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# A Re-assessment of the Exceptional Indigenous Political Setting of the Yorubas: Historicizing the Formation of Old Oyo Empire

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## ABSTRACT

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# A Re-assessment of the Exceptional Indigenous Political Setting of the Yorubas: Historicizing the Formation of Old Oyo Empire

Osadola Oluwaseun Samuel<sup>o</sup> & Adeleye, Oluwafunke Adeola<sup>o</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*Oyo Empire was the most politically organized entity founded by the Yoruba speaking people in present-day Nigeria. The empire was well organized, influential and powerful. At a time it controlled the politics and commerce of the area known today as Southwestern Nigeria. It, however, serves as a paradigm for other sub-ethnic groups of Yoruba derivation which were directly or indirectly influenced by the Empire before the coming of the white man. To however understand the basis for the political structure of the current Yorubaland, there is the need to examine the foundational structure from which they all took after the old Oyo Empire. This paper examines the various political structures that made up government and governance in the Yoruba nation under the political control of the old Oyo Empire before the coming of the Europeans and the establishment of colonial administration in the 1900s. It derives its data from both primary and secondary sources with a detailed contextual analysis.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Pre-colonial systems in Nigeria witnessed a lot of alterations at the advent of the British colonial masters. Several traditional rulers tried to protect and preserve the political organisation of their kingdoms or empires but later gave up after much

pressure and the threat from the colonial masters. Colonialism had a significant impact on every pre-colonial system in Nigeria, even until today. (Atanda, 1980).

The entire Yoruba country has never been thoroughly organized into one complete government in a modern sense. The system that prevails is that known as the Feudal; the remoter portions have always lived more or less in a state of semi-independence, while loosely acknowledging an over-lord. (Akintoye, 1971) The king of Benin was one of the first to be independent of the central government and was even better known to foreigners who frequented his ports in early times, and who knew nothing of his over-lord in the then unexplored and unknown interior. (Osadola, 2018).

Yoruba Proper, however, was organized entirely, and the descriptions here given refer chiefly to it. With some variations, most of the smaller governments were generally modeled after it, but in a much simpler form, and solely in their domestic affairs; foreign relations so far as then obtained, before the period of the revolution, were entirely in the hands of the central government at Oyo (Eyeo or Katunga). (Dzeka & Osadola, 2015) It should be remembered that the coast tribes were of much less famous then than now, both in population and in intelligence; light and civilization for the Yorubas came from the north with which they have always retained connection through the Arabs and Fulanis. The centre of life and activity, of large populations and industry, was therefore in the interior, whilst the coast tribes were scanty in number, ignorant and

degraded not only from their distance from the centre of light, but also through their demoralizing intercourse with Europeans, and the transactions connected with the overseas slave trade. (Ijagbemi, 1973)

This state of things has been somewhat reversed since the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by the suppression of the slave trade, and the substitution therefore of legitimate trade and commerce: and more especially through the labours of the missionaries who entered the country about the same time as the springing up of the modern towns of Lagos, Abeokuta, and Ibadan, through which western light and civilization beam into the interior. (Johnson, 1921)

The position of the traditional ruler (Oba) is hereditary in the same family, but not necessarily from father to son. The King is usually elected by a body of noblemen known as Qyo-Mesi, the seven principal councilors of state. The vassal or provincial kings and ruling princes were 1,060 at the time of the greatest prosperity of the empire which then included the Popos, Dahomey, and parts of Ashanti, with portions of the Tapas and Baribas. (Osadola, 2018)

The word "king" as generally used in this country includes all more or less distinguished chiefs, who stand at the head of a clan, or one who is the ruler of an important district or province, especially those who can trace their descent from the founder, or from one of the great leaders or heroes who settled with him in this country. (Lloyd, 1971) They are of different grades, corresponding somewhat to the different orders of the English peerage (dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts, and barons), and their order of rank is well-known among themselves. (Akintoye, 1971) The Onikoyi as head of the Ekiun Osi metropolitan province was the first of these "kings" and he it was who used to head them all to Oyo once a year to pay homage to the Alaafin, or King of the Yorubas. (Johnson, 1921)

## II. PRE-COLONIAL POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF YORUBALAND: A DISCOURSE

Before the advent of the British in Yorubaland, Yoruba kingdoms maintained an orderly and unified political system which is still in effect till today. A Yoruba kingdom (e.g., the Oyo kingdom) was made up of a headquarters (i.e., Olu-Ilu) and other local towns and villages. However, its political administration consisted of a central level and subordinate units. The central level was headed by the Oba (king) and assisted by a handful of chiefs and other political figures in the administration of the kingdom, while the subordinate units, headed by Baales, concentrated only on the administration of the towns and villages in the kingdom. Like the Oba, the Baale also had a group of chiefs that assisted him in his area of jurisdiction. (Atanda, 1980).

