

## **THE FALL OF BENIN KINGDOM: THE PUNITIVE EXPEDITION OF 1897 IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper examines the various multifaceted remote and immediate causes that triggered the British-Benin war of 1897. It analyses the political upheaval in the pre-colonial Benin kingdom on the eve of the conflict. It also traces the imperial policies of the European powers during the era as an underlining cause of the war. The study adopts the historical method and both primary and secondary sources were used. While the immediate cause of the war had its roots in the halt to the Philips Mission by Benin soldiers, the roll out of the war machinery by the British in 1897 was premised primarily on the ambush and killing of Captain Phillips and his party. However, this paper deals with the copious facts that the war on Benin by the British had been in the works for several years, and that it was an inevitable end to the expansionist drive of empire building in the late nineteenth century. It examines the pre-war preconceived narrative built up by sections of the British parties that visited Benin which became a form of propaganda used by British traders and interests to build up a case to invade the precolonial Benin kingdom. The British war preparations, the various deployment of warships and weaponry, the battles of the war, especially the little mentioned battle at the entrance of Benin, the weapons and strategy of the Benin army are all examined by this paper. The paper concludes that imperialist expansion, largely driven by economic interest led to the fall of the Benin Kingdom.*

**KEYWORDS:** *precolonial, preparations, imperialist expansion, economic, expansion.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper concentrates on the triggers that led to the British-Benin War. It deals with the prevailing circumstances leading up to the conflict, the groundworks of the British prior to the war, the inevitability of the conflict owing to the territorial conquest of European powers in the

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nineteenth century. Up to the 1897 war, the British had faced little resistance in most of her conquest of the independent kingdoms that strand the area that make up the present-day Niger Delta region of Nigeria which was part of the British administrative Niger Coast Protectorate. As it deployed a disingenuous treaty diplomacy with independent kings to exert its influence over their territories. Although, the Benin Empire had been in decline for a few years due to internal political struggles within the kingdom and the loss of control of rebellious vassal states, it was still able to withstand all forms of external aggression until it fell to the British in February 1897. That the Benin Empire was one of the last pre-colonial independent kingdoms to fall to the British, especially when measured against the background that this was forty-six years after Lagos was bombarded in 1851 and ceased to be an independent kingdom in 1861. Lagos is about 100 miles away from Benin and basically in the same geographical area. That it was able to ward off external influence for that long with the British lurking holds much to its resilience built up from centuries of warfare. Though the pre-colonial Benin kingdom was largely forested kingdom in the hinterland, it was still accessible through the waterways in - the Ologbo creek, the Jamieson River line to Sakponba and the Ughoton creeks. These were the areas the British used to launch their assault on Benin.

The British Benin War would have passed off as another pre-colonial conflict of the 19th century with just a mere mention as an historical footnote. But the unique circumstances leading to it, and most significantly, the looting of the Benin bronzes brought the conflict to limelight. The British Benin war cannot be the subject of literary work without mention of the Benin artworks. Without the war, the bronzes would not have been lost to the British army, neither would it have come to prominence. Both events, therefore, are mutually exclusive. This paper touches on the links between the artworks and the war. Whether the British had a prior knowledge of the cache of the pristine artworks prior to the war. Or whether it was a coincidence that they stumbled on the artworks.

The attack on the Phillips mission is positioned as the main trigger for the conflict. However, what cannot be discounted are the underlying triggers such as the industrialization of the British economy, which largely driven by natural resources sourced from Africa in which the pre-colonial Benin had in abundance. British traders at the coast, had to deal with middlemen especially the Itsekiris before they get their hands-on goods. The embargos placed on trade by the Oba of Benin ran counter to the British plans. This situation was contrary to the terms of the Galway treaty entered into by Oba Ovonramwen in 1892. While pressure built up due to the blockage from the Oba, it was not until the attack on the Phillips mission that war was finally declared on Benin.

The pre-colonial Benin Empire had a reputation built on expansionist warfare, in nearly a thousand years of its existence, it had several kings such as Oba Ewuare, Oba Ozolua, Oba Esigie and Oba Orhogbua who were known as warrior kings. This reputation though in decline, was still in place before the war with the British. Centuries of warfare meant pre-colonial Benin always had a standing army. At the time of the war of 1897, it was led by war Chief Ologbosere. It was he who, led the Benin soldiers against the British army during the war.

Philip Igbafe observes that before March 1896, an elaborate plan for the total control of the hinterland was already in execution in several areas.<sup>2</sup> Included in this plan was the formation of permanent outposts in the hinterland to “serve as jumping-off spots for further penetration, the despatch of indigenous travellers to explore inland, the establishment of native councils of chiefs

for the settlement of disputes in order to reduce tribal feuds, which could be disruptive of trade, and the sending of peaceful expeditions.”<sup>3</sup> All these were part of the gradual process of colonisation of Benin and her territories. Also, as part of this comprehensive plan of colonisation “was the economic survey of all areas visited’ with distinctive attention on the “resources available in such areas” as well as the military capacity of the various governments. Ralph Denham Rayment Moor had foreseen the necessity of war of conquest and stated in his dispatch that “in the event of the foregoing peaceable means proving of no avail, it then becomes necessary to resort to force.”<sup>48</sup>

