



The Concept and Practice of Pre-colonial Warfare in Ibibio Land

Uwem Jonah Akpan, PhD^{1*}; Jeremiah Uko Akpe, PhD²

¹Department of History & International Studies, University of Uyo, Nigeria

²Department of History & War Studies, Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, Nigeria

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*Corresponding Author: Uwem Jonah Akpan, PhD

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This paper examines the concept and practice of warfare in the pre-colonial Ibibio society, challenging the Eurocentric view that dismiss pre-state African military engagements as falling outside the classical definition of war. The study argues that the pre-colonial Ibibio society possessed organised and purposeful military structures comparable to that of European and other world civilisations. The study reveals that warfare in the pre-colonial Ibibio society was triggered by economic, political and social factors, including boundary disputes, competition for fertile land and fishing grounds, slave raids, and struggle for territorial dominance. It further reveals that in the absence of a standing army, military recruitment was drawn from agencies such as; individuals and families with established martial reputation, the secret society, and the hunters and blacksmiths guilds. Indeed, the pre-colonial Ibibio employed a wide range of sophisticated military practices, including the use of envoys, espionage, ambushes, deception, vulnerability theory, supernatural rituals and coded communication system. Weapons ranged from spears, machetes, bows and arrows, and later firearms. The study relies mainly on secondary sources and adopts descriptive, thematic analytical approaches to reconstruct the military history of the study area. It concludes that the pre-colonial warfare was structured, culturally embedded engagement with clearly defined practices of declaration of hostilities, preparation for battle, command organisation and cessation of hostilities. Far from being primitive or stateless violence, Ibibio military culture reflects a rich warrior tradition that contributed meaningfully to the study of military history, pre-dating the arrival of Europeans in the area.

Keywords: Ibibio, pre-colonial, war, warfare, tactics and strategy.

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Introduction

War is a state of usually open armed confrontation between two states or parties carried out by armed soldiers for a certain period of time (Howard and Paret, 1976). For victory to be achieved, both sides must have some strategies and tactics. Pre-colonial wars in Africa, their antecedents, manifestations, strategies, and tactics

vary from one region to another but they were not all different from European wars. According to Carl Von Clausewitz, war is a means to the end of a state entity. Put differently, it is an extension of state policy in a violent form. Clausewitz adds that human history has its own peculiar or type of war, its own characteristics, its own limitations and its uniqueness (Cited Howard and Paret, 1976).



However, this view by Clausewitz has been challenged by some scholars and writers who perceive wars from a Eurocentric perspective. To these scholars, the Clausewitz concept of war is not applicable to pre-state communities, they posit that pre-colonial African political entities were not state. According to these scholars, since wars are fought between state entities, violence conflicts in pre-state African communities cannot be regarded as wars (Christopher, 1994).

The Eurocentric perspective appears biased because the Greek communities were city states and some of these states embarked on warfare. Therefore, it would be scholarly myopic, intellectually subjective and educationally misleading to assume that violent conflicts in pre-colonial Africa, including the pre-colonial Ibibio society were not wars as claimed by these Eurocentric scholars. The pre-colonial African societies engaged warfare with different forms of strategies and tactics. These could be seen in the military engagement of the Ibibio society. Wars in the pre-colonial Ibibio society occurred at different time, place and for different reasons. The major reasons included: boundary disputes, struggles to acquire fertile land, fishing grounds, market centers, kidnapping/ killing of a member of a community by another community, show of domination among others, etc., (Akpan, 2018). Contacts and interactions among various groups in Ibibio society and her neighbours, sometimes resulted in armed confrontations.

Pre-colonial wars in Ibibio society were fought predominantly by foot soldiers with simple weapons such as: stones, clubs, knives, spear among others. However, there was no standing army in the pre-colonial Ibibio society, because of undefined lines which separated military, economic, social, political and religious aspects of communal living (Akpan, 2018). Because there was no standing army, fighting of wars was the responsibility of the youth, *ekong* (a secret society), hunters and black smiths, sometimes women assisted in warfare with limited role.

