

**THE MILITARY SYSTEM OF BENIN KINGDOM,
c.1440 - 1897**

THESIS

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I, Osarhieme Benson Osadolor, do hereby declare that I have written this doctoral thesis without assistance or help from any person(s), and that I did not consult any other sources and aid except the materials which have been acknowledged in the footnotes and bibliography. The passages from such books or maps used are identified in all my references.

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(signed)

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ABSTRACT

The reforms introduced by Oba Ewuare the Great of Benin (c.1440-73) transformed the character of the kingdom of Benin. The reforms, calculated to eliminate rivalries between the Oba and the chiefs, established an effective political monopoly over the exertion of military power. They laid the foundation for the development of a military system which launched Benin on the path of its imperial expansion in the era of the warrior kings (c.1440-1600). The Oba emerged in supreme control, but power conflicts continued, leading to continuous administrative innovation and military reform during the period under study.

For the period c.1440 to 1897, a fairly detailed documentation about change in the military system is available, such as oral historical narratives, European travellers' accounts, and objects of art accessible to historical interpretation. This study critically examines these sources, and gives due respect to both continuity and change in Benin history. The study shows that, while the history of military organisation cannot be separated from the general (political and social) history of a period, the Benin military system also had a logic of its own which advanced the aims of the state and of the empire.

This study introduces the concept 'military system', discusses problems of sources, methodology and periodization in African and Benin history (chapter 1) and addresses aspects of Benin's political and military history before 1440 (chapter 2). Chapter 3 focuses on the development of the military during the era of warrior kings from c.1440 to 1600, a period that witnessed the expansion of the state through warfare mounted virtually in all directions. Chapter 4 discusses changes in the military during the 17th and 18th centuries within the context of domestic political constraints, leading to fluctuations in the military power of Benin. This was a period of active trade between Benin and the Europeans, affecting the balance of power between rival elements in Benin. Events closely associated with the development of the military in the 19th century – the most critical century in the history of Benin – are dealt with in chapter 5. Chapter 6 re-examines the Anglo-Benin military confrontation of February 1897 and offers a new perspective on the events which led to the conflict and its aftermath. The concluding chapter discusses the relevance of this study's findings for current debates in Benin historiography.

DEDICATION

To my children

Osayomwanbor Jefferson Osadolor
Osayimwense Alexander Osadolor
Osagioduwa George Osadolor
Osayuware Annette Osadolor

and

my great mother, Arasomwan, the daughter of Omogboru Uwadiae (nee Igbinoba) and Pa.
Uwadiae from Urhonigbe, south-east of Benin Kingdom

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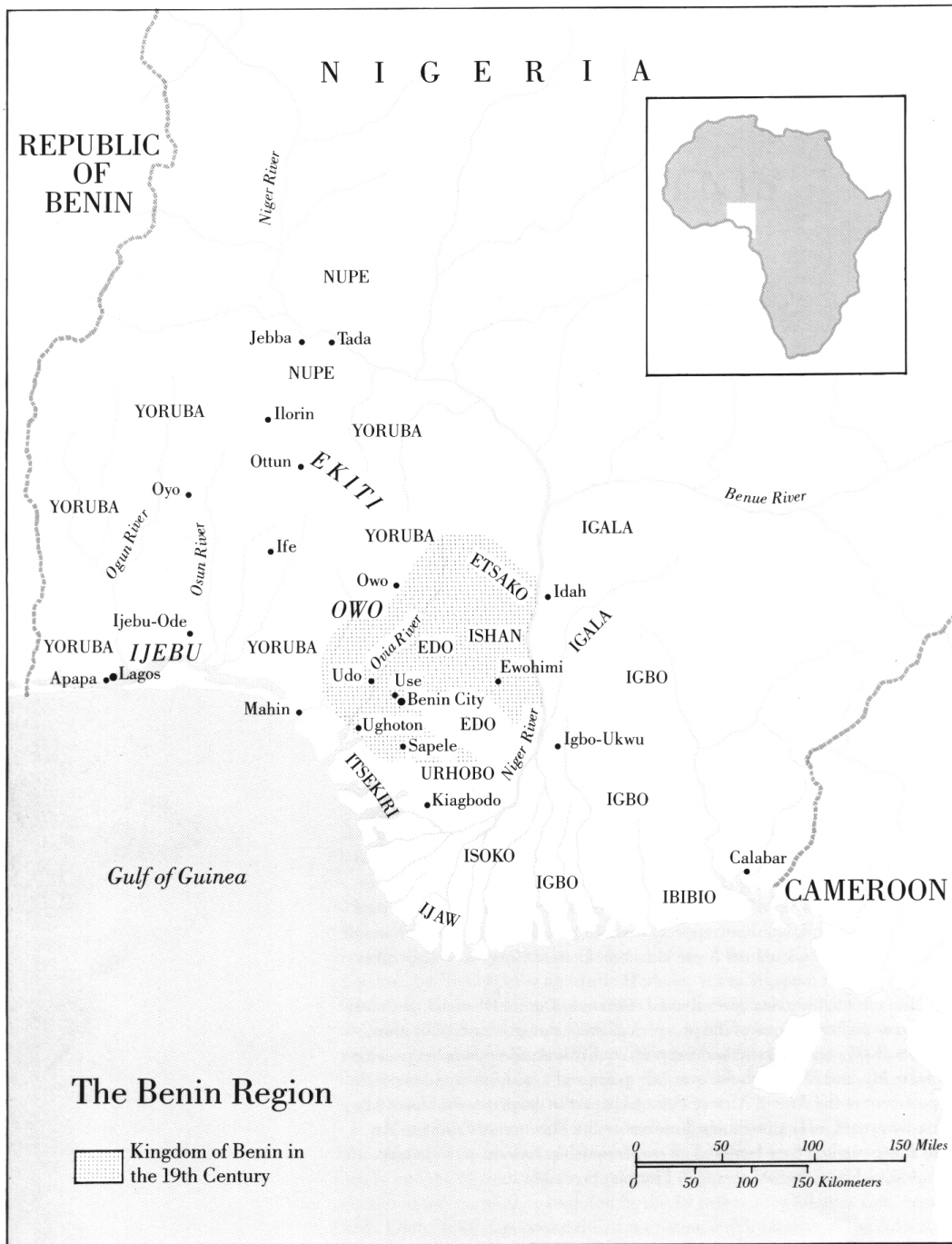
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Map 1.