With the scramble for Africa by European powers, and the resultant conference in Berlin in 1885, which recognised a British protectorate over the Niger Delta areas and all the Benin territories, Britain took steps to “ensure that Benin was brought under proper British control.”<sup>4</sup> In 1888, ObaAdolo joined his ancestors and a violent contest for the Obaship position ensued. During this contest, one of his sons, Idugbowa ascended the throne with the title, Ovonramwen Nogbasi. To establish his authority over his people, there was political purgative where many dissident chiefs that he felt could pose danger and threat to his supreme authority were killed and as a result, of this, there was apprehension in the Kingdom, and this seems to threaten the needed political stability for the effective reign of the Oba and socio-economic development of the empire. Thus, at the very time when the British were increasing their pressure on Benin, not only was there a new ruler in Benin, but there was also a certain amount of suspicion and disunity within Benin’s Ruling class headed by the new Oba Ovonramwen. With the appointment of Major C.M. Macdonald as commissioner and consul general of the Oil Rivers Protectorates in 1891, Britain had assumed an interest and responsibility in Benin Kingdom. These developments meant that the era of the coastal middlemen was numbered and that the barriers which had for so long kept Benin virtually isolated from European influence were beginning to fall so with the appointment of a vice consul to help the consul and commissioner-general in the administration of the protectorate and also to help bring the people, that is the Ukwani, Itsekiri and Urhobo under the control of Britain and to also increase the volume of trade in the region. They felt compelled to also bring the Kingdom of Benin under the influence of Britain. In doing this, Britain realised the importance of signing the treaty with the Oba to give it a legal backing. This was achieved after much British persuasion of the Oba and his Chiefs that the intention of the legal document was for peace.

In Lagos, the establishment in 1851 of a Protectorate, put an end to the authority of the Oba in a state that had hitherto acknowledged the suzerainty of Benin in a variety of ways, including the payments of tribute and the investiture of its rulers and chiefs. With this action, Britain undermined the authority of the Oba as it relates to Lagos. Although a letter was addressed to the Oba on the issues, Beecroft did not recognise the authority of the Oba as it relates to Lagos, and it was a time bomb.<sup>5</sup> The letter necessitated Akintoye to hide under the British protection to call the bluff of the Oba. The letter also, was a threat to the peace and security of the Benin Kingdom as the Oba was seen as recognising and backing a rebel. John Beecroft also took the first step towards establishing British influence in Benin Kingdom when he called for a meeting of Europeans and Africa traders on 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1851. Though cut off from commercial and political contact with the British, Benin soon began to occupy a place in their speculations and a certain attitude towards the state and people began to emerge from early correspondence of consular officials most of whom had desired a state in which civilisation and the art of governance have progressed further than any other kingdom of Guinea. Many had also spoke favourably of Benin

character and moral standards. Britain was not seriously in need for a pretext under which to conquer and colonise Benin that would also veil the economic interest. A major headway in this direction came in 1862 when Richard Burton, the British consul stationed at Fernando Po visited Benin. In his book, *My Wanderings in West Africa*,<sup>6</sup> Burton exaggerated the moral decadence of the people, 'the decline of their standard of civilisation and the bloody customs; *City of Blood* and *City of skull*.' He described Benin as a place of "gratuitous barbarity which stinks of death" and his account was given wide publicity and therefore became a threat to the independence of Benin.<sup>7</sup> While visitors to Benin before Burton sang praises of its glory and splendour, Burton and those who came after him decried the moral standard of the people and refer to the unpalatable adjectives such as fetish, bloody, great rogues, uncivilised and barbarous, among others. According to him, the king of Benin was very much under the influence of his idolatries and life in the Kingdom:

is full of abuses and witchcraft and idolatry, which for brevity's sake I omit.' Leo Africanus, in the early sixteenth century, recorded that the Bini 'live in idolatry, and are a rude and brutish nation; notwithstanding that their prince is served with such high reverence . . . [that on] his death his chief favourites count it the greatest point of honour to be buried with him' Ramusio, c. 1540, said that 'all are anxious for the honour' to be buried with the Oba, as this was an 'ancient custom' in Benin. Human sacrifices, then, existed long before the demands of European slavers could have created an 'unchecked and self-destructive lust' in Benin's rulers for 'human booty'.<sup>8</sup>

They believed that the Oba was so powerful that any time he is not happy, things begin to go bad in the Kingdom politically, economically, socially, and otherwise. This is so because his subjects feared him. Obaro Ikime explains that "there was gradually built up an image of Benin as an unprogressively, economically backward, and morally corrupt state" which could only be saved through the civilising influence of Europe notably Great Britain. They also believed that the easiest way of convincing the officials at home that the overthrow of the powerful ruler was highly desirable was to stress what were termed his barbarous practices, ritual murders and the general economic effects of his rule. The *Oba* controls trading activities in his domain. This, the British officials believed will hinder their efforts at controlling and manipulating trading activities to their own selfish interests.

In early 1893, Benin stopped trade, 'on the grounds that the Itsekiri were reported to have cheated' the Benin kingdom in trade relations by not giving up to the approved 'gift' or custom dues to the Oba. With the advice of Chiefs Uwangu and Eribo, who were the chiefs in charge of foreign trade, Benin 'demanded twenty thousand corrugated iron sheets from the Itsekiri chiefs' as a fine before the border will open for trade to resume.<sup>9</sup> 'Some traders went to see the *Oba* by the advice of Ralph Moor, the Consul General with a view to starting a rubber industry. They made presents to the *Oba* to the value of over thirty pounds, but nothing came out of their mission. This action of the *Oba* annoyed the British agents'<sup>10</sup> who maintained that it was fetish and barbaric to shut down trade. The *Oba* continued to place a ban on trade and several articles of royal monopoly. This continued to annoy the British political officers that they began to argue as

