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By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

A dagger from the Ekumeku movement, which resisted British imperial rule in the western Igbo region for over two decades (1880s-1910s). Taken from Ogwashi-Ukwu, a key centre of

Ekumeku activity, in 1910. Now housed in the British Museum.

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COLONIAL RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

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During colonial times, the Anambra people and the Igbo communities in Delta, especially the Anioma region, faced difficulties. The British colonization of Nigeria, especially in the southeastern and Niger Delta regions, is closely linked to these conflicts.

This period demonstrates the Igbo people's tenacity, resistance, and the many hardships they faced as the British imposed their rule, subdued their culture, and disrupted their economy.

Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a great trouble among the Anambra people, who came from what is now Anambra State, and the Igbo people in Delta, also referred to as Western Igbo or Anioma.

How It Started One of Nigeria's largest ethnic groups, the Igbo are spread throughout the southern parts of Nigeria and even to beyond the Niger River. The Igbo people did not have a single monarch in charge of everyone prior to colonial control. Villages were run by councils, age groups, and elders. This was different from the way the British administered regions with strong monarch presence, like the North or Yoruba land. This decentralized Igbo system included the Igbo communities in Delta, including Aniocha, Ndokwa, Ika, and Oshimili, as well as Anambra, which was named after the Omambala River.

Following the end of the slave trade in the 19th century, the British started their expansion into Igboland in order to trade palm oil. The Niger River served as their point of entry, connecting soldiers, missionaries, and traders with the Igbo people, including those in Anambra and Delta. As the Igbo resisted their domination, the British sought complete control by the late 19th century, which led to conflict.

Anioma Resistance: The Ekumeku Movement The Ekumeku Movement, which took place in the Delta Igbo areas and parts of Anambra between 1883 and 1914, was a significant act of resistance.

In their dialect, “Ekumeku” means “silence” or “silent fight,” which reflects their mysterious strategy to fight the British. They fought to defend their freedom, way of life, and land.

When British interfered with their authority and trade, the war started. Taxes were levied, markets were destroyed, Ekumeku warriors from Asaba, Ibusa, Ogwashi-Uku, and other Anioma communities, including some Anambra neighbors, attacked British forces and their allies. There were significant conflicts in 1898, 1902, and 1904, and the final one was in 1914.

In order to crush the resistance, the British reacted brutally, using Maxim guns, setting villages on fire, and destroying properties. Armed with spears, cutlasses, and homemade firearms, the Ekumeku warriors were defeated. The Delta Igbo areas were completely subjugated by the British by 1914.

Widespread fatalities and property damage resulted from the introduction of warrant chiefs, an unfamiliar system to the Igbo. It was a terrible experience.

Anambra and Pervasive Igbo Opposition The people of Anambra also didn’t stand by and do nothing. Because there was no centralized leadership, the British took almost 50 years to conquer Igboland. The Anglo-Aro War, which lasted from 1901 to 1902, was one notable

conflict.

Aro people, who controlled trade and exercised power through their Ubini Ukpabi oracle. The British attacked because they saw them as a threat. As British forces overthrew Aro power, the towns of Anambra near the Omambala River were subjugated too. They were successful by 1902, despite hard resistance.

The British government then started “pacification” campaigns, sending troops from village to village, setting houses on fire, and enforcing submission. In Anambra, major river markets like Onitsha and ironworking hubs like Awka suffered a great deal. Additionally, missionaries arrived with the goal of converting people to Christianity, which ran counter to customs.

Economic Challenges and Upended Lives Significant economic difficulties were brought about by colonial rule. Traditional food farming was disrupted when the British forced people to grow palm oil for export. Fertile areas close to the Niger and Omambala Rivers in Anambra were turned into British commercial assets.

The Anioma people in the Delta experienced similar exploitation. Farmers who were forced to work for the colonial economy found it difficult to provide for their families.

The warrant chief system further disrupted Igbo society. Traditionally, elders and village councils governed the society, but the British appointed their chiefs, often unrespected figures who exploited people with colonial backing. This bred rebelliousness toward the imposed system.

Adaptability in the Face of Adversity The Anambra and Igbo parts of Delta managed to maintain their culture in spite of these obstacles. In some places, traditional leaders like Obi or Diokpa continued to have say, and market days—Eke, Orie, Afo, and Nkwo—persisted. While the Anioma people clung to their Igbo language and customs, the Igbo-Ukwu preserved their famous bronze craftsmanship in Anambra,

which was later discovered as archaeological treasures.

Missionary schools unintentionally gave some Igbo people more power. People from the Onitsha region, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, later promoted Nigeria's independence using this education.

The Anambra and Delta Igbo communities were highly impacted by colonialism. Later conflicts, such as the Biafra War (1967–1970), further caused pain to the region as they were at the entrance of Igbo land from Northern Nigeria. The 1967 Asaba Massacre in Anioma, in which soldiers murdered numerous people, was a reminder of the brutality of the colonial era.

During colonial times, the Anambra and Delta Igbo strongly opposed British rule. Their strength is demonstrated by the Ekumeku Movement, and during the civil war, despite the British upsetting their way of life. Their strength shapes their identity in Igbo history and in Nigeria at large.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chukwunwike Ossai

An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



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