Map 1: The Kingdom of Benin in the Nineteenth Century. Source: Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Pearls Collection in The Museum of Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1992, p.xii.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

Background

This doctoral thesis examines the process of the establishment and development of the military in the Kingdom of Benin, that is, the core area of Benin Empire which emerged in the forest region of West Africa. The theme of research is on the military system, and the time focus is the period from c.1440 AD to 1897. The thesis explores the social, political and economic dynamics which shaped the military during the period of expansion and consolidation in the history of Benin Kingdom. Beyond this, the work discusses the nature and purpose of the military system which evolved during this period - a long period of over four hundred years which witnessed different phases of development of the Benin polity. During this period of expansion and consolidation, there were numerous changes in the socio-political and economic order as well as among different groups. The altering domestic configurations¹ affected such fundamental issues as the power structure, the hierarchy of formal authority, the state ideology, the value system in the society, and the organisation of production. Its history captures the context and dynamics of an African society too complex for a study in one volume, leading of course, to some inevitable limitation and specialisation in the selection of aspects of the past. Hence, the process of the establishment and development of the military from the mid-fifteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, is considered in a manner which gives due respect to both continuity and change in Benin history. In fact, for the period c.1440 AD to 1897, researchers will find fairly detailed records of change in the military organisation of the kingdom.

The fourth decade of the fifteenth century was significant in the military history of Benin. It witnessed the emergence of a warrior king, and the transformation of the character of the kingdom of Benin. The magnitude of the reforms introduced by Oba Ewuare c.1440 AD to 1473, who was the first and greatest of the warrior kings, was calculated to enhance the power of the monarchy. It was also calculated to eliminate the severe power rivalries among

¹ The evolution of central political institutions namely, the Oba, the *Uzama*, the *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, the *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe*, and the *Iyoba* (Queen Mother) within the power dynamics of the period was such that the state carried out its function in a manner that was determined by the relative powers of the configuration of different groups in the society.

the state functionaries which had beset the ruling dynasty from the reign of Eweka I c.1200 AD. However, conflicts between the Oba and his chiefs continued. During the seventeenth century, the military and administrative chiefs came to overshadow the king, reducing him to a ritual figure, although the non-hereditary chiefs held their power and privileges only by the authority of the king. The opposition which faced the very first Oba, Eweka I in the early thirteenth century was what led to the creation of a political institution known as the *Uzama*,² “to establish some sense of order in the new polity.”³ Although the *Uzama* continued to assert themselves against the new kings, Oba Ewedo c.1255 AD “was forced to make changes in the organisational structure of the state: in the end, the Oba emerged in supreme control and the respective cadres of authority were subordinated to the monarchy.”⁴ This did not put an end to the power rivalries, not even with the reforms introduced by Oba Ewuare. The power struggles continued, and were expressed in conflicts and crises. These, in turn, had important ramifications for the state and its military organisation. The records of change and continuity from 1440 to 1897 have been critically examined under the theme of the military system of the kingdom of Benin.

The kingdom of Benin was one of the most important forest states of West Africa during the precolonial period. Of all the West African states and societies, it is the one most mentioned in contemporary European literature.⁵ This also illustrates a number of important

² The original members of the *Uzama* were six: Oliha, Edohen, Ezomo, Ero, Eholo n'Ire, and Oloton. This group of nobles held their positions and titles by hereditary rights except the Ezomo because the title was conferred on any warrior from any part of the Benin Empire. In the fifteenth century, Oba Ewuare appointed the crown-prince known as Edaiken as the seventh member of the *Uzama*. It was a development which reflected the power dynamics of the period. The *Uzama n'Ihinron* (the seven *Uzama*) as it came to be known, were given the privilege as elders of the state and king-makers because of their role in the restoration of the monarchy after the collapse of the Ogiso dynasty - the first dynasty of kings - in the kingdom of Benin.

³ Isidore Okpewho, 1998, *Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.69.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ This can be explained for two reasons. First of all, after the fall of Benin in February 1897 during the era of European scramble for and partition of Africa, thousands of the royal art of Benin were taken to Europe by the British conquerors. The technical sophistication and precious materials of the works of art were much admired; many were sold and a lot now adorn museums in Europe and the United States of America. The history of the objects has been areas of continuing research and investigations. See for example, P. Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999, *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth Century Benin*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; B. W. Blackmun, 1997, *Icons and Emblems in Ivory: Sacred Art from the Palace of Old Benin*. The Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies. Kate Ezra, 1992, *Royal Art of Benin: The Pearls Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.; Bryna Freyer, 1987. *Benin Royal Art in the Collection of the National Museum of African Art*. Washington, D. C.: Smithsonian Institution; P. Girshick Ben-Amos and A. Rubin (eds.) 1983, *The Art of Power, the Power of Art*. Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA. Flora Kaplan, 1981, *Images of Power: Art of the Royal Court of Benin*. New York. Secondly, from the end of the fifteenth century up to the time of British conquest in February 1897, European travellers, traders and consuls supplied information about Benin. This attracted the attention of scholars, whose interest in the Benin past has yielded enormous amount of literature in Art history, anthropology, ethnography, archaeology and history. See for example, Adam Jones, 1983, *German Sources for West African History 1599-1669*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH; Noel Matthews, 1973. *Materials for West African History in the Archives of the United Kingdom*. University of London: The Athlone Press; A. F. C. Ryder, 1965, *Materials for*

points: First, although much is known about Benin's past from early European travellers and traders, the published information is basically on Benin's external relations.⁶ Second, the study of aspects of precolonial Benin history will continue to attract the attention of scholars because of the competing interpretations and debates generated by the works of previous writers.⁷ Third, the historical quest for the historical knowledge of Benin's past remains fascinating because of its royal art. These developments were expected to open up the boundaries of historical space for the understanding of the place of Benin in African history, but the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the collapse of professional historical study on Benin.

