

## Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria

Rahmani Mokhtaria, University of Saida, (Algeria), [mokhtaria.rahmani@univ-saida.dz](mailto:mokhtaria.rahmani@univ-saida.dz)

**Submission date:** 2021-08-06

**Acceptance date:** 2021-10-24

---

### Abstract;

Pre-colonial Nigeria was the home of a great variety of ethnic groups that exhibited striking cultural and historical differences. Throughout time, those peoples had evolved a number of socio-political organizations that displayed disparities in the size and form of government. Prior to the nineteenth century, three polities, that could be classified into centralized and decentralized, could be distinguished. These were the Yoruba kingdoms to the west, the Sokoto Empire to the north, and the Ibo villages to the east. The urge behind doing this research is to enquire into pre-colonial socio-political organizations with a view to demystifying the form and nature of their government, and unravel the differences/similarities. This investigation relied on a descriptive-analytical method, adopting the chronological thematic approach as a hallmark tool for the scrutinization of data. Three themes have, hence, been selected for that sake: the origin of the polity, the machinery of government and the army. The findings reveal that the three pre-colonial polities were basically inspired by their system of beliefs, and geographical conditions as well. Thus, the centralized/ decentralized paradigms in the three polities were in a proportionate relationship with that parameter. The Yoruba States and the Ibo egalitarian villages pictured, for instance, a deep impress of ancestor worship, but disparate systems of government; while the Sokoto Empire epitomized the influence of Islamic law in shaping a centralized state. The paper argues that beliefs are an essential factor impacting the thought of people, but external contact impresses them deeply, nurturing new ideas, and new modes of organization and space management.

**Key-words:** pre-colonial Nigeria; the Yoruba kingdoms, the Sokoto Empire; the Ibo villages; centralized/decentralized; system of beliefs; geographical conditions; external contact

### 1.Introduction

Nigeria encompasses a myriad of ethnic groups<sup>1</sup> displaying cultural and historical differences. Evolution through time triggered in the rise of a number of socio-political organizations that differed in terms of the size and form of government. Prior to the nineteenth century, three polities, classified as centralized and decentralized entities<sup>2</sup>, could be distinguished. These were the Yoruba kingdoms to the west, the Sokoto Empire to the north, and the Ibo villages to the east. Those political entities depended on trade (with North African

---

\*The most prominent groups were the Hausa, Fulani, Nupe and Tiv in the north; the Yoruba, Annang, Edo (or Bini), Ibibio, Ibo, Ijo, Itsekiri and Urhobo in the south.

\*these terms will be explained subsequently.

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

and Egyptian peoples) as an important economic activity.<sup>1</sup> It is the chief concern of the present article to enquire into pre-colonial socio-political organizations with a view to identifying the form and nature of their government. To pursue that, the following research questions will be addressed: what was the origin of traditional polities, how were their central and provincial governments organized, and how were their armies structured?

## **2.Pre-Colonial Political Systems**

The first two political entities (the Yoruba kingdoms and the Sokoto Empire) typified the example of centralized states where authority was vested in a single ruler, whereas the last (the Ibo settlements) exemplified the case of decentralized communities where authority was diffused in the whole society. In so far as the interference of such terms as state, kingdom and empire poses a problem of ambiguity, it is therefore imperative to define them. The concept of state in traditional Africa, Nigeria in particular, referred to a territory with well-organized institutions under the authority of a single ruler (usually a king). It had, thus, the same connotation as kingdom. Hence, one can speak of Yoruba Kingdoms in the same way as he speaks of Yoruba States. The term empire denoted an extended kingdom, i.e a kingdom that had subdued, through conquest, its neighboring areas. State could, therefore, also be used to speak about empire.

The analysis of the three socio-political organizations will take into consideration three criteria: the origin of the polity, the machinery of government and the army. The first element involves, systematically, the date of emergence, its location and the factors impinging on its formation. The second criterion deals with central and local or provincial governments. The former is concerned with the ruler's position, his prerogatives and his appointment, in addition, of course, to the prerogatives of the state's council and its membership. The latter, on the other hand, has to do with the powers of provincial rulers, their appointment and finally the functions of their advisory councils. The last element is the organization of the army which involves its size, its military divisions, its weapons and its war tactics. For analysis purposes, a chronological thematic approach has been chosen to examine centralized states and decentralized communities.

### **2.1Origin of Traditional Polities**

A major problem hindering the exact delimitation of the date of emergence of pre-colonial polities is that of the lack of written resources, except for the Muslim political systems which had the tradition of recording their history. Genealogies and oral traditions are the main tools resorted to by pagan communities to refer to their origin.