early as 1895 that in order to improve trade in Benin and her territories, the power of the *Oba* must be destroyed. In fact, the crisis had to wait till 1896 largely because the British were busy with Chief Nana Ebrohimi of Itsekiri in 1894 and with the Brass people in 1895.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite this abundant evidence of societal advancement, Europeans choose to believe that the people of Benin were uncivilised and barbarous without culture or social institution that are worthy of emulation as they equated civilisation with Europeanisation. Europe and her cultural elements became the accepted framework for development in Benin as everything without the European standard or format became barbaric. Thus, to study pre-colonial African history became synonymous with prying ‘into the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque, but irrelevant corners of the globe.’<sup>12</sup> Africa was thus relegated, at worst to the bottom rung of humanity, and at best to be viewed as pathological adjuncts of European societies. It therefore became the duty of the benevolent Britain to bring about socialisation and social cultural rejuvenation for the people of Benin and its surroundings.

It is important to note that the *Oba*’s regulation and control of trade through dues, customs and embargoes or opening and closing the city gates was “interpreted by the consuls as part of his fetish practices.”<sup>13</sup> The consuls found useful allies among the middlemen, who were mostly Itsekiri and even when the latter ‘were prepared to comply with Benin demand for trade according to custom, ‘they were prevented by the consular officials. Thus, these officials enabled and supported the Itsekiri middlemen to repudiate the *Oba*’s age-long traditional practice of fixing’ the custom duties, referred to as ‘presence’ at his discretion on the ground that it was fetish.<sup>14</sup> They wrote a ‘series of petitions against the *Oba*, urging that he had either to abolish this due or face the British might.’<sup>15</sup> In the logic of situation, a confrontation became inevitable. Philip Igbofe explains that ‘with the British traders on the coast who were anxious to trade, and officials who were impatient’<sup>16</sup> and regarded Benin’s demand for custom duties as blackmail, extortion and obstructions to free trade, a confrontation was set between the Benin and the British people. The British officials were strongly supported in their standby by the traders on the coast, who urged military action against Benin. ‘Though Pinnock realised the many difficulties to be overcome in dealing with the *Oba*, whom he called ‘the outrageous savage ruling at present at this so-called city of Benin’, he argued that to ignore the *Oba*’s trading policies and human sacrifices constituted a blot on the British West African Colony of Lagos, only about 100 miles away, as well as on the Niger Coast Protectorate government, with its post only fifty miles from Benin. The solution offered by Pinnock was for ‘this demon in Human form, the petty king of Benin’ to be ‘deposed or transported elsewhere, peace and order maintained, the roads and country opened up, teeming as it does with every natural wealth of the great hinterland of the world.’<sup>17</sup>

These accounts led to the erroneous belief that the British officers’ presence in Benin and the subsequent colonisation were motivated by humanitarian considerations. Philip Igbofe argues that it could be true that such accounts of humanitarian concerns stirred the consciences of ‘many in an age when the industrial revolution had made humanitarianism a fashionable doctrine. The events that followed these visits do not bear out the ‘contention that the pressure of officials on Benin in the 1890s was due to humanitarian considerations.’ Rather, it was motivated by material considerations. This is because a painstaking analysis will show that the ‘the increased pressure to bring Benin into the sphere of consular control was occasioned by commercial considerations.’<sup>18</sup>



As the Gallwey treaty latter revealed, the concern for Britain was economic and not humanitarian. The treaty, which did not explicitly say anything about human sacrifices, slave-trade or ‘bloody customs’ was unambiguous on ‘the commercial issues which prompted Gallwey’s visit, and also on the issue of political control of the *Oba*, since this was necessary to secure economic subordination as well.’<sup>19</sup> This conclusion that Britain’s war with Benin was motivated by economic factors and not humanitarian is very evident in a letter from Gallwey to Macdonald in ‘January 1895, when Gallwey again, reported to Macdonald some successes recorded in his negotiations with the *Oba* of Benin, who he said, according to royal messengers, through whom the dialogue were carried out, had agreed to open the trade for all products throughout the Benin territories as well as to abolish human sacrifices. Gallwey surprisingly added, ‘I now consider there will be no necessity to send a punitive expedition to Benin City.’<sup>20</sup> This statement is significant in revealing that by 1895 the consular officials, in line with Macdonald's earlier statement at the time of the 1892 treaty, had actively begun to consider sending a punitive expedition against Benin. It is significant, then, that from the early 1890s, many European traders including some westernised Africans, such as Edward Blyden sought to persuade the British to extend their influence and jurisdiction in West Africa some even “appealed to the British tradition of humanitarianism and ‘commercial instincts,’ while maintaining that a ‘pacified West Africa under a British protectorate would bring substantial pecuniary rewards to Britons through increased trade.”<sup>21</sup> Hollis Lynch reports that many of the advocates of British Imperialism, like Niyan, were persistent. Niyan did not fail to appeal steadfastly to the British public, whenever possible, to support his call for the extension of British power in West Africa. Thus, in a speech, delivered in Middlesex in July 1874, he advised his audience that “England has it in her power to determine to a great extent, what the condition of West and Central Africa shall” be in twenty years and added that extension of British rule was “immediately necessary to forestall vigorous French expansion.”<sup>22</sup>

