

Revisiting Oyo empire within the confine of the Atlantic age

Raji, Adesina Abdulfattah
Department of Political Science
Fountain University, Osogbo,
The State of Osun, Nigeria

Abstract

The Atlantic slave trade remains the largest known forced intercontinental migration in the world history. Ostensibly, the uniqueness of the Atlantic slave trade lie in the number of people involved, time span, and geographical area covered. Therefore, the study contends that Oyo's Empire involvement in the Atlantic slave trade started with her involvement on the importation of horses from the north. Initially, they were probably paid for by the export of slaves to the north. The study argue that, in the 17th century, the demand for slaves grew along the coast, and Oyo Empire started to export slaves to the south through the kingdoms of Alladah and Quidah. The slaves came from Oyo Empire raids to the north and west, and in the 18th century, from trade with the Bariba and Nupe. It further posits that from about the second quarter of the 18th century, the slave trade became increasingly important in the economy of the Oyo Empire as well as in the revenue base of the Alaafin's government. The study established that, Oyo Empire gradually became the chief supplier of the slaves sold on the Yoruba coast, resulting in increased volumes of slave exports from the ports of Ajase (Porto Novo), Badagry and Lagos. Through historical method of enquiry, the study revisit that the usual pattern of the trade was that the Oyo Empire traders sold to coastal middlemen (like the Ijebu and Awori for the Lagos market and Egbado and Awori for the Porto Novo market). Based on this, the study concludes that most of the Oyo Empire trade in slaves belonged to private traders, but some part belonged to the royal establishment bringing revenue to the palace.

Keywords: European, Oyo, Revenue, Slave, Slave trade,

Introduction

The kingdom of Oyo-Ile is regarded in Yoruba traditions as one of the younger of the early Yoruba kingdoms. It is believed to have been founded considerable later than such kingdom as Ketu, Owu and Ila. However, by the seventeenth century, Oyo-Ile had become the greatest of all Yoruba kingdoms-richer, stronger and territorially very much larger than any other. By the eighteenth century, its capital city of Oyo-Ile, known to its northern Hausa neighbours as Katunga, was the center of an empire comprising most of northern and western Yorubaland as well as substantial territories of non-Yoruba peoples like the Nupe, the Bariba and the Aja. During the eighteenth century, armies of the



Alaafin of Oyo were pushing far westwards beyond the Aja country, defeating at least one army of the Ashanti kingdom in parts of what is now the Republic of Togo, most probably in the country of the Yoruba Itsha and Ife of modern Togo Republic. Now known to history as the Old Oyo Empire, the Alaafin's empire was the largest ever in the history of the tropical forests and grasslands of West Africa south of the Nigeria¹. The empire's citizens were divided into two basic categories: free and unfree. Free citizens were individuals who, depending on their clan or ethnicity, were more or less influential in the affairs of the empire. The most influential free subjects were members of the royal clan, followed by individuals of Yoruba descent and, finally, non-Yoruba ethnic groups. Unfree subjects included individuals who voluntarily submitted themselves or another member of their family to *iwofa* status; a temporary form of indentured servitude similar to that practiced in the American colonies during the eighteenth century. Once the debt that required *iwofa* status was repaid, the individual became a free person. The Oyo empire also included large numbers of slaves, often taken from enemy kingdoms that were defeated during wartime, who were "usually employed as farm labourers or servants in households, as body guards to the chiefs, and as long-distance traders (*alajapa*)"²

The Atlantic slave trade was the largest known forced intercontinental migration in world history. In this trade, West Africa occupied the position of the most important sources of slaves for export to Europe and the Americans. The significance of the slave trade lies in the fact that apart from being the most important factor in the dispersal of West African peoples all over the world, its scope modus operandi and consequences made it an unmitigated disaster that brought untold misery to Africans. So far, it remains the darkest period in the history of the sub-region. It is important to stress that, various forms of slavery and servitude existed in Yorubaland before the development of the Atlantic slave trade. Notably, the institution of slavery in Yorubaland predates both the 19th and the advent of the trans-Atlantic Slave trade itself. Slaves were mentioned in the traditions relating to the establishment of many Yoruba towns such, as Ife. Also, slaves featured prominently in the palace organization of several Yoruba rulers. Ile-Ife and Oyo had the most elaborate systems of palace slaves in Oyo as well as Tetu, Ilari, Iwefa and Lemale. In Ife, Ondo and Ila they were known as Emese while in Ijebu they were known as Irewure, Eguren and Odi. In these places, they performed important social, economic and political functions. They served as guards, advisers and agents of the rulers. Others served as domestic servants to individuals and sometimes as farming or trading agents. The making of slaves took several forms. Eunuch slaves were made through emasculation. A man could be sold into slavery for serious crimes such as treason, gross indebtedness, incest and adultery with the wife of royal personage. Slaves also came from tributes and from captives of war.

At the heart of territorial expansion, however, was the maintenance of a dynamic political center that was capable of marshalling economic and military forces. In the case of the Oyo empire, the rules and regulations surrounding the selection of a new Alaafin constituted an elaborate system of check-and-balances that fostered political dynamism. When an Alaafin died or was

¹Akintoye, S. A. (2010). A history of the Yoruba people. Senegal: Amelion Publishing.

²Smith, R. (1988). *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

deposed the elders of the royal lineage made up a list of potential replacements. The prospects had to be of royal lineage, born to a free woman and not a slave, and without physical blemish. The Oyo Mesi then chose the new Alaafin from the royal list. The royal council had an obvious interest in curtailing the future Alaafin's power by selecting a candidate who would best adhere to the constitutional conventions of the kingdom and who did not have too commanding of a personality and therefore would not usurp or overshadow the power of the Oyo Mesi. The delicate balance maintained by this selection process had a tremendous impact on diplomacy within the empire³.

