary societies or peoples divided into numerous petty chiefdoms ... provided some of the stiffest resistance to colonial forces of occupation experiences” (Crowder, 1971, pp.4-5). As will be shown in this paper, the non-centralized or segmentary societies like Esan, provided stiffer and longer resistance than some of the centralized states to the European forces in their quest to conquer the territories in the hinterland of South-Central Nigeria.

**Key words:** Military; Confrontation; Resistance; Conquest; Subjugation

Joseph Inegbenedho Osagie (2014). Colonial Conquest and Resistance: The Case of Esan People of Benin Province of Nigeria. *Canadian Social Science*, 10(4), 82-89. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/4527> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4527>

### INTRODUCTION

In the course of their desire to occupy territories located in what is known today as Nigeria, the British met a lot of resistance from the indigenous peoples. The British expeditionary forces were armed with Maxim and machine guns while the people had crude weapons such as Dane guns, bows and arrows among others. In spite of this, while some empires, kingdoms and states succumbed to British forces after a short resistance, others gave them stiff and long resistance. The Esan, the second major ethnic group in present-day Edo State of Nigeria can be classified among the latter. Unlike Benin Kingdom which fell to British massive fire power after a short but decisive battle in 1897, it was not until 1906, after series of battles that lasted for about seven years that Esan kingdoms were conquered by the British forces.

The reasons for the inability of the British to conquer Esan communities as easily as the more centralized states, in spite of their superior weapon, are not difficult to decipher. Esan, although homogenous in terms of language and culture, was made up of over thirty autonomous kingdoms unlike Benin which was a single and massive territory presided over by the Oba. So, when the British expeditionary force invaded Esan in 1899, after the conquest of Benin kingdom, they were stiffly resisted by the different kingdoms. As each of the kingdoms was independent of the other, it was not easy for the British forces to conquer them as easily as they did in Benin Kingdom. This was because the conquest of one Esan kingdom did not mean the conquest of the others. This situation therefore, slowed down the advance of British expeditionary forces into the hinterland of Esan. It was as a result of this complexity that it took the British forces, in spite of their superior weapons and military tactics, about seven years before the whole of Esan was completely brought under their control.

The British forces had thought that with the conquest of Benin kingdom and the deportation of Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar in February of 1897 (Igbafe, 1979, Chaps. 2&3), the whole of the former Benin Empire, of which they regarded Esan kingdoms as part, had been brought under their control. However, later events were to prove them wrong as they faced stiffer resistance in Esan than they encountered in Benin.

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## THE PEOPLE

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Esan is situated on a plateau which is about 134 metres above sea level. The plateau, according to Bradbury,

...rises from the Oriomo river in the south west to an east-west ridge along the Northern borders of Ishan [Esan] Division of which are situated the chiefdoms of Irrua and Ekpoma. Egoro, Ukhun, Idua and Ewu lie on the northern slopes of this ridge, which is drained by small streams flowing north then east to the [River] Niger (Bradbury, 1957, p.61).

Esan kingdoms are to be found in the north of Benin, the present capital of Edo State of Nigeria. The name Esan refers to the people, their language and their geographical location. For administrative reasons, Esanland was recently constituted into five local government areas namely:- Esan West, Esan Central, Esan East, Esan South West and Igueben. The area is bounded in the north by Etsako East and Etsako West Local government areas; on the west by Orhionmwon local government area, on the south by Ika, Aniocha and Oshimili local government areas of Delta State of Nigeria and on the east by the River Niger.

Esan is essentially made up of thirty-one kingdoms namely; Amahor, Ebelle, Egoro, Ekehelen, Ekpon, Ekpoma, Emu, Ewatto, Ewohimi, Ewosa, Ewu, Ido, Igueben, Irrua, Ogun, Ogwa, Ohordua, Okalo, Okhuesan, Ori, Orowa, Onogholo, Opoji, Ubijaja, Udo, Ugbegun,