The *Oba*’s regular interference with trade for whatever reason was not pleasing to the Itsekiri traders, just as it was not in the interest of the British traders who resorted to appealing to their home government for intervention. Therefore, the Benin River was bound to become an important centre that played its part in involving the British government in the enmeshed problems or difficulties of protecting the interest of its subjects in the important trade of the area.<sup>23</sup> In addition to trade, another economic consideration that gave impetus to the British enterprise in Benin was the 1887 invention of pneumatic tyre by John Boyd Dunlop (1840-1921), a Scottish veterinary surgeon. Dunlop's invention was patented in December 1888 after being tested for his child’s bicycle. Production of pneumatic tyre on commercial scale commenced from about 1890 onward when it was successfully adopted, first for the use of bicycle and later for motor cars.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the abundant rubber in the Benin forests became another attraction for the British. While Adiele Afigbo reports that ‘with the changed situation which dawned after 1830, the official representative of the British Government in the Oil Rivers, began to see his duty first and foremost as the protection of British interests, which translated into the protection of the trade of British subjects,’<sup>24</sup> Philip Igbafe pointed out that ‘the traders on the coast backed the consuls in urging stern measures against the *Oba*’ for the latter to open trade without any form of regulation or custom duties.

The extension and growth of trade in Benin territories and the destruction of the *Oba*’s government, for the British consuls and traders, became indissolubly bound up together.<sup>26</sup> Adding momentous to this need for colonies is the availability of rich products in Benin forests

that had to be exploited. Philip Igbafe observes that “penetration into the Oba’s territories was a prerequisite if access to these forests was to be gained”<sup>27</sup> for the pecuniary values of these forest resources among other economic rationale. Free access to the forest resources “implied the cooperation or subordination of the powerful ruler” in Benin who was bent on upholding the sovereignty of his kingdom and thus was “not willing to surrender his authority or to grant an unconditional freedom of trade within his dominion to the middlemen and Europeans.”<sup>28</sup> This economic reason was the propelling factor for the scramble for territories in West Africa by European nations. However, to avert crisis or ensure that this scramble for territories did not prop up or degenerate into a major conflict among the European nations concerned, the Berlin Conference on West Africa was organised in 1885 in Germany among the leading nations of Europe that were engaged in territorial acquisition in West Africa. Though the Berlin Conference never divided West Africa, it set out conditions for the acquisitions of territory by European powers. Consequently, West Africa became the centre of economic attraction for Europe and was subsequently partitioned between mainly Britain and France.

British firms and business in West Africa began to call for British extension in West Africa. They argue that such an extension was immediately necessary to forestall vigorous French expansion in West African territories.<sup>29</sup> Several merchants such as William Grant and Samuel Lewis, also called on the British government to “bring under its protection the Sierra Leone hinterland so as to ensure uninterrupted trade between it and the colonies.”<sup>30</sup> The British businessmen in Africa also mounted pressure on the British government to extend its authority to Africa, arguing that African leaders, like Samori, king of Sudan have positive feelings of “friendship for the British, and since the widespread conquest of the Muhammadan warrior, Samori was all the more anxious to find refuge under a strong and regular Government.”<sup>31</sup> Edward Blyden, an African Nationalist also wrote that the hinterland, “contained rich agricultural lands which could be developed by the British Government, in co-operation with the American Colonisation Society, colonising the area with about 700,000 American Negroes.”<sup>32</sup> Blyden and his contemporaries that favours British colonial rule in Africa also pointed out that “the new society which would be created would provide safe and permanent markets for British manufacturers, and would in a short time take from the British Government the whole burden of local expenditure”<sup>33</sup> Captain H. L. Gallwey, the first permanent Vice-Consul to the Benin River district was also not content with trading with the middle men at the coast, and preferred a direct contact with the producers in the hinterland in order to increase trade volume and profit for the British traders. After spending the whole of 1891 making exploratory journeys along the creeks and into the interior of the Urhobo markets, Gallwey visited Benin in 1892. Perhaps, Gallwey felt that the *Oba* of Benin had to be made to recognise British interests on the Benin River, which had already resulted in Consul Hewett's treaty with Chief Nana of Itsekiri. Freedom of trade for all traders on the river was one of these interests.”<sup>34</sup> During this period, the palm oil industry dominated the economy of the Benin territories and brought about a revolution in the trade with the European merchants. As British firms controlled the trade, it was inevitable that in the nineteenth century circumstances, that their government should take some interest in the internal political affairs of the various peoples. The economic and political situation in the Benin River followed the same pattern as in the other rivers of the Niger Delta, and British policy sought always for the highest common factor in a series of complex and individual situations. The main catalyst for the British Benin war has its roots in British imperialism ambitions of the 19th century.<sup>35</sup> A by-product of its imperial policies was to move against pre-colonial African rulers who were not yet under its sphere of control as it sought ways to expand its territories for

economic exploitation.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, by way of its “imperial advance,”<sup>37</sup> it was only a matter of time, before the British imperialist machine worked its way up the hinterland of the Benin empire. By December 1896 they had been preparing for an operation that will dethrone the Oba for eighteen months according to dispatches from Ralph Moor to the Foreign office.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile, Oba Ovonramwen did not shift his ground on trade levy on the Itsekiri traders and the situation deteriorated. Ralph Moor, together with his Vice Consul, James Philips began to plan ways to overthrow the Oba in order to develop the protectorate. While Ralph Moor was in his annual leave in 1896, James Philips sent a dispatch to the foreign office in London asking for permission to dethrone the King of Benin and merge his country with the protectorate for the benefit of trade. According to him, the military operation would depose and “remove the King of Benin and to establish a native council in his place and to take such further steps for the opening up of the country as the occasion may require.”<sup>39</sup> After stating these objectives, he requested for a sufficient armed Force, consisting of 250 troops, two seven pounder guns, 1 Maxim, and 1 Rocket apparatus. He also added that the Ivory in the Palace will be sufficient to “pay the expenses in removing the King from his Stool.”<sup>40</sup> In its response, the foreign office denied the request on the ground that the Oba, together with Benin City, the Kingdom’s headquarters is so fortified and protected that war at this time will be very costly to Britain, but James Philips was not patient enough for the response. Armed with revolvers and other weapons and some protectorate personnel, he embarked on what is now known as Philips Mission. It cost him his life and brought about the long south war.