Basic to this research, therefore, is the contribution to the academic debate on the place of the military in terms of the origins and essence of the state in Benin. It is not a review of the current state of problems and issues in African historiography or military historiography. Rather, this work contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of state formation in West African history, and in particular, the study of the character of the Benin state at the heart of three significant historical changes in the last two millennia: changes occasioned by the rise and collapse of the Ogiso dynasty; the emergence of the Eweka dynasty in c.1200 AD up to the fall of Benin in 1897; and finally from 1897 when Benin came under British colonial rule and up to the present day. Benin was the hub of one of the most powerful political systems in precolonial Africa. The kingdom of Benin was the first in this part of Africa to be established with the emergence of the Ogiso.⁸ There were other mini-states and small scale societies in the forest region of the present day south-central Nigeria

West African History in Portuguese archives. University of London: The Athlone Press. See also, J. W. Blake, 1977, *West Africa: Quest for God and Gold 1454-1578* (revised edition of *Europeans in West Africa 1450-1560*). London and Dublin: Curzon Press.

⁶ See A. F. C. Ryder, 1969, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd.

⁷ The debates are on the origin of Benin, the Benin-Ife relationship, the character of state-formation, and the resistance against British imperial aggression.

⁸ The date of the emergence of the Ogiso dynasty has not been established with certainty nor is an approximate date agreeable. Of the 31 'kings' of the Ogiso dynasty, Jacob Egharevba has a list of 15 in his *Short History of Benin*, and suggests that the dynasty was founded about 900 AD. In most works on pre-colonial Benin, writers have tended to accept this point of view that the first Benin dynasty emerged in the tenth century AD. Osayomwanbo Osemwegie-Ero, a local historian of Benin, suggests 40 BC as the possible date. See his chronology of *31 Ogiso 'Kings' in Ancient Benin to mark the Great Benin Centenary 1897-1997*, Benin City: Erosa Sunlink Int., Educational and Cultural Services, 1997. Eghosa Osagie (Professor and Director of Research, Nigerian Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies, Kuru, Jos), suggests circa 600 AD. See his 'Benin in Contemporary Nigeria: An Agenda for the Twenty-first Century', text of Jacob Egharevba memorial lecture organised by the Institute of Benin Studies, and delivered at Oba Akenzua Cultural Centre, Benin City, on 10 December, 1999. The text of the lecture is also available on the website- <http://www.dawodu.net/osagie.htm> (the site was last visited on 20/09/2000). That the first dynasty of kings in Benin known as the 'Ogiso' emerged in the first millennium is not in doubt. What is in doubt is the approximate date of its emergence. Considering the long years of some of the Ogisos, and the achievements or contributions attributed to them, the date may approximately be the middle of the first millennium, circa 500 AD. Benin folklore and traditions are very rich in terms of the activities of the rulers of the Ogiso dynasty. The date suggested here is, however, tentative, until new evidence from archaeological excavations of the sites of the palaces of the Ogiso at Ugbekun and Uhumwindun areas of Benin City.

when the seat of monarchy emerged in Benin. The idea of centralised political organisation which evolved in response to local politics, was a contributory factor to the emergence of the state.

It is useful at this point to explain the concept of 'state' and 'society' as these two terms have been used frequently in this study. While doing this, attempt has been made to explain state-society relations. On this ground, the relations between military system and the state and military system and society is further elucidated. The understanding of the concept of the state usually refers to the modern state which originated in Europe in the fifteenth century, and by the end of the eighteenth century had evolved into a nation-state, and which diffused all over the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are various theories of the state,⁹ and the common characteristics of the state that have been identified are: organised form of decision-making and governance; sovereign or supreme authority; clearly defined boundaries; clearly defined population; and security for the society. These characteristics tend to justify the argument that the state is the political organisation of a society.

From the studies presented and discussed at the Fourth International African Seminar in Dakar, Senegal in 1961, the criteria to be taken in defining a state system were identified. Careful distinctions were made between state systems in general, divine kingship, and kingship by divine right. The Seminar defined state system "as a political structure in which there is differentiated status between rulers and the ruled."¹⁰ This state system is founded not only on relations of kinship but also on a territorial basis. The most important index is the presence of political offices, that is, of persons invested with roles which include secular authority over others in given territorial aggregations for which there are effective sanctions for disobedience.¹¹ Such political offices must furthermore be coordinated hierarchically. It was also pointed out that a state may merge through a process of internal development whereby one of its corporate groups succeeds in imposing itself on others.¹²

⁹ For general discussions of the theories, see J. Haas, 1982, *The Evolution of the Prehistoric State*. New York University Press; R. Cohen and E. L. Service (eds.), 1978, *Origins of the State: The Anthropology of Political Evolution*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues; Elman R. Service, 1975, *Origins of the State and Civilisation: The Process of Cultural Evolution*. New York: Norton; Robert L. Carneiro, 1970, "A Theory of the Origin of the State." *Science*, 169 pp.733-738; Morton H. Fried, 1967, *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology*. New York: Random House.

¹⁰ J. Vansina, R. Mauny and L.V. Thomas (eds.) 1964, *The Historian in Tropical Africa (Studies Presented and Discussed at the Fourth International African Seminar at the University of Dakar, Senegal 1961)*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964, p.87.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*, p.89.

Nonetheless, writers are still interested in asking questions concerning the formation and development of the state system in Africa. At a conference held in Nairobi, Kenya in September 1979 on the theme “State Formation in Eastern Africa in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” each author was confronted with the problem of defining the term ‘state’ in the course of writing his contribution.¹³ A consensus on the definition of the state proved elusive as a uniformly acceptable definition of the state could not be arrived at. The proceedings of the conference suggests that the authors were aware of the on-going interest in the theoretical side of the ‘state’ and the ‘state formation’ debate. In this case, the concept of the ‘state’ was defined from different perspectives, according to the orientation of the contributors.