Among the three systems, the Yoruba Kingdoms were the first to emerge around the eleventh century, in the lower western Niger area, in the forest zone.<sup>2</sup>The first state was Ife Ife. It was founded by Oduduwa. Following his death, his sons dispersed in Yorubaland, forming, in turn, other states on the model of Ife Ife such as Owu, Benin, Ila Sabe, Pobo and Oyo. Benin and Oyo were the most prominent states in terms of consolidation of political rule and territorial extension. The Benin Empire ( 1350-1850), founded by Eweka

---

\*This trade involved exchanges of slaves, ivory, salt, glass beads, cloth and other goods

<sup>2</sup> Olatunji speaks about the formation of a centralized state in the first millennium B.C, in which a Yoruba subgroup known as the Ughobo became the rulers, Olatunde.O.Olatunji, The Yoruba History, Culture and Language, Ibadan, 1970, p 14

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

I, reached its height in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, through expansion from Idah to Lagos. Similarly, the Oyo Empire ( 1700-1900), founded by Oranmiyan in the savanna north of Ife, succeeded to bring under its rule a large area, bounded on the north by the Niger, on the south by the mangrove swamps, on the east by Benin, and on the west by modern Togo.<sup>1</sup> (See map 1)

The Sokoto Empire (1804-1903), on the other hand, came much later around the beginning of the nineteenth century, following a rebellion by the Fulani people<sup>2</sup> against the corrupt Hausa rulers. The holy war, which was waged in 1804, was commanded by a Fulani scholar, called Othman Dan Fodio, and was intended to conquer the state of Gobir. At first neither the Fulani nor the Hausa were able to mark a successful campaign.<sup>3</sup> Within the summer of the same year, however, the Fulani bowmen achieved a sweeping victory over the Gobirawa horsemen.<sup>4</sup> The jihad was, then, extended over the other Hausa States, and by 1808 the Fulani were able to seize power from the Hausa, giving birth to the Fulani ( or Sokoto) Empire. (See map 2) The Fulani kept the same system of rule of the Hausa which was based on Islam (Koran and Malakite law), and which rested on a well-organized taxation system, a code of land tenure and a trained judiciary.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> M.Crowder, The Story of Nigeria, (Faber and Faber), London, 1961, p 39. To attest the magnitude of the Oyo Empire Johnson states that the vassal or provincial kings and ruling princes were about 1060. Samuel Johnson, the History of the Yoruba, (C.M.S Bookshop), 1937, p 41

<sup>2</sup> B.G.Martin traces back the migration of the Fulani to the eighteenth century. B.G.Martin, 'The Spread of Islam in Africa', in, Phyllis.M.Martin& Patrick .O.Omeara . Africa. Indiana University Press, 1986, p 94

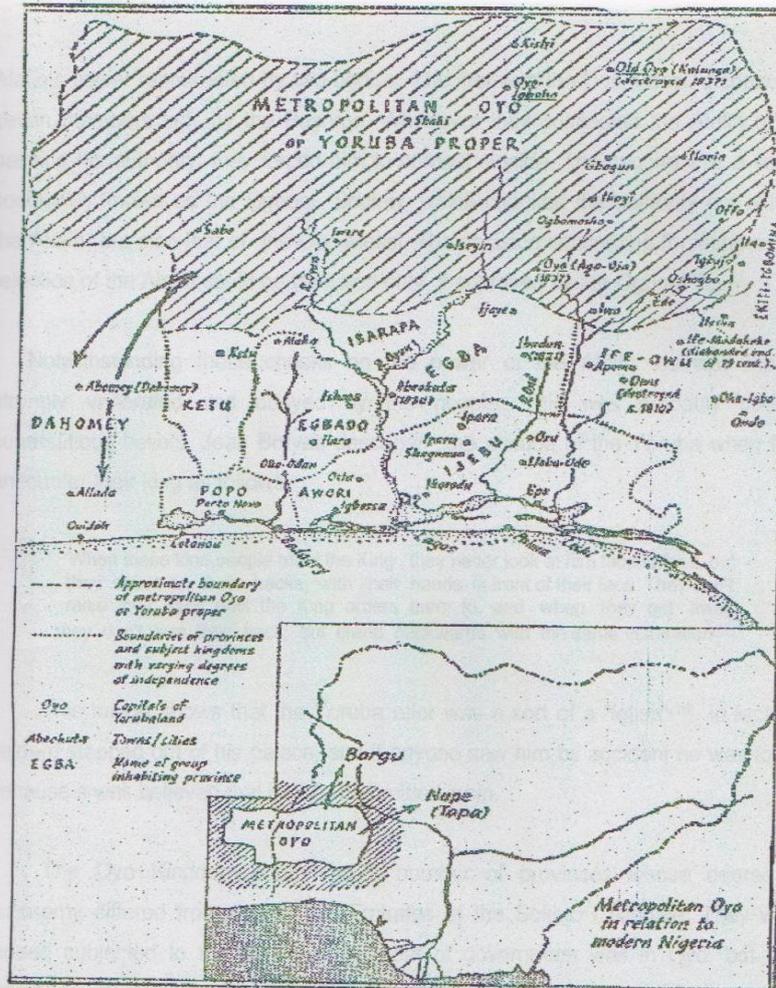
<sup>3</sup> The war took the form of raids and skirmishes initiated by both , S.H Hogben, The Emirates of Northern Nigeria, London, 1966, p 382.

