



J. Oladipo Olugbadehan

Owo: A Yoruba Frontier Kingdom, Southwestern Nigeria

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Southwestern Nigeria:
A Study of History, Politics and
Society in an African Ethnic
Frontier Zone

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Preface

The aim of this book is to present a written history of the Owo kingdom of Southwestern Nigeria to the people of Owo and Eastern Yorubaland, students of Yoruba, Nigerian and African history, and the reading public. It is an introduction to the history, politics and society of this eastern Yoruba state with particular reference to her political development and cultural attributes. Owo kingdom was one of the most important states of pre-colonial Nigeria both in the political, socio-economic and artistic realms. This is more so in the history and economy of the Yoruba –Edo speaking culture area.

But Owo's place and her contributions to the general development of the area have not been adequately represented in the Nigerian historical literature up to this point. The reason for this may be due to her remote location in the eastern extremity of Yorubaland, where she had marched with the Edo and other non –Yoruba ethnic groups in the pre-colonial times. Hence some recent commentators have erroneously assumed that Owo might belong to the Edo culture area and worse still, that she might not be Yoruba at all in origin and attributes. But this book is not the outcome of a search for Owo people's identity as they are unquestionably a Yoruba subgroup.

Two factors stand out in this study: first is Owo's advantageous location on the trade routes in the south-central part of modern Nigeria. As a trading state, the consequences of Owo's location at the intersection of a network of trade routes traversing the south-central area of modern Nigeria was very important to her development. It is argued in this book that Owo's location at this juncture benefited Owo materially as this was an important factor in her growth and survival. But, Owo did not just survive, she also thrived in spite of the overwhelming odds. The people of Owo, especially the women, were avid traders both to the Benin kingdom and other parts of Yorubaland.

The second factor is related to her nearness to the Benin kingdom of the Edo people. It will be futile to deny the fact that Owo and most of the eastern Yoruba country have been greatly influenced by the Benin kingdom during the course of their development. From the 14th century, Benin's political and economic influence extended across the West African littoral from Calabar in the east to Dahomey (modern Benin Republic) in the west and inland into the Guinea forests. However, by

the 18th century, this Benin paramountcy had become weakened; Benin power over her subject peoples having gradually become only intermittent rather than continuous. This was the case on the eve of the imposition of European colonial rule in West Africa in the dying years of the 19th century. As a matter of fact, most of the area under Benin sway had become largely independent of her after the 17th century and in the remaining cases, Benin's dominance was tenuous, at best.

Of all the Yoruba people depicted as being under Benin sway in the pre-colonial times, Owo is the closest in location and so the argument goes that in view of her nearness to Benin, Owo could not have escaped Benin dominance which extended beyond Owo's territory at any time during the course of her history. However, Owo's pre-occupation with her situation constituted an initial inhibition in her interaction with the Yoruba mainland to the west in the early periods because that exposed location had made Owo a ready target for absorption into the expanding Benin Empire. To survive Benin's encroachments, therefore, Owo had to develop a very great skill in adroit diplomacy and adaptation.

This book discusses the vicissitudes of Owo kingdom in the course of her development and highlights the problems confronting the people as they interacted with the expansive Edo kingdom of Benin. This is a study of how an African kingdom, arising with a typically Yoruba political and cultural attributes, responded over many centuries to very close commercial and cultural interactions with her neighbors, and ultimate Benin political pressure.

I wish to reiterate here that Owo's story is not only one of survival, it is also a story of adaptation. But this was not without its price of internal confusion and a slight departure from the general Yoruba pattern of participatory monarchy and governance. The internal politics of Owo initially pitted the royal family against the chiefs but from the later part of the 18th century, the split in the royal family itself provided opportunities for the chiefs to take sides and thus gave rise to endemic strife and disunity. This situation pervaded the kingdom under British colonial rule and has continued in the context of independent Nigeria.