An example of the concept of the state given by William Zartman, is of relevance to this present research. According to him, “a state is the authoritative political institution that is sovereign over a recognised territory.”¹⁴ This definition focuses on three functions: the state as the sovereign authority - the accepted source of identity and the arena of politics; the state as an institution - and therefore a tangible organisation of decision-making and an intangible symbol of identity; and the state as the security guarantor for a populated territory.¹⁵ The argument advanced here is simply to demonstrate that because these functions are so intertwined, it becomes difficult to perform them separately. As Zartman points out, “collapse means that the basic functions of the state are no longer performed, as analysed in various theories of the state.”¹⁶ This means that in precolonial Africa, the factors which contributed to state collapse were also crucial in the understanding and interpretation of the emergence or origins of the state.

From the characteristics of the state, it is reasonable to advance the argument that the kingdom of Benin was a state. First of all, various political institutions at the central and local levels were established for decision-making and governance, with supreme authority in the institution of monarchy. Second, the boundaries of the kingdom were fixed. Thirdly, within the territory, the population was clearly defined, belonging to the core Edo group known as the people of Benin, with the same language of the kwa sub-group of the Niger-Congo language group. Finally, at the level of the political organisation of the Benin society, it qualifies as a state.

¹³ Ahmed Idha Salim (ed.) 1985, *State Formation in East Africa*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, p.1.

¹⁴ I William Zartman, 1995, “Introduction: Posing the Problem of State Collapse” In: I. William Zartman (ed.) *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*. Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., p.5.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

The question has, however, not arisen as to why Benin is referred to as a state and not 'stateless'? The argument of John Iliffe throws some light on the problematic concept of the state in precolonial Africa. According to him, "in the West African forest and its neighbouring grasslands, state formation was slower, and many societies remained stateless when Europeans first described them."¹⁷ He points out that stateless societies were diverse, and that the most numerous stateless people in Africa belonged to the language group later known as Igbo, in the south-east of present-day Nigeria.¹⁸ Iliffe classified the kingdom of Benin as an "important forest state of the period."¹⁹ In the case of Benin, he argues that the evidence that the kingdom grew from earlier villages and micro-states is especially clear from the 10,000 kilometres of earth boundaries built by their founders in early second millennium.²⁰ The argument supports the theory of the state as an institution. On the one hand, this means that the state could collapse if it can no longer perform its functions as an institution. On the other hand, conduct of the state can always be conditioned by the social structure.

The history of the precolonial state in Africa has been the subject of debate among scholars. The main issue in the debate is whether such states had their origins in conquest or emerged through peaceful development in a process of integration of different groups or communities. One of the most critical comparative problems in this issue is the study of the role and place of the military in the emergence of the state in Africa. This is because in the case of the kingdom of Benin, and perhaps in most other precolonial African states, the role of the military was probably the enhancement of state power through aggression on other states, external defence and internal security. Perhaps, most fundamental of all was the role of the military in the state's drive to assure its revenue base, in particular, the payment of tribute, taxes, collection of tolls, and war booty.

It is not possible in this study to examine all the factors contributing to the use of the military for revenue drive in precolonial African states and societies. Scholars who have attempted case studies,²¹ recognise the state as essentially an organisation of legitimate coercive force, in which the military establishment became a function of state power. The earliest of the several general histories of Africa which emphasised state-building or state

¹⁷ John Iliffe, 1995, *Africans: The History of a Continent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.76.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp.76-77.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.77.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ See Richard L. Roberts, 1987, *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley 1700-1914*. Stanford University Press; John Reid, 1986, "Warrior Aristocrats in Crisis: The Political Effects of the Transition from the Slave Trade to Palm Oil Commerce in the Nineteenth Century Kingdom of Dahomey," PhD thesis, University of Stirling, Scotland; Joseph P. Smaldone, 1977, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Thomas

formation, also attempted to interpret the specific role of the military within the state. Since the 1980s the focus has shifted to the study of the character of the postcolonial state in Africa, the nature and reasons for state deterioration, and the mechanisms and policies for coping with state malfunction.²²

It is not possible in this study to get involved with the debates on the postcolonial state in Africa. It is not within the limits of this doctoral research. One of the objectives of this work is to contribute to the understanding of the issues and processes of state-formation in precolonial Africa. The state in precolonial Africa exhibited an astonishing diversity of socio-political formations, that attempts at generalisations may not be useful in comparative theoretical discussions. Hence, this study of the military system of Benin during the period of the expansion and consolidation of the kingdom and empire from 1440 to 1897, is an effort to demonstrate that the state was not an inert abstraction but an organised entity within the society, interacting with other social groups in a macropolitical process. Within this process, the centralised authority and administrative machinery produced political coalitions that generated crises on the one hand, and on the other hand, significantly transformed the kingdom. When the first Europeans arrived, Benin was the major state of the West African forest and deeply impressed them by its wealth and sophistication.²³ Part of that greatness lies in its political organisation, albeit, within the power dynamics of the period. The power dynamics did not exist in vacuum; it was the manifestation of the interaction between the state and society.

Historical studies of the dynamics of power and political configurations in the states of precolonial Africa have focused on the relations between the state and society.²⁴ The conceptualisation of the state and society by Naomi Chazan seems useful here. She argues that state and society are “two intersecting and potentially independent variables with political process as the dependent variable,” in which case, “the state entity does not have an existence of its own, and its actions may have a profound bearing on social organisation and economic enterprise.”²⁵ In support of this view, Victor Azarya points out that “the very notion of state-

Constantine Maroukis, 1974, “Warfare and Society in the Kingdom of Dahomey 1818-1894,” PhD thesis, Boston University; and Bethwell A. Ogot (ed.), 1972, *War and Society in Africa*. London: Frank Cass.