Egboha, Ujiogba, Ukhun, Urohi and Uromi. Each of these kingdoms, in pre-colonial time, had its own independent political institutions headed by a King (Onojie; pl. Enijie). In this respect, there are thirty-one Enijie in Esan. A typical Esan kingdom is made of a number of villages and each village comprises of a number of quarters [*idumu*]. Each of the quarters is made up of a number of families and extended families. The various kingdoms were headed by the Enijie while the villages were headed by the oldest man Edionwele [sing. *Odionwele*]. The Edionwele administer the affairs of the villages on behalf of the Enijie. A typical Esan kingdom is like a federation of villages while a village is like a federation of quarters and families. Before the emergence of the Europeans [British], the people had a well established system of government (Okojie, 1994, pp.47-94). Unlike their Benin neighbour, however, they did not evolve a centralized entity which would have encompassed all the thirty-one kingdoms. So, Esan may therefore, be classified as a loose confederation of independent kingdoms. In spite of this, the people were and are still homogeneous in terms of language and culture.

As will be seen later, from the last decade of the first half of the fifteenth century, specifically from the era of Oba Ewuare (c.1440 A.D.), Benin is said to have conquered and brought all the Esan kingdoms under her suzerainty (*Ibid.*, pp.17-24; Egharevba, 1968, pp.84-85; Igbafe, 1974, pp.1-16). The rulers (Enigie) of Esan kingdoms according to Igbafe "had to be approved by the Oba of Benin before their accession to their thrones acquired legitimacy and validity before their subjects." (Igbafe, 1974, pp.1-16). Esan kingdoms were also said to have paid tribute to Benin up till the nineteenth century. If truly, Esan kingdoms were thus part and parcel of Benin Empire, two vital questions beg for plausible answers. First, why were there series of wars between Benin and some Esan kingdoms throughout the pre-colonial period? Two, why was it that after the conquest of Benin in 1897, the British had to embark on series of wars of conquest which lasted up to 1906 before Esan was brought under their control?

There is however, no doubt that Benin had a lot of influence on Esan from the fifteenth up to the nineteenth centuries. However, the influence depended on several factors which included the character of the Oba, the political stability in the Benin kingdom and the military strength of Esan kingdoms at a particular point during the period under consideration. A strong-willed Oba, under a conducive political atmosphere, could conquer neighbouring territories and bring them under his effective control. In the same way, the military strength and political stabilities of neighbouring kingdoms and territories also determined the influence which Benin had on them. The relationship between Benin and Esan kingdoms during the course of the pre-colonial period can be gleaned from this context. However, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, as a result of fatigue

which resulted from political crisis such as succession disputes and series of wars with immediate and distant neighbours, Benin became weakened and significantly reduced to her pre-fifteenth century status which according to Igbafe, was “conterminous with the Bini section of the Edo-speaking peoples as distinct from the Ishan (Esan), Etsako, Ivbosakon and Urhobo” (Igbafe, 1974, pp.1-16). Benin could not have had any major influence on her immediate and distant neighbours under such atmosphere. When therefore, the British conquered Benin in 1897, they erroneously thought that the whole of the territory occupied by the Edo speaking peoples or what they thought to be “Benin Empire” had been conquered, until faced with stiff resistance when they attempted to penetrate Esan territory.

## PRE-COLONIAL MILITARY ORGANIZATION

Esan kingdoms had no standing army in pre-colonial period. However, all able bodied men in the kingdoms were a ready source of military recruitment. The military force of an Esan kingdom was made up of able bodied men mobilized from all the villages in case of emergency (C.G. Okojie, 1994, pp.87-92). In Esan, as in other pre-colonial African societies, the youths were expected to learn the art of warfare, so that in times of emergency, they could be called up to defend their communities (Crowder, 1971, p.12). When a kingdom was attacked or had to attack any aggressor, a message was sent by the Onojie to the heads (*edionwele*) of the villages, requesting them to mobilized specific number of men to boost the military force of the kingdom. However, the Onojie appointed the commander [*Okakulo*], who was usually one of his trusted noble and “was not only a physically strong man but a feared medicine man” C.G. Okojie 1994, p.87). There was therefore no coordinated military organization which embraced all Esan kingdoms— a characteristic of segmentary societies — “societies or peoples divided into numerous petty chiefdoms which had no coordinated military organization beyond the level of the village.” M. Crowder, 1978, pp.48-49).

