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## Book Review: Indigenous African Warfare, by Col. Festus Boahen Aboagye

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## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **INDIGENOUS AFRICAN WARFARE**

**TITLE:** INDIGENOUS AFRICAN WARFARE (Its Concept and Art in the Gold Coast, Asante and Northern Territories up to early 1900s)

**AUTHOR:** COLONEL FESTUS BOAHEN ABOAGYE

**PUBLISHER:** ULINZI AFRICA PUBLISHING SOLUTIONS, PRETORIA, SOUTH AFRICA

**PAGES:** 539

**REVIEWER:** COLONEL EMMANUEL KOTIA (PhD), COURSE DIRECTOR/LECTURER, KOFI ANNA INTERNATIONAL PEACEKEEPING TRAINING CENTRE, ACCRA-GHANA

The book titled, Indigenous African Warfare (Its Concept and Art in the Gold Coast, Asante and the Northern Territories, Up to the Early 1900s), is written and published by Colonel Festus Boahen Aboagye. The main objective of the publication is to correct a fundamental misconception that early local warfare owed its tactical strategy to or evolved only after contact with Europeans. The book therefore seeks

to illuminate and provide the foundation for the study of modern warfare in contemporary times.

According to the author: ***“The vision and inspiration for this work were nurtured between Teshie and Dehra Dun, where, as a young cadet just embracing on my military career in 1973-1975, I was struck by one remarkable difference between the study of military history at the Ghana Military Academy and at the Indian Military Academy. In Ghana, the study of military history started immediately with World Wars I and II. In India, the officer cadet started with ancient wars fought with basic weapons and formations, including animal formations. It was only after grounding these young cadets in India’s national military history that the course embarked on the study of other military histories. My conviction remains that, even though we should study modern history, we should equally study our own ancient history.”***

It is to address such imbalance in the curriculum of the Ghana Armed Forces that the author wrote the book. The book is made up of fourteen chapters which cover useful pieces of information that confirms the pertinence of indigenous African Warfare and its thematic implications. The first chapter is titled: Towards a Theory of Indigenous Warfare. The chapter presents a structured approach to the study of the concept and art of African indigenous warfare including its contestation with colonial entities. The chapter covers a number of topics which are thoroughly discussed namely; the overview of ancient (4000 BC to 5000 BC) and medieval (500 AD to 1500 AD) warfare, synopsis of early modern military history and comparative Arab military doctrines. The debate on whether

indigenous warfare is an art or science is most fascinating and educative in this chapter. The writer asserts that indigenous warfare was more of an art, partly because its contemporary theorist and thinkers lacked the means to properly document the planning, conduct and outcomes for more systematic and analytical study. In spite of this however, the writer agrees that, a more scientific approach to indigenous warfare is possible to some degree. For instance, indigenous generalship appreciated the doctrinal principle that offensive action was superior to defensive or that to win a war, an army must not only have superior strength, but must have it operationally organized and echeloned to achieve depth. This chapter therefore, lays the foundation for the conceptual framework of the book with comparative analysis and a number of examples. Reference to Clausewitz's theory of war to illustrate the discussions of the theory of indigenous warfare makes interesting reading in this chapter.

Specific areas of indigenous warfare are covered under Chapters Two and Three. Broadly, the chapters discuss the principles of indigenous warfare; spatial trajectory of indigenous warfare, indigenous conflict resolution mechanism, tools and types and levels of indigenous warfare. Of significant interest in Chapter Three are the conflict resolution mechanisms and tools that the book highlights. The writer elaborates on the use of indigenous state councils for arbitration and mediation by first and second estates of chieftaincy and eldership. Another important mechanism highlighted is the use of punitive persona non grata to discipline trouble makers to prevent the escalation of disputes and conflicts. This mechanism, according to the

writer, was normally invoked to ensure the security and preservation of ethnic groups or the state. One effective measure the writer highlights involved the mass exile of stools and ethnic groups which was an effective tool for conflict resolution during the pre-colonial era.

Other conflict resolution mechanisms and tools discussed in the book include Vassalage imposition, Balkanization of conquered ethnic groups (this involves Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration of armies), indigenous diplomacy, influence of indigenous civil society personalities like the fetish priest or kramo. As part of chapter three, the writer clearly examines the types and levels of indigenous warfare which will interest most modern military strategists, tacticians and historians. These include the level of mobilization and casualties, fortification and siege warfare, marine and riverine warfare, civil wars, coups and insurrections, guerrilla and terrorist warfare and day and night warfare.

Chapters Four and Five discuss indigenous society and the army; and the functional arms and roles of indigenous armies. The writer discusses the origins, organization, structure and tactical doctrines of the various indigenous Asafo militias. Interestingly, the writer identifies indigenous Military Reforms and Transformation which is equivalent to modern day Defence Sector Reforms (DSR) or Security Sector Reforms (SSR). He outlines the forms of indigenous Security Sector Reforms for comparative study by actors and researchers in wider peace support operations and in peace and security studies.