²² See I. William Zartman (ed.), 1995, *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*. Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.; Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan (eds.), 1988, *The Precarious Balance: State and Society in Africa*. Boulder, Colorado and London: Westview Press, Inc.

²³ Iliffe, 1995, *Africans*, p.78.

²⁴ See John Lonsdale, 1981, “States and Social Processes in Africa: A Historiographical Survey,” *African Studies Review*, Volume 24, Nos 2 &3, pp.139-225; P. S. Garlake, 1978, *The Kingdoms of Africa*. Oxford: Elsevier-Phaidon; J. Goody, 1971, *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa*. London.

²⁵ Naomi Chazan, 1988, “Patterns of State-Society Incorporation and Disengagement in Africa,” In: Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan (eds.), *The Precarious Balance*, p.123.

society relations which presupposes the state to be different from society is a Western liberal idea.”²⁶ His view is a reaction to the position of Robert Maclver who stressed the distinction between the state and society in a democracy.²⁷ In an overview of pre-colonial Africa, John Lonsdale points out that state-society relations varied from total indifference to complete absorption.²⁸ This was dependent, any way, on the nature of political organisation.

The political culture of Benin during the precolonial period seem to suggest that there was no clear distinction in state-society relations. The social order was the channel of administrative role, and the rank or privileges which were only granted by a reigning king could not be withdrawn by another. The outstanding landmarks of the state-society relationship in the kingdom of Benin were the changes in the organisational structure of the state through the redistribution of offices among the different orders of chiefs in the society. As will be seen in the subsequent chapters of this study, the monarchy manipulated the relations between the state and society through the redistribution of administrative competences. It was the main political weapon of the Oba in the ‘distribution of authority’ to balance the competition for position, power and prestige.

The evidence of military-state relations in Benin is glaring from the subordination of military authorities to the state. Benin law and custom seemed to have properly defined the relationship of military power to civil authority. This is because, in spite of the fact that the kings of the Ewaka dynasty were beset by severe power rivalries, Benin tradition has no record of any military chief taking over the position of the Oba. The power struggles led to fundamental changes in the military organisation of the state. The role of the Oba as supreme military commander of the army was terminated in early seventeenth century. Further changes were made in the military command during the eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century, two alternative commands emerged in the Benin army. This was the situation of military-state relations until the British invasion of February 1897.

On the other hand, military-society relations in Benin was basically the relationship between the military and social structure. This was more problematic than the relations between the military and state. This was due to two factors, the first, being the leadership and composition of the army, and how the military strata related with the strata of society. The

²⁶ Victor Azarya, 1988, “Reordering State-Society Relations: Incorporation and Disengagement,” In: Donald Rothchild and Naomi Chazan (eds.), *The Precarious Balance*, p.10.

²⁷ See Robert M. Maclver, 1948, “The Community and the State,” In: Robert M. Maclver (ed.) *The Web of Government*. New York: Macmillan, pp.192-208.

²⁸ John Lonsdale, 1981, “States and Social Processes in Africa.” Other studies have supported his position. See Stephen D. Krasner, 1984, “Approaches to the State: Alternative Conceptions and Historical Dynamics,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 2; Martin A. Klein (ed.), 1980, *Peasants in Africa: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

second factor was the penetration of the tension in the society into the military. In this study, the evidence shows that both 'freeborn' Binis and slaves had the opportunity to occupy top military positions. The General Commander of the Benin army under Oba Ewuare the Great (c.1440-1472), was a slave of the Oba who held the military position because of his investiture with the title of *Iyase*. Until early eighteenth century when the military title of *Ezomo* became hereditary, the position was given by the Oba as a reward to an outstanding warrior from any part of the Benin Empire. The *Iyoba* (Queen Mother) had her own regiment of the Benin army. There is also evidence from the oral traditions of Benin that slaves were appointed as war commanders of the queen mother's own regiment.

The social structure of Benin was of considerable importance in the organisation of the army. Regiments of the army were based on the discrete village settlement, the village being the basic unit of the wider political organisation. The age-grade system which provided a village-wide system of stratification and organisation for all the men, was the basis of recruitment into the army. The youths and men were divided into three grades namely, *Iroghae*, the youths and young men up to the age of thirty; *Ighele*, the matured adult men from the age of thirty to fifty; and *Edion*, the elders who were men above fifty years. Each grade had specific rights and duties vis-à-vis the community. The *Ighele* were the fighting force of the village, and therefore, constituted the regiment. Except for reasons of disability, military service was obligatory for the *Ighele*. Generally, there was no specific warrior element in the age-grade organisation and each fighting unit which constituted a regiment of the army was not an independent unit but as part of the larger force.

With the system of age-grade in Benin, tensions arising from crisis and conflict in the society often penetrated the military. The social background of the war chiefs and regimental commanders was a reality of group interest. This in turn, had implications for the state and political coalitions. The structure of social relations which determined the positions of various groups was such that at the level of power politics, political competition worked to exacerbate, rather than to solve, social and group conflicts. The interweaving of interests between the Oba and his senior chiefs on the one hand, and between the Oba and his war chiefs on the other hand, serves to illustrate how crucial the configuration of class groupings was for military-society relations in the kingdom of Benin. The vast epics of bloodletting from the reign of Oba Ewuare (c.1440 to 1472) through to Oba Ovonramwen (1888 to 1897) that inflicted severe damage to the Benin society, were the results of tensional forces arising from competing group interests. Perhaps the most disturbing outcome of the conflicts, arising

from the interweaving of interests, was the outbreak of frequent civil wars. In all cases, each conflict and rivalry threatened to undermine the stability of the state.

The political crises in precolonial Benin had two interrelated dimensions. The first was the problem of military-society relations. The second aspect was the power structure which generated the competition for position, power and prestige. Both are useful in the understanding and interpretations of the political developments during the period. The developments, as will be seen in the subsequent chapters of this work, were balanced against domestic political constraints and ultimately, the reforms which were also carried out in the military organisation of the state.

