

THE BIGHT OF BIAFRA: THE FORGOTTEN ABOLITION (1860-1950)*

Abstract

The paper is designed to show that Britain's heroic campaign against the slave trade did not end with the work of the Royal Navy in the Atlantic or in the 1860s, nor did it end on the shoreline of the Atlantic. On the contrary it penetrated the hinterland of the Bight of Biafra involved intensive activity on the part of the men who established and ran British imperium in the hinter and went on until about the end of the fourth decade of the twentieth century. It is also designed to show that in the end this last segment in the history of the great campaign had three phases. The first was concerned with weaning the middlemen states of the coast from their deep involvement in the trade and thus making them the ally of Great Britain in the campaign. The second phase took the form of the forceful invasion of the interior, which made possible the dismantling of many of the structures and the outfits, which had sustained the massive recruitment of victims that had fed the overseas trade and that continued to feed the internal segment. But then the trade changed in character and went underground. This new form of the business was not discovered until about the third decade of the twentieth century. As soon as the discovery was made, the third phase of the campaign started and went on in different forms until about the late 1940s or even later.

In this paper we use the phrase "the Bight of Biafra" as a code name for that block of Nigerian territory, whose inhabitants, between 1967 and 1970, made a bid to become the sovereign and independent Republic of Biafra. From the dawn of recorded history this region has been the home of the following major ethno-linguistic groups – the Ijo, the Efik, the Igbo, the Ibibio and the linguistically multifarious Benue-Congo speakers of the upper Cross River. While the Ijo and the Efik occupy the coast, the others occupy the hinterland. The region gained an unenviable high profile for itself in the three or so centuries of relations between West Africa and the West, which was dominated by the

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notorious Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Understandably, it subsequently occupied a prominent place in the campaign that abolished the Atlantic segment of that trade. Now there were actually three segments to the slave trade during those three centuries. What we call the Atlantic segment was the middle segment. At one end of it was the New World segment and at the other end the West African segment. It was to the latter segment that the slave trade of the Bight of Biafra belonged. Slave trading and slave dealing in the three segments were not abolished in one campaign, as we know. But in general the abolitions in the New World and in the Atlantic are currently better known and more copiously written on than the elimination of the same evil in the third segment.

This observation applies with a special force to the slave trade of the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland. The result is that till date we know very little about the internal slave trade of this region either before the Atlantic abolition or after it. As a corollary we know next to nothing, or nearly so, about the campaign to abolish it apart from the fact that a proclamation against slave dealing in the region was issued in 1901 and that the proclamation was replaced by an ordinance in 1916. But how and how far the law was enforced, through what agencies, and what impact was achieved we did not know until the present author's work on *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in Southeastern Nigeria 1885-1950* was published in 2006¹

Similarly, much as historians of the region know that the British colonial administration in Nigeria pursued the Aro up hill and down dale for more than two decades on account of various 'crimes' of which slave dealing was one, they did not perceive that engagement with the Aro as part of a larger campaign against the slave trade in the Bight and its hinterland². But perhaps much more telling is the fact that some weighty elements among the British colonial rulers saw the campaign against the Aro as deriving from religious prejudice inherited by their colleagues of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate from the Christian missionaries instead of as part of that philanthropic, humanitarian and economic movement that had extinguished the slave trade across the Atlantic in the nineteenth century³. Equally telling, and perhaps more regrettable, is the fact that this

author, who researched and published on the Aro-British imbroglio more than any other 20th century Nigerian historian, did not see or present his work on the topic as part of this wider campaign. In fact the main thrust of his argument and presentation in this matter was the celebration of the resilience of African institutions and cultures even in the face of seemingly overwhelming foreign aggression. Furthermore, he thought this engagement came to an end about 1927 not knowing that, as part of the wider campaign against slave trade, it continued for another two decades or so⁴. Thus the story of the campaign against the slave trade in the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland is unknown even after more than a century. It is on this ground that we are inclined to describe the abolitionist movement there as one that has been more or less forgotten.

