

WAR DIPLOMACY IN PRE-COLONIAL IGBO LAND – THE NNEWI EXAMPLE

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Abstract

There are quite a handful of scholars who strongly believe and posit that a greater part of African societies of which Igbo land is a part of, in the pre-colonial era were not involved in diplomatic practices until the takeover of the region by the Europeans. It would be difficult to accept such assertion hook, line and sinker especially in the light of the various inter-group relations that took place among the various African societies in the pre-colonial era. Human existence and the various co-operations that go with it has made the practice of diplomacy essential among groups of human societies including African societies in pre-colonial times. Hence, diplomacy being a strategy or mechanism by which competitive national interest is achieved was adequately employed by pre-colonial African societies- Igbo communities in particular, to achieve their various interests as they relate with each other. War which in this regard is relations by other means, served as a useful diplomatic tool to achieve interest, as African communities at various points in the pre-colonial era employed this diplomatic tool to secure and protect their interest. This work is targeted at highlighting war as a key mode/channel by which diplomatic practices was facilitated during the pre-colonial times in Igbo land generally and particularly in Nnewi. War in pre-colonial times enhanced diplomatic intercourse and provided the avenue for some key diplomatic principles such as Negotiation, Mediation and Alliances to be engaged in, between Nnewi and her neighboring communities as well as among other Igbo communities.

Key words- Diplomacy, War, Pre-colonial, Igbo-land, Nnewi

Introduction

The recurrence of war throughout history surely cannot be explained in terms of human cussedness. Unless war served some useful purpose, or at least unless rulers, governments and people fancied that it did, it would not have become such a hardy perennial of the international society. No matter how men argue against the use of war, or how convincingly they may prove that its costs may far exceed the values gained from it, it will survive as long as the rulers of mankind are unable to agree on an acceptable alternative to it. The hard fact is that war is a method of achieving interest and purposes. Nwankwo (2002), notes that contrary to the arguments against the use of war, evidence points inescapably to the conclusion that war has often paid, and moreover, that it has paid not only for bad men working in bad causes but often for good men in good causes. Hence for that reason it persists as an instrument of national policy. He further stated that the argument against the use of war must rest not upon misconceptions of its utility but upon the realization that it is an inhumane and barbarous way of achieving even goods ends. However, it has to be stated that war has persisted because of its social utility of which it has performed functions for which there have been no other workable procedures. Thus it seems indisputable that war has performed functions that have been socially desirable and that it has made contributions quite beyond the capabilities of any other means. For centuries, war has been regarded as a means of remedying unjust situations, of settling disputes, of enforcing rights, it has also been used as an instrument against criminal aggression as much as it has been the instrument of aggression itself. The students of history can point to countless instances in which war was the means by which unfair and unjust situations has been upturned, for instance the French Revolution overturned a corrupt and autocratic monarchy, the Latin

American Wars of Independence removed the heavy hand of Spain and gave to Latin Americans the opportunity to build their own lives and fortunes and the wars in the Balkans brought release from Turkish misrule. Furthermore, Nwankwo (2002) pointed out that war has been the instrument by which most of the great facts of political national history have been established and maintained. It has played a dominant role in nearly all political crises, it has been used to achieve liberty, to secure democracy and to attempt to make it secure against the menace of its use by other hands.

Therefore in the light of the usefulness of war this work tends to highlight war as a national policy in pre-colonial Nnewi, serving as a diplomatic instrument for achieving the national interest of territorial expansion.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The non-existence of centralized political structure in some African societies such as the Igbo society during the pre-colonial time has made some scholars to regard such societies as chaotic societies and thus unfamiliar to diplomatic practices. According to Njoku (2003), these scholars include David Hume, Arnold Toynbee and Sir Hugh Trevor-Roper. These scholars belong to the school of thought which denied the historical existence of positive inter-group relations in Africa before the advent of Europeans.