However, the Baale of each town and village is entitled to pay annual homage (isakole) to the Oba at the central level. Baale literally denotes 'Father of the land' in Yoruba tradition, they are mainly viceroys and do not wear the crown as they are affiliates and their towns are tributary to neighbouring Oba. Oba is a Yoruba term for King; an Oba is the monarchical head of government in ancient Yorubaland. Some Obas ruled supreme over their kingdoms and subjects with unchecked powers while some had checks and balances like the great Old Oyo Empire (OOE), some have their powers checked as a result of their tributary status to Old Oyo Empire. Their titles vary amongst clans in Yorubaland, for example, the Oba of Oyo is called 'Alaafin of Oyo' (Man of the palace at Oyo), some Obas' titles are attributes to their land, examples are Oluwo of Iwo, Osolo of Isolo and so forth. (Johnson, 1921) Any erring Baale can be relieved of his post or sanctioned to certain punishment respective of his offence since all Baales were responsible to the Oba at the central level, but this must have the consent of some offices in the administration. The Yoruba political administration had a decentralized structure, i.e. power was constitutionally shared among all political levels/sections of the kingdom ranging from the highest to the lowest unit, unlike the

Hausa political system which was highly centralized. (Lloyd, 1971).

The Yoruba political administration was also based on the ultimate principle of 'check and balance' which implies that each of the administrative levels can check, challenge or nullify actions of other levels irrespective of their administrative hierarchy, for example, in the political system of the Oyo empire, the Oyomesi (the 7 hereditary kingmakers headed by Basorun) and the Are-Ona-Kakanfo (head of the army) acted as checks to the Alaafin who can be deposed by being presented an empty calabash or parrot's egg if found incompetent or guilty of impeachable crimes, for example, Are-Ona-Kakanfo Afonja, with the help of some of the Oyomesi, presented an empty calabash to Alaafin Aole signifying his rejection as the king which was to be followed by his suicide. (Akinjogbin, and Ayandele, 1980) However, it can be safely concluded that the Yoruba political system had a semblance to the modern federal system of government. (Atanda, 1980).

Of all the kingdoms and empires in Yorubaland, the Oyo political system was the most popular and outstanding as it was able to influence issues in other kingdoms like Ijebu, Ife, Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin) and so on. Below is the political-administrative structure of the Oyo Empire. (Bascom, 1965).

The Alaafin was seen as the political head of the Empire. The Oyomesi chose him. (Balogun, 1985) It was claimed that he could only appear three times a year in public and that was only during some important festivals. The Alaafin is the supreme head of all the kings and princes of the Yoruba nation, as he is the direct lineal descendant and successor of the reputed founder of the nation. The succession as above said is by election from amongst the members of the royal family, of the one considered as the most worthy, age and nearness to the throne being taken into consideration. It might also be mentioned in passing that the feelings and acceptance of the denizens of the harem towards the king-elect are

often privately ascertained and assured of previously. (Akintoye, 1971).

In the earliest days, the eldest son naturally succeeded the father, and in order to be educated in all the duties of the kingship which must one day devolve upon him, he was often associated more or less with the father in performing important duties and thereby he often performed royal functions, and thus gradually he practically reigned with his father under the title of Aremo (the heir apparent) having his official residence near the palace; but as the age grew corrupt, the Aremo often exercised sway quite as much as or more than the King himself, especially in the course of a long reign, when age has rendered the monarch feeble. (Afolayan, 1998) They had equal powers of life and death over the King's subjects, and there are some cases on record of the Aremo being strongly suspected of terminating the father's life, of attaining full powers at once. It was therefore made law and part of the constitution that as the Aremo reigned with his father, he must also die with him. (Ijagbemi, 1973).