At the village level, all the able-bodied men were ready recruit of the fighting force. According to Okojie, “every man capable of bearing arms had to fight when the village was attacked or when the village had to take reprisals against seizure of a wife, killing of a man...” (Okojie, 1994, p.87) As was the practice at the kingdom level, the commander of the military (*okakulo*) was appointed by the head of the village (*odionwele*) in consultation with the village council. The *okakulo* was expected to be a man of valour and was appointed from among the *Igene* (able bodied men) age group (Bradbury, 1957, pp.68-69).

The main instruments or weapons used in fighting were bows and arrows, crossbows, barbed cudgels and machetes (*Ibid.*; Egharevba, 1968, p.92). From the fifteen

century however, Esan warriors began to use Dane guns which they obtained from Benin traders. The people of Benin were the first to used Dane guns which they obtained from the Europeans especially the Portuguese, whom they had contact from the middle of the fifteen century. It should be noted that Esan did not have direct contact with the European until the last decade of the nineteenth century.

That the people developed the art of warfare was not by accident. Esan kingdoms were surrounded by hostile neighbours throughout the pre-colonial period and this necessitated the development of strong military forces to protect themselves and defend their territories. To the south of Esan was the powerful Benin kingdom which on several occasions embarked on various wars of conquest against the people. By the second half of the fifteenth century, most Esan kingdoms were subjected to constant attacks led by the various Obas of Benin in order to bring them under their suzerainty. The series of attacks were equally militarily resisted by the various Esan Kingdoms. As a result of this, some of the Obas decided to court the friendship of some of the Enojie of Esan. So, at the beginning of his reign the Oba, would send white chalk (*ere*) to the Enojie of Esan kingdoms as a gesture of friendship; the acceptance signified reciprocal friendship with the Oba and his kingdom while rejection meant refusal of friendship. Refusal of such friendship overture by the Oba usually led to war(s) between such Esan kingdom(s) and Benin Kingdom (Okojie, 1994, p.92). As most Esan kingdoms were usually suspicious of friendship overture by the Oba of Benin, there were series of wars between them throughout the pre-colonial period. An example was the “Uzea War”, which was fought between Uromi kingdom and the Benin Empire in the fifteenth century. The war which lasted for two years —1502-1503—was caused by the refusal of the fearless Agba (1488-1504), the Onojie of Uromi, to accept the friendship of Oba Ozolua (1481-1503) of Benin. In the course of the war, Oba Ozolua who personally led Benin forces was killed by Uromi soldiers at the now famous “battle of Uzea” (*Ibid.*, pp.368-374; Bradbury, 1957, p.64).

The pre-colonial relationship between Esan kingdoms and Benin was thus, characterized by friendship and hostility. This is because at no point in time did cordial relationship exist between all Esan kingdoms and Benin. Friendship with Benin depended on disposition of the reigning Oba towards the Esan kingdoms. Consequently, a reigning Oba may enjoy cordial relationship with some Esan kingdoms while hostility would exist between him and some other kingdoms. So, from the fifteenth century up to the last decade of the nineteenth century, Benin was always at war with one Esan kingdom or the other (National Archives, Ibadan [N.A.I.], 1982, p.34).

Benin also received military assistance from some friendly Esan kingdoms in the various wars which she fought in the pre-colonial period. One of such wars was

the “Idah War”, which was fought between Benin and the kingdom of Idah from 1515 to 1516 (*Ibid.*, p.xiv). In 1515, war broke out between Benin kingdom and Idah — a kingdom in the far north of Benin now part of the present day Kogi State of Nigeria. In the course of the war which was personally led by the Oba Esigie, some Esan kingdoms such as Ugboha and Igueben sent some warriors to assist Benin forces, as some of the major battles were fought on the outskirts of Esan territory. The inhabitants of Ugboha, a village in Benin kingdom trace their origin to Ugboha kingdom of Esan. They are said to be the progeny of the blacksmiths from Ugboha Kingdom who accompanied the legendary warrior, Enore, who was one of Esan warriors who assisted Oba Esigie in his wars with Idah (Dark, 1973, p.31). It was therefore, with the military assistance from some friendly Esan kingdoms that Benin was able to defeat Idah. At the end of the war, some of the Idah war captives who could not be taken to Benin were given to Esan Kings and warriors as booties. Some Benin warriors who could also not return home due to one reason or the other settled in some Esan Kingdoms especially, Igueben kingdom, whose Onojie is said to have given military assistance to Benin in the course of the war (Okojie, 1994, pp.565-566).