Oyo Empire and the Outside World

By the late 15th century, contacts had developed between Europeans and the people of the coastal region of the Yoruba country. Trade was initially in legitimate trade. By the 17th century, slaves had become an important article of trade. Oyo as a result of her superior military power, built upon a cavalry force and on account of her proximity to the northern slave markets became 'the greatest slave-maker', the greatest slave trader among the various Yoruba states before the 19th century. The majority of those sold by Oyo into slavery before the 1820s were mainly from captives taken by Oyo in its wars against non-Yoruba people of Dahomey, Borgu and Nupe. In the 1830s, the Old Oyo Empire which had been tottering for the past few decades finally collapsed. Before this time, however, new states had risen in the Hausa and Nupe countries. This meant the closure of these areas to Yoruba enslavement. With the closure of the northern source of slave supply, the Yoruba states descended on themselves for the supply of slaves to the coast. As the theatre of slave traffic, every Yoruba man became a possible candidate for enslavement. The situation degenerated to the extent that some rulers started selling their own citizens into slavery. For instance, the Alara of Ara (Ekiti) was twice deposed in the 1850s for selling his people into slavery. On the two occasions he was reinstated by the Ibadan who by then had replaced Oyo as the greatest slave makers in Yorubaland.

Slave trade as an economic activity became pronounced as from the 19th century with the involvement of Arab slave dealers. Slaves were part of the article of trade in the trans-saharan trade between West Africa and North Africa. It is due to this fact that, some European scholars argue that the Arab slave trade formed the bedrock of the Atlantic slave trade. To the European scholars, Europe merely engaged in what was already in existence and only altered it by changing the destination of the human cargoes to important areas of need. Yet studies have shown that the Atlantic slave trade differ remarkable from the ones across the Sahara in desert. Thus, the uniqueness of the Atlantic slave trade lie in the number of people involved, the time span, the geographical areas covered, the condition, the slaves were subjected to and the effects of the trade on the peoples of West Africa. Essentially, therefore, Oyo's role as one of the most important centre of slave trade can be partly explained on the basis of her geographical position. Old Oyo was placed to control the commercial

³Schraeder, P. J. (2004). *African politics and society: A mosaic in transformation*. U.S.A.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning

activities of the component parts of the empire. It lay on the main trade route from the north to the south. This trade route was a part of one of those trans-Saharan caravan routes which reached the Guinea coast. Beginning from either Badagry or Porto Novo on the Guinea Coast, the route passed through Ipokia, the Egbado towns and thence to Saki, Igboho and Old Oyo⁴.

From Old Oyo, the route led to the north: Borgu, Busa, Nupe and some of the Hausa states reaching, the important trade centre of Kano (Morton Williams, 2017). Here it linked with the Kano-Bornu-Kajdar-Kezzan route as well as the Kano-Agadus-Ghadames route, both terminating at Tripoli on the Mediterranean coast⁵. Elephant tusks and rock salts were also bartered at the Guinea Coast for rum, tobacco and European cloth⁶). By the 18th C, slaves had formed an important commodity in the trade⁷. There was no doubt that for the people of the Old Oyo Empire, the Capital became the most important centre to benefit from this trade. The diplomatic network established by the Oyo empire during the eighteenth century offers important insights into the diplomatic practices of the pre-colonial independence era. The core of the empire consisted of the spiritual centre of Ile-Ife and the original Oyo kingdom led by the Alaaifin and the Oyo Mesi. The remainder of the empire was established by the Alaaifin and other political leaders as a series of concentric circles, in which those closest to the centre were most closely tied to and dependent on the political favour of the Alaaifin; conversely, the further one ventured from Oyo and Ile-Ife, the greater the independence of the local political leaders.

Four concentric circles of power roughly captured the diplomatic relations of the Oyo empire. The first circle consisted of Yoruba kingdoms, which owed direct allegiance to the Alaaifin due to the sharing of direct blood ties. These kingdoms were usually directly administered by Oyo. The second circle also consisted of Yoruba kingdom, whose leaders recognized the authority of the Alaaifin. The lack of direct blood ties, however, ensured that the leaders of these kingdoms enjoyed some degree of political autonomy from the center. A third circle was composed of *Suzerain kingdoms* that, although not inhabited by the Yoruba people, recognized the authority of the Alaaifin as the most influential leader within the region. A final circle consisted of largely independent political systems, such as the Nupe in the northeast, over which the Alaaifin had little or no influence⁸.

The evolution of the “guns-or-butter” debate within Oyo empire has important implications for understanding the regional diplomatic practices of African empires. First, warfare served as an important dimension of foreign relations. Unlike current international norms that make wars exceptional events, the norms of the pre-colonial independence era ensured that warfare was more

⁴Morton-Williams, P. (2017). *The Oyo Yoruba and the Atlantic Trade, 1670-1930*

⁵Bovill, E.W. (1963). *The golden trade of the Moors*. London: Oxford University Press.