This law affected any rate of checking the Aremo of patricide. It continued to take effect up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when, in 1858, it was repealed by Atiba one of the later Kings in favour of his Aremo Adelu. The Aremo may now succeed if found worthy, but he must be elected in the usual way, but if passed over or rejected by the king-makers he must leave the city and resort to a private retirement in the provinces. This, however, is not obligatory, but as he must be superseded in his office, such a course is inevitable, unless he chooses of his own accord to die with his father. (Akintoye, 1971)

The choice may sometimes fall upon one of the poorer princes, in the quiet pursuit of his trade, with no aspiration after the throne; such a one is sent for, and unnecessarily ill-used for the last time to his surprise; this was done probably to test his temper and spirit. He may not be aware of the intentions of the Oyo Mesi until they are admonishing him as to the duties and responsibilities of the exalted position he is soon to fill. (Atanda, 1980).



The nominators are three titled members of the royal family, viz., the Ona-Isokun, the Ona-Aka, and the Omo-Ola, uncles or cousins of the King, but generally entitled the "King's fathers." These have to submit or suggest the names to the noblemen for election, but the Basorun's voice is paramount to accept or to reject. (Afolayan, 1998)

Curious and elaborate ceremonies precede the actual accession to the throne. After all, arrangements have been made; the ceremonies begin by a sacrifice brought from the house of the

Ona-Isokun by a body of men called Omo-ni-nari; these belong to a family specifically concerned with carrying out all menial duties connected with the offering of sacrifices and in waiting upon the King and the priests. As soon as they enter the house where the King-elect is, he is called out, and he has to stand up with an attendant by his side. (Biobaku, 1973) He is touched on the chest, and the right and left shoulders with the bowl of sacrifice, with the attendant uttering some words. This is the signal that he has been called to the throne. On the evening of the same day, he is conducted quietly into the house of the Ona-Isokun where he spends the first night. In order to avoid the crowd, the attention of the populace is usually diverted by a procession of the Kings' slaves and others with much noise and ado, as if escorting him, whilst the king-elect accompanied by the Aregbe'di, a titled eunuch, and a few of the Omo-ni-nari come up quietly a long way behind. (Akintoye, 1971)

At the Ona-Isokun's house, he is attended solely by the Omo-ni-nari. He is admonished and advised by those who stand in place of a father to him. Some ceremonies of purification are performed, propitiatory sacrifices are again offered which are carried to various quarters of the city by the Onito-ni-nari.

The next night he passes at the house of the Otun-Iwefa (the next in rank to the chief of the eunuchs). This official being a priest of Sango, it is probable that the king-elect spends the night with him in order to be initiated into the sacerdotal

part of his office, the Alaafin having as much spiritual as well as secular work to perform, being at once King and Priest to his people, and probably he learns there also the usages and doings of the massive population in the inner precincts of the palace with which the eunuchs are quite conversant. After this, he is conducted into one of the chambers in the Outer Court of the palace (Omo ile) where he resides for three months, the period of mourning, until his coronation. (Lloyd, 1971, Biobaku, 1973)

The main gateway to the palace being closed at the demise of the King, a private opening is made for him in the outer wall through which he goes in and out of his temporary residence. (Balogun, 1985) During this time he remains strictly in private, learning and practising the style and deportment of a King, and the details of the essential duties and functions of his office. During this period he is dressed in black, and is entitled to use a "cap of the state" called "Ori-ko-gbe-oyo." (The head may not remain uncovered). The Basorun at this time conducts the affairs of state. (Johnson, 1921)

These are the seven hereditary kingmakers in the Oyo Empire. Their leader was Basorun. They were responsible for installing a new Alaafin. The first class of noblemen consists of the noblest and most honourable councilors of state, termed the Oyo Mesi. They are also the king-makers. They are seven in number and of the following order: The Osorun (Bashorun); Agbakin; Samu,; Alapini; Laguna; Akiniku; Asipa.

