

BRITISH COLONIAL RULE IN THE NIGER DELTA

"Treaties of Protection"

Editor's Introduction

Beginning with the arrival of the Portuguese in the region in the 1480s, the Western Niger Delta emerged as one of the most substantive points of commercial and political contacts between Africans and Europeans on the African continent. For several centuries, European trading nations -- including Portugal, France, England, and Holland -- were actively engaged in contacts with the Western Niger Delta. Although the evil slave trade was not absent from this part of Africa, the Western Niger Delta did not experience the same amount of devastation from the slave trade as the eastern Niger Delta. So-called legitimate trade predominated in the Western Niger Delta for centuries. By the nineteenth century, England had edged out other European nations in the competitive trade of the Western Niger Delta. By the mid-nineteenth century, it was clear that England's interests in the region were well beyond mere normal commerce between nations. It had insinuated itself into the political affairs of various communities, particularly the Itsekiri who served as the main middlemen between Europeans and the inland communities of the Western Niger Delta. The Western Niger Delta was part of Britain's Niger Delta Protectorate that extended its operations throughout the Niger Delta long before the British Colony of Southern Nigeria was inaugurated in 1900. In addition, the Royal Niger Company (later UAC, United Africa Company), was operating as a political agency for British foreign interests.

Such British interests became manifest in the 1880s. England was now insisting on control of the political affairs of the Itsekiri among whom native "Governors of Benin River" had been appointed for the primary purpose of promoting peaceful commerce. These interests rapidly spread to other communities in the 1890s. Three related instruments were employed by the British to enforce their interests in the Niger Delta. First, gun-boat diplomacy was extensively used to intimidate communities in order to uphold British interests. If gun-boat diplomacy was not invented in the Niger Delta, it was clearly perfected in it. Second, under the cover of gun-boat diplomacy, pro forma treaties were "signed" by Western Niger Delta communities with British agents. Noteworthy in the transactions of the treaties is the role of "interpreters" who routinely vouched that they had explained the treaties to the Chiefs of these communities and that they understood them. The chiefs neither wrote nor read the treaties. Nor did they understand English

language in which the text of the treaties was written. The terms of the treaties were not negotiated, because they were printed in England and shipped to the Niger Delta. Third, if gun-boat threats failed and British commands were not heeded, physical punishment of warfare was available to the British. That was the approach the British adopted in their attack on the ancient City of Benin in 1897. Benin rulers had defied British overtures for colonial control of their affairs. The Benin War of 1897 was preceded in 1894 by another attack on an Itsekiri chieftain, Nana Olomu, who broke with the British after serving them well for more than a decade.

The entries in these pages deal with so-called "treaties of protection" which the British enforced on various communities in the Western Niger Delta. We hope to feature as many of these treaties as we can obtain in the future. Those concerning the Western Niger Delta that are currently available to us fall into three categories. The communities involved in the treaties were (i) [Itsekiri of "Benin River,"](#) (ii) [Urhobo of "the District of Warri,"](#) and (iii) [Urhobo of "Sobo Country."](#) Such were the terms by which the British designated the geographical areas of these communities in the 1880s-1890s.

Nomenclature

A significant number of the names by which Nigerian ethnic groups, as well as their cities and towns, are known in modern times came from European rendition of native names before and during colonial times. Some comments on these names will help to put in proper context the terms that appear in the documents reproduced in the web pages that follow this introduction.

Itsekiri of Benin River. The British apparently had considerable difficulty with the Itsekiri name. It appears in these documents as "Jekeri." Later, in colonial times, it appears as "Jekri." More remarkably, the British consistently identified the Itsekiri geographically as belonging to Benin River. Nana Olomu and his predecessors in office were known as "Governors of Benin River." In these and other documents that will be featured in the web pages of URHOBOWAADO on British imperialism in the Western Niger Delta, British agents variously referred to the Itsekiri and their country as "Benin," "Benin River," and "New Benin." The abandonment of the "Benin River" identity came in the 1900s, with the establishment of Warri as the capital of a new British colonial Province of Warri. It is significant that many of those who signed the two treaties of 1884 and 1894, including Nana Olomu and Dore Numa, were to play major roles in later Itsekiri history

Urhobo of District of Warri. Signing treaties with communities in and around Warri was a prime activity of British colonial agents in the early 1890s. They were clearly identified as the "Sobo of the District of Warri." Their problem in later years concerning questions raised about their ownership of Warri was a testimony of the bad faith of British imperialists who disrespected the treaties they signed with these communities.

Urhobo of Sobo Country. As contrasted with the Urhobo of the "District of Warri," the Urhobo of what the British designated as "Sobo country" were inland peoples. British treaties with these communities came later as the British intensified their manouvres for territories in the European "Scramble for Africa" that followed the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. The name "Sobo," which is

resented by Urhobos as a derogatory reference term, has actually been around for centuries. Its origin is uncertain. It probably came from a Portuguese corruption of the Benin term for Urhobo which is "Uhobo." The term appears in the first account of Portuguese voyages to the western Niger Delta, in the second half of the 1480s, which identified its two ethnic inhabitants as "Jos" (clearly for Ijo) and "Soubo" (clearly for Urhobo.)

Abraka. Abraka lies on the upper Ethiope River. It apparently had a flourishing market in the nineteenth century. Perhaps because of such qualities, it attracted early British attention. [Abraka's treaty with the British in 1892](#) was one of the earliest in upland Urhobo country. But that early attention also led to casualties with its name. Its native Urhobo name is "Avwraka" which is a challenge, even to speakers of many Nigerian languages. The British could not handle it, calling and spelling it as "Abrakar." Remarkably the British corruption has stuck, but without the last "r."

Calabar. Calabar is another name that has been influenced by European naming practices. In the documents in these web pages, there are frequent references to Calabar. Sometimes the term New Calabar was used to refer to Ijaw territory in eastern Niger Delta. Old Calabar was then used to refer to the Efik town on the Cross-River Estuary that today has inherited the name Calabar.

Acknowledgment

I want to acknowledge the efforts of some people who have helped to bring these important documents to our web site. The documents on British treaties with Urhobo communities in the "District of Warri" are from the archives of Chief Anthony Ukoli, who is native to the City of Warri. He had kept these seven treaties as part of his record keeping in respect of the history of his people. I thank him for trusting me with these valuable documents. The Itsekiri and Abraka treaties were secured by Mr. Andrew Edevbie who has devoted a considerable amount of his time to Urhobo affairs and Urhobo studies in the last two years as Secretary of Urhobo Historical Society. I salute his patriotic efforts. I thank Ms Deborah Pierce-Tate, Secretary of the Department of African American Studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo, for her skills in photocopying the documents, many of them over-sized originally. Finally, I thank Ms Silver Wilson, an undergraduate work-study student of the same University, for her diligence and brilliance in scanning the documents. The help of these men and women has been invaluable in my efforts to bring the documentation of colonial treaties to our web site.

Peter Ekeh

Editor@waado.org

October 5, 2000

[RETURN TO CONTENTS](#) | [RETURN TO NIGER DELTA TREATIES](#)