<sup>4</sup> Explaining this point Hogben says: 'the forces that these generals commanded were no more than amateur peasant levies with the primitive weapons of the Crusades. Enthusiasm took the place of staff work.' Ibid, p 382

<sup>5</sup> John.Reader, Africa: A Handbook to the Continent, (Alfred A Knopf Inc), New York, 1998\_p 212

Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria

Map1



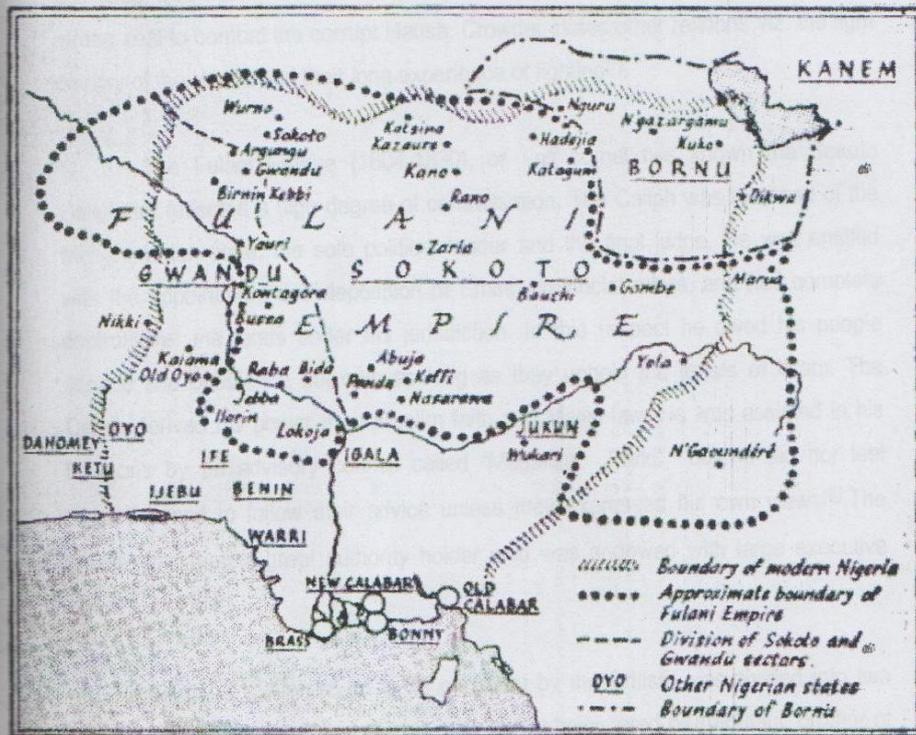
5. Metropolitan Oyo and Yorubaland in the middle of the eighteenth century

Source : Michael. Crowder , *The Story of Nigeria* , London, 1978, p 85

NB : No scale was mentioned in the original map .

Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria

Map 2



4. The Sokoto Caliphate (or Fulani Empire) and Borno, circa 1850

source: Michael. Crowder, The Story of Nigeria, London, 1978, p70

NB: no scale was mentioned in the original map.

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

In contrast with the Yoruba States (notably the Benin and Oyo Empires), the Sokoto Empire encompassed a far larger area. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the empire stretched over 1,500 kilometers from Dori in modern Burkina Faso to southern Adamawa in Cameroon, and included Nupe lands and Ilorin (in northern Yorubaland), and much of the Benue Valley.<sup>1</sup>

If the origin both of the Yoruba Kingdoms and the Sokoto Empire was more or less easy to delineate, that of the Ibo villages is completely less clear, in view of the inefficiency of human memory as a tangible source. Nonetheless, it is usually believed that most of the decentralized polities placed their origin three or four generations above the ancestors.