Njoku (2003) as well noted that scholars who tow this line of thought believe that the nature of inter-group relations in pre-colonial Igbo land was characterized by chaos, barbarism and stagnation and so were not familiar with the art and science of diplomacy before the coming of the Europeans. The evidence often proffered to support this stance is the vicious conflicts, wars and instability in various parts of Igbo land by the time the Europeans came. Nnewi which

is one of the well known towns in traditional Igbo society had a fair share of wars during the pre-colonial era. Alutu (1963) made mention of some of these wars such as the Uruagu-Nnewichi war which was a war between two villages in Nnewi and the war of Eze Okpo known also as the Otolo-Eze Kwuabo war, this war was between Eze kwuabo people under the leadership of Eze Okpo and the rest of the people of Otolo which is another village in Nnewi.

But it is erroneous to assert that due to the chaos and wars in Igbo land during the pre-colonial era, diplomacy was not practiced. It is important to note that it was through the diplomatic machineries available in Igbo land during the pre-colonial era that the various wars and conflicts were resolved and settled and even war itself could sometimes be employed as a diplomatic means.

And also regarding the absence of a centralized political structure in pre-colonial Igbo land it must be stated that for the purpose of inter-societal and inter-group relations there existed systems/structures in Igbo societies to facilitate such roles. Therefore, it is erroneous to opine that the Igbo are strangers to diplomacy just because they had no centralized political structure and had lots of conflicts and chaos among themselves. Consequently, little or no studies has been carried out to determine war as a diplomatic tool in pre-colonial Igbo land especially in Nnewi, therefore, this study is set to fill this gap.

Objectives of the Study

This work has the objective of highlighting war as a veritable instrument or channel through which diplomacy was practiced in pre-colonial Igbo land in general and Nnewi in particular, despite its chaotic nature. It will also establish the fact that wars rather than permanently destabilizing and destroying pre-colonial Igbo societies, provided opportunities for various

diplomatic practices to be utilized both in the execution of the wars (with regards to alliances) and in resolving the various conflicts (with regards to mediation and negotiation). This work also has the objective of highlighting the fact that irrespective of the various wars fought during the pre-colonial era in Igbo land, inter-societal and inter-group relations of which war is a part of, still existed through the various systems/structures in Igbo societies which facilitated them.

REALISM AS A THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

Realism is one of the dominant theories in international relations which is of the view that international politics is driven by competitive self-interest. According to Ekpe, Abasiattai, & Akpan (2012), for realist, states are the main actors in the international system because they are legally sovereign actors. The principle of sovereignty is that there is no actor above the state that can compel it in a desired way. Thus, Nnewi in the pre-colonial era was a sovereign entity with its own internal organization, government and administration, without any supra-national authority over it and was driven by its self interest which was primarily geared towards territorial expansion, of which it pursued with the means of military/war diplomacy. Hence Nnewi in pre-colonial times fought a lot of wars with her neighbours through which they forcefully took over and occupied the territories of their neighbouring communities. Furthermore, Ekpe, et,al (2012), noted that for the realist it is human nature that compels states to act the way they do, human nature according to them is fixed and crucially selfish, thus explaining Nnewi's attitude towards her neighbours during the pre-colonial era which was mostly brutal and selfish, only focused on achieving her selfish interest. For the realist, since there is no supra-national authority in the international system or sovereign body above the states, international politics is characterized by self-help, where states that make up the international system rely extensively on their military

resources to achieve their ends. Such was the case for Nnewi in pre-colonial times which relied heavily on military instruments and resources for the achievement of her interest. Elaborating more on the concept of self-help as espoused by the realist, Dunne and Schmidt (2006) noted that self-help is the principle of action in an anarchical system where there is no global government. According to the realist theory, each state actor is responsible for ensuring their own well-being and survival. Realists do not believe it is prudent for a state to entrust its safety and survival to another actor or international institution. It is thus with this realist mentality that pre-colonial Nnewi survived and achieved her interest.