For victory to be achieved in war, every citizen in Ibibio society had a role to play. Thus, wars in the pre-colonial Ibibio society were influence by

contacts and interactions in the society. However, Noah (1991) posits that, unlike after the arrival of the Europeans, inter-ethnic warfare was rare. The inter-dependence of the various communities made warfare unnecessary and economically expensive and unwise. It was economically expensive to embark on war, but that does not mean that war(s) did not occur among the Ibibio. Warfare in the pre-colonial Ibibio contributed to military tactics and strategies like European wars, through various tactics and strategies, concepts and practices employed in the war(s).

It is against this backdrop that this paper examines warfare in the pre-colonial Ibibio society. For a deeper understanding of the above, the following sub-topics shall be considered: the Ibibio origin, migration and settlement, the socio-political organisation of Ibibio society, military organisation, causes of war, declaration of hostilities, preparation for war, weapons, strategy and tactics of warfare. The focus of this paper, especially the tactics and strategies has received scant scholarly attention in the historiography of military tactics and strategy. This paper therefore seeks to add to the existing knowledge of the military tactics and strategies in the Ibibio area.

Clarification of Concepts

For easy understanding and proper appreciation of this paper, there is need to clarify some of the key concepts used in the work. This is particularly important in view of the plethora and sometimes confusing, or even contradictory definitions of concepts by scholars.

War:

War is a state of open hostility or confrontation which leads to violence and destruction. Skirmishes, raids, pitched battles and even campaigns, are not wars but incidents within a war. Countless duels make up a war. A war, even when undeclared must usually be ended by agreement more or less formal, between the belligerents to make peace or at least to observe an armistice (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>). Pre-

colonial war was an open armed confrontation between African societies before the coming or interference of Europeans in the political and military activities of Africa societies.

Warfare:

Warfare is the way and means of fighting a war. It is the activities of fighting a war or strongly competing, especially with reference to the type of weapons used or the way the fighting is done (www.weaponslaw.org). Means of warfare generally describes the weapons being used by parties in an armed conflict in the conduct of hostilities (www.weaponslaw.org). Indeed, warfare is the theoretical part of war. Pre-colonial warfare refers to military operations or activities between two societies, kingdoms, empires or groups of city states before the outset or coming of the Europeans or before European political and military domination.

Pre-colonial Period:

Although there are various approaches in writing history, the thematic, chronological and geographical focus of this study is within the pre-colonial era. Periodisation in African history indicates that the pre-colonial period is within the time frame of the years from the early migrations and settlements to 1900. The era before this period is referred to as the earliest times, while the era after the pre-colonial period is the era of British occupation and colonial rule, 1900-1960 (in select African states). In other words, the pre-colonial period indicates the activities of African societies before the advent of European colonial rule (Smith, 1989).

The Ibibio People

The Ibibio people, Nigeria's fourth largest ethnic nationality, inhabits the South-Eastern or coastal region of Nigeria (Akpan, 2018). It is generally believed that the Ibibio migrated from the Central Benue Valley to the Cameroons before migrating to present-day Nigeria through different routes. Abasiattai (1991) states that it was during the Late Stone Age that the ancestors of the people,

moving probably "from further North," occupied the Central Benue valley where, along with other population living in a fairly well defined area over which they still wandered to hunt and gather, they evolved the Proto-Bantu language and other common religious and social institutions, including conception of God.

It is noted that upon leaving the Central Benue valley and migrating south wards through the forests, the Ibibio later settled in Usak Edet in the Cameroon side of the Nigeria-Cameroon border. While in Usak Edet, the Ibibio were referred to as Afaha people. From Usak Edet region in the Cameroon, the Ibibio seemed to have migrated to their present location through three major directions. There were some Ibibio groups who reached Nigeria perhaps by an overland route and settled at Ibom in Arochukwu in present-day Abia State (Ukpong, 2006; Akpan, 2018).

Ukpong (2007) observes that there were other Ibibio who reached Ibibio mainland by sea through Eket, Oron axis. The third wave of migrants entered Ibibio land via the Uruan corridor.

