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The 1897 Colonial Invasion of Benin and the Minimalist Policy of the British Government

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of the British government in the colonial invasion of the Benin Empire in 1897. It discusses the attitude of the British government towards the colonial acquisition of Benin. The study argues that contrary to the widely held notion in colonial literature, the British government had little interest in colonial adventures in West Africa. This informed the delegation of governmental powers to the consular officials to enable them protect the interest of British merchants in the region. However, the British government was drawn into the engagement after the massacre of some consular officials by Benin Empire soldiers. This resulted in the punitive invasion of Benin in 1897.

Keywords: Benin kingdom; British Government; Minimalist Policy.

INTRODUCTION

Most studies on British imperialism in the nineteenth century have ascribed economic motives for her colonial adventures in West Africa (Hopkins, 1973; Igbafe, 1979; Sagay, 1970). In this regard, Britain has been described as a mercantilist nation that supported the commercial activities of its merchants and trading firms in Africa. Consequently, the trade depression and rivalry among the various European traders in the second half of the nineteenth century forced her to establish colonies in West Africa. However, there is another argument that the official position of the British government remained unchanged despite the depression rather it was the consular officials and merchants ("men on the spot") who intensified the effort to establish political control over British territories (Porter, 1968; Ayandele *et al*, 1971). In certain cases, they argue that it was the outcry for vengeance among the consular officials after certain acts of indiscretion by African leaders that changed the policy of the government. This group asserts that unlike the situation in France and Germany, the free trade policy of Britain brought her prosperity and dominance in the international market which obliterated the need for colonies in Africa.

This study, therefore, examines the effect of the economic crisis of the nineteenth century on British colonial policy. It discusses specifically the attitude of the British government towards the colonial invasion of Benin. The study argues that the British government adopted a conservative and cautious approach towards military intervention in Benin but was forced to modify her policy after the killing of consular officials. The paper demonstrates that the British colonial intervention in Benin was more political than economic, and this reinforced the minimalist policy of the metropolitan government towards colonial intervention in the area.

BRITISH COLONIAL POLICY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The nineteenth century was a period in which economic orthodoxy dictated that the state should play a minimal role in economic affairs. This was in line with the philosophy of Adam Smith that the economy fared better when the government allowed as much initiative to the private sector as possible. This resulted in the improvement of the productive capacity of British industries which reduced the prices of their finished products. This gave the British industries the capacity to dominate every market in the world through free trade. For instance, in 1820, only 30 percent of British exports went to their empire. Britain was even supplying goods to industrialized nations such as Germany France, Belgium, and the United State. This forced the British government to modify its colonial economic policy to be less dependent on its subject territories for national wealth. Hitherto, the British government had committed resources towards the maintenance of the territorial integrity of her dependent territories because she regarded colonial engagement as a profitable venture but the economic climate of the nineteenth century necessitated a policy modification.

Within the metropolitan capital, there was also a gradual shift toward greater social spending (Gardner, 2012). This placed more pressure on the British economy and made it imperative for the government to adopt a conservative stance towards its colonies. The main thrust of the new policy was well captured by Sir James Mackintosh in his speech to parliament in 1823. According to him, a British colony should be granted "full permission to conduct the whole of their own internal affairs; compelling them to pay all the reasonable expenses of their own government, and giving them at the same time a perfect control over the expenditure of the money; and imposing no restrictions of any kind upon the industry or traffic of the people" (Wedderburn, 1881). After an exhaustive parliamentary debate, the British adopted the policy of self-sufficiency in the fiscal administration of its colonies. This meant that the existing colonies were made to pay for the cost of governance and embark on projects that they could execute out of their own resources. The British government also limited their interest in colonial acquisitions. This was reflected in the decision of a Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1865. The committee advised strongly against extending British commitment in West Africa. It also realized the difficulties of withdrawing British administration from any territory in West Africa so recommended the training of natives to prepare them for eventual self-governance. With this recommendation, the British government withdrew her support for colonial adventures in West Africa and encouraged the preservation of her informal empire already established by the consuls. This position remained unchanged despite the Berlin Conference of 1884/5 which gave her the right to acquire territories within her sphere of influence and those which she had established "effective occupation". This reduced the competition for West African territories and allowed the British government to delegate more powers to the consuls and merchant firms.