METHODS

This work which involved the construction of the history of pre-colonial diplomatic practices in Nnewi by means of war was carried out using a historical research approach, which involves a systematic and objective location, evaluation and synthesis of evidence in order to establish facts and draw conclusions as regards to ancient history of Nnewi. It involved a qualitative/descriptive analysis of data collected from oral tradition, and published works. The study used discrete analysis of the interviews and materials to achieve the desired goal of the research.

NNEWI AND HER NEIGHBOURS IN THE PRE-COLONIAL ERA

Nnewi is one of the Igbo urban towns east of the Niger in Anambra State of Nigeria. It is the present headquarter of Nnewi North Local Government Area and it has been classified by Uchendu (1965) and NjaKa (1974) as belonging to the central Igbo Area. Through the Onitsha-Oba-Nnewi old road to Nkwo market triangle, which is the centre of the town is about twenty-

four kilometers away from the River Niger. From the Onitsha-Oba-Okigwe new express road, it is about twenty kilometres away.

Nnewi is bound on the North by Ojoto, to the South by Ozubulu and Ukpok, on the East by Nnobi, Awka-Etiti and Amichi, and on the west by Oraifite and Ichi. It lies approximately between latitudes 6.00N and 6.03N and between longitudes 6.50E and 7.00E. The town covers a surface area of about seventy-two square kilometres, and has an elevation of about ninety metres above sea level, (Ugochukwu, 2000).

Nnewi's relations with her neighbours in pre-colonial times were characterized by wars of expansion. According to Ifeakandu (Personal Communication, August 7, 2015) Nnewi was a greedy and covetous people and as a result coveted the lands of their neighbouring towns. This made Nnewi to fight a lot of wars with her neighbouring towns and as they fought they displaced the people and took over their lands both for settlement and for farming purposes. This is why the present day Nnewi has a large territory, which were mostly lands forcefully taken from her neighbours. Hence, Chukwuka (Personal Communication, August 4, 2015) pointed out that war diplomacy was the strategy adopted by Nnewi in her relations with her immediate neighbours in the pre-colonial times. War diplomacy involved the use of military tactics and strategy to achieve national interest. The tactics they employed most times involved laying ambush against people going to the market or stream and from there invade an entire village.

Chukwuka (Personal Communication, August 4, 2015), however highlighted that Nnewi in pre-colonial times also had diplomatic relations with some of her distant neighbours such as the Abam people of Ohaofia with whom they formed military alliances as the Abam people had

strong warriors, hence Nnewi formed alliance with them so as to enable them fight their numerous wars.

Along the same line, Okeke (Personal Communication, August 5, 2015) pointed out that Nnewi's diplomatic relations with her distant neighbours in the pre-colonial times also extended to Nri as they most times relied on Nri spiritualists for some form of spiritual assistance especially with regards to fortifying themselves spiritually before embarking on their wars as well as spiritual cleansing of the land whenever sacrilege was committed on the land. According to one of the oral sources interviewed (Chukwuka), this spiritual fortification comes in the form of tying some charms given to them by the Nri spiritualists round their waists and arms by the Nnewi fighters while the spiritual cleansing is done by the Nri spiritualist using a sheep while the person(s) who committed the sacrilege dresses half naked and acknowledges the evil they have done by speaking it out over the sheep. After this the person(s) who committed the sacrilege lies on the ground while the sheep is made to climb on the person(s). When this ritual is completed the land is cleansed of the evil committed.

Thus, Nnewi in pre-colonial times employed war diplomacy in her relations with her immediate neighbours and at the same time diplomatically forming alliances with some of her distant neighbours in order to achieve her military, spiritual/religious as well as economic interest.

WAR: NEGOTIATION, MEDIATION AND ALLIANCE

Oxford advanced learners dictionary referred to war as a situation in which two or more countries or groups of people fight against each other over a period of time. War in diplomatic process is most times used as coercive diplomacy which Unanka (2006) defined as a military

instrument for the implementation of foreign policy or resolution of conflict/crisis situations. Unanka (2006) went further to state that coercive diplomacy most times takes the form of military maneuverings. North Korea was able to use it effectively during the Korean War (1950-53) because it had the military might, (Unanka, 2006). Thus, pre-colonial Nnewi had used war as a diplomatic instrument a lot of times. Some of these wars include the Otolu Nnewi-Awka etiti war, the Nnewi-Nnobi war, the Nnewi-Igboukwu war and so on, most of which took place between the 17th to 19th centuries.