Population pressures from the North-West by the advancing Igbo, land as well as other conflicts with the Ekoi to the North-East who had settled in the Ibom region led to warfare and social tension. It is observed that, the Aro, who was not a military race, hired some Akunakuna who were Ekoi mercenaries to fight the Ibibio and expelled them from Ibom (Noah, 1988, Ukpong; 2007; Akpan, 2018).

The subsequent migration of the new waves of Ibibio people following the Igbo-Ibibio War, estimated to have occurred between 1500-1550, caused further pressure on Ibibio people already concentrated in Ikot Oku Ikono district and in turn triggered massive dispersals in all directions over the Ibibio mainland (present-day Akwa Ibom State) (Ukpong, 2007; Akpan, 2018). Abasiattai (1987) further observes that as the people spread out from Ikot Oku Ikono, they formed clans that existed today and clans based religious festivals and cults. In other words, Ibibio occupied their present locale through various waves of migration.

Socio-Political Organisation of the Ibibio Society

No matter how simple a society might be, there are behaviours and attitudes relating to political organisation in such society. Thus, there is no society without its political organisation. In the pre-colonial Ibibio, the village was an outstanding political unit. These villages were independent and equal in status; each had the power of life and death over its inhabitants. This degree of independence and autonomy gave rise to the notion of village state or village republic, in describing the traditional political structure of Ibibio people (Noah, 1988).

The Ibibio people operated a republican form of political organisation not a stateless society as classified by some anthropologists. The Ibibio political institution strictly adheres to the principles of primogeniture and power radiated from the elders. It is because of this that the traditional political organisation of the Ibibio people is at times described as gerontocracy (Anene, 1966; Noah, 1988). This political organisation was structured in an ascending order, namely: the family, ward, village, village groups, and the clan (Udo, 1983).

Each Ibibio village was lineage based with the family constituting the smallest component. The Village Council consisted of all heads of lineages and this formed the highest authority on all matters affecting members of the village (Noah, 1988).

Every Ibibio village had secret societies responsible primarily for the enforcement of village laws. The most popular of secret societies were the *ekpo*, *ekong* and *ekpe*. They were also used to collect levies and debt in the societies (Noah and Ekpo, 1992). In the pre-colonial Ibibio society, it was not enough that justice was seen to be done, of even greater importance was that it should be done in accordance with tradition, conscience, and the wishes of the ancestral spirits (Talbot, 1926). This strict adherence to ancestral veneration was applied to village administration. It was such that even though all chiefs were elders, not all elders were chiefs.

Another arm of the Ibibio societal organisation was the age grade. Apart from executing village laws, they were institutional devices for integrating the activities of the village to ensure

social cohesiveness. It is important to note that it was from the rank of a particular age grade that the bulk of the army was drawn (Talbot, 1926). This political and social organisation of the pre-colonial Ibibio gave prominence to the warrior tradition.

The Practice of Warfare in the Pre-colonial Ibibio Society

As observed earlier, the pre-colonial Ibibio society had no standing army due to the fact that there were no clear demarcations between the military, socio-economic, political and religious activities or aspects of life. This is not to say that the pre-colonial Ibibio society had no military commanders and leaders during the times of war but it was not usually in the form of a permanent, professional army with standing military commanders. During times of war, specific war leaders and commanders emerged to lead fighting forces drawn from the community. Again, this is not to assert that the pre-colonial Ibibio society never embarked or experienced military expeditions or war. Since the pre-colonial Ibibio society had no standing army, there existed three major ways of recruiting soldiers to defend its territory whenever they were invaded or they invaded another territory.

Firstly, individuals and families with military reputation: this group of soldiers possessed strength and skills to withstand the enemies, this is because pre-colonial warfare was fought “face to face”, where physical contacts with the enemies are inevitable. They were known to be good fighters; as a result, they were looked upon for guidance whenever conflict or war arises.

As observed by Mazrui:

...in the pre-colonial days when fighting involved mostly face-to-face confrontation entailing the use of fists, clubs, machetes, or spears - the men had an advantage as the

taller and more muscular members of the species. And because it was, they who reaffirmed the right between war and peace, the man became politically and therefore military pre-eminent (Mazrui, 1992: 191).