This raises a fundamental question: why did the British government not change her colonial policy after the Berlin Conference? The reason for this is not farfetched. The West African trade was of little or no importance to the British economy. The conference was conducted at a time when the chief raw materials of the region were already cheap and becoming cheaper. This obliterated the need for active involvement in West African affairs. As C.C. Wrigley puts it, "it was certainly not to increase the supply of palm oil that

the British pushed troops and officials into the hinterland of the West African coast; on the contrary, they were finding it difficult to absorb the palm oil that the existing trading system was producing" (Ajayi and Espie, 1965, p. 404). Beyond this, the West Africa region was not perceived as an attractive market for British manufactures. It is also important to point out that Britain conducted more trade with foreign countries than with her colonial territories. For instance, between 1883 and 1892 Britain exports to foreign countries increased from £215 million to £291 million; British exports to the Empire decreased from £90 million to £81 million. Britain in 1883 imported goods to the value of £328 million from foreign countries; this rose by 1892 to £423million. Imports from the Empire decreased in the same period from £98 million to £97 million (Shannon, 1976).

All these reinforced the position of the British government in West Africa. As the prime minister, Lord Salisbury asserts in a speech in the Commons on 8 February 1898: "However strong you may be, whether you are a man or a nation, there is a point beyond which your strength will not go. It is madness (to continue to take on new commitments): it ends in ruin if you allow yourselves to pass beyond it" (Nicolson, 1969, p. 20). This suggests that the British government saw colonial acquisitions as a source of weakness rather than strength. For the British government, colonial administration meant expense. It was extremely difficult to get the British parliament to approve huge sums for colonial intervention in West Africa. Consequently, up to 1900, the British government maintained the policy of minimal intervention in the internal affairs of West Africa. This placed the consuls and imperial trading firms responsible for protecting British interest in the region. They were also expected to maintain British influence in the area at little or no financial cost to the metropolitan government. Therefore, it was largely as a result of the economic and imperialistic interest of these groups that British rule was established in West Africa.

THE BRITISH CONQUEST OF BENIN

The fall of Benin was the culmination of events that were part of British consular imperialism in West Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This period saw the abolition of the slave trade and the introduction of what has been termed "legitimate commerce" between European merchants and African traders. Indeed, the development of legitimate commerce was an adaptation to African conditions of a free-trade policy which had become a common feature of British international trade during the period (Anene and Brown, 1966; Usuanlele 2014; Bradbury 2017). As a result, the British increased the volume of trade with states of the coastal area (Oil Rivers) of present-day Nigeria due to the large quantity of oil palm produce in the region. This was significant because the British industrial revolution had created a demand for palm oil as an ingredient for soap and candle making as well as a lubricant for machines. The trade provided wealth for the Itsekiri traders who acted as middlemen between the British merchants and the hinterland communities such as Benin. The frequent conflict between the European and Africa merchants over issues such as failure of the local trading states to honour treaties and disagreement over prices led the British government to intervene directly in the area by appointing John Beecroft as the first consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra on 30 June 1849.

The appointment of John Beecroft, an experienced and strong-willed British trader, was a major step in the process which was to end with the imposition of British rule on what became known as the Niger Coast Protectorate (Ikime, 1977). His main responsibility was to protect the lives and economic interests of British traders in the area. He adopted mainly forceful means in quelling local resistance and furthering the economic interest of British traders in the region. Nevertheless, Benin remained relatively unaffected by the British consular establishment in the region since there was no longer any direct trading relationship between the two groups. This meant that Benin's pattern of trade remained largely as it had been for centuries - trade organized under the royal monopoly of some products carried on with the Itsekiri middlemen who

had direct contact with and access to the Europeans (Igbafe, 1977). The Oba also continued the practice of demanding tributes in the form of customs duties from the middlemen and closing markets when such payments were not made. However, certain developments that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century made the economic policy of the Oba unfeasible and adjudged by the British to be anachronistic. First, in this period, capitalist development in Europe was entering its imperialistic stage (Odiahi 2017; Osagie & Otoide 2018). This resulted in intense competition for the acquisition of colonies and the hunt for sources of raw materials in Africa and other parts of the world by the European imperialistic nation. Second, the prices of African produce (such as palm oil) were on the decline in the international market. This made it necessary for European merchants to push into the interior to eliminate the role of the middlemen whose activities were believed to reduce their profit. Third, the invention of pneumatic tyre by John Boyd Dunlop, a Scottish veterinary surgeon, led to the increased demand for crude rubber from the tropical forest of which Benin was endowed with a large quantity. Another important development was the increase in the number of trading firms in the delta area. This was owing to the emergence of Macgregor Laird's African Steamship Company which ran a regular mail service between Britain and West Africa (Ikime, 1977).