The role of war as a factor of contact in this region and during this period has usually been misunderstood. It is common to assume that wars were more or less endemic not only amongst the Igbo, but also between them and their neighbours, and that these wars usually created serious discontinuities in inter-group relations. But not only were the wars not as endemic as is popularly believed, but they did not necessarily create the degree of discontinuity in inter-group relations usually credited to them. As in other societies, so also here, war was the continuation of relations. In other words wars here were usually waged by communities whose lives and livelihoods were interlocked to an almost inextricable degree. And they went to war simply because these interlocked interests could not be sorted out to the satisfaction of all concerned. Whether the war usually succeed in sorting them out or not, the fact is that the result was that the relationship which preceded the wars, and which continued in one form or another during wars, in most cases survived each war, (Afigbo, 1981).

Apart from using war as a diplomatic tool to achieve interests, war had also opened way for some other modes of diplomacy such as negotiation, mediation and alliance, as Nnewi even in the midst of fighting wars was also exploring other diplomatic channels.

Barston (1996) defined negotiation as an attempt to explore and reconcile conflicting positions in order to reach an acceptable outcome. On the other hand Berridge (2005) referred to Mediation as the active search for a negotiated settlement to an international or intrastate conflict by an impartial third party. Also Godongs (2006), as well stated that mediation is a special form of negotiation in which a neutral third party has a role. Such role is to help the parties in conflict achieve a mutually acceptable settlement. He further noted that it is any activity in which an agreement on whatever matter is researched by an impartial third party, usually a professional, in the common interest of the parties. Since direct negotiation between disputants is not always feasible, given their divergent interests, needs and emotions, third party intervention becomes necessary in many conflicts. Negotiation and mediation thus is a veritable diplomatic tool for the settlement of dispute and conflict situations. For instance negotiation and mediation process played out in 1979 when President Jimmy Carter of the United States mediated between Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and negotiated the historic peace treaty (the camp David accord) between Israel and Egypt, (Unanka, 2006). Regarding alliance as used in this work, it has to do with military alliance. Weissberg (1985) referred to military alliance as a diplomatic strategy whereby groups of individual nations agree to protect themselves from foreign oppression by treating an attack on one as an attack on all, as a way of deterring aggressive behaviour. Examples of military alliances in contemporary history include the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), WARSAW PACT and the South East Asian Treaty Organization (S.E.A.T.O), where an attack on any member nation is considered an attack on all, thus requiring every signatory to come to the aid of the victim, (Unanka, 2006).

Thus in pre-colonial times Nnewi had used these diplomatic modes to achieve her interests most especially in the various wars they had fought.

Nnewi in pre-colonial times fought many wars for territorial expansion as well as in response to external aggression, and they usually used war to achieve their interests. An example of this was narrated by Alutu (1963). It was a war between Otolu Nnewi and her neighbouring Amichi in the 17th century, executed by two war leaders from both sides- Eze Enwe came from Otolu Nnewi while Nwamkpi came from Amichi. The war was instigated when Eze Enwe's brother was killed by Nwamkpi, and in response Eze Enwe mobilized against Nwamkpi in Amichi. The war ended when the elders of Amichi- (who felt that if the war was allowed to continue it would lead to over running of Amichi by Nnewi's strong army and most likely their territory would be taken over)- negotiated a cease fire with Nnewi, promising to surrender Nwamkpi to them. Thus, by this it showed how war/coercive diplomacy paved way for diplomacy by negotiation.