The British went about preparing for the war immediately after news of the ambush and killing by Benin soldiers of the party led by Captain James Phillips on 4 January 1897. ‘The District Commissioner at Sapele received word of Phillips’ death on 7 January 1897 from Chief Dogho, an Itsekiri chief. The latter of was in alliance with the British. Three days later news had reached London’.<sup>41</sup> According to Henry Galway, news reached him on 12 January 1897.<sup>42</sup> The core British troops that fought the war were drawn from Cape Town, Malta, England and within the Niger Coast Protectorate.<sup>43</sup> Admiral Harry Rawson, the head of the naval squadron from Cape Town after receiving instructions on 15 January, 1897<sup>44</sup> was at the centre of the preparation alongside Henry Galway. ‘In twenty-nine days, he collected, provisioned, organised and landed a Field Force of 1,200 men’.<sup>45</sup> Besides, there were the use of the deployment of nine warships in preparation for the war in addition to Admiral Rawson’s yacht. They were HMS *St George*, HMS *Theseus*, HMS *Phoebe*, HMS *Forte*, HMS *Philomel*, HMS *Barrosa*, HMS *Widgeon*, HMS *Magpie*, HMS *Alecto* and Admiral Rawson’s yacht *The Ivy*.<sup>46</sup> Alongside ‘the P&O cruiser SS *Malacca*, which had brought a battalion of 310 marines, was fitted as a hospital ship’<sup>46</sup>. These Navy ships were manned by ‘Captain Michael Pelham O’Callaghan who led a flying column from a flotilla of warships and gunboats, including HMS *Philomel*, *Barrosa* and *Widgeon*, along Gwato Creek to the west of Benin City, and Captain McGill led another flying column, with HMS *Phoebe*, *Alecto* and *Magpie*, along the Jamieson River at Sapobar, to the east of Benin City’.<sup>47</sup>

The HMS. *Theseus* and *Forte*, came from the Mediterranean Squadron, while the remainder belonged to the Cape Squadron.<sup>48</sup> As part of preparations for the war, most of the ships used, sailed from considerable distances. H.M.S. *St. George* sailed from Simons Town,<sup>49</sup> Western Cape, South Africa. HMS *Theseus* and *Forte* sailed from Malta, 8000 miles off,<sup>50</sup> HMS *Alecto* from the Gambia,<sup>51</sup> HMS *Widgeon* at Brass<sup>52</sup> and HMS *Malacca* sailed from England.<sup>53</sup> In all, the Benin Punitive Expedition took place over three weeks between 9 and 27 February 1897, and



involved the mobilisation of around 5,000 men, including European and African soldiers and supporting roles such as carriers (from Sierra Leone, Lagos and Benin) and scouts and guides. The attack was organised as a naval operation, led by Vice Admiral Sir Harry Rawson, Commander-in-Chief at the Cape of Good Hope, with the Niger Coast Protectorate.<sup>54</sup> 'It involved a force of 1,400 soldiers, drawn variously from the Protectorate's Constabulary, Admiralty seamen, and more than 100 marines and officers brought on 'special service' from Malta, South Africa and Britain'.<sup>55</sup> These troops were supported by an estimated 2,500 carriers, most of whom carried water, plus scouts, and there were also dozens of medics and Protectorate staff.'<sup>56</sup> "This main column comprised 250 Hausa troops from the Protectorate Force, with five Maxims and two 7-pounders, alongside 120 bluejackets from HMS *St George* and HMS *Theseus* with two rocket tubes, 120 marines, light artillery and marine artillery, and around 1,200 carriers."<sup>57</sup>

The makeup of the troops also "included the Mediterranean Squadron and the support of detachment of the West Indian Regiment."<sup>58</sup> Part of the preparations by the British was the deployment of spies into Benin, as reported by Phillip Igbafe thus: "Spies and messengers were drafted into the Benin territory to report on the movement of the Oba and chiefs."<sup>59</sup> The assembled team of the British military officers and soldiers officially made land fall at Warri(Warri) on 6 February, 1897<sup>60</sup> from where they subsequently commenced their march towards the city of Benin. While there existed an established British imperialist policy, which was founded on economic grounds, these were centred on its quest to exploit the vast natural resources of Benin. A position that was copiously acknowledged by agents of the British government overseeing affairs of the Niger Coast Protectorate in the years preceding the British Benin war and British officials based in London. One of such was that of Consul-General Claude MacDonald, on 16 May 1892, who asserted that: 'there is no doubt that the Benin Territory is a very rich and most important one. Minerals, Gum Copal, Gum Arabic, Palm Oil Kernels, et cetera are to be found in large quantities'.<sup>61</sup> The natural resources with which Benin was endowed with was common knowledge to the British, yet this endowment referred to within it circles were mostly of the natural resources of the pre-colonial Benin kingdom and not entirely the artworks of the kingdom whose large cache of existence was not entirely known before the war, even though earlier visitors to Benin had eluded to the existence of some form of artworks where the sighting of 'large ivory teeth'.<sup>62</sup> was mentioned. However, the existence of Benin artworks was known to the ranks of the British military going by the revelations of the early visitors to Benin. However, it was until the visit of Henry Gallwey of the British groups, during his visit to Benin 1892 to get the Oba to sign a protectionist treaty that, he gave a picturesque description of the sighting of the Benin bronzes. According to him: 'every house had at the end of one of its rooms a clay altar, on which were placed, in the case of important men, carved elephants' tusks, clay figures, heads of bronze and wood, figures of birds and beasts, water-pots, metal bells and other objects.'<sup>63</sup> He described seeing in the Oba's courtyard the altar, on which were carved ivory tusks, bronze heads, and bronze barn-door cocks'.<sup>64</sup> Oba Ovonramwen, he described gave him an artwork as a gift; 'the King in return presented me with a very fine elephant's tusk, on which I eventually had inscribed: "Presented to Captain H. L. Galway by King Ovorami, (Ovonramwen ) Benin City, 1892." On showing the tusk to my chief, Sir Claude MacDonald, he informed me that the tusk was the property of the Government! I told him I would not do it again, and so was permitted to retain the ivory!'<sup>65</sup>