The direct consequence of this was the drop in profit for the old British firms that traded in the area. This situation was worsened by the sudden collapse in the prices of palm oil and palm kernel in the world market due to the increased availability of American petroleum (Hirshfield, 1979). All these developments resulted in the graduate penetration of British traders into the hinterland from the 1860s. This form of penetration or inland push was made more feasible with the extensive use of quinine as an immune booster to African tropical disease. With the reputation and influence wielded by the Oba of Benin, it was reasonable for the British consul to be anxious to get to Benin and establish some kind of relationship with the Oba. The need for this kind of contact had become necessary to seek the cooperation of the Oba in protecting British trade in the Benin River. This informed the visit of a British consul, Richard Burton, to Benin in 1862. His visit was aimed at persuading the Oba to use his power in restraining the Itsekiri traders from plundering British factories in the Benin River. By his visit to Benin, Burton was hoping that the Oba, "whose 'Fetish' is so powerful that the whole river obeys him", might be persuaded to use his influence against the offending Itsekiri (Ryder, 1977, p. 253). The Oba was, however, more interested in reviving trade at Ughoton than interfering in the affairs of the Itsekiri, although the latter still paid tributes to Benin. This conflict of interest resulted in a stalemate with no agreement reached between the two parties.

As far as Burton was concerned, the only fruit of the mission was the opportunity of shaping world opinion about the moral degeneracy in Benin. In his publication in the Fraser Magazine, he described Benin as a place of 'gratuitous barbarity' which stinks of death with its crucifixions, human skulls strewn about like pebbles because of a generous resort to human sacrifices (Igbafe, 1977). Burton's report painted Benin in the darkest possible manner and gave a poor impression about the custom of the people. With such a negative report, Benin came to be described with such epithets as the 'City of Skulls', and 'City of Blood', while the people themselves were depicted as barbaric, uncivilized and great rogues (Ikponmwosa, 2014). Although available evidence suggests that human sacrifice increased in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is equally important to recognize that Burton account was not free from the racist orientation of the period where the black race was considered to be primitive and genetically inferior to Europeans. In an age where humanitarian issues stirred the consciences of many in Europe, the subsequent consuls mounted anti-Benin propaganda and blamed the Oba for every misfortune that befell the British traders in the area. This move was aimed at encouraging a British occupation of Benin under the pretext of a civilizing mission. It must however be stressed that based on the covering dispatches and records of consular visits to Benin, the increased pressure to bring Benin into the sphere of consular control

was occasioned not by humanitarian concerns but by commercial considerations (Igbafe, 1977). This was due to the great economic potentials the British saw in Benin particularly its rich forest and agricultural resources. They also recognized that for these resources to be exploited, the Oba had to either modify his economic policies to accommodate free-trade or be subordinated by the superior military might of the British. All these meant a shift in emphasis of the British consuls from a mild determination of gaining access to Benin territories to a more forceful attempt at controlling the rich resources of the kingdom (Shoup 2011). The extent to which the British consuls and traders could achieve this objective was intricately linked to their ability to impress on their home government on the need to either dethrone or impose their will on the recalcitrant Oba.

Despite the negative publicity in Europe about the Oba and the people of Benin, the British government however did not take any immediate step towards establishing colonial rule in the area. It is important to stress that the British government had little interest in investing huge resources in establishing a colonial presence in tropical Africa. The British government was content in providing military support for the British firms trading in the region. This position was reflected in the resolution of the parliamentary select committee of 1865 which recommended a reduction in the commitment of the British government to foreign imperialist adventures. As a result, Benin did not receive any official visit from the British consuls for the next twenty-seven years despite the competition for territories by the other European powers (Idahosa et al., 2017). However, the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw the appearance of other European powers on the African scene. This was largely due to the stability attained by Europe in the 1870s as states such as Germany and Italy emerged to challenge the continental dominance of Britain. The loss of the territories of Alsace Lorraine by France at the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 as well as the personal ambition of King Leopold of Belgium led these two countries to embark on an aggressive imperialistic policy in Africa. This move was welcome by Otto Von Bismarck, the German Chancellor and architect of an intricate alliance system in Europe, believed that France will be weakened by her colonial pursuits and Britain will become isolated which will equally diminish her power. However, this position of Bismarck changed in 1883 when Britain refused to recognize the claims by a German merchant, Herr Luderitz to Angra Pequena in South West Africa (Anene and Brown, 1966). This rebuff forced Germany to adopt a revolutionary position by establishing colonies in Africa. A major fall-out of this was the international rivalry among the major European states for colonies in Africa. This resulted in the 1884/1885 Berlin Conference to settle the claims and counter-claims by the imperial nations.