Consequently, this paper seeks to show that such a movement did indeed exist but was not well articulated and well publicized, and for that reason was not widely known amongst either contemporaries or amongst the historians who came after them - thanks to relatively poor documentation. We are inclined to suggest that the ultimate explanation for this situation is the fact that the British had, on the morrow of the extinction of the Atlantic segment, or indeed even before it became clear that that end had been achieved, downgraded the place of the abolitionist movement and programme as an imperial objective. They had come to lay the emphasis more strongly than before on the advancement of their economic interest and on the protection of that interest from threats which they perceived to emanate from their European rivals⁵.

The critical years in this change in British official position in the matter may be said to be those that followed the well-known epoch-making achievement of the Lander Brothers in West African geographical discovery - an event we do not need to recount here in any detail. The demonstration that what is today known as the Niger Delta was the outlet into the sea of the River Niger whose exploration had cost the British a great deal in time, resources and human lives, would appear to have, among other things, creamed off the more adventurous souls from the British movement for West African geographical and commercial exploration and focused their attention on that river as the easiest and

richest gateway to the Western Sudan. On this development K.O.Dike, a great authority in the history of this region during the period in question, wrote as follows: "The activities of the new comers [that is of these more adventurous souls] were canalized into the well-known Niger Expeditions of the nineteenth century, organized by the humanitarian and industrial forces that decisively influenced the passing of the Abolition Act in 1807. Their views are well preserved in the voluminous literature of the time."

Now one aspect of those views was the need to shift "the traders' frontier from the seaboard to the Nigerian hinterland"⁶. This River and therefore the activities of these optimistic and adventurous new comers to the West African sub-region, however, lie outside our area of current concern. Its importance to us here is that the development on the Niger just mentioned left the Bight of Biafra, our focus of interest, to the same European business men, known to scholars of the area and period as 'Old Coasters', who had run the slave trade regime of the bad past. Says Dike,

It was natural that the old Liverpool traders, for whom inland penetration would mean heavy losses in capital equipment, should ally themselves with the African middlemen. Success in inland penetration would cut off their supplies and the ensuing decline and eventual disappearance of coastal business was a prospect they fought bitterly to prevent⁷.

'Old' or 'New' comers, the two groups subscribed to the increasingly triumphant doctrine of "free trade" which assigned governments only a minimal role in the management of economic life. Such hardheaded businessmen as the Old Coasters were not the breed to continue the campaign against the slave trade along lines that would compel them to put their resources into the pursuit mainly of philanthropy and humanitarianism. Not surprisingly they fell for the assumption that the triumph and expansion of so-called legitimate trade would drive the slave trade, now known as illegitimate trade, to its death. But the growth and expansion of the new trade was to be achieved through the use of the coastal middlemen as the vanguard of the campaign⁸. In their understanding, intervention more direct than that was unnecessary except in those regions where the continued survival of the internal slave trade

involved the recruitment of slaves by means of organized raids and wars that by their nature created conditions that were detrimental to legitimate trade. If they knew anything about the region it was that the slave trade of the Bight and its hinterland did not involve formal raids or even large-scale wars.

The foregoing analysis is important here because it helps us to understand one of the fundamental features of the 'forgotten' abolition in the Bight of Biafra. While abolition in the Atlantic was direct, that is involved a head-on collision between the abolitionist forces on the one hand and the slave trade and slave traders on the other hand; abolition in the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland was indirect, avoiding for the most part head-on collision between the opposing forces. It also mouthed at every possible juncture such phrases as *'quieta non movere'* and *'festina lente'*. In a latter part of this paper, we shall see how commitment to another ideology, this time a politico-administrative ideology, led in the same direction.