As to the factors impacting the formation of states in pre-colonial Nigeria, one can generally cite emigration, trade and conquest. In the case of the Yoruba kingdoms, waves of emigrants had swept the country, the most notable being that of Oduduwa and his family, coming there from the east, precisely Nubia (upper Egypt).<sup>2</sup> Interactions between the different groups had, undoubtedly, culminated in the rise of Ife Ife and later the other kingdoms such as Oyo.

The Sokoto Empire, by contrast to the Yoruba kingdoms, reveals the importance of trade<sup>3</sup> and conquest in the state-formation process. Originally the Hausa States had developed thanks to an extensive system of trade, across the Sahara, with North African states (Morocco and Tunis), West African states (Songhay and Kanem), and Egypt. Monopolization of trade boosted, likewise, the rise of the Hausa States. Besides, trade was usually an agent of dissemination of Islam which brought new ideas and practices in the region.<sup>4</sup> Later, the conquest of these states by the Fulani contributed to the emergence of the Fulani Empire.

The decentralized Ibo villages, on the other hand, reveal a strikingly different picture that of a society insulated from foreign contact by the thick forest.<sup>5</sup> The isolation of the Ibo was, hence, an outstanding factor in shaping their system of rule<sup>1</sup> as it tended to limit their mental and political horizon.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Toyin Falola and Mathew.M.Heaton, A History of Nigeria in [http://books.google.com/books/about/A\\_history\\_of\\_Nigeria.html?id=XygZjbNRap0C](http://books.google.com/books/about/A_history_of_Nigeria.html?id=XygZjbNRap0C)

<sup>2</sup> Dr Johnson, a Yoruba native of Lagos, stated that Nubia was the original home of the Yoruba in view of similarities in habits, modes of thought, manners and customs. Quoted in C.L.Temple, Native Races and their Rule Sketches and Studies of official Life and Administrative Problems in Nigeria, Frank Cass and Co.Ltd, 1968, p9

\*Trade was an important factor in the rise of West African kingdoms such as: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay.

\*Commenting the importance of Islam in Sudanese states. Jackson said: 'the appearance of Islam in the western Sudan was important for more than religious reasons. It opened many West African states to the influence of Muslims from North Africa and Egypt and from all further a field, who introduced the arts of writing and scholarship. It ensured good training relations between the western Sudan and the lands beyond the Sahara', John.G.Jackson, Introduction to African Civilizations, Carol Publishing Group Edition, 1990, p 219

\*On the impact of natural conditions, Lanciné Sylla says: 'des montagnes hostiles ou des forêts non propices au groupement des hommes n'abritent que des poignées d'hommes n'ayant pas besoin d'une structure étatique complexe et centralisée pour vivre politiquement', Lanciné Sylla 'Reflexions sur la Typologie Classique des Systèmes Politiques Africains', in Annales Universitaires d'Abidjan, série D, Tom 10, 1977, p 73.

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

Differences in origin between the Yoruba Kingdoms, the Sokoto Empire and the Ibo villages were, further, reflected by differences in their machineries of government, both central and local. The question is to find out how these were structured.

## **2.2 Central Government in Traditional Polities**

The examination of the central administration of the three-mentioned polities involves automatically the investigation, within each, of three institutions, notably: the ruler, his advisory council, and the army.

### **2.2.1 The Ruler in Traditional Polities**

The nature of the prerogatives of the ruler and the extent of his power differed widely from one political system to the other. In virtue of their centralized status, both of the Yoruba States and the Sokoto Empire had single rulers, though with considerable differences in terms of their powers. The Yoruba ruler, commonly known as Oba,<sup>3</sup> was a divine king entrusted with momentous religious functions, as religion ( ancestor-worship) regulated practically every aspect of the Yoruba life. He was frequently required to perform rituals for the welfare of his people since he was believed to have magic religious powers, enabling him to communicate with the spirits of the dead. The Yoruba called him Ekije Orisa, that is a companion of gods and lord of life.<sup>4</sup> He was also the dispenser of justice in case of conflicts between the descent groups. Furthermore, he was the supreme overseer of the nation<sup>5</sup> since he was the proprietor of tribal land, controlling both its allocation to the cultivators and the distribution of food in case of famine. One can hardly deduce from such aura of powers that the Oba was an absolute monarch. In fact, there were many constraints upon his prerogatives. Besides, he could not make a decision alone. All the government's acts were undertaken in his name by his councilors.