In the nineteenth century, some friendly Esan kingdoms also sent warriors to assist Benin in her wars with some Yoruba kingdoms. One of such was the war which Benin fought with Akure, a kingdom in the present-day Ondo State of Nigeria in 1823, in which some Esan kingdoms sent warriors to support Benin forces (N.A.I., 1982, p.34; Osadolor, 2007, pp.89-110). In the nineteenth century also, some Esan kingdoms, especially those in the north were subjected to constant attack by the Nupe, a warring ethnic group across River Niger, whose major objectives were to forcefully convert their neighbours to Islam and hunt for slaves. The Nupe had gained control over Etsako, northern neighbours of Esan and subjected the people to constant raids (*Ibid.*). From this base, they began to foray into some northern Esan kingdoms specifically, Ujagbe, Ewu, Ukhun and Irrua (Okojie, 1994, p.242). These Esan kingdoms fought series of battles to ward-off the Nupe invaders from their territories. In the various battles, some of the southern Esan kingdoms especially Ekpoma sent warriors to assist their northern brothers in their wars against the Nupe jihadists and invaders. In the course of the battles, some of which were fierce, a number of Nupe warriors were taken captives by Esan warriors. Some of these captives were given to the Enijie while others were taken home by war generals as booties. The progenies of these Nupe captives can still be found in some Esan towns and villages today (*Ibid.*, 38).

So, before the emergence of the Europeans and the conquest of Benin in 1897, Esan kingdoms had developed the art of warfare and this has been shown above in the various wars which they fought in the pre-colonial period with their immediate and distant neighbours.

## ESAN AND THE EUROPEANS

As earlier mentioned, the people of Esan did not have direct contacts with the Europeans until after the conquest of Benin by the British in 1897. The pre-1897 contacts between the people and the Europeans were through Benin traders who curbed Esan territory for merchandise which they exchanged with the Europeans. From about the second half of the fifteenth century, during the reign of Oba Ewuare, the first Europeans had visited Benin. According to Hubbard, “the second half of the century (fifteenth) saw the arrival of the first European in Benin, the Portuguese Ruy de Sequeira in 1472 in Ewuare’s reign and Alfonso de Aveiro in 1485 in Ozolua’s reign” (Hubbard, 1948, p.173). Henceforth, trade developed between Benin and the Portuguese. In order to meet the demands of European merchants, Benin traders travelled to distant locations including Esan to procure the merchandise which were demanded by the European traders. These long distant Benin traders belonged to associations known as *ekhe* - long distant traders - whose members operated in specific areas. The *ekhen Egbo* operated in the Yoruba area through Usen. The *ekhen-oria* traversed the whole of Esan area up to distance location as Idah in the present Kogi State of Nigeria while *ekhen-Irehen* operated in Owan, Etsako up to Akoko Edo areas in the present Edo State (Igbafe, 1980, pp.19-33). These traders travelled to distant areas, especially Esan territories, in search of local merchandise such as cloth, ivory, pepper, slaves among others, which were highly demanded by early European merchants. As early as 1492, the Portuguese who sailed into Benin River were said to have purchased a number of merchandise, which included “blue cloth” from Benin (Izuakor, 1987, pp.34-35; N.A.I., 1982, p.xix; Okojie, p.16-17). As the Benin people were not known to produce colored cloth, it is suggested that the “blue cloth” exported by the Portuguese from Benin must have come from Esan who were famed for the production of multi-colored cloth (*ukpon ododo*). Benin traders exchanged these products for European merchandise such as tobacco, brandy, mirror, beads and fire-arms among others. So, although Esan people did not have direct contact with Europeans, they obtained European merchandise through Benin traders. Even from the early nineteenth century when European merchants began to demand for raw materials such as rubber and palm produce (oil and kernels) to feed their industries at home, Esan people still did not have direct contact with them. All the raw materials produced in Esan, as it was in the past, got to European merchants through Benin traders. It was after the conquest of Benin in 1897 that the British officials and merchants began to make inroad into Esan territories.