In the event, the British Government that had powered the abolitionist movement on the Atlantic left the Old Coasters of the Bight of Biafra and the affairs of their region severely on their own from the 1830's on. Indeed it was not until 1849 that that Government began again showing hesitant and undefined interest in the Old Coasters and their region of interest through the appointment of a consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra. Without a police force or an army of his own, or indeed any form of regular bureaucratic support, except perhaps the occasional support of a gunboat of the Royal Navy, that official was from 1849 to 1891 a shadowy figure and thus had to depend also on the support and co-operation of the Old Coasters and the local rulers to get anything important implemented in the entire Biafran region. In other words, the emergence of the consul did not indicate, on the part of the British government, a new resolve to pursue the abolitionist programme beyond the edge of the waters of the Atlantic into the interior where the slave trade still raged unchecked, nor did it bring about a change on the part of the Old Coasters regarding how best to bring about the end of that scourge. Why should it when the new trade expanded and brought them

profits in spite of or even because of the conditions prevailing in the interior? Without any extra effort on the part of the European traders, the city-states maintained their position as the centres of the new trade in palm produce just as they had been the centres for the outlawed trade. There is also evidence that without any special effort on the part of the Old Coaster the new trade quickly grew in volume and value. Thus, points out Jack Harris, "The amount of palm oil imported into Liverpool from the Oil Rivers had grown from 150 tons in 1806 to approximately 15,000 tons in 1846"⁹ Understandably what concerned the Old Coasters most, because of its importance for the survival of their business in the Bight, was how to maintain the peace along the coast since it appeared the death of the old trade on the Atlantic had severely eroded the authority of the rulers of the city-states.

Their response to this challenge was to constitute at the mouth of each river, where they had substantial business, so-called governing councils which handled local disputes, especially in trade matters, amongst themselves or between one of themselves and a local businessman or amongst the local businessmen themselves. In time the consuls reorganized these councils into what came to be known by the sonorous name of 'Courts of Equity', which with the consul as chairman became the power in the coastal states. Apart from ensuring the maintenance of peace and security in the city states and that the export of slaves was not resumed by these states since they had entered into treaties with the British government outlawing the trade, the Courts of Equity and the people who set them up did nothing else touching on the abolition of the slave trade. In fact even though they were aware that their local business counterparts still participated in the internal slave trade this did not worry their conscience since they also knew that such importation of manpower from the interior into the coastal communities helped to uphold the legitimate trade, which kept them in business. In short there was a kind of total moratorium on the abolitionist campaign from the end of the Atlantic segment of the traffic around 1860 to about 1891 as far as the Bight and communities to its interior were concerned¹⁰.

Because of impulses traceable partly to the natural evolution of British policy towards her West African possessions and partly to international obligations such as those arising from her being signatory to the General Act of the Berlin West Africa Conference (1885), Britain decided to put her position in the Bight of Biafra on a formal and regular basis. To this end she appointed in 1889 Major Claude Maxwell Macdonald a sole commissioner charged with reporting on the affairs of the Bight and its hinterland and on their future administration. With respect to the future administration of the area Britain had three models to choose from – the Crown colony system of government which was already in operation in Lagos to the West, the Chartered Company system which was in operation on the Niger under George Taubman Goldie and then the Protectorate system which was still a new idea. Our interest here lies in the fact that the choice, which Britain made finally, committed her further to that policy in and approach to abolition, which emphasized *festina lente*. One of the reasons why the Crown Colony system was rejected was that it would imply a head-on collision with the slave trade and slave keepers in the Bight – an immediate and total abolition of the slave trade and slavery that is - while the Protectorate system was adopted because it promised scope for taking it easy with native customs, institutions and cultures which were believed to include such important economic institutions as the slave trade and slavery. To put the icing on the cake Major Macdonald whose report made the choice possible was appointed to head the new administration, which was now set up in the Bight, with the title of Commissioner and Consul-General. This was in 1891¹¹.

The basic idea in the protectorate system was that no one should unduly rock the African political, economic, social and cultural boat except where unusually scandalous issues of barbarity were involved. Slave trade and slavery were institutions whose continued existence was scandalous and barbaric. But then as economic institutions they were closely intertwined with the new legitimate trade, which the colonial administration was there to promote and protect and whose prospects would be seriously threatened if slave trade and slavery were to be precipitately eliminated. Therefore, though a little antiquated as economic

institutions, the slave trade and slavery had to be approached with a great deal of thought and circumspection especially as they did not obstruct the growth and expansion of legitimate trade but tended to promote it. Some other economic argument recommended this posture. Since the infant colony was expected to balance its budget from its own resources in accordance with the dictates of the *laissez faire* philosophy of the age, this meant that under the protectorate system the government would not have to budget for abolition and emancipation which otherwise it would have to do if it were to elect for a formal and full time pursuit of slave traders and slave holders. Here we see some of the implications for the abolitionist movement of the protectorate policy, of the indirect approach, in short ultimately of indirect rule.