⁶Clapperton, H. (1829). Royal Gold Coast Gazette and Commercial Intelligencer. *Journal of a second expedition into the interior of Africa: from the Bight of Benin to Soccatoo*. Cape coast, 1822-3

⁷Morton-Williams, P. (2017). *The Oyo Yoruba and the Atlantic Trade, 1670-1930*

⁸Schraeder, P. J. (2004). *African politics and society: A mosaic in transformation*. U.S.A.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning

frequent and understood by African leaders as a legitimate tool of foreign policy. During the eighteenth century, for example, the leaders of the Oyo empire pursued war as an “annual or biannual exercise (Ajayi & Smith, 1971). War was also undertaken to satisfy both political and economic goals. The classic political rationales for launching attacks against neighbours ranged from placing more territory under the direct administration of the empire to demonstrating the military capabilities of the empire to other kingdoms and outside powers. Economic factors also played an important role in military calculations. A successful military campaign increased control over external markets to which goods could be sold, raised the levels of tribute to be received from newly subjugated kingdoms, and ensured that greater numbers of slaves could be put to work within the empire and sold to outside powers⁹

The Formation of an Oyo Imperial Colony during the Atlantic Age

The Oyo empire was a large Yoruba kingdom, ruled according to the typical Yoruba system of government applied over a vast territory. At the head of it all was the Alaafin, a typical Yoruba divine king. Like the kings of all Yoruba kingdom, the Alaafin was selected from the pool of princes of one royal lineage. For the selection, all princes (sons and grandsons of former kings) were eligible – with the singular exception of the oldest son of the recently deceased king. From the early seventeenth century, this one prince, with the title of Aremo, was allowed to be freely associated with his reigning father in matters of government, and then he had to die (by committing suicide) when his father died. Succession by primogeniture was, as would be remembered, generally rejected by Yoruba kingdom; Oyo-Ile’s requirement that the Aremo must die represents a particularly drastic rejection of it. The purpose, as in all Yoruba kingdoms, was to ensure that the right of the people to select their king would not be interfered with one privileged prince¹⁰

The administration of the Oyo empire was based on indirect rule. The Alaafin exercised his authority by accrediting resident officials known as *agele* (also called *asojuoba* – “the eyes of the king”), who in turn were supervised by royal messengers known as the *ilari*. These resident officials were responsible for overseeing the *tribute* or payments to be made by subordinate towns and kingdoms in recognition of their submission to the empire. For example, in 1748, the king of the Abomey kingdom agreed to pay a yearly tribute of “forty men, forty women, forty guns, and forty loads of cowries and corals” after the defeat of his kingdom’s forces in a series of military engagements with the Oyo¹¹. The Alaafin also exchanged gifts with the leaders of friendly neighbouring kingdoms who were not under the control of the Oyo empire. In these cases, the provision of tribute represented a relationship of mutual respect¹².

⁹Schraeder, P. J. (2004). *African politics and society: A mosaic in transformation*. U.S.A.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning

¹⁰Akintoye, S. A. (2010). *A history of the Yoruba people*. Senegal: Amelion Publishing. P. 249-250

¹¹Smith, R. (1988). *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. P. 36

¹²Schraeder, P. J. (2004). *African politics and society: A mosaic in transformation*. U.S.A.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning. P. 41

Of the numerous Yoruba polities -city-states and kingdoms -that emerged between about ad. 800 and the 1700s, only one attained imperial status. This was the Old Oyo Empire. It came into prominence in the seventeenth century, but its imperial foundations were laid in the sixteenth century or even earlier¹³. The Oyo Empire, from the seventeenth century through its collapse in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, fits the definition of an imperial state in the sense that it expanded beyond its core area in northwest Yorubaland, controlled regions and peoples far beyond its heartland, took over other polities, indirectly controlled other hegemonic and expansionist states, and succeeded in manipulating the political structures of those other polities in ways that made it exercise sovereignty over them. Oyo can be called an Atlantic Age empire not only because it flourished in the high noon of the Atlantic period but, more importantly, because its imperial expansion was a response to the impacts of the Atlantic commercial revolutions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries¹⁴. Archaeological investigations have focused on the capital of the empire itself, Oyo-Ile and its core area in northwest Yorubaland. It seems that the occupation of the area of Oyo-Ile (capital of the Old Oyo Empire) by thriving and hierarchical agricultural communities was well in place around the ninth century ad.¹⁵(Agbaje-Williams 1983). We can only speculate at this point, on the basis of historical sources, that Oyo-Ile was constituted into a full- fledged kingdom and a *primus inter pares* by the thirteenth century¹⁶.

The next two centuries were marked by travails for the polity due to dynastic changes, external attacks, internal conflicts, and settlement displacements¹⁷Oyo-Ile, as a viable kingdom, rebounded in the fifteenth century. And, at the close of the sixteenth century, the reinvigorated polity had developed and consolidated important institutional structures that would enable it to become, during the next two centuries, the largest political unit in West Africa south of the Niger River. Archaeological surveys have revealed that five major wall systems were built in Oyo-Ile between the sixteenth and late eighteenth centuries. At its peak in the mid-eighteenth century, the imperial capital covered an area of more than 5,000 ha, with diameters of 10 km north—south and 6 km east-west. Agbaje-Williams (1986) has estimated that between 60,000 and 140,000 people occupied the city in the eighteenth century. Clearly, the Yoruba of Oyo went through an interregnum of 80 years as an exiled dynasty after its defeat by the Nupe. They re-established Oyo as more centralized and expansive than ever. The people created a government that established its power over a vast empire. During the 17th century, Oyo began a long stretch of growth, becoming a major empire. Oyo never encompassed all Yoruba-speaking people, but it was the most populous kingdom in Yoruba history.

¹³Law, R. (1975). A West African Cavalry State: The Kingdom of Oyo. *The Journal of African History*.16 (1): 1—15.