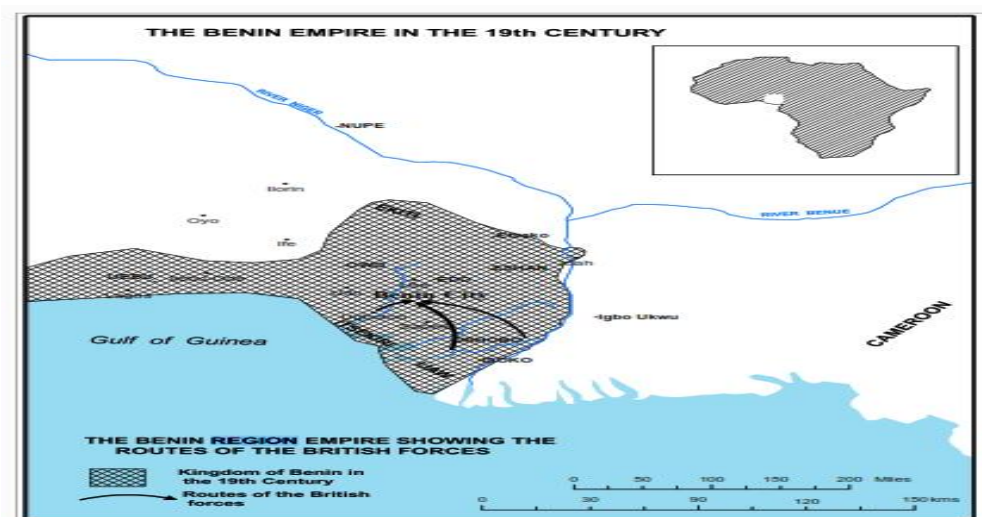
Henry Gallwey being a high-ranking British officer later played a pivotal role in the British Benin war both with his knowledge of Benin and the existence of the Benin artworks. A point he alluded to thus: 'I was the only man in the column who had ever visited Benin City before, so I managed to be fairly useful, my knowledge of the King's compounds proving especially so'.<sup>66</sup> Phillip Igbafe pointed out James Phillips' mention of the artworks as a means to recoup the cost of deposing the Oba thus: 'financially, Phillips was optimistic that the large store of ivory in the king's house would be sufficient to offset the cost of the operations for the deposition of Oba Ovonramwen'.<sup>67</sup> As one of his dispatches to the Foreign office indicated thus: 'I would add that I have reason to hope that sufficient Ivory may be found in the King's house to pay the expenses in removing the King from his Stool'.<sup>68</sup> That the artworks were being suggested as a makeweight to defray the cost of an initial move against the Oba months before the war, at the time when the Foreign Secretary was reticent to sanction a move against the Oba on account of 'insufficient troops'<sup>69</sup> is a pointer to the likelihood of it being a factor in the war. The cost of the war had to be paid for at some point, though, the remote reason for the war being the quest to expand British economic ambitions into the hinterland of Benin, anything that could bolster this, was used, the artworks turned out to be an ample opportunity to toll this part and a common trend in the imperial era, was that 'looting was an economic tool, but it was also a means for the colonial power to assert dominance over the colonised people through erasing cultural identity and instilling a sense of inferiority among the subjugated'.<sup>70</sup>

The artworks as a causal factor in the British Benin war could be said to fall within the prevailing theme of British economic imperialism of the late 19th century. The subsequent reported sale of most of the artworks after it was shipped to Britain, and the correspondence within government circles on a policy of sale of the artworks<sup>71</sup> to upset the cost of the war attest to this. A point rather brazenly reinforced by this assertion thus: 'with the sacking of the Benin capital by the British, they (artworks) were taken from the Oba and sold in Europe for the benefit of the British hostages and the soldiers'.<sup>72</sup> The inevitability of war with Benin for the rich treasure of the region began to dawn on the Europeans and it was accosted by arguments particularly the appropriateness of such war and the feasibility as well as the cost implications. Richard Bacon "believed Britain's interests were best served by a 'forward policy', in which expanded political control would help the spread of both trade and civilisation."<sup>73</sup> Such a policy tended to be self-perpetuating, because the subsequent growth of commerce, investment and commodities only brought a greater necessity to protect what was at stake. Not all politicians in London were convinced of the wisdom of this course. Twenty years later, in 1882, the Colonial Secretary in the Liberal government, Lord Kimberley, warned Prime Minister William Gladstone of the dangers of involvement in the Bight of Benin: "The coast is pestilential, the natives numerous and unmanageable. The result of a British occupation would be almost certainly wars with the natives and heavy demands upon the British taxpayer."<sup>74</sup>