The result was that for about ten years (1891-1900) the Commissioner and Consul-General and his administration did not take one direct step, or even make one major direct pronouncement, against the internal slave trade in the Bight and its hinterland. For the most part what they did during the period was to set up a definite system of administration for maintaining the peace in the coast communities in the interest of trade. This system of administration was believed to be imbued with all or most of the values usually associated with *pax Britannica* - by itself advertised as a powerful solvent for quietly doing away with barbarous customs and institutions when brought into contact with them. The protectorate government hoped, by gradual stages, to take this system into the hinterland by means of treaties with the supposed rulers of the states and 'empires' of the region. For the time being it was satisfied to urge the coastal middlemen into that yet unknown interior with the new gospel and new items of legitimate trade. The expectation was that these new products would take, spread like wild fire and in time drive the illegitimate trade and its associated barbarous practices to their graves without the need for a special campaign that would occasion extra costs and other inconveniences besides. Here it must be pointed out that, as he took office in the Bight in 1891, Major Claude Macdonald had been issued with instructions which amongst other things "emphasized the part the encouragement of legitimate trade would play in civilizing the

inhabitants of the protectorate and in preparing the way for direct British rule"¹²

Apart from spearheading the introduction of the new trade into the interior, these coastal communities assisted the colonial administration with their local knowledge and technology in matters of transport and communication in the treacherous delta environment as well as helped it on occasions to fight groups in the interior accused of obstructing legitimate traders and some other agents of the new regime. On these and other grounds, which we do not have to detail here, the Consul-General and his administration were very appreciative of the coastal middlemen and ensured that, in negotiating the local political, economic and cultural terrain of the Bight, they did not step on the toes of such obliging allies, especially as far as the worrisome matter of the double-headed evil of slave dealing was concerned. With respect to the more or less extreme sensitivity with which the administration treated the coastal middlemen and their affairs, Sir Ralph Moor was to inform his superiors in London in 1904 as follows:

It is in my view of the utmost importance to the success of the Territories that the coast tribes of middlemen be supported by Government and that all possible steps be taken to enable them to maintain their position both as regards trade and numbers, also that their native systems of government should be strenuously upheld and enforced with such improvements as may from time to time be found for the general welfare of the people and country"¹³.

This indirect approach to abolition with its accompanying policy of *festina lente* meant, *inter alia*, that next to nothing touching directly on that project received specific mention in the official records of the period. The annual reports and routine dispatches of the period dwelt for the most part on such issues as the penetration of new territories in the interior, the spread of legitimate trade, rising revenue from import and export receipts - all considered as the valid parameters for assessing the achievements of the new regime in the Bight. This dearth of direct and adequate information in the surviving records of the period, we suggest, is partly

responsible for the neglect of the topic by later-day historians and thus for the fact that it has been largely forgotten.

But 1900 was to mark a turning point in the history we are trying to sketch here for it saw the return, for a time, to the direct or head-on collision methods which characterized the Atlantic phase of abolitionist history. The reasons for this change of approach can easily be mentioned. In the first place, after about a decade of virtually undisturbed existence, the Protectorate had grown some appreciable muscles even in its financial sector where it now boasted of a comfortable surplus. On this Professor J.C. Anene, an authority on this period of the history of the Bight has written:

The Protectorate Government under Sir Ralph Moor, the High Commissioner, was well placed ... The finances were good, even showing a surplus of revenue over expenditure to the amount of more than #22,000. The long troublesome district of the Kwa Ibo River and its turbulent Ibibio inhabitants had been pacified and government control was firmly buttressed with detachments of troops at Eket and Azumini. The overthrow of the Benin kingdom was tantamount to almost complete control of the Western Division¹⁵.