Against this background, the process of the establishment and development of the military has been examined, albeit, within the state formation process. The history of state formation in Benin has been explained by some Africanist scholars as one of the complex centralised political organisations in tropical Africa. There are some other writers who believe that the tropical rain forest hindered communications that were essential to large-scale organisation. As it were, writers have been asking questions on the origins of this exceptional state of Benin, why Benin embark on a large-scale state formation process in spite of environmental barriers, and why Benin set out on a path of conquest and expansion.

The attempt to answer these questions have led to the investigations of different aspects of Benin history. However, Alan Ryder is of the view that “from the evidence we do have it would seem that Benin owed its extraordinary development to three factors: its monarchical traditions, the creation of a complex political and social hierarchy and, arising from these two, the growth of an imperial tradition”.²⁹ The third factor is of particular interest for this work because the growth of an imperial tradition was supported by a military system which advanced the political aims of the state. By studying this system, it has been possible to throw new light on some of the questions being asked about Benin. The argument for this kind of research project to investigate the military history of Benin has also been advanced by Adiele. E. Afigbo. According to him, “Benin’s imperial history, especially in its military dimensions and external relations should, if properly handled, throw some light on aspects of the history of the petty chiefdoms to the north, east and south of the kingdom after about 1400.”³⁰

In south-central Nigeria, that is in southern Nigeria east of Yorubaland and west of the Orlu-Nsukka uplands, the rise and expansion of the Benin Empire was one of the factors,

²⁹ Alan Ryder, 1967, 'The Rise of Benin Kingdom' In: R. Oliver (ed.) *The Middle Age of African History*. London: Oxford University Press, p.29.

though not necessarily the most important single factor in explaining the development of the states and societies in the area. In Yorubaland also, the dimension of inter-group relations with Benin presents some difficulties for the historian of precolonial Nigeria in the historical interpretations of common traits in the social structure and political institutions of the societies. Do such traits suggest conquest, the migration of peoples, or merely the diffusion of ideas? “The examination of such traits”, argues P. C. Lloyd, “provides an almost endless source of data for the historian but few easy solutions to his questions.”³¹

Perhaps, the solution may be found partly through the investigation of the military history of Benin which will probably throw more light on inter-group relations between Benin, her neighbours and tributary states than the investigation of common traits in political and social structure. This is because in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, some of the Yoruba states were brought under the control of Benin. The Benin army overran much of south-eastern Yorubaland and maintained at least nominal control there until the British conquest in the nineteenth century. Benin’s power was also asserted westward along the coastal lagoon, in which a royal dynasty of Benin origin was installed in Eko (now Lagos) in the early seventeenth century. The most powerful of the Yoruba states was Oyo. The attempts to extend its power into south-eastern Yorubaland led to a war with Benin, first in the late sixteenth century and in the early seventeenth century, and the sphere remained effectively outside of the control of Oyo because of the treaty signed with Benin which fixed the boundary between the two powers at Otun.³² Beside the control of greater part of Yorubaland, the neighbours of Benin to the north, south and east were subjected to its rule. The most distant conquests became tributary states while those within some eighty kilometres of Benin City were subjected to direct rule, and those between were placed under princes of the royal lineage whose political powers were derived from the authority of the Benin monarch.

For a long time, some writers doubted the possibility of complex state formation in the West African forest region, in particular, with the kind of social complexity which evolved in Benin kingdom. Referring to Benin, Graham Connah asked questions: on why should such development take place in West African rain-forest, an environment that to many outsiders has seemed to constrain rather than to encourage human endeavour.³³ Such questions would appear to underestimate the potential for cultural growth in the forest region of West Africa.

³⁰ A. E. Afigbo, 1981, “The Benin ‘Mirage’ and the History of South Central Nigeria,” *Nigeria Magazine*, no. 137, p. 23.

³¹ P. C. Lloyd, 1987, “Political and Social Structure” In: S. O. Biobaku (ed.) *Sources of Yoruba History*. Ibadan: Oxford University Press Limited, p.206.

³² Jacob U. Egharevba, 1968, *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press (Fourth Edition), p.31.

³³ Graham Connah, 1987, *African Civilizations: Precolonial Cities and States in Tropical Africa: An Archaeological Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.122

To outsiders, particularly non-African writers, the nature and character of the different phases of state formation in Benin, that is, the large-scale organisation of the kingdom and empire, were developments which seem possible only in the savannah area. This is why Alan Ryder also asked similar questions: on why Benin departed from a political pattern seemingly in harmony with its social structure and suited to its physical environment, a physical environment where the tropical forest hindered communications that were essential to large-scale organisation.³⁴

Attempts have been made by writers from different disciplines to throw light on a number of questions being asked about Benin. Since 1957 when the Scheme for the Study of Benin History and Culture was set up,³⁵ different research projects have been studying the oral history, language, social and political institutions, economic organisation, the religion, the art, and other aspects of Benin. The literature on Benin studies suggest that scholars are more interested in the art of Benin than any other aspect of its heritage and history. No study of the military system has been embarked upon except a few research on aspects of the military history of Benin.³⁶

For the more recent works on Benin history, the state of knowledge has progressed beyond explaining as well as describing events in the past or of what the history is all about. Rather, the presentation of conflicting views of particular periods and problems, albeit, within the context of general interpretations, has deepened the understanding of the historical details of the Benin past. The challenge of prevailing views concerning the chronological data, the origin of Benin, the Ogoke period, the origin of the Eweka dynasty, and the rise of Benin seems to be the sources of disagreement among the historians of Benin. The issues presented in the debates have helped in the understanding of the evidence, the arguments and the methods used by academic and non-academic historians, and other writers. The debates have also stimulated interests in historical reconstruction, in knowing what happened and why it happened, and how different writers, viewing the same event, have attempted to answer the questions being asked about Benin. In some cases, the subject matter being investigated or the

³⁴ Ryder, 1967, "The Rise," p. 27.