The office of the Oba was hereditary in the same family, but not always from father to son. Generally an electoral college, constituted from the lineage heads, selected the future king among numerous candidates. There were three parameters for choosing a king: his eligibility, popularity, and capacity to undertake the great responsibilities which evidently involved the knowledge of all rituals. Once the process of selection was terminated, the Oba was to live in total seclusion stepping out of the palace only in the case of special feasts and rituals.<sup>6</sup> The motive behind this seclusion was to hasten the grandeur of the king and stir more respect to him<sup>7</sup> ensuring, thus, the best safeguard for public orders.<sup>8</sup>

---

\*Here Schwarz states 'civilizations arise as a response to challenge. But the challenge must be neither too hard, for then the people cannot respond, nor too easy, for then the people need not respond' A.O.Schwarz.Jr, Nigeria the Tribes the Nation or the Race the Politics of Independence, Cambridge, 1965

\*A.E.Afigbo, The Warrant Chiefs Indirect Rule in Southern Nigeria 1891-1929, Longman, 1972, p 8

\*In Oyo he was called Alafin and in Ife he was known as Oni

\*He was supposed to secure easily the help of ancestors in order to stop such calamities as floods and famine

<sup>5</sup> John.J. Jackson ,op.cit, p 218

\*Some of the Yoruba chiefs wore bead veils to hide their faces from the vulgar eye. Burns, Alan Burns, History of Nigeria, (George Allen and Unwin Ltd), London, 1948, p 34

<sup>7</sup> Burns mentions another reason : 'should a king go out, the normal life of his capital would be arrested as the whole population would be required to attend the sovereign' *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> . Samuel Johnson, op cit, p 57

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

On the other hand, the ruler of the Fulani Empire stood in a completely contrasting position. He was acknowledged as Caliph (or Sarkin Musulmi), that is head of the Muslim community. He was the chief executive as he was the sole political leader, the final judge and the commander-in-chief of the army. He was also entitled with the appointment of Emirs or Provincial rulers, and had complete control over the lands under his jurisdiction. In this respect, he owed his people great respect and obedience as long as he upheld the tenets of Islam.

The Caliph was chosen by the state council. A set of criteria was to be taken into consideration including: rate of learning and personal conduct. In other words, the candidate had to be well-versed in theology and jurisprudence, in addition to compliance with Islamic creeds. These were highly valued by the Fulani as the Caliph was to portray a model for his populace.

In the third case, the Ibo ruler ( or chief), on the other hand, presents a particular case in view of the fact that the Ibo had small autonomous structures where authority was divided among the lineages, kingship societies, age-grades,<sup>1</sup> secret and title- holding societies.<sup>2</sup> The chief was simply a ritual functionary. This means that he was vested with only moral authority rather than political leadership (such as disputes between father and son or between brothers). The chief had no coercive force to compel the rebel to obey him, but the fact that he was believed to embody the spirits of the ancestors was sufficient to bring the recalcitrant to respect his orders.

The Ibo chief was chosen on the basis of his wisdom itself dependent on age and experience. It was overwhelmingly believed that an elderly person was more suitable for leadership in view both of his great experience (which conferred upon him a readiness to deal with all issues), and his nearness from the world of the dead.

Parallel to the ruler in the socio-political control of the Ibo communities were the village council and the village-group council. The first was empowered to settle frictions between lineages. It included all the heads of the lineages under the leadership of the head of the senior lineage. Persons wishing to voice their views on particular issues could also attend signifying, thus, the example of a democratic society. Matters of a common interest between villages or cases of clashes fell within the competence of a village-group council which rarely met, owing to the fact that villages were autonomous. This council comprised all the village heads together with the elders, and was presided by the head of the senior village ( known as Obon Ison).

The foregoing notes reveal two important facts. The first is that in centralized systems (the Yoruba Kingdoms and the Sokoto Empire), rulers tended to be vested with more powers than their counterparts in decentralized systems ( the Ibo villages). The second is that within the animist polities (the Yoruba Kingdoms), rulers were less powerful than the leaders of the

---

\*Age organizations were divided into three groups: junior, middle and senior. The first two undertook communal labor such as the clearing of paths and cutting of forests, whereas the last group was entrusted with the administration of the affairs of the village.