In the second place, the indirect method, with its excessive dependence on the services of the coastal middlemen, was not delivering the expected dividends. Just a short distance into the interior beyond the headwaters of the rivers and major creeks that constituted their routes of advance into the hinterland, the Ijo and Efik commercial allies of the government as well as the latter's political and other agents ran into the southern frontier of the economic sphere of interest of the primary producers of the hinterland. This was a frontier that had not moved in either direction for centuries and thus that had come to be seen as hallowed by custom, usage and tradition. The hinterland economic interests were not persuaded that it should now move, and move to their disadvantage for that matter. Most prominent amongst these hinterland-business interests were the Aro who by now were well known for their dynamic role in the trade of much of this area. Inveterate slave and general traders, they did not want to hear of free trade or of the abolition of the slave trade. Consequently wherever

the coastal bearers of the new doctrine of *laissez faire*, free trade and *pax Britannica* attempted to cross this frontier, they ran into serious overt and covert obstruction which forced some of them to turn back and others to pay heavy bribes and tolls in order to go and come. Finding the 'antics' of these 'half-naked' hinterland 'barbarians' strange and unacceptable, the protectorate government promptly fell back on the *ultima ratio* in all arguments – force. The military were fitted into the equation in 1901 in a very big way starting with the Aro Expedition (1901 – 1902). They remained in the equation for at least two decades fighting the slave trade, slave traders and associated barbarous practices¹⁶. By 1914 they had conducted some forty of such campaigns disarming the people as they went as well as impoverishing them by burning their villages, destroying their farms and raiding their livestock. A report on one such expedition boasted: "The towns and villages of Ibiaku, Mbiabon-Okon and Aitu-Utuk and the crops round them have been destroyed and 21 cap guns and 2 Sniders were surrendered and destroyed"¹⁷ Some more campaigns were still to come after 1914. Indeed the last engagement, which the army had in this region with slave dealers and their ilk, did not come until 1926!

However, the resurrection of the direct methods of the Atlantic phase did not mean the abandonment of the indirect methods, which, after so many years, had eaten deep into the bones of the protectorate administration. On the contrary as soon as a district was beaten into shape by the army, it was brought under the indirect method through the introduction of all the structures and institutions characteristic of peace time *pax Britannica* – British and so-called native courts, police formations, European business interests with their trading outposts, missionaries and their stations, modern road networks and transportation etc. The consequence was that by 1914 the entire Bight of Biafra and its hinterland had been brought under the indirect methods of abolition in varying degrees. In some cases this was done prematurely with unfortunate consequences. Surveying the entire situation in Nigeria in 1914 Sir Reginald Coupland, the well-known historian of imperial Britain, was well pleased with what he saw and wrote as follows: "By 1914, when the administration of all Nigeria was united under Sir

Frederick Lugard as Governor-General the life of its varied peoples had been as peaceful, orderly and prosperous as that of any subject people in the world. And the cats had been stopped from mousing"¹⁸.

With the stepping down of the role of the military in the campaign as time went on, the abolition of the internal slave trade naturally reverted to what it had been in the history of the protectorate from its earliest days in the nineteenth century – a secondary objective of the government. The primary objective remained, as before, the advancement of legitimate trade whose success was expected to lead to many results, one of these being, as already mentioned, the death of the internal slave trade.

In 1901 the Commissioner and Consul-General, Sir Ralph Moor, had also issued a proclamation following the successful completion of the Aro Expedition, which made it an offence to be involved in any form of slave dealing. Those caught breaking this law were liable to be punished with imprisonment for a maximum term of seven years and/or a fine. This law, which Sir Frederick Lugard reissued in 1916 as an ordinance,¹⁹ became the main instrument under which the campaign for the abolition of the internal slave trade was waged till the end of British colonial rule in Nigeria. Throughout the period it was in force, the government made no sustained effort to seek out those who still engaged in the slave trade or to expose the tricks and ramifications of the trade. Only such dealers as were unlucky or stupid enough to stumble against the law were apprehended, prosecuted and, if found guilty, convicted. Those who were deft and crafty enough in their methods to avoid running into the law went on with their business without much let or hindrance. This meant the campaign was throughout a languid and lazy affair for the established courts and the police²⁰. Because convictions under this law were not generally very many, the government began allowing itself to be deluded into believing that the evil was coming under control or nearly so. In fact as early as 1904 there were members of the administration who were already beginning to entertain the belief that because fewer and fewer cases of slave dealing were coming to the notice of the Government "the vigilance exercised by officers in this direction" was adequate and effective²¹.