It should be recalled that the first British official to visit Benin in the nineteenth century was Richard Burton, the Consul of Fernando Po in 1862, during the reign of Oba

Adolor (1848-1888). It was not until 1892, that another British official, Gallwey, the Commissioner and Vice-Consul of the Benin District of the Oil River Protectorate visited Oba Ovonramwen (1888-1897) with whom he sign a treaty which was expected to guarantee freedom of trade for all traders on the rivers along the creeks and Benin river distributaries (Igbafe, 1979, pp.37-48). In 1896, however, when Itsekiri and Urhobo traders refused to pay taxes for trading in Benin territory, Oba Ovonramwen ordered the market closed and forbade his subjects to trade with them. As a result of the negative effect which this action had on British merchants on the coast of Benin, some British officials, led by Consul Phillips, decided to visit the kingdom to persuade the Oba to open the market and to also draw his attention to the fact that such action violated the terms of the treaty which he entered into with them in 1892. As the Oba was celebrating the Igue festival, a time he was not expected to receive visitors, he advised Consul Philips to defer his visit by three months — an advice which the Consul ignored. It was in the course of the journey to Benin in January 1897 that Consul Philips and members of his expedition were ambushed and killed at Ugbine village, by Benin warriors, for defying the advice by their revered Oba. This incident provoked a brutal reprisal by the British government against Oba Ovonramwen which consequently led to the conquest of Benin kingdom in February 1897. The Oba was subsequently deposed and deported to Calabar (*Ibid.*). With the conquest and deportation of the Oba, colonial rule was imposed on Benin. For effective administration of the territory, the British authorities created the Benin Province and integrated it into the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. It was from this base that the British launched wars of conquest against the people of Esan in order to bring them under their authority.

The people of Esan were however, not unaware of the happenings in Benin. Stories about the military encounters between the British and the Benin and the eventual conquest and deposition of the Oba were known to them. They were therefore, conscious of the fact that they would be next target of the British forces. As a result, they began the process of solidifying their military strategies and war formation by mobilizing all the able bodied men in readiness for the impending confrontation with the British military might. In addition to mobilizing the people, some Enigie (Kings) also consulted their “strong medicine men with magical powers” (Ojiefoh, 2002, p.33) to fortify their territories against the imminent attack. So, by the time the British actually launched the first attack on Esan territories, the people were not taken unaware.

As the British had never had any direct contact with the people of Esan, they erroneously thought that the fall of Benin and the deposition of the Oba meant that Esan and other the neighbouring territories had been subdued. Later events in Esan were to prove them wrong as the people resisted their incursion into their territory.

The people resisted the British forces and their superior weapons for about seven years. In fact, the resistance by the people delayed the establishment of effective colonial rule in Esan and its environs until about the second half of the first decade of the twentieth century.

A number of factors were responsible for the inability of the British expeditionary forces to conquer Esan as easily as they did Benin. One of the factors was the resistance mounted by some Benin chiefs against the British authorities which effectively blocked all roads to Esan. Another factor was the series of wars which the British expeditionary forces had to fight with the different Esan kingdoms before they could bring them under their control. After the conquest of Benin, some chiefs, especially Ologbosere and Ebohon, who refused to surrender, retreated to the north east of Benin, in the vicinity of Igieduma, Ehor, Uhi and Ugbiyokho - which were Benin villages bordering Esan, where they mounted resistance against British (Igbafe, 1979, pp.94-97) . In these areas, they established military camps which blocked all attempt by the British force to advance into the hinterland of Benin. The action of these chiefs also hindered the advances of British force into Esan territories which according to Igbafe,

... sealed off the Ishan [Esan] country from British officers and other Benin Chiefs; roads to local markets were blocked and villages under their control were prevented from making submission to Benin.... The powerful chiefs formed a centre of resistance for all those who disapproved of the establishment of British rule in Benin (*Ibid.*, pp.98-99).