The title of each (as above said) is hereditary in the same family but not necessarily from father to son; it is within the King's prerogative to select which member of the family is to succeed to the title, or he may alter the succession altogether. (Balogun, 1985)

They represent the voice of the nation; on them devolves the sole responsibility of protecting the interests of the kingdom. The King must take counsel with them whenever any critical matter affecting the state occurs. Each of them has his

state duty to perform, and a special deputy at court every morning and afternoon whom they send to the Alaafin at other times when their absence is unavoidable; they are, however, required to attend court in person the first day of the (Yoruba) week, for the Jakuta (Sango) worship and to partake of the sacrificial feast. (Biobaku, 1973)

The Osorun or Iba Osorun (Basorun, i.e., the lord that performs the "Oran ") may be regarded as the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the kingdom and something more. He is not only the president of the council, but his power and influence are immeasurably more significant than those of the others put together. His is the chief voice in the election of a King, and although the King as supreme is vested with absolute power, yet that power must be exercised within the limit of the unwritten constitution, but if he is ultra-tyrannical and withal unconstitutional and unacceptable to the nation it is the Basorun's prerogative as the mouthpiece of the people to move his rejection as a King in which case His Majesty has no alternative but to take poison and die. (Atanda, 1980)

Next, to the Alaafin in authority and power, he often performs the duties of a King. He takes precedence of all provincial kings and princes. There were times in the history of the nation when the Basoruns were more potent than the Alaafin himself. During the long course of history there have been several alliances between the two families so that, in the older line of Basoruns at any rate, the blood of the royal family also runs in their veins. (Afolayan, 1998).

Several points of similarity may be noted between the Alaafin and his Basorun. The Alaafin is Oba (a king), the Basorun is Iba (a lord). The Alaafin's wives are called Ayaba, the Basorun's Ayinba. They are similarly clothed, carrying their heads bare and shaven, and their headbands used as belts; but the Ayinbas are not equally avoided by men as the Ayabas are.

The Iba Osorun has Igbis to his palace as well, but a limited number; those of the Alaafin being unlimited. Igbis are a royal attendant who sees to the welfare of the royal house or prominent personalities in the old Oyo empire. He too has several Ilaris as a king, but they must be created for him by the Alaafin. (Johnson, 1921)

The Alaafin has his crown, his throne, his Ejigba round his neck. The Osorun has a specially made coronet of his own, a uniquely ornamented skin called the Wabi on which he sits, and a string of beads around his neck also like the Ejigba. (Osadola, 2018) At the major festivals of the Alaafin, the Basorun also has minor festivals to observe in conjunction and has his part to play at the central observance also. When the Alaafin reigns long and peacefully enough to celebrate the Bebe, a festival akin to the royal jubilee, the Basorun must follow with the Owark. But it is a peculiarity of the Basorun's children that the boys are never circumcised. (Biobaku, 1973)

Although the title is hereditary in the same family yet it is within the King's power to change the line of succession when necessity demands that course. Thus the whole unwritten constitution of the Yorubas seems to be a system of checks and counter-checks, and it has, on the whole, worked well for the country. There have been five different families of the Basorun line, each one with its distinctive cognomen. The first and oldest belonged to the family totem of Ogun (the god of war) and have for appellatives Moro, Maso, Mawu, Maja, Ogun. This was the original line contemporary with the earliest Kings. It covered the reign of 18 Kings and ended with Basorun Yamba, in the reign of King Ojigi. (Atanda, 1980)

With the long lease of power and influence enjoyed by this family, it became as wealthy and great as, or even greater than, the sovereign himself, especially as some of the Basoruns outlived two or three successive Kings. Therefore King Gberu the successor of Ojigi transferred the succession to his friend Jambu of another line, whose appellatives were Maja Maro. This line embraced the reign of seven Kings and ended with

Asamu in Abiodun's reign. The third began with Alobitoki in Aole's reign, having the appellatives of Maja Majo of the totem of Agan. (Balogun, 1985)

This line was not allowed to continue, it flourished during the reign of one King only, for Ojo Abuiumaku the son of Onisigun and grandson of Basorun Ga was of the older line. The fourth line began with Akioso in King Majotu's reign, and also ended with himself in the reign of Oluewu, the last of ancient Oyo. This family was rather insignificant.