Twenty years later a similar optimistic view of the position was still being expressed. In the Annul Report of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria for that year it was written: "In the more backward communities of both groups of provinces [i.e. of Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria] cannibalism and slave dealing still linger on a small scale"²².

However in 1932/33 the government was to have a rude awakening as a report came from the Owerri Province saying that slave trading in the Bight and its hinterland was actually on the increase. When more detailed reports were called for from the generality of political officers, the revelations confirmed the initial report. In fact in 1932 a hardened slave dealer had entered the police barracks at the headquarters of the Okigwe division and kidnapped for sale, a girl of about nine years who had been put in the custody of the police after having been earlier rescued from another set of slave traders who were on their way to sell her. All these compelled the government to attempt once again to be proactive in the matter by setting up a crack team of police officers from the C.I.D. under an Assistant Commissioner of Police to find out all it could about the illegal trade that would apparently not go under²³.

The investigations of the team, which lasted intermittently from November 1933 to May 1936, confirmed that the trade was still very much a going business. Some of the offending traders were caught in the act, prosecuted and imprisoned while many of their would-be victims were released and restored to freedom. The team also dug up many interesting details about the trade – who were the suspected kingpins, who were the suppliers, who were the ultimate takers, what were the leading slave centres or markets, who else apart from the already stigmatized Aro were involved in the business, what were their methods, what routes they used, how the two trades-the legitimate and the illegitimate-were intertwined and so on. In the end the government called off the investigation prematurely for many reasons of which we shall mention only two or three of the most important here. One was severe shortage of staff, which soon became worse with the outbreak of the Second World War. Another was unwillingness to take the kind of drastic action that was indicated because that would also damage the legitimate trade, which

appeared to be doing well in spite of the slave trade or even because of it. A third reason was that the government had grown sick and tired of the irreformability and mule-like stubbornness of the 'wild' men and women of the Bight of Biafra and its hinterland. But perhaps the most important reason was that the real solution to the problem was nowhere in the books of the colonial government. The slave trade was first and foremost an economic system and institution. The challenge, which the government was being called upon to address, was the introduction of economic measures that would offer the unrepentant slave dealers an alternative and more fruitful means of livelihood. Some junior officers in the system floated such an idea. But their superiors never behaved as if they read the memoranda in which these opinions were expressed. Sir Ralph Moor had early in the century defined the economic policy of his government in the Bight as one of 'supervision and control', that is the supervision and control of the exploitation of the natural products which already existed in the area. Briefing the Colonial Office on one occasion on how to bring about the economic development of the Bight and its hinterland, Moor wrote as follows: "My view at present is rather that the matter is one of *supervision and control* and to establish this, I would submit that it will repay the Government to expend a reasonable amount of revenue"²⁴. This brisk statement continued to inform the economic policy of the British in Nigeria until the end of their rule. It had no scope for the kind of innovation, which we are talking of here.

Therefore, in spite of the findings of the police team, the prosecution of the campaign was allowed to remain in the laps of the regular courts and police with their slow and languid methods. After this we hear next to nothing more about actual steps taken by government to prosecute the campaign for the abolition of the evil trade apart from suggestions from various quarters, especially from the judiciary, to amend the existing law in this matter here and there to increase its deterrent effect as well as close a number of loopholes that were said to make it difficult to secure the conviction of many an accused person. By the early 1940's the government was again deluding itself into believing that all was well or nearly so in this tortuous matter, or that in any case all other

forms of the evil had been extinguished leaving only that form which was associated with child marriage. But petitions from concerned educated members of this region, especially from the Ibibio area, showed that this was not indeed the case. The sale of adult women for instance, was still in vogue – these women being occasionally sold along with their children to dealers who resold them to waiting takers in the upper Cross River and Ogoja areas²⁵.