\*The acquisition of a title required usually the payment of entry fees and in return the new comer would secure prestige and influence.

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

Muslim polities (Sokoto Empire). This leads, then, to enquire into the status of the advisory council within each political system.

**2.2.2 The Advisory Council in Traditional Polities**

In the Yoruba Kingdoms, the Oyo Mesi<sup>1</sup> served to advise the Oba on the management of his kingdom, and acted at the same time as an executive, a legislative and a judiciary council. Moreover, it exercised a great check on the Oba's power. If, for instance, the Oba was found guilty of not conforming to Yoruba rituals, or acting in tyranny, the council forced him to commit suicide. In this way, the Yoruba system of government displayed an instance of checks and balances.<sup>2</sup> The Oyo Mesi comprised seven members<sup>3</sup> headed by the Basorun, a kind of prime minister. Their offices were elective dependent upon broad support.

The Sokoto Empire, by contrast, had a body, known as the Magalisar Sarki, to assist the Caliph in the administration of the empire. It included a number of wazirs, the most important of whom were the vizier, kind of prime minister, to whom the Caliph entrusted all affairs, the executive wazir whose task was to cater for the carrying out of all judgments, since he was the chief of police, and finally the advisory wazir whose concern was mainly with the judiciary. Appointment to the council was elective. Officials had, of course, to be learned and capable of undertaking their responsibilities.

The case of the Ibo villages, again, is very particular in the sense that the chief had no council of his own to assist him. Instead, the affairs of the village, as it was shown earlier, were the reserve of different competences ( the village and village-group councils).

It could be argued that the Yoruba Kingdoms and the Sokoto Empire had more elaborate state councils than the Ibo settlements. Yet, it is worth mentioning that the specialization of functions (within the Yoruba and Fulani councils) was not highly developed as in modern societies. If relative sophistication was a major feature of the central governments of the first two polities by contrast with the Ibo communities, could this also apply to their respective provincial governments?

**2. 3 The Provincial Government in Traditional Polities**

The Yoruba States were divided into a number of provinces (or towns) headed each by a chief and his council, administering a number of settlements, known respectively as: quarters (group of compounds including a population varying between 100 and 200),<sup>4</sup> and compounds ( hamlets that contained the extended families). Yoruba provinces used to be generally autonomous, though recognizing a nominal allegiance to the Oba. The number of provinces was directly related to the territorial expansion of the kingdom. The empire of Oyo, for instance, encompassed by far the largest number of provinces, almost all of Yorubaland.

---

\*It had different names from one kingdom to the other

<sup>2</sup> Impressed by the Yoruba system of government, William H Clarke stated :‘The highest excellence of the best government among white people consists in constitutional checks or limits to prevent abuses of power. Strange as it may seem the central Africans ( i.e the Yoruba people ) had studied this balance of power and reduced it to practice, long before our fathers settled in America before the barons of England had exorted the great charter ( the Magna) from King John’ quoted in Olatunji, op.cit, p 20

\*These were the Osorun (Basorun), the Agbakin, the Sanau, the Alapini, the Laguna, the Akiniku and the Asipa.

<sup>4</sup> Josef Gugler §William Flanagan, Urbanization and Social Change in West Africa, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p 23

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

At the top of the hierarchy was the chief who was chosen from the lineage of the founder of the town by the other lineages,<sup>1</sup> and did not have absolute powers. He was, in fact, under the close control of a council of elders who constituted the chiefs of the different lineages inhabiting the town. At the head of each quarter was the quarter-chief who performed both social and jurisdictional functions. The quarter-chief was the head of the oldest family within the quarter. Matters which could not be settled by the quarter-chief were debated by a council of elders. The smallest administrative unit, the compound, was under the responsibility of the senior member.

The Sokoto Empire, on the other hand, was divided into two sectors comprising each a number of provinces called emirates which in turn administered a number of districts and villages. The western sector had its headquarters at Gwandu,<sup>2</sup> while the eastern sector had its capital at Sokoto. The latter continued, however, to be the capital of the whole empire, in view of its dominating position in the jihad. Each emirate was under the responsibility of a governor, or emir, bearing the title of Sarki who was assisted by an advisory council. Both of the districts and villages were administered by their respective heads and alkalis. The number of emirates tended to increase with time, as new provinces were annexed. Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century, there were about 30 emirates,<sup>3</sup> the most important of which were: Sokoto, Kano, Katsena, Zaria, Hadejia, Adamawa...etc. Emirs were chosen by a council of clerics, called Mallamai, and confirmed by the Caliph. They enjoyed a considerable rate of autonomy, though acknowledging the supremacy of the Caliph. They were vested with the administrative and judicial affairs of their respective provinces with advisory councils to assist them in discharging these functions.