¹⁴Law, R. (1975). A West African Cavalry State: The Kingdom of Oyo. *The Journal of African History*.16 (1): 235

¹⁵

¹⁶

¹⁷

Far more than any other Yoruba kingdom, the political system of the Oyo empire emphasized military strength and preparedness. Apart from the high military chiefs of the Oyo Mesi, almost every other chief, no matter what functions he performed in the stated, was also supposed to be a military officer able and ready to command troops. High military positions enjoyed enormous respect and honour in the society, and the upbringing of the youths of the Oyo homeland devoted much emphasis to military skills. Some cities close to Oyo-Ile particularly focused on military training and preparedness. Among these were Koso, the town founded to the memory of Sango, Igbogunb, Igboho, Iresa, Ogbomoso and Ede, but the most important was Ikoyi. The Onikoyi, ruler of Ikoyi was the greatest provincial military chieftain. Young men who emerged into adulthood with the best military distinctions anywhere in the Oyo country stood a chance of being appointed by the Alaaafin's government as military officers. Of such officers, the most honoured were the Eso, seventy in number, about whom something has early been said. The Are OnaKakanfo was usually referred to as the Eso of the Esos, and so he was in essence but, usually he was not appointed from among the Esos – the position was usually given to a provincial ruler who had strong military credentials¹⁸.

The key to Yoruba rebuilding of Oyo was a stronger military and a more centralized government. Taking a cue from their Nupe enemies (whom they called Tapa), the Yoruba rearmed with armor and cavalry. Oba Ofinran, Alaaafin of Oyo, succeeded in regaining Oyo's original territory from the Nupe. A new capital, Oyo-Igboho, was constructed and the original became known as Old Oyo. The next Oba, Eguguojo, conquered nearly all of Yorubaland. After this, Oba Orompoto led attacks to obliterate the Nupe to ensure Oyo was never threatened by them again. During the reign of Oba Ajiboyede, he held the first Bere festival, an event to celebrate peace in the kingdom. Celebrated regularly, it would retain much significance among the Yoruba long after the fall of Oyo. Under his successor, Abipa, the Yoruba repopulated Oyo-Ile and rebuilt the original capital. Despite a failed attempt to conquer the Berlin Empire sometime between 1578 and 1608, Oyo continued to expand. The Yoruba allowed autonomy to the southeast of metropolitan Oyo, where the non-Yoruba areas could act as a buffer between Oyo and Imperial Benin. By the end of the 16th century, the Ewe and Aja states of modern Benin were paying tribute to Oyo.

The reinvigorated Oyo Empire began raiding southward as early as 1682. By the end of its military expansion, Oyo's borders would reach to the coast some 320 kilometres (200 mi) southwest of its capital. It met little serious opposition until the early 18th century. In 1728, the Oyo Empire invaded the Kingdom of Dahomey in a major campaign of its cavalry. Dahomey warriors, on the other hand, had no cavalry but many firearms. Their gunshots scared the Oyo cavalry horses and prevented their charging. Dahomey's army also built fortifications such as trenches, which forced the Oyo army to fight as infantry. The battle lasted four days, but the Yoruba were eventually victorious after reinforcements arrived. Dahomey was forced to pay tribute to Oyo. The Yoruba invaded Dahomey seven times before finally subjugating the small kingdom in

¹⁸Akintoye, S. A. (2010). A history of the Yoruba people. Senegal: Amelion Publishing. P. 251

1748. With its cavalry, Oyo campaigned successfully in conquest and suppression over great distances. The Oyo army was able to attack defensive fortifications, but it was harder to supply an army, and they withdrew when supplies ran out. The Oyo did not use guns in its major conquests. The military waited until the 19th century to adopt them. In 1764, a joint Akan (Akyem)-Dahomey-Oyo force defeated an Asante army. The alliance victory defined borders between the neighboring states. Oyo led a successful campaign into Mahi territory north of Dahomey in the late 18th century. The Yoruba also used the forces of their tributaries; for instance, they accomplished a 1784 naval blockade of Badagri with an Oyo Dahomey-Lagos force.

At the beginning, the people were concentrated in metropolitan Oyo. With imperial expansion, Oyo reorganized to better manage its vast holdings within and outside of Yorubaland. It was divided into four layers defined by relation to the core of the empire. These layers were Metropolitan Oyo, southern Yorubaland, the Egbado Corridor and Ajaland. Metropolitan Oyo corresponded, more or less, to the Oyo state prior to the Nupe invasion. This was the hub of the empire, where the Yoruba spoke the Oyo dialect. Metropolitan Oyo was divided into six provinces, with three on the west side of the Ogun River and three to the river's east. Each province was supervised by a governor appointed directly by the Alaafin of Oyo. The second layer of the empire was composed of the towns closest to Oyo-Ile, which were recognized as brothers. This area was south of metropolitan Oyo, and its Yoruba inhabitants spoke different dialects from that of Oyo. These tributary states were led by their own rulers, titled Obas, who were confirmed by the Alaafin of Oyo.

The empire's third layer was the Egbado Corridor southwest of Yorubaland. This area was inhabited by the Egba and Egbado, and guaranteed Oyo's trade with the coast. The Egba and Egbado tributaries were allowed, like their Yoruba counterparts, to rule themselves. They were, however, supervised by Ajele. These were agents appointed by the Alaafin of Oyo to oversee his interest and monitor commerce. The lead representative of Oyo in the corridor was the Olu, ruler of the town of Ilaro. Ajaland was the last layer added to the empire. It was the most restive and distant, and kept in line with threats of expeditions against it. This territory extended from the non-Yoruba areas west of the Egbado Corridor far into Ewe controlled territory in modern Togo. This area, like all tributary states, was allowed a fair degree of autonomy as long as taxes were paid, the orders from Oyo were strictly followed, and access to local markets was provided to Oyo merchants. The Oyo often demanded tribute in slaves. The tributary sometimes made war on other peoples to capture slaves for this. Oyo punished disobedience by wholesale slaughter of the community, as it accomplished in Allada in 1698.