The British authorities had thought that they could subdue these Benin chiefs by sending a few men and materials against them. As these various efforts proved abortive, they mobilized a large contingent to confront these defiant chiefs. In fact, the force they sent against these defiant chiefs almost equaled the ones that captured Benin. In the words of Igbafe,

[t]he seriousness with which the expedition was taken and the degree of active opposition anticipated were reflected in the size of the expedition. There were sixteen white officers of the political and other department, three of whom had the rank of brevet major, two Majors, seven Captains, two lieutenants, besides a surgeon and medical officer, one transport officer and one political officer. The main body of troops consisted of 250 other ranks who had two Maxim guns, one rocket tube apparatus and one 2.57 millimeter machine gun (*ibid.*, p.102).

The expeditionary forces had camped at a Benin village of Igieduma on 22 April, 1899 and by the next day marched against Ologbose's troops a few miles from the village of Okemue. By the 24 April, the village of Okemue though heavily defended by Ologbose force succumbed to the superior weapons of the British force (*Ibid.*, pp.102-103). It was from Okemue that the British force made the first incursion into Esan by attacking Ekpon, an Esan kingdom bordering Benin which they thought they could be captured with ease. However, unlike

the battle at Okemue which lasted for a day, the British forces met a stiff resistance from Ekpon warriors. Against the expectation of the British forces, the battle at Ekpon lasted for five days – 25 to 29 April — a situation which they were not prepared for. Out of frustration, the British forces almost destroyed the kingdom by killing innocent civilians and burning their houses. As the Ekpon warriors could not withstand the superior fire power of the invading forces and in order to save the civilian population from attack, they retreated into the forest where they launched guerilla attack against the enemies. This military strategy adopted by Ekpon warriors, completely wore out the foreign forces within a few days. As a result of the fatigue they suffered at Ekpon, the British forces withdrew from the town and retreated to Okemue thus halting further advances into Esan. It was while retreating on 29 April that they ran into ambush mounted by Ekpon warriors in which they suffered heavy casualties which included one of their key officers by name Captain Uniacke (Igbafe, 1979, pp.100-103). After this major debacle, the British forces abandoned Esan expedition to concentrate on the consolidation of their conquest of Benin territories.

It was not until the middle of May 1899 that the British finally defeated the forces of the defiant Benin chiefs. The arrest, trial and execution of some of these chiefs including Chief Ologbosere on 28 June finally put an end to what has been considered by Igbafe as,

..... the bloody drama which began with the tragic end of J.R. Phillips and several officers of the Niger Coast Protectorate at the hands of Benin soldiers on 4 January 1897 and the subsequent but more bloody punitive expedition against Benin in February 1897 (*Ibid.*, pp.105-106).

After the subjugation of all oppositions in Benin, the British authorities directed their attention to Esan. From the experience in their first battle at Ekpon, they had realized that it would require series of battles before the more than thirty kingdoms of Esan would be conquered and subjugated, unlike Benin that succumbed after a single battle. To successfully conquer Esan, each of the disparate kingdoms had to be dealt with one after the other. Like the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria, the conquest proved too costly for the British forces in terms of human and materials. In some cases, certain kingdoms which had been conquered had to be re-conquered because immediately the British forces withdrew after the initial conquest; the people would regroup and continue with resistance. This led to frustration on the part of the British forces to the extent that sometimes they had to completely burn down some Esan towns and villages to serve as warning to those still resisting. The eventual conquest of the Esan by the British can therefore, be likened to that of the Igbo which according to Afigbo,

... were fragmented into innumerable autonomous village communities each of which had to be dealt with in turn. ... As the British were later to discover, it did not make military

conquest any easier. Whether by peace or by war each tiny community had to be dealt with in turn. And since every village could not be garrisoned, those villages in which troops were not quartered tended to regard themselves as having proved too powerful for the British. This sometimes meant that even villages which had been conquered before had to be conquered a second time (Afigbo, 1980, pp.412-413).