It remains to mention the astounding fact that by this time the government had apparently completely lost interest in the slave trade and the campaign against it and thus took no action that has survived in the archives to follow up the leads provided in the petitions. The British were by this time more concerned with parrying the political challenges of the nationalists so-called. It is thus not surprising that in this region at least the trade in children survived their rule, which had lasted about a hundred years. Writing on the survival of aspects of this evil trade into post-colonial Nigeria Professor V.C. Uchendu, a well-known authority on the anthropology and sociology of the Bight and its hinterland said:

Kidnapping, as distinct from capture in war, was a more individual operation. Its targets were usually unprotected strangers and children. It gave rise to a specialized 'man-stealing' profession, which continued in Nigeria well after the slave trade. Newspaper reports in [contemporary] Nigeria indicate that the activity, though not common now, is not yet ended.²⁶

An unsympathetic critic of the colonial government may question whether indeed it had an abolitionist agenda. There was no programme of action with plans and projections, strategies and tactics. There was no policy file on the matter. There was no desk or project officer at any level of the multi-layered administration assigned the duty of monitoring progress in the campaign. There were no posters. There were no slogans. If the government's activities in this matter were to be measured against these parameters, the answer to the critic's question must be in the negative. However, it is fair to mention once again that from the beginning the government had pinned its hopes on the slow corrosive effects of British civilization or *pax Britannica*. It was here that it had

plans and programs. Indeed to the end it was the openly avowed credo of the government and its admirers like Rev. Mr. G.T. Basden that *pax Britannica* would do the trick and by implication that no special action was called for. Thus Basden writing in 1938 had deposed: The suppression of the overseas traffic did not lead to the cessation of slavery in the interior: it continued to exist until the operation became more and more restricted. Under the rigorous methods now in force, the day cannot be distant when the sporadic cases of kidnapping will be abandoned. Child stealing will cease to be a profitable institution, the police will see to that²⁷.

However, it appears that more than forty years after the end of British rule, the full trick still remains to be done! But perhaps more important from the standpoint of this paper is the fact that the manner in which this campaign, whatever it amounted to, was waged explains to us why not much was known about it even while it was on, and therefore why it would appear to have been almost promptly forgotten.

Notes/References

- ¹. The University of Rochester Press, New York, has published the book.
- ². Thus neither J.C. Anene, *Southern Nigeria in Transition 1885 - 1905*, (Cambridge University Press, 1966), T.N. Tamuno: *The Evolution of the Nigerian State: The Southern Phase 1891 - 1914* (Longman, 1972), nor K.K. Nair, *Politics and Society in South Eastern Nigeria 1841 - 1906* (London, Frank Cass, 1972) discusses this legislation in the wider context of the abolitionist campaign.
- ³. A.E. Afigbo, "Herbert Richmond Palmer and Indirect Rule in Eastern Nigeria 1915-1928" In the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* (hereinafter *JHSN*), 3/2 (1965) pp. 295-312.
- ⁴. A.E. Afigbo, "The Aro Expedition of 1901-1902 : An Episode in the British Occupation of Ibo Land" in *Odu, Journal of West African Studies, New Series*, 7 (April 1972) pp.3-27; "The Nineteenth Century Crisis of the Aro Slaving Oligarchy", *Nigeria Magazine* (1974), Nos 110-112; "The Eclipse of the Aro Slaving Oligarchy 1901 - 1927" in *JHSN*, 6/1 (Dec. 1971), pp. 3-24.