About 1,200 Royal Marines, sailors and Niger Coast Protectorate Forces coordinated the attack. Nine ships, H. M. S. St. George, Theseus, Phoebe, Forte, Philomel, Barossa, Widgeon, Magpie and Alecto<sup>75</sup> were used to bring in troops to the coast and the army invaded Benin, the capital city of the Benin Empire and Kingdom via three coastal routes - the Ologbo creek, the Jamieson River line to Sakponba and the Ughoton creeks.<sup>76</sup> The Philomel, Barrosa and Widgeon with six canoes were detailed off for Gwato Creek and the Phoebe, Alecto, and Magpie for similar duties up the Jamieson River at Sakponba while the rest when through Ologbo creeks.<sup>77</sup> Having disembarked on land, the march on foot followed as they headed inland through the creeks of the

Niger Delta and the thick undergrowth typical of the dense tropical rain forest, where “the only means of transportation was by carriers.”<sup>78</sup> On February 9<sup>th</sup>, the fighting began, capturing Sakponba on the 11<sup>th</sup> and Ologbo on the 12<sup>th</sup>, the troops advanced from Ologbo on the 14<sup>th</sup>, with the Benin soldiers keeping up a running fight and contesting every turn. After 10 days of bitter fighting, the Sakponba column, and the main column reached Benin City but the Gwato column was defeated and routed by a section of the Benin troops commanded by War Chief Ologbosere. The troop finally captured Benin after firing some rocket tubes into the city.”<sup>79</sup> Homes, religious buildings and palaces were set ablaze by the conquering soldiers. On the third day, the blaze grew out of control and engulfed part of the city. War Chief Ologbosere and several others retreated into the districts and began a long guerrilla warfare against the British colonial army.

There were three main battles of the war, all from the three front the British chose to attack Benin. These were from Gwato (Ughoton), Sakponba and Ologbo. There is also, the less mentioned battle at the entrance of Benin, where the Benin Army’s resistance led to the death of several British troops. “The main column was stationed at Ologbo while the other two were supporting columns.”<sup>80</sup> The battle of Ughoton was a fierce military confrontation, in which many of the British were killed.<sup>81</sup> “The column was also attacked at its base and the commanding officer was killed.”<sup>82</sup> The British army at Ughoton beat a retreat because of the heroics of Ebeikhinmwun who was the Front Commander of Benin warriors at Ughoton.<sup>83</sup> The Benin Army was reported to have been able to put up an obdurate defence at this location, ‘because the Benin military leaders had anticipated that the British attack would come from that direction and no headway was made there.’<sup>84</sup> Though the Benin Army put up a brave resistance to the advancing British troops, they captured Sakpoba on 11 February, 1897 and Ologbo a day after on the 12<sup>th</sup>, the troops advanced from Ologbo on the 14<sup>th</sup> in two columns,<sup>85</sup> they reached Obarete (Obaretin) on the 16<sup>th</sup>, where they encountered resistance, but the ‘Maxims and volley firing cleared the bushes.’<sup>86</sup> In two days, the British troops advanced into Benin City from the Sakponba and Ologbo invasion routes in the afternoon on 18 February, 1897.<sup>87</sup>



**A map showing the Benin Empire in the Nineteenth Century**

Source: “Adapted from the Military System”<sup>88</sup>

On the brief battle at entrance into Benin on 18 February 1897, Felix Roth detailed the resistance the Benin Army put up. Which resulted in several casualties for the British. According to him, ‘again and again we were fired into, the firing was very hot. Then the enemy collected on the opposite side of the road in the bush and trees, and kept up a hot fire, killing and wounding a lot of our men. They had made a sort of embankment which, owing to the dense bush, could not be seen; they fired over this and then dropped down, so that until some of our troops passed this place and the natives were afraid of being cut off, they peppered us fearfully.’<sup>89</sup> It was at this battle that British Captain Byrne was killed alongside the “company of men” under his command.<sup>90</sup> At every turn, the several battles of the British Benin War were won on the strength of the superior firepower of the British, largely due to the Maxims machine guns,<sup>91</sup> which contrasted with the ‘second-hand ordnance’<sup>92</sup> the Benin army had which was not a match for the British weaponry. The British had a full array of modern weapons at their disposal. “From 1892 to 1898, Felix Roth, was in the “Medical Service of the Niger Coast Protectorate.”<sup>93</sup> He was part of the invasion of Benin as a British naval surgeon.<sup>94</sup> He gave details of the weapons used by the British and how it was deployed. The Maxims were a common feature. And by all accounts, they came in handy for the British. The Maxims had the capacity to wreak maximum damage in relation to its usage in the nineteenth century, and “they proved decisive, in last 19<sup>th</sup> century warfare in empire expansion.”<sup>95</sup> Also, test revealed in the mid-nineteenth century that the Maxims had the capacity to fire “off 3,000 rounds in 3 minutes and 3 seconds.”<sup>96</sup> It’s little wonder therefore that, there are detailed accounts of how the Maxims came in handy for the British in pushing back the Benin soldiers.<sup>97</sup> The advantage of the Maxims were also mentioned by Reginald Bacon in his account of the war.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, other weapons used by the British, included rockets and seven-pound guns.<sup>99</sup>