The Oyo Empire developed a highly sophisticated political structure to govern its territorial domains. Scholars have not determined how much of this structure existed prior to the Nupe invasion. Some of Oyo's institutions are clearly derivative of early accomplishments in Ife. After reemerging from exile in the early 17th century, Oyo took on a noticeably more militant character. The influence of an aggressive Yoruba culture is exemplified in the standards placed on the oba (king) and the roles of his council. The oba (meaning 'king' in the

Yoruba language) at Oyo, who was referred to as the Alaafin of Oyo (Alaafin means 'owner of the palace' in Yoruba), was the head of the empire and supreme overlord of the people. He was responsible for keeping tributaries safe from attack, settling internal quarrels between sub-rulers, and mediating between those sub-rulers and their people. The Alaafin of Oyo was also expected to give his subordinates honors and presents. In return, all sub-rulers had to pay homage to the Oba and renew their allegiance at annual ceremonies. The most important of these was the Bere festival, marking the acclamation of successful rule by the Alaafin. After the Bere festival, peace in Yorubaland was supposed to last for three years. The king could not be disposed but could be asked to commit suicide if he is no more wanted. This is done by sending Bashorun (The warrior) to present an empty calabash or a dish of parrot's egg to him and pass a sentence of rejection such as (AwonEniyan Koo) meaning the people rejects you and also the gods reject you, by tradition, the Alaafin must poison himself and die.

The Oyo Empire was not a hereditary monarchy, nor an absolute one. The Oyo Mesi selected the Alaafin. He was not always directly related to his predecessor, although he did have to be descended from Oranyan (also known as Oranmiyan), a son of Oduduwa (also known as Odudua, Odua) and to hail from the Onalsokun ward (which is one of the three royal wards). At the beginning of the Oyo Empire, usually the Alaafin's oldest son succeeded his father to the throne. But, this sometimes led to the oldest son, i.e. the first-born prince, the Aremo, hastening the death of his father. Independently of the possible succession, the Aremo was quite powerful in his own right. For instance, by custom, the Alaafin abstained from leaving the palace, except during the important festivals, which in practice curtailed his power. By contrast, the Aremo often left the palace. This led a noted historian S. Johnson to observe that: "The father is the king of the palace, and the son the King for the general public". The two councils which checked the Alaafin had a tendency to select a weak Alaafin after the reign of a strong one to keep the office from becoming too powerful.

The Alaafin of Oyo appointed certain religious and government officials, who were usually eunuchs. These officials were known as the *ilarior* half-heads, because of the custom of shaving half of their heads and applying what was believed to be a magical substance into it. The hundreds of *ilari* were divided evenly among the sexes. Junior members of the *Ilari* did menial tasks, while seniors acted as guards or sometimes messengers to the other world via sacrifice. Their titles related to the king, such as *obal'olu* ("the king is supreme") or *madarikan* ("do not oppose him"). They carried red and green fans as credentials of their status. AU sub-courts of Oyo had *Ilari* who acted as both spies and taxmen. Oyo appointed these to visit and sometimes reside in Dahomey and the Egbado Corridor to collect taxes and spy on Dahomey's military successes, so that the Alaafin of Oyo could get his cut. Similar officials had existed in Ife, as attested by terracotta art depicting them.

Oyo Mesi and the Yoruba Earth cult known as Ogboni kept the Oba's power in check. The Oyo Mesi spoke for the politicians while The Ogboni spoke for the people backed by the power of religion. The power of the Alaafin of Oyo in

relation to the Oyo Mesi and Ogboni depended on his personal character and political shrewdness. The Oyo Mesi were seven principal councilors of the state. They constituted the Electoral Council and possessed legislative powers, similar to today's United States Congress. Led by the Bashorun, acting as prime minister, and ran by the Agbaakin, Samu, Alapini, Laguna, Akiniku and Ashipa. They represented the voice of the nation and had the chief responsibility of protecting the interests of the empire. The Alaafin was required to take counsel with them whenever any important matter affecting the state occurs. Each man had a state duty to perform at court every morning and afternoon. Each mesì had a deputy whom they would send to the Alaafin if his absence was unavoidable. The Oyo Mesi developed as a check on the Alaafin's power, preventing the Alaafin from being an autocrat; the Oyo Mesi compelled many Alaafin to commit suicide during the 17th and 18th centuries. The head of the council of Oyo Mesi, the Bashorun, consulted the Ifa oracle for approval from the gods. New alaafins of Oyo were seen as appointed by the gods. They were regarded as *Ekeji Orisa*, meaning "companion of the gods." The Bashorun had final say on the nomination of the new Alaafin, his power rivaling the king himself. For example, the Bashorun orchestrated many religious festivals; in addition to being commander-in-chief of the army, which gave him considerable independent religious authority. Chief among the responsibilities of the Bashorun was the all important festival of Orun.

However, this religious divination, held every year, was to determine if the members of the Mesi still held favor with the Alaafin. If the council decided on the disapproval of the Alaafin, the Bashorun presented the Alaafin with an empty calabash, or parrot's egg as a sign that he must commit suicide. This was the only way to remove the Alaafin because he could not be legally deposed. Once given the parrot's egg, the Bashorun would proclaim, "the gods reject you, the people reject you, the earth rejects you." The Alaafin, his eldest son, and the Samu, his personal counselor and a member of the Oyo Mesi, the Asamu, all had to commit suicide in order to renew the government all together. The process and suicide ceremony took place during the Orun festival. The Oyo Mesi does not enjoy an absolute power or influence, and while the Oyo Mesi may wield political influence, the Ogboni represented the popular opinion backed by the authority of religion, and therefore the view of the Oyo Mesi could be moderated by the Ogboni. There are checks and balances on the power of the Alaafin and the Oyo Mesi and thus no one is arrogated absolute power. The Ogboni was a very powerful secret society composed of freemen noted for their age, wisdom and importance in religious and political affairs. Its members enjoyed immense power over the common people due to their religious station. A testament to how widespread the institution was is the fact that there were Ogboni councils at nearly all sub-courts within Yorubaland. Aside from their duties in respect to the worship of the earth, they were responsible for judging any case dealing with the spilling of blood. The leader of the Ogboni, the Oluwo, had the unqualified right of direct access to the Alaafin of Oyo on any matter.