This group of soldiers (individuals and families with military reputation) were relied upon whenever their villages or communities was invaded or they were about to invade others.

Secondly, the *ekong* society: this was another major avenue of recruiting soldier to defend their society whenever their society was invaded or they were about to invade others. Every Ibibio village had the *ekong* society whose members were required to display excellent combative skills, boldness, and the ability to display and undertake great risks. Some of the village war leaders and warriors came from this class of men. *Ekong* society was not a war club; it was an elitist secret society used as a way of displaying affluence. Members of the *ekong society* fought in village wars not as members of that society but as citizens (Noah and Ekpo, 1992). The *ekong* society engaged in wars as their civic responsibility, not as their profession.

Thirdly, hunters and blacksmiths guild: This was another major way of recruiting soldier to defend the pre-colonial Ibibio society whenever their community was invaded or they were about to invade others. The blacksmiths assumed the role of leadership in the village army as a result of their skills in manufacturing weapons such as: iron swords, cutlasses, club, and iron points, while the hunters assumed military importance because their occupation provided training in adventure and courage. Apart from their importance in war time, they also (the hunter and blacksmith), provided security in peacetime by guarding the markets, trade routes and farm lands (Ajayi, 1965). This all-in-one-traditional role in the pre-colonial Ibibio cuts across

the military, economic, political, social and religious aspects of societal living. The hunter and blacksmith, mentioned above, used their skilled labour as a means of sustenance, while manufacturing war implements. This is how everyman brought whatever skill and expertise at his disposal towards the successful prosecution of the war.

It should be noted that causes of wars in the pre-colonial Ibibio society were mostly economic, political and social. Specifically, wars could be occasioned by disputes over trade routes, farmlands, hunting grounds, and controversy over virgin forest. Others were: slave raids, struggle over control of fishing grounds or markets, killing of a messenger of peace, and, marital disputes involving persuading a woman to abandon her home to take refuge with a new man (Mazrui, 1992).

It should also be mentioned that in the pre-colonial Ibibio society when conflict could not be resolved, and war became inevitable, the intention could be announced in several ways. The first, is the use of envoy who carried an *eyei* (the young shoot of the oil palm tree), in order to provide him safe passage through the enemy territory to convey the message. The enemy village dare not cause any harm to his person for fear of an impending defeat in the coming war (Noah and Ekpo, 1992). This “fear of an impending defeat” triggered the adoption of the supernatural forces in warfare. Talbot rightly captures this traditional method of declaration of war in pre-colonial Ibibio society thus:

When one town decides to make war upon another, the inhabitants send two men (each presumably carrying *eyei*) to lay a plantain leaf upon the road before the enemy’s town. On this, little pieces of powder, shots and caps are laid as a declaration of hostilities (Talbot, 1926:543).

Apart from this open method of communication, there existed covert or concealed methods that were utilised by friends and wives to

warn a close relative about an impending danger. For instance, should a man from the enemy village visits his wife residing in the belligerent village, the use of salt or pepper was use to send mute signs of hostility to the husband. According to Noah and Ekpo (1992), the woman devises this means of sharing this information with her husband without overt reference to it. In this case she cooks food for the husband without salt in the soup, when the husband asks her to bring salt, she grudgingly makes a move as though she was going for the salt but never returning with any.

In explaining the above, Talbot posits thus:

Then if the husband is a clever man, he will read the meaning of her behaviour; but if not, he will call again, more angrily: Do you not hear? I tell you to bring salt! ...the woman fetches it but will not put it in, so the man is forced to do this for himself. Should she sleep with him that night, sometimes she sighs softly through the darkness: did I ever forget to put salt in your chop before? Then at length, if he is in the least wise, he will understand (Talbot, 1926: 543).

In a situation the husband or the relation is not sensitive enough to understand the message; the woman will repeat it the next day and after this. Noah and Ekpo (1992) posit that “unless he is unusually stupid, he will see what it means: danger threatens flee.

