WARFARE AND PEACEMAKING IN PRE-COLONIAL IGBOLAND

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Abstract
States have disparate interest groups, which may be ethnic, economic, ideological etc. Dealing with all these forces often involved the use of diplomacy and coercion, to prevent or balance destructive conflicts of interests and values. And so one of the most important functions of any State is to ensure peaceful co-existence and social justice among the various groups within and outside its borders through its social, legal, political and military institutions. In pre-colonial times, Igbo States like others in the area that later morphed into Nigeria, experienced various forms and levels of conflicts that sometimes escalated into intra-group and inter-group wars. This work considers such wars, by using historical data from primary and secondary sources as well as interviews to survey selected wars that occurred in certain parts of Igboland. These accounts formed the basis for careful generalisation on warfare in the region during the pre-colonial times. The work infers that warfare and the processes of peace making in Igboland before the colonial period were determined by among other things socio-political structure of the society and the world view of the Igbo at the time, such as abhorence for shedding of a kinsman's blood in time of peace or war. Finally, their humane conduct of wars and treatment of the defeated and prisoners of war have much to recommend them even in present times.
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Introduction

War is a situation of violent conflict where two groups or States fight against each other over values or scarce resources. Wars were unavoidable features of States in the pre-colonial period and occurred when diplomacy failed to resolve serious conflicts in intra-state and inter-state relations. This work considers warfare and peace making in Igboland in pre-colonial times paying close attention to the nature of wars, environmental influence on wars, preparation and weapons, causes of wars and peace-making processes.

Like many other parts of pre-colonial Africa, wars in Igboland were triggered by diverse factors, the most common being economic, particularly contestation over land. Wars could be prolonged but not endless. Efforts were made by both State and non-State actors to terminate wars and to ensure peace often times on conditions that preserved the prestige of the belligerents. Long before the Geneva Conventions on the conduct of wars, the Igbo had military conventions adopted to reduce the brutality of conflicts. Warring States or groups refrained from attacking such soft targets as women, children and markets as well as religious centres or shrines.

Nature of Conflicts and Warfare

Inter-group relations in pre-colonial Igboland was not always peaceful. Sometimes wars were fought when diplomacy failed to resolve serious disagreements. In the pre-colonial period, wars were an essential feature in domestic and external relations of both centralized and non-centralised States. However, military historians agree that the nature, intensity and frequency of wars varied from society to society and was dependent on certain factors. In this regard, Osadolor (2011) notes the significant influence of the physical environment on combats. He contends that "there was not a model of a single military culture. For instance, while the forest promoted fighting on foot, the river promoted fighting from boat and the savannah promoted fighting from horse back" (Osadolor 2011:12).

Igboland is located in the forest zone where mobility and interaction were very difficult. The forest environment barred the use of horses for movement and for wars. Wars were therefore fought by foot soldiers (infantry) due to the absence of the horse. In riverine Igbo communities with largely maritime economies, wars were waged on water using war canoes to control territories and river routes. Richard and John Lander in their exploration of the River Niger, reported of the presence of patrolling war canoes in the lower Niger believed to be owned by the Aboh of Western Igboland. Isichei (1977), also describes the Osomari an Igbo state as one of the major naval powers on the lower Niger in the nineteenth century. All these demonstrate the reality of naval warfare among the riverine Igbo States and communities in pre-colonial times.

In addition to location, other factors such as the socio-political structure of the society and available technology to a large extent defined the nature of pre-colonial African wars. In the case of Igboland, the decentralized State system also, affected the nature of warfare and military organization in the area. There were no pan-Igbo wars just as there was no pan- Igbo State but wars could breakout between lineages, villages and village groups. The segmentary system of many Igbo States unlike some centralized large kingdoms did not call for large armies to fight their wars. It is believed that this small size of Igbo States and their armies also contributed to "their pacifist tendencies" in intra-group and inter-group relations (Onwumechili, 2000:23).

Moreover, the absence of repressive socio-political institutions encouraged a culture of peace and diplomacy instead of war and coercion among the largely egalitarian Igbo States. Igbo States like many pre-colonial states in West Africa did not have a standing or regular army of professional and full time soldiers (Akinade 2021; Ajayi and Smith, 1971). In Igboland, the famed war-like Ohafia and Abam village States produced what could approximate to professional soldiers. However, soldiers including the regularly engaged Ohafia and Abam warriors were not known to undergo any formal training. Rather, troops were raised to fight as the need arose and once hostilities ceased soldiers moved back to peace time occupations (Odoemene, 2011; Akinade, 2021; Akinjogbin,1980).