- ⁵. See Chapter 1 of A.E. Afigbo, *The Abolition of the Internal Slave Trade in Southeastern Nigeria 1885 -1950* (University of Rochester Press, 1966).
- ⁶. K.O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830 - 1885* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1956), p. 61.
- ⁷. *Ibid.* pp. 60-61.
- ⁸. K.O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830 - 1885* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1956) p.61.
- ⁹. *Ibid.* pp. 60-61.
- ¹⁰. A.E. Afigbo, *The Abolition of the Internal Slave Trade* chapter 2, ----- "Britain and the Hydra in the Bight of Benin: Towards a History of the Abolition of the Internal Slave Trade in the Oil Rivers and Its Hinterland, c.1885 - c.1943" in *African Economic History* 31(2003), pp.1-18.
- ¹¹. J.S. Harris, "Some Aspects of Slavery in Southeastern Nigeria" in *Journal of Negro History*.
- ¹². For the details of the developments in this period the reader is invited to consult the following works: K.O. Dike, *Trade and Politics*, J.C. Anene, *Southern Nigeria*, G.I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers* (O.U.P. 1963), A.E. Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891 -1929* (Longman, U.K. 1972).
- ¹³. J.C. Anene, *Southern Nigeria in Transition*, T.N. Tamuno, *The Evolution of the Nigerian State*,
- ¹⁴. J.C. Anene, *Southern Nigeria in Transition*, A.E. Afigbo, "Britain and the Hydra in the Bight of Benin". A.E. Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture* (University Press Ltd., Ibadan, 1981), chapter 8.
- ¹⁵. See Despatch dated 7 July 1901 in CSO 520/12, Southern Nigeria Despatches to the Colonial Office.
- ¹⁶. J. C. Anene, "The Southern Nigeria Protectorate and the Aros 1900-1902", in *JHSN*, Vol.1, Dec. 1956.
- ¹⁷. A.E. Afigbo, "The Aro Expedition of 1901-1902".
- ¹⁸. C.O. 520/25 Southern Nigeria Despatches to the Colonial Office, June to September 1904, See Despatch No. 324 of 21 July 1904; P.A. Talbot, *Peoples of Southern Nigeria*, (Oxford 1926) 4 vols. see vol.1 pp.213 - 217, 230, 236-237, 257 ff.; Sir Reginald Coupland, *The British Anti-Slavery Movement* (London, Second Edition Frank Cass and Co. Ltd 1964) p. 241.
- ¹⁹. C.S.O. 26, No.03063 Vol. 1, *The Slavery Ordinance*.
- ²⁰. A.E. Afigbo, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Chapter 3.

- ²¹ See Report by A.B. Harcourt dated 03.03.04 enclosed in Despatch No. 154 of 11.04.04 in C.O. 520/24, Despatches from Southern Nigeria Protectorate to C.O.
- ²² See Conf. Despatch 275 of 19 March 1925 forwarding Annual Report for 1925 in C.O. 583/133 Nigerian Despatches to the Colonial Office, 1925.
- ²³ For this paragraph and the following see A.E. Afigbo *The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Chapters 4 & 5.
- ²⁴ C.S.O. 1/13 See Despatch No. 50 of 14. 6. 96.
- ²⁵ NNAE, OG.3981..Ogprof 2/1/3226, See petition from Ibibio Union dated November 26, 1946 and another apparently undated, but received in the Office of the Resident, Ogoja on Dec, 8 1951.
- ²⁶ V.C. Uchendu, "Slaves and Slavery in Igboland, Nigeria" in S. Meirs and I. Kopytoff (Eds.) *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977) p.125. For the latest relevant evidence on this, see A.E. Afigbo "Britain and the Hydra in the Bight of Benin" and *The Abolition of the Slave Trade* etc last page of Chapter 5.
- ²⁷ G.T. Basden, *Niger Ibos* (London, Frank Cass, 1966) First Edition 1938, p.243. In 1929. Alan Burns had similarly written "The influence of these large public works [the building of railways, harbours and roads etc.] on the African population was very great. Apart from the civilizing effect of easier communication, there was a marked increase in trade, and in the circulation of coin. Thousands worked for the Government and were paid in money with which they were able to purchase for themselves both necessaries and luxuries, returning to their villages to boast of their adventures and to show off their recently acquired finery to their less sophisticated brothers which increasingly became popular, did a great deal towards the suppression of slavery and the improvement of trade." *History of Nigeria* (London, George Allen and Unwin 1929) p. 217. Quotation is from the 8th edition published in 1978.