Another method was the use of pepper, if the man was fond of it. On the whole, some wars in Ibibio were never announced, reason being that “if the date for the outbreak of hostilities is announced, a lame man would escape early to avoid being caught in the midst of it (Noah and Ekpo, 1992). Indeed, it was believed in the pre-colonial Ibibio society that if

the other party got to know of the impending attack, preparation for war would be in top gear. So, in other to achieve total victory, they concealed their plans and take the other side by surprise.

When going to war in the pre-colonial Ibibio society, it was inevitable to embark on intense preparation for the war. This is when the role of supernatural is crucial, in some cases decisive in warfare. According to Talbot (1926), sacrifices would be offered to the ancestors imploring their support and all the combatants would have to submit to a ceremony called the “shot and machete” - *juju*, involving the priest rubbing magic leaves over the body of the warriors in order to render them invulnerable. Also, magical powder was rubbed over their faces to make them invisible to their opponents. Apart from this, paid charm makers and diviners would be assembled from all friendly villages. Also, extensive use was made of medicine and charms which warriors hung on their necks and arms to give courage and skill and little bags containing magic roots and leaves to act as additional talisman against the enemy’s weapons.

In order not to neutralise the effects of the charms and render the preparation useless, a statutory requirement was upheld, as standard procedure in terms of battle formation. Talbot describes warrior code of conduct as thus:

As the band of warrior marched through the town, they were forbidden to salute any woman whom they chanced to meet. While war preparations were on, warriors were not expected to sleep with any woman nor eat food prepared by a twin mother or a menstruating woman. While on the march to the battlefield, they were not to look backwards nor pass through water which women used. No one was to touch the body of a

fellow warrior lest contact
with another counteract
the effect of his own
(Talbot, 1926:543).

In the pre-colonial Ibibio society, to ensure total victory in war, the warrior also observed strict rules over choice of food. For instance, ‘soldiers’ were forbidden from eating “soft food”, such as pumpkin, okro, etc. but the eating of roasted plantain was recommended (Noah and Ekpo, 1992).

Weapons used in the pre-colonial Ibibio society included machetes, spear, clubs, bows, and, arrows. Arrows were poisoned through the help of men whose duty it was to “cook” them in poisoned concoction. Also, a kind of spear known as *asauten* was used. This was made from the fond of a young oil palm tree, and then shaped to look like a dart while at the other end a few palm leaves would be trimmed to enable it to literally “fly” to the target. Most *asauten* were poisoned, but unlike spear which would have strings attached to aid its recovery, *asauten* could be extended generously (Noah and Ekpo, 1992).

In addition, extensive use was made of the type of missiles known by the Ibibio as *iyro* (pieces of sticks cut to size that can be thrown to hit the enemy). It was the responsibility of women to supply these missiles to the fighters at the war front and some women actually targeted the enemy with some of them. Mention should also be made of the use of *mukanda* net for swinging of an enemy (Noah and Ekpo, 1992). The arrival of European into the interior of Ibibio area with superior weapons (guns), changed the contour of the pre-colonial Ibibio warfare. Physical contact and close combat was abridged. These new weapons gave the pre-colonial Ibibio society enormous advantages in warfare. For instance, there was need to fire a gun from a distance without getting close to the enemy, among other advantages.

A point of departure for a comprehensive understanding of the strategy and tactics of warfare in the pre-colonial Ibibio is the influence of geography (terrain and vegetation), on the conduct of war. A detailed discussion about the terrain and vegetation of the area is not needed here to justify

that the forested nature of the area practically ruled out the use of the cavalry, moreover, close fighting and reliance on ambush were all dictated by these conditions. Strategy was influenced by factors such as the environment, and those making use of it (Noah and Ekpo, 1992).

Before battles were fought, scouts were sometimes sent secretly to the enemy’s war camp to sprinkle medicine or charms intended to cause quarrels and disagreement. Also, spies were used to obtain intelligence reports. Usually, people from neutral towns were bribed to bring news about the enemy’s war plans, the road they were likely to take, and so on. That information could be for the purpose of ambush (Noah and Ekpo, 1992).