In some parts of Igboland, soldiers were raised from selected youthful age grades with physically fit young men ready to fight on short notice (Isichei, 1977; Azuonye, 2002). Ohafia represents an example of States with such military security, based on well organised age grades. Ohafia's warlike culture is explained by her geographical location in the midst of hostile Igbo and non-Igbo neighbours. She had to develop her military strength and readiness by making active participation in wars compulsory for certain age grades.

Her survivalist aggressive security involved head hunting expeditions and frequent wars in Igboland and the Cross River areas. These wars were made compulsory for certain age grades. Ohafia society therefore came to glorify gallantry and the warrior or dike. Those who failed to fight in wars and to bring back human heads were excluded from induction into the revered warrior class and were greatly despised and consistently humiliated in Ohafia society. They were described as ujo meaning cowards or the fearful (Azuonye, 2002).

Among the Obowo people, young men were not forced to go to war but were expected as a sense of duty to offer military services when their community needed them. However, as Anyanwu (1988:9) elaborates; "Obowo people did not take kindly toward those who failed to enlist in the army; such persons were treated as "saboteurs" of the common will to survive". The penalty for dodging enlistment for no good reason in this Igbo society include ostracism and loss of face for the family.

Igbo States waged both regular (open) and irregular wars (guerilla and commando attacks) depending on the circumstances. In the same war situation, combatants could adopt any or a combination of these approaches against their enemies. However, guerilla warfare and commando attacks were used mostly in slave raids and counter-raids and in dealing with other military missions that could not be effectively carried out with regular methods. For instance, irregular warfare was used by Igbo groups to wage wars and to abduct or kill fugitive offenders or criminals living in exile in enemy territories. It was also adopted to capture or assassinate renowned warriors in enemy camps (Anyanwu, 1988, Odoemene, 2011).

In Western Igboland, just before the dawn of formal colonial rule, Ekumeku warriors adopted guerilla methods in fighting against the better equipped army of the Royal Niger Company and later the British colonial force (Isichei, 1976). For years, the Ekumeku soldiers controlled the Asaba hinterlands and successfully resisted company and later protectorate soldiers sent against them.

Also, in his micro study of Obowo military history, Anyanwu (1988) records that Umungwa, an Obowo village used their commandos to eliminate a fugitive who fled to his maternal home, another Obowo village known as Umuokeh. This was carried out after several diplomatic moves for his repatriation to Umungwa failed. The assassination of this popular fugitive which Umuokeh saw as a violation of her sovereignty precipitated the Umungwa-Umuokeh war that lasted for about three years.

Preparation and Weapons of Wars in Pre-colonial Igboland

Igbo village states especially with heightened insecurity of the slave trade period, made arrangements to safe guard their territories against invasion and surprise attacks. They dug trenches and moats and set traps around their towns or communities to prevent sudden or surprise attacks from enemies (Odoemene, 2011; Basden, 1982).

Before the commencement of wars, communities often engaged the services of medicine men to prepare medicine for the safety of their society and soldiers. Such religious preparation boosted the morale of fighters as they embarked on wars. Basden (1982:203) observes this feature of Igbo warfare in the Awka Civil War early in the twentieth century (1903-1904) where a medicine man was invited by a section of the belligerents “to concort medicine, provide charms, and offer sacrifices to ensure success" and to immune the fighters against bullets. Isichei (1976) comments on this practice of resorting to supernatural protection in wars by individuals and communities in Igboland. She stressed that "to the Igbo, religio - magical

protection was at least as important as conventional weaponry in preparing for war. No war preparations were complete without the dibia who arranged religious protection both for individuals and for the whole town". (Isichei, 1976:78)

Prosecution of wars in pre-colonial times was also aided by military intelligence. Intelligence gathering involved the use of spies, informants, and usually a recource to the supernatural to gain inside information and early warning on impending danger or attack, plans, strengths and weaknesses of an enemy State. In Igboland, women were not known to have played any direct role as combatants in wars and extant literature hardly reveals any organised and widespread use of women for intelligence gathering. This aspect of pre-colonial Igbo history needs more research attention. Nonetheless, in some traditions like the Alayi-Nkalu war, a daughter of Alayi married in Nkalu was said to have passed on critical information to her natal home, used to neutralise the powers of the Nkalu Warrior and commander, which led to the defeat of the Nkalu people.

Combatants in Igbo wars employed different types of weapons such as sticks, clubs, stones, knives, bows and arrows, spears etc. (Odoemene, 2011). Fire arms were not widely used in Igboland before the second half of the nineteenth century. However, the possession of guns in wars gave a State or group, military and psychological edge over others that did not have fire arms. Basden (1982) submits that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Danish (dane) guns and American snider rifles had become common among the Igbo. These guns were imported mainly from Europe and the United States, through the Littoral States of the Niger Delta. Growing demand for guns in the course of time gave rise to local fabrication of guns that supplemented imports and servicing of damaged or malfunctioning ones. The introduction of fire arms in Igboland is implicated in the increasing brutality of wars in the area, especially from the nineteenth century onwards.