The structures of the indigenous military at operational and tactical levels (both Southern and Northern armies of Ghana) are covered under Chapters Six and Seven of the book. Prominent military strategies and doctrine covered include those of the Akyem operational doctrine, the Akan tactical doctrine of defence and offence, Asante operational doctrines, the operational organization of the Mamprugu Army (now in Northern Region) and reforms of war and the structure of the Zabarama-Grunsi Army, among others. An important lesson here is that, the indigenous society in pre-colonial Ghana had long ago developed doctrines at the operational and tactical levels. This, therefore, serves as a great challenge to the present generation of the Armed Forces of Ghana and Africa as whole.

An important segment of the book is the evolution and employment of weapons in indigenous armies covered in Chapter Eight. The writer gives an overview of the evolution of weapons and their employment in wars. In the words of the writer ***“Indigenous armies were predominantly composed of foot soldiers or infantry, the fundamental weapons were hand-held stone, bone and wooden implements.....”*** The writer subsequently gives justification for the decline of indigenous weaponry, and the ascendancy and proliferation of European weapons technology. The chapter concludes with the impact of European fire arms on tactical and operational deployments and movements and indigenous training for war.

In Chapters Nine and Ten the writer addresses issues on Command and Control in indigenous armies and warfare. Leadership and Generalship in indigenous warfare is covered extensively in Chapter Ten. The chapter gives detailed synopses of local and expatriate generalism and leadership of the various indigenous armies. Chapter Eleven discusses indigenous defence, economics and war logistics. The gender dimensions of military organization and warfare are covered in Chapter Twelve. This segment discusses issues of women and sex in indigenous armies and warfare. The writer summarizes the crucial role of women during war as the maintenance of morals, domestic economic development, rear homeland defence, direct and indirect participation in combat and combat service support.

Chapter 13 of the book deals with Military traditions, customs, conventions and norms. These, according to the author are a very important part of regimental and military history. The conventions and norms during the indigenous era covered issues like the declaration of war; request for allied assistance; reporting of war victories; recruitment; promotions; appointments and retirements; court martial and field trials; and the general treatment of prisoners of war and casualties. Military traditions and customs traced to the indigenous era included paying of compliments, gun salutes, banners and flags and indigenous military ranks and insignia. A discourse on the end of indigenous warfare and the beginning of European military legacy, form the concluding chapter of the book.

The book on Indigenous African Warfare presents over 120 different varieties of indigenous concepts and doctrines under the 14 chapters

of the book reviewed. The book is a theoretical study of military art and science; it presents a structured approach to the study of African indigenous warfare and therefore sufficiently presents a structured study, understanding and critical thinking about our past military history. This book also helps to correct the fundamental misconception that such warfare evolved only after contact with Europeans. In his comments for the launch of this book, Lieutenant General Daniel Opande, former Force Commander of the UN Mission in Liberia said: ***“The Indigenous African Warfare is a book that should be read by all potential peacekeeping mission leaders – civilian, military, police and humanitarian actors for useful insights and lessons towards the management and resolution of conflicts.”***

Professor Eboe Hutchful, the Executive Director of the African Security Sector Network also stated that: ***“The book seeks to collate and reinterpret the scattered existing work works on indigenous military history....The book goes well beyond that by adding new areas of research such as the gender dimensions of military organisation and warfare, and military budgeting, while establishing important parallels in logistics.”***

Finally, the book can help to introduce or revise the study of Military Art and Science in our higher learning institutions, to compete with similar courses offered at higher institutions in developed countries like the United Kingdom and the USA. This will help to raise the profile in the study of modern warfare



The book is an excellent piece of work and contributes to the enhancement and enrichment of contemporary military professional and academic studies. The book is an outstanding material for academic researchers, teachers and students of history. Students of military history in particular, will be adequately grounded on the concepts and art of warfare in the Gold Coast, Asante and the Northern Territories up to the early 1900s before they embark on the study of contemporary military history. The quality of writing and printing of the book are excellent. It is expected that in future revised editions by writer a comparative reference will be made to the interesting doctrines and tactics of the old Ghana Empire and possibly indigenous warfare in Dahomey.

Colonel Festus Boahen Aboagye has excellently presented a simple book for scholars and researchers in military history to use with ease. The book can easily be adopted by any tertiary institution to formulate a course for a first degree or a post graduate course. It is a book which all military officers and other ranks (both retired and serving) will find useful reading. In addition, it is a must for all scholars of Ghana History to read. The book may be considered for a course under the study of Military Art and Science as part of a proposed Master of Arts Degree in Defence and Conflict Studies at the Ghana Armed Forces Command and Staff College and a future War College in Ghana. The book may be considered as a Military History textbook for Cadets training at the Ghana Military Academy and finally, some aspects of the book can be adopted for Army Promotion Examinations in Military History.