Another example as stated by Alutu (1963) was in the war between Otolu Nnewi and Igboekwu. It all began with small skirmishes which later became more violent and many lives in Otolu Nnewi were lost. As Otolu Nnewi then remobilized for a more aggressive fight, Igboekwu negotiated a meeting at Nkwo Igboekwu (their market square) there Nnewi elders demanded four pieces of cloth and an ox as well as basketful of house flies, tsetse flies, Agbisi and Ichekwiliche. These would be used for rituals to prevent Igboekwu from executing further attacks on Nnewi people, these flies being flies that bite and sting.

With regards to mediation, in pre-colonial Nnewi there were people who served as mediators, mediating in cases of conflicts between villages. Okeke (Personal Communication, August 4, 2015) stated that his great grandfather Obi Okeke served as one. Obi Okeke was the Obi of Abubo Nnewichi and the great grand-father of the current Obi. This shows the caliber of people who acted as mediators in pre-colonial Nnewi. They were mostly traditional rulers, title

holders who were widely respected, as well as wealthy personalities, war lords and even chief priests.

One of the things that characterized the wars fought by Nnewi especially the major ones, was the alliances formed in the process. Alutu (1963) also highlighted that Otolo Nnewi was in high spirit and very enthusiastic and optimistic during the Otolo-Akwa-etiti war because of the alliance it had formed with Igboukwu. He stated that on the fixed day, the Otolos jumped into the war as they had the assistance of soldiers from Igboukwu known as Umu Afa Igbo, with whom they felt the conquest of Awka-etiti would be a mere walk over. The Alliance was based on a previous war fought between Nnewi and Igboukwu as stated above, but was resolved after a presentation of some items for rituals to Nnewi by Igboukwu. Thus an alliance evolved which provided that none of the parties should venture attacking each other but instead assist each other in times of war.

It has to be noted that in each war fought by Nnewi in pre-colonial times, it added to its territory. This is the more reason why Nnewi was ever eager to go to war at any slightest provocation.

Furthermore, Alutu (1963) highlighted the alliance formed by Eze Orimmili of Uruagu Nnewi with Ohaofia people during the Uruagu-Oraifite war (“agha-oha”) which was caused by the invasion of neighbouring Oraifite by Uruagu Nnewi for territorial aggrandizement. With the alliance formed, Eze Orimili arranged with the Ohaofia troops for the invasion of Oraifite and other contiguous communities. Ohaofia was to be paid for this alliance with slaves and some other items such as oxen and metal objects like matchets.

Conclusion

In conclusion it has to be noted that in as much war was prevalent in pre-colonial Igbo societies, it did not prevent the co-existence of the various Igbo communities nor did it hinder them from relating with each other through other means such as trade, marriage, religion and so on. War only served as one of such means for furtherance of relations when peaceful means have failed, war here was just a diplomatic tool for achieving interest. It has to be noted too that despite the numerous wars in pre-colonial Igbo societies, they still had their peculiar mechanisms for resolving crises and managing conflicts prior to the advent of the Europeans in the second half of the 15th century. They also had diplomatic institutions and frameworks for bilateral and multilateral relations. These institutions might not have been sophisticated if assessed from a biased modern Eurocentric perspective, but they sufficed for the people's milieu and needs. Hence, war served as an effective diplomatic tool for Nnewi in pre-colonial times as her interest were achieved by it and also paved way for the application of other modes of diplomacy.

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LIST OF SELECTED INTERVIEWEES

S/N	Name of Person Interviewed	Status/ Occupation	Place of Interview	Age	Mode of Interview	Interview date
1.	Obi Francis Okeke (Obidiegwu)	Obi of Abubo Nnewichi	Nnewichi Nnewi	68years	Direct	4/8/15
2.	Mr. Ifeakandu Onubuogu Emmanuel	Village Elder	Nnobi	60years	Direct	7/8/15
3.	Mr. Emmanuel Sunday Chukwuka (Odu)	Village Elder	Umudim Nnewi	78years	Direct	4/8/15
4.	Mr. Francis Okeke	Village Elder	Uruagu Nnewi	56years	Direct	5/8/15