The manner these Western weapons were used initially depended on the type of war. In civil wars or intra-village wars (ogu) likely to involve kinsmen or groups that have real or putative blood relationship; weapons were used with caution to avoid killing a kinsman something the Igbo abhorred. But in inter-state wars involving one village group and another without kinship relationship (agha or ogu egbe) all sorts of weapons including guns were freely used and belligerents could be killed without remorse. In wars between kin groups military codes or certain conventions were observed such as the exemption of women, children and visiting traders as well as markets and shrines etc. from attacks.

Causes of Wars in Pre-colonial Igboland

Different conditions and circumstances were strong motives for wars in pre-colonial times not only in Igboland but in other parts of West Africa. Just as in modern wars, these factors were as diverse as the need and desire for territorial expansion, economic advancement, protection and enforcement of cultural values, personal and political interests (Akinade, 2021; Odoemene, 2011; Anyanwu, 1988). Some of these reasons for wars will be subsequently examined using specific experiences of few Igbo Village States and communities.

The most prevalent cause of wars in Igboland just as in other parts of pre-colonial Africa was expansionism especially the desire to acquire land or retain land for farming or settlement. Typical examples of wars triggered by contestation over land include wars fought in the late nineteenth century by a number of village groups in the Owerri area known as 'Ogu Mkpuru Oka'. Territorial expansion often became necessary with population increase. Obibi village group faced this situation but unfortunately she was surrounded by other village groups giving

her little or no room for expansion without encroaching into a neighbour's farmland. Since every village group protected its land jealously, Obibi had no alternative but to endeavour to extend her boundaries by war (Isichei, 1976:79).

Records also show that the Ezza of northeastern Igboland, hemmed in by Igbo and non-Igbo groups resorted to wars of expansion to deal with the problem of land hunger. Ottenberg (2005) notes that the Ezza were locked in on all sides by other Igbo or the Cross River peoples and were prone to fight in order to expand. It is therefore not surprising that like the Ohafia they made "military service compulsory for age groups of fighting age" (Ottenberg, 2005:14).

The Alayi people of Southern Igboland expanded eastward due largely to population pressure on available land, by defeating the Nkanu people who probably were the autochthons in the whole or part of the present Amankalu area. The war described in the local tradition as tough and prolonged, was fought by selected age groups in Alayi. The memory of this war is still preserved in the way the Amankalu areas of Alayi address themselves as "Mba gburu enyi".

In the pre-colonial times, issues that were quite personal in nature could escalate into wars between one community and another due to the slim divide between the individual and the community in the traditional society. For this reason, inter-personal conflicts or disagrements often pitched one community against another. The Igbo consider it a great honour to defend their kinship interests and values. Therefore every family, village or village group was duty bound to protect its territorial integrity and the lives of its members within or outside its physical space. Also, a village or a village group had what could be described as collective or national prestige. A group might also go to war if its sovereignty and also this perceived prestige or honour appeared to be insulted or at stake. Not to do anything at all in the face of real or perceived wrong, provocation and insult was interpreted as weakness and could mean loss of face or social prestige for a group concerned.

This inter-weaving of personal and communal interests partly explains why particularly the killing of a kinsman in such matters that were wholly personal when not properly addressed and restituted often snowballed into wars involving entire communities. For instance, Anyanwu (1988) attributes the Avutu civil war of about 1740 AD and the Umuokeh - Umulogho war that started in the 1890s all among the Obowo, to inter-personal economic disputes. The first started as a disagreement between two women over the price of local beans, which resulted to the death of a young man. The second was a dispute over the amount of balance due to a buyer in a transaction.

Another inter-personal issue that often led to wars was marriage dispute in either endogamous or exogamous marriages. In the pre-colonial times marriages were used to cement inter-personal and inter-group relationships. Contrarily, marriage was also a frequent source of wars. Families and the larger groups never took it lightly when their married daughters were maltreated or harmed by their husbands and could resort to the use of force to seek redress when attempts at peaceful resolution failed. Therefore, while marriage was a vital source of peace making and peace keeping, it could also be a factor of conflict. As Isichei (1970) aptly observes; th*e practice of exogamy was a fruitful source of disputes. Every village had a large group of daughters married in other towns. If any of them was maltreated in life or in death, the resulting dispute easily escalated into wars.*

In Orlu area, flouting of tradition in a marital relationship was behind the Amucha - Umudioka war, which occurred in the late nineteenth century. The tradition of the people required that the

remains of a married daughter be sent to her family of birth for burial. Where disagreements arose, families of a deceased married woman often used force to ensure that this tradition was respected. In this particular case one titled man from Amucha *"refused to send the corpse of his late wife to Umudioka her natal home"* for burial against tradition and consent of the woman's family (Anyanwu, 1988; 161). This triggered the inter-village war between Amucha and Umudioka as efforts at peaceful resolution of the matter failed.