At the conference, the British claim to the 'Niger Districts' or the 'Oil River Protectorate' was recognized. The Benin kingdom was regarded by the British as part of that protectorate, even though there was no formal protectorate treaty between Britain and Benin (Ikponmwosa, 2014). This led the British consul to take active steps to ensure a treaty was ratified with the Oba. This was important to consolidate their hold over the Benin kingdom and prevent any other European power from penetrating the area. Moreover, the signing of treaties was recognized by the imperial nations as evidence of a sphere of influence. A formal treaty with Benin was also necessary to protect the trade of British firms who established factories at Ughoton and sought direct commerce with Benin. Perhaps, this informed the attempted visit of consul Annesley to Benin in 1890 to advance the course of British interest in the territory. Furthermore, the British government realized that the administrative capacity of the Niger Coast Protectorate had to be strengthened to promote the efficiency of the consulate in the region. Therefore, in 1891, they increased the number of consular officers in the region and renamed the Oil Rivers the Niger Coast Protectorate two years after (Ikponmwosa, 2014). Beyond this, they established two vice-consulates in the area. One stationed in the Benin River and the other in Warri. The Benin kingdom was placed under the Benin River with H.L. Gallwey appointed as Vice-consul. Gallwey was a staunch advocate of direct trade with the interior. His immediate step was to bring the hinterland communities under British control and increase trade in the region. Thus in 1892, he made a successful visit to Benin

and concluded a treaty of protection with the Oba. The treaty completely stripped Benin of her independence and made a vassal of the British. Articles IV and V of the treaty obliged the Oba to accept consular guidance in all matters of internal as well as external policy; article VI threw open trade to all nationalities in all parts of the kingdom; article VII likewise opened Benin to ministers of the Christian religion (Aremu & Ediagbonya 2018).

A critical analysis of this treaty has raised questions about its validity. The fundamental problem revolves around the level of the mutual understanding of the terms of the treaty between the parties. It would appear that the Benin ruling aristocracy lacked the basic understanding of the implications of the agreement they reached with the British consul. The Oba is reputed to have continually asked his principal chiefs whether the mission was a "war palaver" and only conceded to the treaty after receiving reassurances that the terms of the agreement were peaceful (Ryder, 1977). This raises doubt as to whether the Oba understood the articles of the treaty he ratified with consul Gallwey. His anxiety would have stemmed from the tense atmosphere which clouded the meeting with the British consul. It must be realized that the 1890s was a period of political exigency in Benin as the problem of internal stability at home and the growing influence of British consuls in the area caused a lot of anxiety and apprehension for the Oba. This situation was further intensified by the threat made by consul Gallwey during his period of waiting to see the Oba that he would depart and not return to Benin as a “friend” (Oguniran, 2005). Beyond this, Gallwey had also warned during his preliminary exchanges with the Oba’s messengers that he would make only one attempt to negotiate and that he would give no presents until a treaty had been signed. This decision reflected Gallwey’s disposition towards the Oba and determination to go to any length to bring Benin under British rule. In many ways, the treaty appears as an imposition rather than a mutually contracted agreement. It is important to point out that Gallwey visited Benin with a treaty whose articles were skewed in favour of Britain. Probably in an attempt to legitimize the agreement before the international community, the treaty began on a false note claiming that it was initiated at the request of Oba Ovonramwen. To make matters worse, the consul rejected the Benin interpreter because he appeared too submissive to the Oba and insisted on his own interpreter who he referred to as Ajaie (Ajayi). This creates doubt as to the sincerity of Gallwey's intentions, the level of accuracy of Ajaie's interpretations, and the extent to which Benin's ruling aristocracy could influence the final outcome of the agreement. Certainly, neither the chiefs nor the Oba could have consented to the treaty had Gallwey been more diplomatic in his approach or if the full implications of the agreement were well explained to them.