The main geographic focus was north of the forest, Oyo enjoyed easier farming and thus a steady growth in population. This contributed to Oyo's ability to consistently field a large force. There was also an entrenched military culture in Oyo where victory was obligatory and defeat carried the duty of committing

suicide. This do-or-die policy no doubt contributed to the military aggressiveness of Oyo's generals. The Oyo Empire was the only Yoruba state to adopt cavalry; it did so because most of its territory was in the northern savannah. The origin of the cavalry is disputed; however, the Nupe, Borgu and Hausa in neighboring territories also used cavalry and may have had the same historical source. Oyo was able to purchase horses from the north and maintain them in metropolitan Oyo because of partial freedom from the tsetse fly. Cavalry was the long arm of the Oyo Empire. Late 16th and 17th century expeditions were composed entirely of cavalry. There were drawbacks to this. Oyo could not maintain its cavalry army in the south but could raid at will. Cavalry in highly developed societies such as Oyo was divided into light and heavy. Heavy cavalry on larger imported horses was armed with heavy thrusting lances or spears and also with swords. Light cavalry on smaller indigenous ponies was armed with throwing spears or bows. Infantry in the region around the Oyo Empire was uniform in both armor and armament. All infantry in the region carried shields, swords and lances of one type or another. Shields were four feet tall and two feet wide and made of elephant or ox hide. A 3-foot-long (0.91 m) heavy sword was the main armament for close combat. The Yoruba and their neighbors used triple barbed javelins which could be thrown accurately from about 30 paces.

The Oyo Empire, like many empires before it, used both local and tributary forces to expand its domains. The structure of the Oyo military prior to its imperial period was simple and closer aligned to the central government in metropolitan Oyo. This may have been fine in the 15th century when Oyo controlled only its heartland. But to make and maintain farther conquest, the structure underwent several changes. Oyo maintained a semi-standing army of specialist cavalry soldiers called the *Esoor Esho*. These were 70 junior war chiefs who were nominated by the Oyo Mesi and confirmed by the Alaafin of Oyo. The Esowers were appointed for their military skill without regard to heritage and were led by the Are-Ona-Kakanfo. After Oyo's return from exile, the post of Are-Ona-Kakanfo was established as the supreme military commander. He was required to live in a frontier province of great importance to keep an eye on the enemy and to keep him from usurping the government. During Oyo's imperial period, the Are-Ona Kakanfo personally commanded the army in the field on all campaigns.

Since the Are-Ona-Kakanfo could not reside near the capital, arrangements had to be made for the latter's divided evenly by a river. Provincial forces were thus grouped into two armies, under the *Onikoyi* and *Okere* for the east and west side of the river respectively. Lesser war chiefs were known as Balogun, title carried on by the soldiers of Oyo's successor state, Ibadan. Tributary leaders and provincial governors were responsible for collecting tribute and contributing under local generalship to the imperial army in times of emergency. Occasionally, tributary leaders would be ordered to attack neighbors even without the backing of the main imperial army. These were often utilized in Oyo's distant campaigns on the coast or against other states. Oyo became the southern emporium of the Trans-Saharan-trade. Exchanges were made in salt, leather, horses, kola nuts, ivory, cloth and slaves. The Yoruba of metropolitan Oyo were also highly skilled craft making and iron work. Aside

from taxes on trade products coming in and out of the empire, also became wealthy off the taxes imposed on its tributaries. Taxes on the kingdom of Dahomey brought in an amount estimated at 638 thousand dollars a year.

By 1680, the Oyo Empire spanned over 150,000 square kilometers. It reached the height of its power in the 18th century. And despite its violent creation, it was held together by mutual self-interest. The government was able to provide unity for a vast area through a combination of local autonomy and imperial authority. Unlike the great savannah empires, of which Oyo may not be Oyo Empire and surrounding states called a successor since it was a successor of Ife, there was little c. 1700. if any Muslim influence in the empire. It is known that at least some Muslim officials were kept in Metropolitan Oyo, and men capable of writing and calculating in Arabic were reported by French traders in 1787.

Oyo and the Trade in Slaves

In general, the Yoruba people, among the most heavily targeted, contributed significantly to the cultural and economic influence upon the Atlantic slave trade during its run from approximately 1400 until 1900 CE. From 1400 onwards, the Oyo Empire's imperial success made the Yoruba language a lingua Franca almost to the shores of the Volta¹⁹ (Stride & Ifeka, 1971: 302). This expansion was closely related to Oyo involvement with its northern neighbours and in the Atlantic slave trade. Horses do not breed in the southern savanna, and Oyo had to import its horses from the north. Initially they were probably paid for by the export of slaves to the north. In the 17th century, the demand for slaves grew along the coast, and Oyo started to export slaves to the south through the kingdoms of Adada and Qudah. European goods were imported which were used to play for the horses in the north. The slaves came from Oyo raids to the north and west²⁰, and the 18th century, from trade with the Bariba and Nupe.