Inter-personal disagreements often degenerate into inter-group or inter-community wars especially when death occurred in the circumstance. Usually, communities tried to resolve such conflicts through diplomatic processes and could only engage in war when diplomacy failed. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a historical fiction on pre-colonial Igbo society; the inter-personal conflict that resulted in the death of an Umuofia daughter at Mbaino market nearly led to an inter-state war. This was, however, resolved through diplomacy with Mbaino accepting Umuofia's conditions for peace (Achebe, 1958).

In the period of the slave trade, some Igbo states waged wars with other communities to obtain captives. Isichei (1976) highlights how Osomari fought other Igbo states to procure war captives, who were then sold into slavery. The Aro of Cross River Igboland, with the help of Ohafia, Abam and Edda soldiers warred against Igbo and non-Igbo communities that supposedly hindered their slaving and trading activities (Afigbo, 1981). Such wars when successful on the side of the Aro, produced more war captives that were disposed in the slave markets.

Termination of Wars and Peace making in Pre-colonial Igboland

Certain processes were involved in termination of wars and peace making in pre-colonial Igboland. In conflicts involving two villages, some neutral villages or communities sufficiently trusted by the two parties could intervene to return the belligerents to peaceful conditions. Well informed elders and diplomats with sound arbitrating skills from these neutral villages could initiate or facilitate a peace process to resolve the issues at stake between combatants. In the Umungwa-Umuokeh war, which lasted for about three years (1891-1894), some villages in Obowo waded in to end the war, and successfully mediated between the warring groups. The mediators helped the parties to negotiate a mutually acceptable peace settlement (Anyanwu, 1988).

In Igbo communities women were sometimes instrumental to ending conflicts. Daughters (umuada) married within and outside their village were influential in peace making process not only in their natal families or lineage of birth but in the entire village because of the respect the traditional society accorded them. The umuada had the "the reputation of firmness, frankness and impartiality" and for this reason their decisions on inter-group disputes were usually accepted or honoured (Anyanwu, 1993:118). Therefore their intervention through persuasion, protests and other traditional strategies could ensure peace in intra-group and inter-group conflicts at different levels of the society.

Sources show, though with some varying degree, that this function of women in conflict resolution was universal among the Igbo. An astounding example of women's involvement in the context of peace making was evident among the Umuezechima Communities in Western Igboland, where a group appearance in war front of the highly respected Umuada (Umundomi) or married daughters of the disputants signaled the end of hostility. With regard to this role of women in termination of wars, Ejiofor (nd) cited in Ejiofor (1982:304) recalls this oral account;

> *We were told that there were military codes of conduct (Iwu Ogu) but that was the case long, long ago. If during a war in those days the Umuada (daughters) who formed a link between warring parties appeared in the war front as a group the war stopped...*

The appearance of Umuada in a battle field was not just a sign for a truce but for a permanent cessation of hostilities. It was a call to settle the causes of the war through diplomacy.

Also in parts of Ngwaland peace was enforced between warring parties when the ezeala, the priest of ala sent an osu carrying palm fronds, an emblem of peace, to the battle field. The combatants were expected to stop fighting upon sighting the osu. After this a date would be fixed for a peace convention to resolve the contentious issues that led to the war (Oguntomisin, 2004)

Wars often ended with a covenant of peace presided by priests. Anyanwu (1988), Odoemene (2011) and Oguntomisin (2004) all underscore the important position of priests in ending wars in pre-colonial times. Reputable priests of concerned groups and those invited from trusted neutral communities administered oaths and offered sacrifices to seal agreements of peace or treaties reached by warring parties. Usually such peace covenants or treaties were expected to be respected by the affected groups for generations and sometimes memorials were raised at the time, like planting of trees, to preserve such agreements for posterity.

Conclusion

In pre-colonial Igboland, inter-group and intra-group relations or dealings expectedly were not always peaceful. The need for territorial expansion, founding of new settlements in the process of state formation and also serious disagreements or disputes between groups or communities, which failed to be resolved through diplomacy led to wars.

The nature of these wars was influenced by a number of factors such as the forest environment, the social organization of the society including kinship relations. Wars were waged largely with traditional weapons. And the conduct of wars was regulated by certain military conventions such as the exemption from attacks of soft targets including; women, children, shrines and visiting traders.

Certain changes in warfare occurred over time, due to contacts with the Europeans, which resulted to introduction of fire arms and the drive for war captives who were either sold or converted into domestic slaves. Although the use of guns and the desire for slaves increased the brutality of wars in Igboland they did not completely eliminate the traditional and humane military conventions in Igbo wars.

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