At the head of each advisory council was an official, known as Ghaladima who exercised a great influence. Below him in rank was the Serki-n-dakay (the master of the horse). This function was extremely important given the role played by the cavalry in the Fulani army. Next to him was the commander-in chief of the emirate's military force, then the alkali (chief justice), then the Gado ( Lord of the Treasury), and finally the Serki-n-shano who was responsible for the military stores.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of the Ibo villages, the largest unit was the village-group ( or ison)<sup>5</sup> which was a loose structure. Each village (obio) was formed of a number of wards ( or lineages), headed, each, by the ward head (the senior member of the lineage vested with moral pressure) and the lineage council ( in matters requiring legal power). Wards were further subdivided into a set of ward-sections ( or sub-lineages) where authority was dispersed among the heads of the sub-wards and their respective councils, assuming the same functions as the leaders of the lineages.

---

\*Installation of chiefs required first the provision of the sword of justice from the Oba to attest for their legitimacy.

\*Gwandu was created in 1808 to stop the Kebbawa threat

<sup>3</sup> Toyin Falola and Mathew.M.Heaton, op.cit

<sup>4</sup> A.H.M.Kirk.Green, Barth's Travels in Nigeria, Extracts from the Journal of Henrich Barth's travels in Nigeria 1850-1855, London, 1962, p 125

<sup>5</sup> The population of a village-group usually numbered a few thousand souls at the most. Afigbo op cit, p 8

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

All in all, it could be said that the centralization of government both in the Yoruba States and the Fulani Empire had enabled them to evolve well-elaborated institutions to manage their affairs (both centrally and locally). However, the absence of this pattern in the Ibo villages had not inhibited them from conceiving their proper organs which fitted their needs. A pertinent question, yet, would be to see the way in which the three polities had perceived the question of the stability of their governments, in other words how the three systems (the Ibo in particular) organized their armies?

**2.4 The Army in Traditional Polities**

Since political stability depends on defense capabilities the question is to find out the importance of the army in those traditional polities. In the case of the Yoruba Kingdoms, above all the Oyo Empire, constant threats from the kingdoms of Nupe and Dahomey made necessary the development of a strong army. The size of the Yoruba armies differed with time according to the resources of the kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Clapperton, in his exploration travels across Yorubaland, in the early eighteenth century, noticed that an Oyo army, sent against Dahomey, consisted of many thousands of horsemen.<sup>2</sup> The Oyo army was under the leadership of a general, called Are-Ona-Kakanfo, who was directly responsible to the Basorun. It was formed from the caboceers (chiefs) and the retainers. It comprised both horsemen and infantry. The former were armed with bows, swords and lances. Though firearms were introduced in West Africa in the seventeenth century by the Portuguese, they were not used until around the 1840's.<sup>3</sup>

The Yoruba had an efficient philosophy which harnessed the same zeal in soldiers as the one boosted by Islam. According to that philosophy, 'an Eso (warrior) must fight and conquer..must fight and perish' and 'one who wears a coronet must never flee in battle.'<sup>4</sup> In fact, victory in battles did not haunt just Yoruba soldiers, but even their generals who according to custom had to commit suicide in case of defeat. It was no doubt these rigid rules which had made feasible the strength of the Yoruba armies, and consequently the expansion of the kingdoms.

Good organization and efficiency was also the same peculiarity of the Fulani army whose size varied with time. The constant threats from the emirates of Kebbi, Zamfara, and Nupe urged Fulani generals to deplore great efforts for the strengthening of their army. Each emirate had its own military force to make law and order. In case of a civil war, a general mobilization was made among the different peoples constituting the empire.

The Fulani army was made up of horsemen and infantry. The principal weapons were swords, bows, javelins, and battle axes. When on the point of encountering their enemy, the Fulani relied on two tactical formations. The first was that of the cavalry being followed by the infantry and then the reserve. The second rested on placing both of the cavalry and the infantry in the lead, and the reserve behind them. By the end of the nineteenth century,

---

<sup>1</sup> Roland.Sydney Smith, Kingdoms of the Yoruba, (University of Wisconsin Press), Madison, 1988, p 143

<sup>2</sup> .ibid

<sup>3</sup> . ibid, p 145.