In all, as documented by the Chief of Staff for the Benin Expedition, Captain George Le Clerk Egerton,<sup>100</sup> the British weapons consisted of ‘a dozen 7-pounder RML mountain guns, each carried with more than 300 charges and projectiles. Six rocket-tubes and ‘a ready supply of war rockets’ was carried by each division, along with many hundredweights of gun cotton (nitrocellulose).<sup>101</sup> ‘There were 14 Maxim guns adapted to be carried across land, each with 126 belts and boxes of 334 rounds – plus 24 more Maxims on the warships, with HMS St George and Theseus having seven each.’<sup>102</sup> ‘That makes a total of 38 Maxim guns, with perhaps 2 million machine-gun cartridges in total that could be shot at the rate of 380 bullets per second if all Maxims were firing at once. This fire power was doubled by 1,200 Martini-Enfield and Lee Metford bolt-action rifles for which each man carried a hundred rounds of ammunition.’<sup>103</sup> According to Dan Hicks, ‘there is some evidence that flintlock guns were rifled by hand, and converted into percussion locks, by the Benin soldiers.’<sup>104</sup> They also used “Dane guns (muzzle-loading smooth-bore flintlock muskets), pistols, machetes, cutlasses, spears, bows and arrows, knives.”<sup>105</sup> The guns the Benin soldiers used reportedly to “contain six drams of powder and four pistol bullets.”<sup>106</sup> The Benin army also use canons from Portugal and China. These include four of the venerable cannons with which the Benin army had tried to repel the British forces. “One of these guns bore the Portuguese royal coat of arms and the name of a nearly sixteenth-century Lisbon manufacturer, while another had a Chinese inscription, and has been dated by experts to the eighteenth nearly nineteenth century. They are testimony to Benin City’s cosmopolitan networks, but the story of how and when they got there is an intriguing mystery.”<sup>107</sup>



The internal issues within the top hierarchy of the kingdom, impacted on its intelligence effort on the British which had an adverse effect on preparations for the war. According to Benson Osadolor, “the Benin military leaders did not seem to have embarked on a systematic and extensive gathering of information to counter British attack.”<sup>108</sup> This created difficulty of choosing the correct line of operations. The main routes to Benin City from the Atlantic coast were Ologbo and Ughoton creeks. The Benin war plan did not take into considerations other decisive points in the expected theatre of war. This was probably due to erroneous appraisal of the British strategic war plan.<sup>109</sup> In spite of this crisis, the stiff resistance put up at some point by the Benin troops during battles of the war as the British war party advanced towards Benin apparently points to some modicum of preparations. The various ambushes set up by Benin troops, though not strong enough to have helped push back the British advance for a considerable number of time, revealed some measure of strategy. To this it was reported that in response to a boggle traps set up by the Benin soldiers which was described thus: “the natives showed some cuteness, for on one side of the road they had cut a track for some hundreds of yards, so as to be able to fire on us as we went up. . . we found this ambushade at once, thanks to our scouts, and troops were sent up it.”<sup>110</sup> Reginald Bacon emphasised, the ingenuity of the ambushes of the Benin army thus: “The nature of ambushades used by the Benin were peculiar. They never chose a thick portion of the bush, but always made a clearing, cutting the bush to a height of three or four feet, the object in view being apparently to hide in the bush beyond, and have a clear range for their slugs without being impeded by the foliage to a convenient range of about thirty yards.”<sup>111</sup> During the war, the Benin soldiers were known not to launch attacks at night.<sup>112</sup> The Benin army also made an “embankment”<sup>113</sup> at the path leading into Benin from which they made a ground stand against the approaching British troops, with the latter suffering several casualties as a result.<sup>114</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The British Benin war caused pre-colonial Benin kingdom its independence and resulted in the deposition and exile of the last independent king of Benin, Oba Ovonramwen. The narrative built up by the British before the war, was that Benin was a kingdom of savagery that needed to be rescued by its magnanimity. That though, was besides the core issue. This paper has established that plans were aloft to attack Benin years before the conflict broke out. And that all declarations made, and steps taken by British interests were aimed at achieving this purpose. James Phillips’ intended visit to Benin was not meant to be friendly, going by the content of the dispatch he sent to the foreign office in London.<sup>115</sup> The response of the foreign office which he did not wait to receive, was a case of postponing the evil day, as one of the reasons his request was turned down was due to the plausible financial cost of any conflict with Benin. At no point was conflict with Benin completely ruled out by the foreign office. What is clear therefore, is that the British-Benin war would have happened at some point, due to the prior plans of the British, and the fact that pre-colonial Benin would not have acceded to the request of the British as contained in the Galway treaty. The Phillips mission therefore only brought the conflict forward. The British war campaigns gathered steam after the Galway treaty entered into by Oba Ovonramwen in 1892. This literally caused Benin her independence which it finally lost after the war. Prior to the treaty, the British had no appendages with which to hold Benin. Trading decisions taken by the Oba against vassal states, like the embargo placed on the Itsekiri middlemen would previously not have resulted in any action against the Oba. But the treaty opened the door for the opprobrium displayed by British colonial administrators and British traders after the trade blockage on the



Itsekiri middlemen. The British-Benin war had its core foundations in British imperialism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. All other causes are ancillary to this. The quest by British traders to exploit the natural wealth of Benin such as palm oil and rubber to drive the economy of the United Kingdom and increase their profiteering, meant that they pushed for the Oba to be removed. There was no way, Oba Ovonramwen would have been removed without conflict. In the end, the British-Benin war was a battle between an African Empire that was on the vestiges of its absolute splendour holding out for her independence to defend centuries old heritage and interest against the might of the colonial British army driven by imperialist ambitions.

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