Between 1892 and 1897, the behavior of Benin and Britain reflected their various interpretations of the terms of the treaty concluded in 1892. For Oba Ovonramwen, there was nothing in his actions to suggest that he understood the treaty as a legal document which diminished his authority in Benin and made him a subject of the queen of England. The conception of his power remained untainted as he continued to uphold and promote the traditions of his ancestors. Like his predecessors, he continued to exercise control over trade, and his agents enforced his directives at the various trading centers in his domain, including the demand for customs duties from the Itsekiri middlemen and the closure of trade on his request (Oguniran, 2005, p. 530). This rigid commercial policy of Benin was viewed by British consuls as obstructionist to trade and contrary to the terms of the Gallwey treaty of 1892. The strict economic policy of the Oba had not led to a substantial increase in trade, much to the chagrins of British traders and officials.

It is pertinent to note that the need for expansion of trade with Benin was particularly important given the Treasury insistence that the consular establishment in the protectorate must recoup its expenses from the import duties introduced in 1891(Ryder, 1977,p. 272). Indeed, the impact of the Benin economic policy on trade in the Niger Coast area reflected the power and influence of the Oba in the region. So the British began to argue as early as 1893 that to improve the trade of this part of the protectorate, the power of the Oba of Benin must be destroyed. For the British officials,

therefore, the expansion of trade in the region became intrinsically connected with the deposition of the Oba. Decisive action against Benin was postponed due to the failure of the British consul, Ralph Moor to convince his superiors about the efficacy of the use of force means in dealing with the Oba as well as the more pressing threat posed by rulers such as king Nana of Itsekiri and King Koko of Brass who obstructed the penetration of British trade into the interior. The foreign office was quite skeptical in granting Moor's request given the level of human resources, military preparedness and equipment required to persecute a war with Benin. It is significant that even during the colonial period; the British government never had the intention of expending too much revenue in the administration of Benin. The decision of Oba Ovonramwen in April 1896 to stop all trade with the Itsekiris gave further impetus to Ralph Moor in his quest of using forceful means in establishing British authority in Benin. Although the decision was made on purely commercial grounds, it was however misconstrued by Moor as an attestation to the failure of pacific means in dealing with the Oba of Benin. According to him, 'he [i.e Ovonramwen] refuses all overtures and indeed now only becomes worse the more we attempt to approach him in peace-evidently regarding such courses as signs of fear and weakness.' (Ryder, 1977, p281). In a dispatch sent to the foreign office in June 1896, he reaffirmed his position by advocating the use of forceful means in depositing the Oba:

> I consider that if the efforts now being made continue unsuccessfully until next dry season, an expeditionary force should be sent about January or February to remove the king and his ju-ju men for the sufferings of the people are terrible. This would of course necessitate the establishment of a post in that country which would serve as a good the base for further development (NAE, CSCO 3/3/3, 17/11/1896).

This did not only reflect the impending danger looming around Benin but the consul's ignorance about the customs and traditions of the people. They claim that the people were negatively affected by religious activities (juju) of the Oba is incorrect. As already been explained, the Oba engaged in ancestry worship to promote the goodwill and prosperity of the kingdom. However, in extreme situations, humans were sacrificed to the gods and ancestors as a major atonement for the wrongs of the people. This was misunderstood by the British officials as it gave an added impetus to their call for the disposition of the Oba (Okeke & Akpan 2012). Indeed, the upsurge in human sacrifices in the nineteenth century was the response of the Oba to political and economic adversities such as declining trade, internal revolts against his authority, growing hostility from Benin's neighbours and even the Europeans who had been trading allies, all of which called for serious rituals (Oguniran, 2005). This was exactly the state of affairs in the protectorate when consul-General Ralph Moor proceeded on his annual leave to Britain. He was relieved by acting consul-general J.R. Phillips, a man with a unique appetite for fame and fortune. He would appear that Phillip saw in the position of acting consul-general an opportunity to distinguish himself and make a meaningful contribution to the administration of the protectorate. After holding a meeting with the British traders in the region, Phillips became fully convinced about the futility of pacific means and took immediate steps to depose the Oba from his stool. In fact, in his dispatch to the Foreign Office, he requested for permission to invade Benin on the ground that the Oba was an “obstruction” to British trade in the area (Igbafe, 1977). Knowing full well the stand of the Foreign Office towards the colonial expenditure, he stated emphatically that the cost of the war would be defrayed from the sale of ivory and other rich antiquities found in the palace. In another move against the Oba, he encouraged the Itsekiri chiefs to give no more presents or pay customs duties to Benin. This was followed by an ill-fated attempt to visit Benin without formal authorization from the British government.