During this period, it is important to stress that, the first slaves captured by Oyo began to find their way into the Atlantic slave trade and Oyo began to face the problem of responding to the possibilities and dangers of getting caught up in the trade. Oral traditions still reflect some of the tensions between the military and the merchant's council – one arguing for still more military expansion, the other wanting to pursue peace for the sake of trade in fact, neither of these possibilities seems to have been pursued consistently. For several decades before 1774, the Bashorun, or supreme military commander, became more important than the Alaafin, whose powers were usually so circumscribed by councils as to make him a mere figure head. Then the Alaafin Abiodun had once been a merchant and he apparently sought to develop his power on the basis of the slave trade, which increased enormously in the 1780s, while Oyo's military power declined.

¹⁹Stride, G.T. & Ifeka, C. (1971). *Peoples and empires of West Africa: West Africa in history 1000-1800*. Edinburgh: Nelson P. 302

²⁰Law, R. (1975). A West African Cavalry State: The Kingdom of Oyo. *The Journal of African History*. 16 (1):226.

With Oyo, imperial expansion began and continued for many decades before military aggression came to be linked to the slave trade, but once the link was made, the decade of the 1780s was both the peace decade for Oyo's export of slaves and the beginning of its internal crisis, it is probable that Oyo appears to have first built an empire and then began the large scale export of slaves without first changing its forms of government²¹. The dominant power of Oyo, dependent up cavalry to control the routes to the coast and to enforce tribute payments which were often in the form of slaves. The centre of Oyo was actually located close to the Niger river, far inland and much of its involvements in the Atlantic trade relied on independent or semi-autonomous ports on the coast. The rise of Dahomey after 1700 forced Oyo to intervene more directly in coastal affairs and after the middle of the eighteenth century, the Oyo administration colonized a route to the coast in order to protect its foreign trade more effectively, Benin failed to keep abreast of these developments and consequently its early involvement in trade with Europe was not pursued actively.

Several features of the history of Oyo is particularly striking. In Oyo case, the consolidation of a state-managed economy was relatively late; only after 1650 in Oyo. State management in Oyo case was closely related to slave exports which was the sole export for Oyo. Since Oyo was actively involved in acquiring slaves through wars of conquest, raiding and tribute, state management of trade dependent upon access to slaves. Finally, Oyo needed to trade north as well as with Europe. Oyo lacked the gold and kola resources of Asante but, nonetheless, had an active trade with north. In this case it appears that northern exports were principally goods purchased from European merchants, although local textiles were also important. The most striking item, perhaps was cowries which were imported in large quantities probably to finance Oyo's imports of horses, salt, textiles and other goods that connected Oyo so closely with the central Sudan.

Be that as it may, towards the end of the 18th century, the Oyo army was neglected as there was less need to conquer²². Instead, Oyo directed more efforts towards trading and acted as middlemen for both the trans-Saharan and Trans-Atlantic slave trade²³. Europeans bringing salt arrived in Oyo during the reign of king Obalokun²⁴. Thanks to its domination of the coast, Oyo merchants were able to trade with the Europeans at Porto Novo and Whydah²⁵.

²¹Akinjogbin, A. (1998). *War and peace in Yorubaland 1793-1893*.

²²Oliver, R.& Anthony A. (2001). *Medieval Africa 1250-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 3030

²³Stride, G.T. & Ifeka, C. (1971). *Peoples and empires of West Africa: West Africa in history 1000-1800*. Edinburgh: Nelson P. 292

²⁴Smith, R. S. (1989). *Warfare & diplomacy in pre-colonial West Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press P. 31

²⁵Stride, G.T. & Ifeka, C. (1971). *Peoples and empires of West Africa: West Africa in history 1000-1800*. Edinburgh: Nelson.

Here the Oyo empires captives and criminals were sold to Dutch and Portuguese buyers²⁶

Sources of Oyo's Slaves to the Atlantic

Many historians have argued with some justification that before the 1820s the slave trade in Yorubaland was inconsiderable. However, after the 1820s there occurred a phenomenal increase both in the volume of slaves domesticated in Yorubaland and in the number of those sold to the European slave traders along the coast. This was due principally to the pervasive state of war in Yorubaland in the 19th century. The collapse of Oyo created a power vacuum in Yorubaland. The attempts by the nascent and imperial states of Ilorin, Ibadan, Ijaye and Abeokuta to fill this vacuum provoked several wars throughout the Yoruba country. War provided captives who became candidates for enslavements. More wars meant more captives. In many of the Yoruba wars, hundreds at times thousands were taken captives. In 1860 during the Ijaye War and soon after the Egba army had been worsted by the Ibadan, about 1,000 Egba captives appeared in the Ibadan slave markets.

Following the defeat of Dahomey army by the Egba in 1851 about 1,000 Dahomey soldiers were taken captives. Another example was that of Ibadan in 1874. In that year, the Ibadan army invaded the Ekiti country. The Balogun of Ado put up a resistance. On 16 January 1874 the Ado were routed in a single battle. Thereafter and according to a contemporary account:

Men, women and children were captured without the slightest attempt at resistance. So many were the captives and so much the booty that the campaign appeared more like a promenade.

Thus the official abolition of the slave trade by Britain and the attempt to enforce it in Africa by naval action did not terminate the slave trade in Yorubaland. The military and political struggle for supremacy among the Yoruba states in the post 1793 period ensured that rather than decrease slavery and the slave trade increase to great proportions. Oyo Empire, it must be noted was a slave state and its kings used slave labour on his vast farmlands. Majority of Oyo's Empire slaves came through wars of expansion and consolidation. In wars, Oyo took more slaves than it needed for the royal farms, and traded them to the Europeans for guns, cloth, metal goods and cowry shells. As already stated in the work, Oyo Empire also traded with Africans to its north for horses and for more captives for the slave trade.