The significance of this book is in four areas: first is the relationship between the eastern Yoruba districts and the Benin kingdom in the pre-colonial period. The history of the Yoruba people is the most researched of any people group in sub-Saharan Africa. Yet a full general history of the Yoruba has been made impossible by our lack of knowledge of significant parts of pre-19th century history of eastern Yorubaland, until recently. This study deals with the history of Owo kingdom, the largest and most influential of the Eastern Yoruba states up to the end of the 19th century and into our times. It explores the centuries-long relationship of the Owo kingdom and the Edo kingdom of Benin, the immediate neighbor of the Yoruba people. For about four centuries, preceding the 19th century, the most powerful influences on Yoruba political history had centered on two core areas: the old Oyo Empire with its capital city of Oyo-Ile (Home Oyo) in the north-west grasslands and the Benin kingdom with its capital city, Benin, in the deep forests beyond the Yoruba southeast. Of surviving impacts of Benin on the political institutions and traditions of the Eastern Yoruba kingdoms, there is abundant evidence. The picture remains unclear, however, of the exact nature of the relationships between the Eastern Yoruba and the Benin kingdom. Owo exhibits the deepest Benin impact: she was the nearest to Benin, and she was the most powerful and most expansionist of the Eastern Yoruba kingdoms. By focusing on the Owo kingdom, this book has thrown a big light on the murky history of the Yoruba-Edo culture area.

Second is the extent of the participation of the Eastern Yoruba in the Atlantic Slave Trade. Up to this point, a clearer picture of Yoruba participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade remains elusive. Almost all of our conclusions so far on Yoruba participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade from the 17th century to the 19th century has been derived from information about Slave trading through the ports on the coast of modern Benin Republic (pre-colonial Dahomey) and the participation of the Oyo Empire in it –that is, beyond the far western parts of Yorubaland. At least, up to the late 18th century, Benin, trading through her port of Gwato, (Ughoton) was perhaps the biggest Slave Trader on the Lower West African coast. This study has helped us answer a number of important questions: what was the role of the Eastern Yoruba in this Benin trade? Was

the slave trade a factor in Owo's expansionism and power, and in the evolution of Owo's political system? How did it affect the other Eastern Yoruba states and people?

Third is the import of this study on recent interpretations of sources on Yoruba history, generally, up to this point. This book has some other ramifications. It has filled a yawning gap, a very significant gap, in our knowledge of Yoruba oral sources. A systematic collection, collation, interpretation and application of Owo's oral sources have led to significant revisions of hitherto widely held conclusions concerning the eastern Yoruba culture area in Yoruba history.

Lastly is its use in the employment of the European literature on the Lower West African coast in the reconstruction of Yoruba history. This is the first real attempt to employ, in Yoruba historical reconstruction, the literature emanating from European traders', missionaries' and travelers' accounts of their activities on the Lower West African coast during the 17th and 18th centuries. To date, this literature has been employed almost exclusively in the reconstruction of Benin history. Yet, with Benin so much involved in the history of Owo and other Eastern Yoruba kingdoms, it is to be expected that this literature holds valuable information on the Eastern Yoruba. This book has helped to unearth this historical literature while using it to reconstruct the history of Owo kingdom and the adjacent frontier states in the Yoruba-Edo speaking culture area.

This book is offered in the hope that it will contribute substantially to the growing knowledge of Yoruba and African history.

August 2010

Exordium

The history of the Yoruba people of West Africa is the most researched and the most written up of the histories of all the people of Africa. The tradition started as soon as western literacy came into Yorubaland in the 1840s. A Yoruba cleric, the Reverend Samuel Johnson, of Oyo heritage and educated abroad, returning to Yorubaland, started to collect the traditions of the kingdom of his origin in Yorubaland and ended up, at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, with an impressive volume, in majestic prose, entitled *The History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of British Protectorate*.

Partly emulating him and partly acting on their own in accordance with Yoruba tradition which places a lot of emphasis on its history, literate Yorubas in various parts of Yorubaland began to write the local histories of their own kingdoms and so the first half of the 20th century was a period of enormous literature on Yoruba history. Not many of them are as sophisticated as the first Yoruba history written by Samuel Johnson but altogether, they constitute a massive amount of information on Yoruba history. Then after the Second World War, Yoruba scholars in the History Departments in Nigeria and abroad began to do serious academic research into Yoruba history and, as a result, many monographs and many joint works have been published on the history of the Yoruba people.