Before fighting actually began, certain measures were taken to put in place medium of communication for notification of cessation of hostilities. A conversational narrative by an informant has been documented thus:

Once fighting begun, both camps sent spies to climb tall trees to spy on each other. These spies were never to be killed by either side because in addition to reporting to their own side the enemy’s war encampment, they would be the first to announce when a flag of truce has been raised. Such communication would be done through the use of trumpets and every warrior was required to be familiar with the sound of the trumpet from his own side (Noah and Ekpo 1992).

Some strategic operational blunders could undermine command and control, and increased vulnerabilities; this was handled by strengthening logistics and supplies. Also, the fighters provided their weapons and also catered for their maintenance. According to Mair (1992), those of them not too far from homes often went back for more provision

when they needed it. If they fought far away from home, then they had to “live on the country” even the one they were supposed to defend.

In terms of tactics the people dug pits which they lined with spikes at the bottom and covered with leaves. This was done at places best known to be enemy’s thoroughfare (Smith, 1973). In actual battle, Noah and Ekpo (1992) cite a missionary report which documents an account the Ibibio people even made bombs with calabashes filled with bees which, when thrown into the enemy’s camps, produce the desired effect. As pointed out earlier, the introduction of guns influenced the tactical formation of battle.

In this regard it has been noted that guns:

...enabled Ibibio warriors to crawl stealthily in the night into the enemy’s compound and with water, made a hole through the enemy’s mud wall. After observing through the hole where the enemy’s head lay while asleep, he put the nozzle of the gun and ‘picked’ the enemy (Noah and Ekpo, 1992: 195).

Moreover, the introduction of gun further militarised the warrior tradition in the pre-colonial Ibibio. Among the Ibibio, military campaigns were usually not long. It was been documented that all it took to end a war, was, if the enemy succeeded in killing two to five reputable warriors from the other side. They would be so demoralised that the campaign could be called off even before serious fighting had begun (Noah and Ekpo, 1992). It is important to note from the narrative of oral tradition that the pre-colonial African societies, Ibibio society inclusive had and practice a high level of civilisation in warfare. Concept and practice in warfare was not a European invention but rather their ways of life.

In the pre-colonial Ibibio, the number of adult males that engaged in military activities was determined by various factors. In this case, the warrior tradition, the magnitude of the threat perception, and the objectives of the war, among

other, may be considered as valid measures to determine this all-important aspect of military operation. It should be noted that during war period, it was the responsibility of all citizens to contribute positively to the war efforts.

As a result of absence of centralised political organisation, and, a Commander-in-Chief; command control of the military organisation most likely depended on the warrior tradition, secret societies, and, the occupational guilds which the fighting men were drawn, the fighters provided their weapons and also catered for their maintenance. This practically undermined the degree of loyalty and compliance of the fighter to the military cadre to some extent.

In the pre-colonial Ibibio warfare, the vulnerability theory applied from the declaration of hostilities to cessation of hostilities. The Ibibio specifically made use of spies, informants, rain makers, and invocation of bees, snipers, sign language and in-laws; to learn, explore, and execute coordinated attacks when the enemy was most at ease. It was also executed when the fighters sought to replenish their supplies, mend their weapons or relieve themselves, etc.

Conclusion

The pre-colonial warfare was an open armed confrontation between African societies before the advent of Europeans. It has been acknowledged that the pre-colonial Ibibio society, like the rest of African societies, experienced warfare. It has also been established that wars in the pre-colonial Ibibio society were triggered by some factors such as: the quest for fertile land, struggle for fishing grounds, show of domination or hegemony, kidnapping among others. These wars were possible because of the contacts and interactions between the Ibibio and her neighbours. It has been discovered that warfare the pre-colonial Ibibio society was with tactics and strategies worthy of emulation just like most pre-colonial African wars.

Some of these notable practices, tactics and strategies include: the use of envoy to convey the message of war or dispute with another community, the role of supernatural, ambushes, deceptions, the

use of spies, vulnerability theory, among others. However, it would be inappropriate to assume that pre-colonial warfare in Ibibio society has not contributed to the concept and practice of modern military just like every other pre-colonial African and European wars. The Ibibio society has been in existence before the advent of Europeans; there was no way they would have copied these practices and concepts from Europeans when there were no solid contacts.

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