The eventual conquest of Esan commenced when a detachment of British forces was sent to Unae and Edenu villages in Irrua kingdom in 1899. After the initial confrontation, Irrua warriors retreated into the forest where they embarked on guerilla attack which nearly cut off the supply line of the British forces. As the invading forces could not cope with the situation, they withdrew from Irrua in order to strategise on the best option to adopt in the conquest of the town. This method of attack and retreat was also adopted by other Esan kingdoms when they were attacked by British forces. The people had realized from the stories they heard about the conquest of the “powerful” Benin kingdom that they could not engage the British forces and their superior weapon in direct military confrontations and so, devised the “attack and retreat” method which the invading force had no immediate answer. After the Irrua debacle, no part of Esan was attacked again until 1901, when the British authorities sent a contingent of soldiers led by Major W.G. Heneker to bring Uromi under their authority. Like the Irrua expedition, the invading force met stiff resistance from the Onojie of Uromi and his people in a series of battles which lasted for forty-five days – 16 March to 30<sup>th</sup> April 1901 (N.A.I. C.S.O. 1901). The British party had travelled from Benin through Agbor to Igueben from where they launched the first attack against Uromi. The Uromi forces under the command of heir apparent, Prince Okojie, quickly swung into action by relocating from the main town to their headquarters situated at Umuwazi in the Okhiole ward where they prepared for a counter attack against the British forces. (Ojiefu, 2002, p.38). The British troops on the other hand, were stationed at Ebhebe village from where they bombarded Ewoyi and other Uromi villages. As the battle became fierce and closer to his palace, the Onojie of Uromi, Okolo (c.1873-1900) who “was an old man, almost crippled with age, grey haired and wrinkled, but wise and strong” (*Ibid*) fled to Amedeokhian on the outskirts of Uromi for refuge. Prince Okojie subsequently took charge of the military resistance. As the firing power of the invading force became too much for them, Uromi warriors adopted guerilla tactics against the British forces. The series surprise attack greatly frustrated the efforts by the British forces to advance into Uromi. Out of frustration, they marched to Amedeokhian where Okolo, the Onojie, was taking refuge and arrested him. He was summarily executed in cold blood without any form of trial (N.A.I., 1982, p.321; Okojie, 1994, p.378). This barbaric and brutal act on the part of the British forces against the

Onojie, “very much pained [Prince] Okojie who redoubled his effort not only to fight for the land of his birth but to avenge the ... end of his great father at the hands of the invaders” (*Ibid.*). The Prince subsequently mobilised his men to forcefully confront the invaders in order to push them out of Uromi. When the British troops realized the futility of their situation in the war, they sent a message to Benin requesting for reinforcement. However, before the reinforcement arrived from Benin, the Captain of the British troop was killed in one of the numerous surprise attacks launched against them by Uromi guerrillas. When reinforcement eventually arrived, British forces launched a major attack against Uromi forces at Awo Amedokhian. The battle last all day and seriously shook the military strength of Uromi. In the course of the battle, several houses at Awo Amedokhian, the main battle ground, were destroyed by the British forces. In spite of this, Prince Okojie and his forces refused to surrender. When the British troops found Uromi forces difficult to vanquished, they employed the service to local sympathizers such as Onokpogua, the then Ezomo of Uromi, who succeeded in deceiving the Prince out of the forest (Momodu, 2011). The Prince was subsequently arrested, summarily tried, found guilty and deported to Calabar on 30 April, 1901 (*Ibid.*). Justifying the deportation of Prince Okojie, the Political Officer, who accompanied the British Forces, Mr. Fosbery, said that,

Ekwoke (Prince Okojie) had been the prime mover of all the trouble that he was a source of danger to the peace and good order of Uromi and that to effect a speedy settlement of the country his removal was necessary for at least one year (N.A.I. C.S.O.1/3, 1901).

Several Esan towns were subsequently attacked by the British forces and one after the other, they were conquered but not without resistance. However, the British authorities were to realize that military conquests were mere Pyrrhic victory as the people easily regrouped to continue with military resistance even when troops were stationed in their towns. For example, after the conquest of Uromi, troops were stationed in the town. This however, did not end the resistance by the people as they were very hostile to the foreign troops whom they viewed as “nuisance” in their communities, most especially as they no longer had an Onojie as a result of the murder of Okolo and deportation of the heir apparent. So, they continued to engage in guerilla attack which usually took the British forces by surprise. The resistance continued for several months and when the British authorities could no longer withstand it, they conceded to the wishes of the people by allowing Prince Okojie to return from exile to ascend the throne of his forefathers (Okojie, 1994, pp.378-379). It was only after this concession that the people finally surrendered to the British authorities.