<sup>4</sup> M.Crowder, op.cit, p 41

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

another pattern was adopted relying on a detachment of musketeers, archers, and infantry, being put into the vanguard.<sup>1</sup> It was certainly this good organization which stimulated the victories of the Fulani.

Unlike the Yoruba States and the Fulani Empire, the Ibo villages did not possess a standing army. It is true that they were sheltered from the outside world by the forest, yet this does not imply that they were immune from external attacks.<sup>2</sup> In times of crisis, leadership was assumed by the most influential persons, notably those with good physical strength. In fact, the Ibo had rituals where fights were engaged to prove the soldier's power. War leaders used surprise attacks (at high noon) which had the effect of weakening their enemies' response. Once the crisis was over, they relinquished their command to avoid, probably, any abuse of power.

If the Yoruba and Fulani armies were, certainly, better organized with well-disciplined soldiers and efficient tactics, the decentralized Ibo villages had, nonetheless, conceived a particular system to deal with external problems.

### **3. Conclusion**

The three socio-political structures, examined above, help draw certain conclusions. First, the scale of political organization evolved by these polities was highly influenced by the system of beliefs. The Yoruba States reflected the influence of animism and ancestor-worship in developing kingdoms where the rulers were sacredly venerated, but whose powers were curtailed by an effective system of checks and balances. The Sokoto Empire portrayed, par excellence, the example of a centralized state where Islamic law framed the political life of the empire. The Ibo villages, on the other hand, displayed a set of fragmented autonomous communities where people could participate in the law-making process, and where ancestor-worship served as a code for social and political control.

Apart from the religious parameter, other factors had, certainly, had their impact on these different polities. The case of external contact with other peoples, through emigration, trade, or conquest, showed clearly the prominent role played by interactions in affecting the political organization respectively of the Yoruba and Fulani. By contrast, the isolation of the Ibo settlements was deeply influential in promoting the development of a polity that had evolved along its own rhythm. The period, stretching from the fifteenth century till the beginning of the twentieth, was to mark the inauguration of a new phase of external contact between those three traditional political entities and the Europeans who had a completely different system of beliefs and values, correlated with a relatively developed technology. This contact was to impact those polities in a completely different way leading ultimately to their colonization.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert.S Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-colonial Africa*, (second edition, University of Wisconsin Press), Madison, 1989, p 125

<sup>2</sup> Afigbo op cit, p 8

**Beliefs, Geography, and Contact in the Forging of Traditional Polities in Pre-Colonial Nigeria**

---

**References:**

- Afigbo A.E. , The Warrant Chiefs Indirect Rule in Southern Nigeria 1891-1929, Longman, 1972
- Burns, Alan, History of Nigeria, (George Allen and Unwin Ltd), London, 1948
- Crowder M., The Story of Nigeria, (Faber and Faber), London, 1961
- Falola Toyin and Mathew.M.Heaton, A History of Nigeria in [http://books.google.com/books/about/A\\_history\\_of\\_Nigeria.html?id=XygZjbNRap0C](http://books.google.com/books/about/A_history_of_Nigeria.html?id=XygZjbNRap0C)
- Gugler Josef §William Flanagan, Urbanization and Social Change in West Africa, Cambridge University Press, 1981
- Jackson John.G. , Introduction to African Civilizations, Carol Publishing Group Edition, 1990
- Johnson Samuel, the History of the Yoruba, (C.M.S Bookshop), 1937
- Kirk.Green A.H.M, Barth's Travels in Nigeria, Extracts from the Journal of Henrich Barth's travels in Nigeria 1850-1855, London, 1962
- Lanciné Sylla 'Reflections sur la Typologie Classique des Systèmes Politiques Africains', in Annales Universitaires d'Abidjan, série D, Tom 10, 1977
- Olatunde.O.Olatunji, The Yoruba History, Culture and Language, Ibadan, 1970
- Phyllis.M. Martin§ Patrick .O.Omeara , Africa. Indiana University Press, 1986
- Reader John. , Africa: A Handbook to the Continent, (Alfred A Knopf Inc), New York, 1998
- Schwarz.Jr Frederick A. O., Nigeria the Tribes the Nation or the Race the Politics of Independence, Cambridge, 1965
- Smith Robert S, Kingdoms of the Yoruba, (University of Wisconsin Press), Madison, 1988
- Smith Robert.S, Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-colonial Africa, (second edition, University of Wisconsin Press), Madison, 1989
- Temple, C.L., Native Races and their Rule Sketches and Studies of official Life and Administrative Problems in Nigeria, Frank Kass and Co.Ltd, 1968