²⁶Smith, R. S. (1989). *Warfare & diplomacy in pre-colonial West Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. P. 31

Summary and Conclusion

The work has examined Oyo Yoruba in the Atlantic Age. It is interesting that from about the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the slave trade became increasingly important in the economy of the Oyo Empire as well as in the revenue base of the Alaafin's government. Oyo Empire gradually became the chief supplier of the slaves sold on the Yoruba coast, resulting in increased volumes of slave exports from the ports of Ajase (Porto-Novo), Badagry and Lagos. The usual pattern of the trade was that the Oyo Empire traders sold to coastal middlemen (like the Ijebu and Awori for the Lagos market and the Egbado and Aworifor the Porto Novo market). The main sources of Oyo's Empire slave supplies to the coast are known however, the relative numerical importance of each source in the whole volume remains unclear. As would be remembered, Richard Lander recorded, during visits to Oyo-Ile in 1826, that convicted criminals were a source of slaves to the coast by Oyo Empire. Since convicts belonged to the state, this must have been a source of royal revenue exclusively. Very probably, from the time of the serious political troubles in Oyo-Ile in the third quarter of the eighteenth century (in the time of the Basorun Gaha), the number of ordinary persons convicted of offences and sold into slavery increased significantly. Captives in war constituted a probably much larger source from the Oyo Empire wars in the Nupe, Bariba and Aja countries. Oyo Empire also bought large numbers of slaves from the Nupe and Bariba, and from Hausaland, mostly for resale on the coast, and partly also for sale to native buyers in the Oyo homeland who owned slaves for domestic and other types of labour.

European slave traders on the coast were aware in the late eighteenth century that large numbers of the slaves being supplied to the coast were bought by the Oyo from the Nupe country and from Hausaland, Sultan Bello of Sokoto wrote that the Hausa country sold many slaves to the Yoruba. The slaves bought from the Nupe comprised probably mostly Nupe, and the rest comprised partly Yoruba (of Igbomina, Okun Yoruba, Akolo and Ekiti origin), partly Kakanda, and partly Gbagyi (northern neighbors of the Nupe).

Notably, most of the Oyo Empire trade in slaves belonged to private Oyo traders, but some part belonged to royal establishment, bringing revenue to the palace. Tolls on the slave traffic also brought increasing royal revenue but never seems to have amounted to more than a small part of all tolls. Moreover, tributes from the vassal states regularly included some slaves, most of whom were usually absorbed into the royal service; the few who were sold yielded some revenue for the king's government. Finally, criminal kidnapping contributed to the number of slaves reaching the coast through the Oyo traders. The number of the kidnapped was probably all at any time, but, understandably, popular fears and sentiment exaggerated it - and have passed the exaggerations into the traditions.

Bibliography

- Akinjogbin, A. (1998). *War and peace in Yorubaland 1793-1893*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Akintoye, S. A. (2010). *A history of the Yoruba people*. Senegal: Amelion Publishing.
- Alpern, S. B. (1998). *Amazons of Black Sparta: The women warriors of Dahomey*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bascom, W. (1962). Some aspects of Yoruba urbanism. *American Anthropologist*. 64(4): 699-709.
- Bovill, E.W. (1963). *The golden trade of the Moors*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bowdich, E. (1966). *Mission from Cape Coast castle to Ashantee (1819)*.
- Bowdich, T. E. (1819). *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, with a statistical account of that kingdom, and geographical notices of other parts of the interior of Africa*. London: J. Murray.
- Clapperton, H. (1829). Royal Gold Coast Gazette and Commercial Intelligencer. *Journal of a second expedition into the interior of Africa: from the Bight of Benin to Soccatoo*. Cape coast, 1822-3
- Daizel, A. (1793). *The history of Dahomey: An inland kingdom of Africa*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Easley, D. L. (2009). *The four forest states of Africa*. Oyo Empire Cape Girardeau: Southeast Missouri State University.
- Fasanya, A. (2004). The original religion of the Yorubas. <http://www.laits.utexas.edu/africa>
- Falola, T. (ed.) (2000). *Kingdoms of West Africa: Benin, Oyo and Ashante*. Africa: 2. Carolina Academic Press. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Goddard, S. (1971). Ago That became Oyo: An Essay in Yoruba Historical Geography. *The Geographical Journal*. Blackwell Publishing. 137(2): 207—211.

- Kehinde S. Y. (2009). The Democratic Structure of Yoruba Political-Cultural Heritage. vol no6. OAU, Ile-Ife: Department of Philosophy.
- Law, R. (1975). A West African Cavalry State: The Kingdom of Oyo. *The Journal of African History*. 16 (1): 1—15.
- Morton-Williams, P. (2017). The Oyo Yoruba and the Atlantic Trade, 1670-1930
- Oliver, R. & Anthony A. (2001). *Medieval Africa 1250-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oliver, R. (1975). *The Cambridge history of Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schraeder, P. J. (2004). *African politics and society: A mosaic in transformation*. U.S.A.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning
- KShillington, K. (1995). *History of Africa*. New York: Macmillan Limited.
- Smith, R. (1988). *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Smith, R. S. (1989). *Warfare & diplomacy in pre-colonial West Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Stride, G.T. & Ifeka, C. (1971). *Peoples and empires of West Africa: West Africa in history 1000-1800*. Edinburgh: Nelson.
- Thornton, J. (1998). *Africa and Africans in the making of the Atlantic world, 1400-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornton, J. K. (1999). *Warfare in Atlantic Africa 1500-1800*. London and New York: Routledge.