The people of Ekpoma, Irrua, Agalu, Oka, among others also mounted stiff resistance against British force

even after the initial conquest. As the British force became desperate, they resorted to the use every excuse, no matter how insignificant, to unleash terror and suffering on the people of Esan. For example, in 1904, a British contingent was sent from Benin to Ibore; an Irrua town, to arrest the killer of one Mr. Iyo of Uniya, a suspected informant and sympathizer of the British. When the contingent that was led a British Officer, Captain Henniker, could not achieve its objective, they bombarded the village (N.A.I. 1982, p.xiv). In the fierce battle that ensued, the British forces suffered heavy casualties which included two officers. Consequently, they retreated from the town and requested for reinforcement from Benin. A stronger force, led by Mr. F.S. James was later sent against the town and in spite of their heroic resistance, the people were defeated and the town was completely razed down (*Ibid.*, p.150). Ibore was again visited by British military patrol in 1906 as the people still continued to resist British authorities.

To ensure complete pacification of the people, the colonial government in Benin sent patrol troops periodically to the Esan kingdoms which had already been conquered. As late as 1906, patrol troops were still being sent to some towns and villages in Esan. These patrol troops at times, met with resistance and in some cases their route were completely blocked by Esan warriors and this made their movement difficult and sometimes impossible. This trend continued until towards the end of 1906 when the people finally surrendered to the British force as they could no longer continue with the resistance due to the brutal reprisal attack unleashed on them by the British forces. So, unlike Benin kingdom which completely collapsed after a single battle, Esan kingdoms did not surrender to British authorities until after several battles which lasted for about seven years. The eventual submission of the people therefore, was not based on the convention of the benefit of British administration or a realisation of it, but as way of avoiding excessive use of force by the British expedition against the people (Igbafe, 1979, p.111). As they could no longer continue to bear this hardship and deprivation which resulted from the punitive measures adopted by the better armed British forces, the people had no alternative but to submit to the new masters as “there is limit to which human endurance cannot extend and the hardship and privation into which the incessant punitive expedition plunged the people were bound to wear down all opposition and indigenes to their knees” (*Ibid.*) So, after heroic resistance which lasted for about seven years (1899-1906), the people of Esan eventually succumbed to the superior fire power of the British invaders. Colonial rule was finally imposed on Esan nine years after Benin kingdom had suffered the same fate. The territory was thus, incorporated into Benin Province of Southern Protectorate of Nigeria as Ishan Division.

## CONCLUSION

In spite of their heroic resistance, the people of Esan, like other kingdoms and empires in what is today Nigeria, eventually succumbed to the superior military power of the British expeditionary forces. However, they did not succumb without stiff and heroic resistance which the foreign forces initially underestimated. Though most of the centralized kingdoms and empires were subjugated immediately the metropolitan cities were captured and the rulers deposed, the less centralized states, proved to be hard nut for the British force to crack. Although Esan was culturally homogeneous, they were however politically fragmented as each of the kingdoms was independent of the other. The British authorities may have been misinformed about the relationship between Esan and Benin. They probably thought that Esan was an appendage of the much orchestrated Benin Empire and that with the conquest of Benin, all the neighbouring entities such as the Esan had been subjugated. Later events were to prove them wrong as they were confronted with stiff resistance by the people of Esan. British soldiers had to fight series of battles before they were able to subjugate all the kingdoms of Esan. So, like other segmentary societies, the kingdoms of Esan provided some of the stiffest resistance the British forces in their quest to occupy and subjugate the people in the territory that came to be known today as Nigeria. Therefore, based on all the discussions above, the British-Esan battles ought not to be seen merely in terms of the success of the British forces but as a significant resilience and prowess of Esan people in the face of overwhelming odds and technology (Crowder, 1971).

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