The determination and spirited effort demonstrated by the acting-consul has raised questions about the true intentions behind his hurried visit to Benin. Despite the argument of many imperial writers such as Alan Boisragon that the object of Phillips's expedition was to persuade the Oba to grant free trade to British merchants in his

country, it would appear more plausible that the Consul-General's visit was predicated on the desire to satisfy his ambition. As Phillip Igbafe has explained, Acting Consul-General J.R. Phillips was an ambitious man who sought to advance his career by accomplishing some feat, which a visit to Ovonramwen would have constituted, especially if the Oba were persuaded to open up trade as well as to abolish some obnoxious practices before the return of Moor from leave (Igbafe, 1977). It is very likely that the distinguished award received by H.L. Gallwey in 1896 for concluding a treaty with Ovonramwen served as a driving force behind the ambition of Consul Phillips.

Beyond this, Phillips may also have been concerned about the prestige of the protectorate given his inability to enforce the terms of the 1892 agreement. For a consular official who was new in the area and largely ignorant of the history and traditions of the Benin people, he probably underrated the military prowess of the kingdom and fancied his chances of achieving success in his mission. He, therefore, began by sending a customary gift accompanied by a message which signified his intention of visiting the Oba. He also informed the Oba that he was coming with eight or nine white men. However, as a result of the *Ague* festival which the Oba was observing, he replied the message advising Consul Phillips to defer his journey until an appropriate time which he shall inform him, and at which time he hoped that he (the Consul-General) will come accompanied by one Jekri (Itsekiri) chief and no other Whiteman. But the British consul refused to abide by this instruction. This undoubtedly sparked serious outrage in Benin as it was perceived that their sovereignty and territorial integrity was being violated. The people of Benin interpreted this move as an act of aggression that deserved an "appropriate" response. This line of action was considered even more expedient given the antecedent of British activities in the region which witnessed the forceful deposition of Jaja of Opobo and Chief Nana of Itsekiri. This created a state of insecurity and fear of a concerted attack against Benin, which strengthened the resolve of the people to defend their kingdom against external aggression.

This prompted the Benin military chiefs led by Ologbosere to lay an ambush on the British party and their African servants. Phillips and some members of his expedition such as Peter W.C. Copeland Crawford, Arthur I. Malling, Kenneth C. Campbell, Robert H. Elliot, Harry S.Powis and Thomas Gordon, were by this action killed on the 4th of January, 1897 at Ugbine (a village few kilometers away from Benin City, along the Benin-Ughoton road) (Ikponmwosa, 2014). In retaliation, the famous British "Punitive expedition" was launched under the command of Admiral Sir Harry Rawson. This resulted in the occupation and conquest of Benin on 17th February 1897 after considerable fighting and devastation of the capital city. This led the Oba and a large number of his chiefs to flee the city which effectively assailed the independence of the kingdom and paved the way for the incorporation of Benin into the British Empire. Benin was consequently administered as part of a larger unit called the Niger Coast protectorate which was later transformed into the protectorate of Southern Nigeria in 1900. The British Political officers imposed a colonial state over the core area of the conquered kingdom which was constituted before 1914 as Benin City District and from 1914-1960 as Benin Division (Usanlele, 1988).

CONCLUSION

The British invasion of Benin in 1897 was precipitated by the massacre of Phillip's party. Although the British had a clear economic interest in Benin, she exercised initial caution due to the cost of administrating a huge empire. It had been the object of British economic policy in West Africa before the late nineteenth century to provide strategic and technical support to its trading firms without establishing political control. In most cases, the British government was drawn into colonial engagement in the area not as a result of any deliberate (official) policy but due to the activities of the consuls or as the Benin case demonstrated, the massacre of British officials. It would appear that the British government was more concerned about protecting its hugely profitable trade in India and the Far East rather than acquiring new territories in West Africa. This informed

the minimalist policy adopted by the metropolitan government towards colonial intervention in Benin and other places in West Africa.

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