Oluyole, the first Basorun of the new city, was the grandson of Basorun Yamba, and therefore of the older Ogun line. The fifth and last line commenced with Gbenla in the reign of King Atiba, the totem is Aye and is the family now in office and has already lasted through the reign of three kings. The Basoruns of Ibadan after Oluyole are only honorary with no royal duties attached to the office. (Johnson, 1921)

Are-Ona Kankanfo was the head of the army. Oyo had for long maintained a strong army that had been used in winning different wars. It was claimed that if the military should suffer any defeat, the Are-ona-kankanfo was to commit suicide or go on exile. (Afolayan, 1998).

Next in importance to the Oyo Mesi and of a rank below them are the Esos or guardians of the kingdom. These constitute the noblemen of the second class. They also are addressed as "Iba." It is a military title, not necessarily hereditary. It is the reward of merit alone, and none but tried, and proven soldiers are selected for that rank. (Adeoye, 1980)

First and foremost amongst them and apart by himself stands the Kakanfo, an Eso of the Esos. Then the 70 captains of the guard, ten of whom are under each of the seven councillors. Each wears an Akoro (or coronet) and carries in his hand no weapon, but a baton or staff of war known as The Invincible. (Atanda, 1980)

So much is this title thought of by military men and others and so great is the enthusiasm it inspires, that even the children and grandchildren of an Eso hold themselves bound to maintain the spirit and honour of their sires. The Eso is above everything else noble in act and deed.

"Emi omo Eso " (me born of an Eso) is a proud phrase generally used even to this day by any of their descendants to show their scorn for anything mean or low, or their contempt for any difficulty, danger, or even death itself. (Biobaku, 1973).

Most of the Egba chiefs sprang from the Esos of Oyo, Okukemu the first "king" of Abeokuta was a Sagbua, A special notice must now be taken of the Kakanfo who stands at the head of the Esos.

The title given in full is Are-Ona-Kakanfo. It is a title akin to a field-marshal and is conferred upon the most exceptional soldier and tactician of the day. This title was introduced into the Yoruba country by King Ajagbo, one of the earliest and most renowned of Yoruba Kings. (Afolayan, 1998)

Like the Ilaris, at the time of his taking office, he shaves his head completely, and 201 incisions are made on his occiput, with 201 different lancets and specially prepared ingredients from 201 vials are rubbed into the cuts, one for each. This is supposed to render him fearless and courageous. They are always shaved, but the hair on the inoculated part is allowed to grow long, and when plaited, forms a tuft or a sort of pigtail. (Balogun, 1985)

Kakanfos are generally very stubborn and obstinate. They have all been more or less troublesome, due, it is supposed, to the effect of the ingredients they were inoculated with. In war, they carry no weapon but a baton known as the "King's invincible staff." It is generally understood that they are to give way to no one not even to the King, their master. Hence Kakanfos are never created in the capital but in any other town in the kingdom. (Ijagbemi, 1973)

There can be but one Kakanfo at a time. By virtue of his office, he is to go to war once in 3 years to



whatever place the King named, and, dead or alive, to return home a victor, or be brought home a corpse within three months. (Atanda, 1980).

This society possessed judicial powers and was also involved in policymaking. (Afolayan, 1998) The maintenance and preservation of the cultural values of the people were also delegated to them. They influence a lot of issues in society.

The three eunuchs were also involved in the administration of the Empire. They were:

1. The Osi Efa: He was in charge of political affairs; he has to die with the Alaafin. He was also called 'Abobaku.'
2. The Ona Efa: He was for judicial purpose.
3. The Otun Efa: His function was to perform religious duties for the Alaafin. (Johnson, 1921)

### III. CONCLUSION

The Yoruba political structure revolved around many figures starting from the Oba, the political head, council of chiefs (Ijoye which consisted of Iyalode, Otun, Osi, Iyaloja, etc.), the kingmakers (Afobaje, part of whom might be the chiefs), the Baale, the army (Eso) and the religious cult. It must be noted that the titles of some of these figures vary in each Yoruba kingdom; for example, the Oba is known as Alaafin in Oyo while in Ife he is referred to as Ooni. The kingmakers are also known as Oyomesi in Oyo while the Ijebus call them Osugbo. It must also be noted that succession to the throne of the kingdoms in Yorubaland was hereditary. Though the Aremo (prince) may help his father in administering the kingdom or empire but does not necessarily succeed him after his death. After the demise of a king, a new one is chosen from the same or other ruling houses by the kingmakers with the help of the religious cult. (Osadola, 2018)

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