³⁵ Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike was appointed the Director. For the research agenda of the Benin Historical Research Scheme, see K. O. Dike, "The Benin Scheme", *Ibadan* No. 1, October 1957; K. O. Dike, "The Benin Scheme Begins", *Corona*, IX September, 1957 and K. O. Dike, "Benin: A Great Forest Kingdom of Medieval Nigeria", *The UNESCO Courier*, No. 10, October 1959.

³⁶ See for example, P. M. Roese, 1992, "Kriegführung und Waffen im alten Benin (Sudnigeria)", *Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift*, Jahrgang 33, Heft 3 Berlin: Germany; B. W. Blackmun, 1983, "Remembering the Warrior Kings", In: Ben-Amos, P. Girshick and A. Rubin, (eds.) *The Art of Power, the Power of Art* Los Angeles: Fowler Museum of Cultural History, UCLA; and M. P. Roese, A. R. Rees and G. K. Maliphant "Defence Systems of the Benin Empire", *West African Journal of Archaeology* 7, 1977. See also, S. J. Barnes and P. Ben-Amos, 1983, "Benin, Oyo, and Dahomey: Warfare, State Building, and the Sacralization of

theory held by the historian, has dictated the facts which were significant in their selection. Consideration of the examples given below will throw more light on this discussion.

For instance, the clarification of the chronology of the history of Benin kingdom is still being debated. The kinglist published by Jacob Egharevba, and the one collected from Isekhurhe, the priest of the royal ancestors do not agree with the lists published by European writers. Alan Ryder believes that the conflicting interpretations has been due to the problems in early European accounts. According to him, “it is true that European visitors to Benin lacked a sense of history, and either asked or recorded nothing about the origins of the state and its dynasty.”³⁷ The accuracy of the time-frame for the kinglist is one of the issues in the debate. The chronologies are suspected to be highly speculative and do not seem to have been verified by corresponding sources. Stefan Eisenhofer addressed the issues in his recent work,³⁸ in which he argues that chronological conclusions are problematic for now. This is because the authenticity of the chronological data has not been established as Egharevba connected the reigns of Benin kings with specific years, and he is being queried for forcing his African oral material into a linear European time scheme and the framework specified by European written sources.

Apart from this problem, debates about the origin of Benin, and the origin of Eweka dynasty have raised more controversial issues than the disagreement over chronological data. The claim by Jacob Egharevba that “many, many years ago, the Binis came all the way from Egypt”, although “tradition says that they met some people who were in the land before their arrival”³⁹ is been disputed by local historians, most families, the royal family, and some other writers. In spite of this disputation, major lines of new interpretation of the origin of Benin often provoke a reconsideration of the subject.⁴⁰ Philip Igbafe points out the reason for this. According to him, a great deal of confusion has been introduced into the study of Benin history by the mixture of the origin of the people with the origin of the ruling dynasty.⁴¹ With the exception of Daniel Oronsaye who also claim Egyptian origin for Benin,⁴² most writers are disclaiming the migration theory. This denial is supported by the fact that among the

Iron in West African History”, *Expedition* (The University Museum Magazine of Archaeology/Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania. Vol. 25, No. 2, Winter. pp.5-14.

³⁷ A. F. C. Ryder, 1965, “A Reconsideration of the Ife-Benin Relationship,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. VI, No. 1, p.25.

³⁸ Stefan Eisenhofer, 1997, “The Benin Kinglist/s: Some Questions of Chronology”, *History in Africa* 24, pp. 139-156.

³⁹ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ See for example, John K. Thornton, 1988, “Tradition, Documents, and the Ife-Benin Relationship” *History in Africa* 15, pp. 351-362.

⁴¹ Philip A. Igbafe, 1981, “Benin in the Pre-Colonial Era” *Tarikh* vol.5 no. 1, p. 2.

⁴² D. N. Oronsaye, 1995, *The History of Ancient Benin Kingdom and Empire*. Benin City: Jeromelaiho Printers, pp. 1-12.

inhabitants in several wards and areas in Benin City, there are no traditions of their ancestors migrating from anywhere else. They claim that they are the original inhabitants of their land. Igbafe's evaluation and interpretation of the data concerning the social structure of the Benin supports the idea that Benin City may well be a product of the collection of juxtaposed villages with their own village rulers over whom later powerful monarchs came to exercise control and thus create a larger political entity or kingdom.⁴³ The question still remains unanswered: where did the Binis come from?

This problem of tracing the origin of Benin is connected with the interpretations of the link between Benin and Ife, and has further complicated the understanding of the historical details between the origin of Benin and the origin of the Eweka dynasty. This is because Egharevba mentioned in his *Short History of Benin* that the Binis on their way from Egypt stayed shortly at Ile-Ife. While the historical explanations of the Benin - Ife relationship are still capable of being upset by new information, the understanding of the evidence and arguments so far only explains the origin of the Eweka dynasty and not of the people.⁴⁴ Ryder cautions that some of the information recorded by European visitors to Benin since the fifteenth century is not easily reconcilable with the conflicting traditions in Benin-Ife relationship.⁴⁵ He suggests that "the Nupe-Igala area straddling the confluence of the Niger and Benue emerges as the key area in such a reconstruction of Benin dynastic difficulties," adding that "the Yoruba states would seem to be related to the same general complex."⁴⁶ There is no doubt that the institution of kingship in Benin is older than that of Ile-Ife or other Yoruba states, and the chronology of events in the histories of Benin and Ife favours Ile-Ife origin of the Eweka dynasty and not of the Ogiso dynasty or of the Benin people.

While much work is still to be carried out in the early history of Benin, Stefan Eisenhofer seem to have introduced some problems in the search for historical knowledge. The problems are encapsulated in his view that "in the past few decades much research has appeared on the early history of this kingdom, the origin of its kingship, and the time of the early Ogiso kings, who are considered by many historians as the autochthonous founders of Benin kingship around 900."⁴⁷ This view is not in agreement with the opinion of Alan Ryder who pointed out in 1992 that the momentum and enthusiasm which carried Benin studies

⁴³ Igbafe, 1981, "Benin in," p.3.

