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Positions of British and Aro-Igbo Combatants in the Anglo-Aro War (1901-1902)

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Okoroji's Farm

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Burning of Arochukwu during the Anglo-Aro War after the British captured it. Photo by Donald A. MacAlister.
Source: British Museum.



The Anglo-Aro War (1901–1902) was a conflict between the British colonial forces and the Aro Confederacy in southeastern Nigeria. The war led to the fall of the Aro Confederacy and the expansion of British rule in the region. The British fought the war to break Aro dominance in trade and politics, while the Aro people defended their land and influence. This article explains the positions of both British and Aro-Igbo combatants during the war and their military strategies.

01

Background of the Anglo-Aro War

The Aro Confederacy was a powerful political and economic force in southeastern Nigeria. It controlled trade routes and the Ibini Ukpabi oracle, which was highly respected in Igbo society. The Aro also played a key role in the slave trade, which the British wanted to end. In 1901, the British attacked the Aro to reduce their power and take more control of Southern Nigeria.

02

British Military Strategy and Positions

The British army had about 87 officers, 1,550 soldiers, and 2,100 carriers. Their strategy was to attack Arochukwu, the capital of the Aro Confederacy, from multiple directions. The British advanced through four main routes:

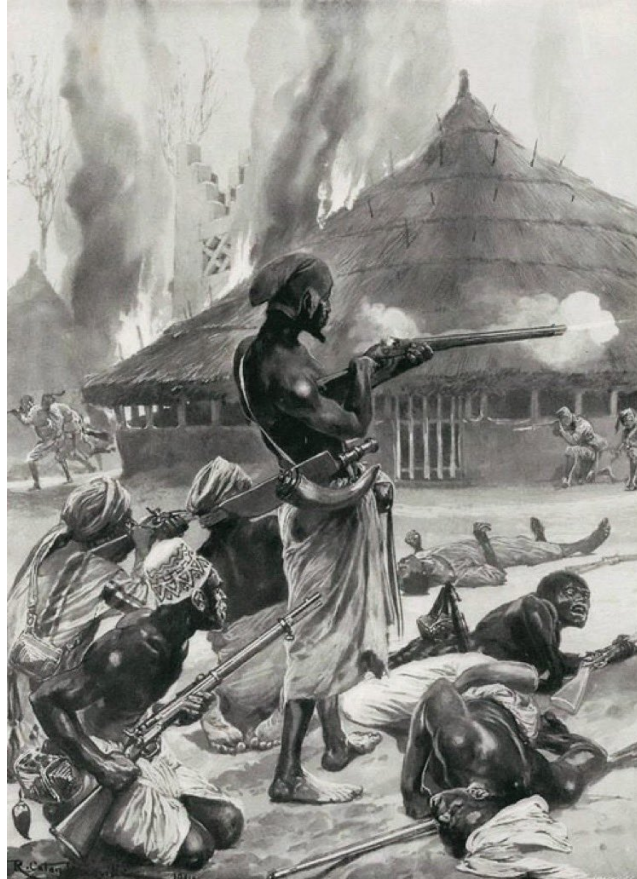


OGUTA ROUTE	British forces moved from Oguta towards Arochukwu, facing resistance from Aro warriors along the way.
AKWETE ROUTE	British troops advanced from Akwete, encountering ambushes and obstacles set by Aro defenders.
UNWANA ROUTE	This route included riverine areas, making movement difficult for the British forces.
ITU ROUTE	The British faced strong opposition from Aro fighters using guerrilla warfare.

The British used modern weapons, including Maxim guns and 75mm artillery, giving them an advantage over the Aro warriors, who mostly had old rifles, swords, and machetes. Their main tactic was to surround and isolate Arochukwu by attacking from different directions at the same time. This strategy worked, and Arochukwu fell in December 1901.

03

The Opening Up of Nigeria: The Expedition Against the Aros (1901)



The Opening Up of Nigeria: The Expedition Against the Aros" (1901) by Richard Caton Woodville II.

04

Aro-Igbo Defensive Tactics and Positions

The Aro Confederacy was well-prepared for the war. They built trenches and used guerrilla tactics to resist the British army. Some of their key strategies included:

- **Fortified Trenches:** Aro warriors dug hidden trenches in strategic locations, such as Okoroji's Farm, to ambush British troops. These trenches were so well made that even British officers were surprised by their quality.
- **Guerrilla Warfare:** Aro fighters used hit-and-run attacks and ambushes to slow down British advances.
- **Strongholds in Key Towns:** Towns like Bende and Edimma were well



defended and used as bases for counterattacks.

During the battle at Okoroji's Farm, British soldiers entered an open area where Aro warriors had concealed trenches. The Aro fired heavily, forcing the British to rethink their approach. The British stopped moving forward and used artillery fire before attacking from the flanks. The Aro eventually retreated, suffering many casualties.

05

Key Battles and Outcomes

Several important battles took place during the Anglo-Aro War:

- Battle of Arochukwu (December 1901) – British forces captured Arochukwu after weeks of fighting, marking a turning point in the war (Wikipedia, 2024).
- Battle of Edimma (January 1902) – The Aro put up strong resistance but were eventually defeated.
- Battle of Bende (March 1902) – This was the final major battle. The Aro suffered heavy losses, and their organized resistance collapsed.

06

Aftermath and Legacy

After the war, the British took control of southeastern Nigeria and ended the Aro Confederacy's influence. The Ibini Ukpabi oracle was destroyed, and the Aro's economic power declined. However, the war also showed the bravery and military skill of the Aro people. Their resistance remains an important part of Nigerian history.

The Anglo-Aro War was a major event in Nigeria's colonial history. The British used modern weapons and military strategies, while the Aro relied on trench warfare and guerrilla tactics. Although the British



won, the war highlighted the determination of the Aro people to defend their land. Today, the war is remembered as a symbol of African resistance against colonial rule.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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