In spite of all these, however, it remains very difficult to write a general history of the Yoruba people. The reason for that is that there are serious gaps that need to be filled up and one of the most important gaps is the lack of knowledge concerning most of what we refer to as eastern Yorubaland, that is, the kingdoms east of Ile-Ife. These are the Yoruba people of the various kingdoms of the Ekiti, Akoko, Owo, Ondo, Igbomina and the pockets of settlements in the northeastern Yorubaland area of Owe, Iyagba, Ikiri, Abunu, Oworo. Some work has been done in this area but mostly in the period covering the 19th century. Very little work has been done on this area on the period prior to the 19th century. The significance of the present work is that it focuses on the history of the Owo kingdom, believed to have been the largest, most influential and most enduring kingdom in the whole of eastern Yorubaland before the 19th

century. This work has elucidated the rise of that kingdom and, in particular, it has looked at a very important theme in its history-its relationship with the Edo kingdom of Benin, the southeastern neighbors of the Yoruba people.

An important part of this study is an examination of the ramifications of Benin influence on Owo. Owo was the closest Yoruba kingdom to Benin and Owo came under the influence of Benin in the 15th and 16th centuries. But Owo did not rise because of the development or growth of Benin and her history is not part of the history of the Benin kingdom in its origin. Owo kingdom, like the other Yoruba kingdoms, rose in the forests of Yorubaland. But while it was rising, it soon came under the influence of Benin.

There are three ways in which the history of Owo contributes to our knowledge of Yoruba history and, in that case, to the historiography of Africa. First is Owo's interaction, in her early history, with the Benin kingdom, her neighbor to the southeast. Coinciding with the period of European penetration of the West African coast and the beginnings of foreign trade in the 15th century, Owo endured Benin hegemony and armed encroachments between c1430 and c1600. By an acceptable recompense, through adroit diplomacy and political sagacity, Owo was strengthened by this experience and by the 17th century, she had emerged a viable power in Eastern Yorubaland.

The second area in which the history of Owo contributes to our understanding of African historiography concerns her involvement with the slave and ivory trades. Owo people initially supplied the slaves and ivory products that fed the Atlantic Trade. Owo people benefited from these trades and this may account for her emergence as a mega-state in an area where the mini state polity was the norm. Later on, before the close of the slave trade era in the 19th century, however, Owo people themselves ended up being enslaved and sold into the Atlantic slave mart by their leaders.

The third area in which Owo history contributes to our understanding of the issues relating to the historiography of Africa is in the internal changes which occurred in the administration of Owo kingdom in the 18th century. The innovations of the later part of the 18th century in terms of the new chieftaincies and other changes in the

administration of Owo and environs may be indicators of Owo's continued success during the period. But in the 19th century, internal conflicts resulting from the struggle for power among the lineages and maybe, a search for control of the trade routes both in the capital and the satellite townships led to the flowering of an underground movement, the *Bamgbosun* which unleashed fear and terror on the polity. The resultant tensions in the kingdom ultimately led to internal strife and the near collapse of the kingdom before the British take-over of Yorubaland in the 1890s.

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Dedicated to the memory of my father and mother, Josiah and Eunice Tinuade Olugbadehan
All thanks be unto our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to the Glory of God

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Abbreviations

AA: African Arts

AEH: African Economic History

AG: Action Group

CEA: Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines

Cf: compare

CSSH: Comparative Studies in Society and History

EAS: East African Studies

HA: History in Africa

IJAH: International Journal of African Historical Studies

IJAL: International Journal of American Languages

JAH: Journal of African History

JAS: Journal of the African Society

JRGS: Journal of the Royal Geographical Society

JHSN: Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria

JIH: Journal of Interdisciplinary History

JRA: Journal of Religion in Africa

NAI: National Archives, Ibadan

NCNC: National Council of Nigerian Citizens

NPC: Northern Peoples Congress

Op. cit.: upper citation

PRO: Public Record Office

TAJH: Trans-African Journal of History

WAJA: West African Journal of Archaeology

Maps

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