⁴⁴ For details, see A. F. C. Ryder, 1965, "A Reconsideration of the Ife-Benin Relationship" *Journal of African History* vol. 6 no. 1 pp.25-37; G. A. Akinola, 1976, "The Origin of the Eweka Dynasty of Benin: A Study in the Use and Abuse of Oral Traditions", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. Vol. 8 no. 3, December.

⁴⁵ Ryder, 1965, "A Reconsideration," p.37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Stefan Eisenhofer, 1995, "The Origins of the Benin Kingship in the Works of Jacob Egharevba," *History in Africa*, 22, p.141.

forward in the 1950s and 1960s dwindled away in the 1970s and was almost extinguished in the 1980s; suffering excessively in the general climate of academic recession in Nigeria since the 1980s.⁴⁸ Moreover, in strict historiographical sense, Eisenhofer's bibliography lack the information about the 'much research' work on the early history of Benin. Furthermore, he claims that 'many historians' consider 900 AD as the possible date for the emergence of the Ogiso dynasty without any reference to such historians. Jacob Egharevba first suggested the date and writers seem to accept it without critically assessing the historical dynamics of the period. A more problematic aspect of the view of Eisenhofer is what he describes as "the abundance of literature on the early history of the Kingdom of Benin."⁴⁹ This position is both provocative and questionable because much of what is known about early Benin are basically from oral traditions. The oral traditions occupy a special place both as history, and as historical sources for the reconstruction of the early history of Benin. No serious academic study of the Ogiso era and even the pre-Ogiso period (the era of no kings in Benin history) has been undertaken. It is doubtful where Eisenhofer got his 'abundance of literature on the early history of Benin.'

The effort toward reconstruction of the pre-colonial history of Benin has led to a kind of collaboration between academic and non-academic historians of Benin. Although among the non-academic (local historians) of Benin,⁵⁰ some of their works lack concern for problems of method - historical and epistemological - the works are genuinely illuminating and exploratory and nourish a strong sense of local identity among the Benin people.⁵¹ Scholars investigating aspects of Benin history and culture, who are better equipped with the techniques and logic of research, often co-operate with the local historians. In most of the scholarly literature on Benin, the assistance and co-operation of local historians has been acknowledged by the writers. On the one hand, the scholars have one advantage over the local historians. They are able to articulate the general applicable criteria for assessing competing historical interpretations. On the other hand, local history writing thrives in scholarly climate, in questioning the views of non-Binis about the state-formation capacity of Benin and phases of development of the Benin polity. The community cherishes this kind of work, as it

⁴⁸ See A. F. C. Ryder, 1992, "Benin Studies: State of the Art," paper presented at an International Conference on Benin Studies held at the University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria, March 23-26.

⁴⁹ Eisenhofer, 1995, "The Origins," p.141.

⁵⁰ Jacob U. Egharevba, Edun Akenzua, Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, Osemwengie Ebohon, Air Iyare, Prince Ena Basimi Eweka, Dr. Osaren S. B. Omoregie, Daniel Oronsaye, H. O. Uwaifo, T. I. Imasogie, Aghama Omoruyi, Osayomwanbo Osemwegie-Ero, and D. U. Emokpae.

⁵¹ See Osarhieme Benson Osadolor, 1997, "Survey of the Non-Professional Historiography of Benin," paper presented at an International Workshop on New Local Historiographies in Africa and South Asia, at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies (Centrum Moderner Orient), Berlin/Germany, October 10-12.

demonstrate that Benin had not been outside the mainstream of world civilisations, particularly as regards its contribution to the arts and the evolution of political culture.

On a more critical note, the pioneer local historian of Benin, Jacob Egharevba,⁵² who demonstrated the potentials of non-written sources for the reconstruction of the history of Benin before the emergence of academic historiography in Nigeria in the 1950s,⁵³ not only opened two key debates on Benin history, but was confronted with the problems of conflicting interpretations.⁵⁴ His *Short History of Benin* has been published in four editions, “differing from one another considerably in many passages.”⁵⁵ In these circumstances, Eisenhofer argues that “Egharevba’s work is not to be seen as some kind of historical archive, containing oral documents that have been handed down unchanged from generation to generation for centuries.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, Usuanlele and Falola points out that the changes which characterise the various editions of *Short History* may not be unconnected with the colonial climate, and the author’s work at the Benin Museum which further exposed him to European officials and scholars.⁵⁷ It is necessary to point out that the socio-cultural milieu in which Egharevba was educated, dominated by Yoruba teachers largely under the influence of Samuel Johnson’s *History of the Yorubas*, had impact on his approach to historical studies.⁵⁸ This notwithstanding, Egharevba was concerned with “what happened” and not “why it happened.” This is one of the many weaknesses of his works. For the professional historian, *what happened* is important, but *why it happened* is even more important. The importance of historical studies depends on the scholarly approach to the subject, and local historians are usually not able to start from a clear beginning of the research problem to an intelligible end.

Nonetheless, the most enduring and sustained lines of scholarly research are the works of Philip A. Igbafe, A. F. C. Ryder and R. E. Bradbury.⁵⁹ Their research results are enlightening and valuable. What appears to be the seemingly discouraging complexities of the

⁵² See Uyilawa Usuanlele and Toyin Falola, 1994, “The Scholarship of Jacob Egharevba of Benin,” *History in Africa*, 21, pp.303-318.

⁵³ See Obaro Ikime, 1979, *Through Changing Scenes: Nigerian History Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, Inaugural Lecture, University of Ibadan. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, October.

⁵⁴ For a critique, see Eisenhofer, 1995, “The Origins,” pp.141-163.

⁵⁵ *ibid.* p.142.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ Uyilawa Usuanlele and Toyin Falola, 1998, “A Comparison of Jacob Egharevba’s *Ekhare Vb Itan Edo* and the four editions of its English translations, *A Short History of Benin*,” *History in Africa*, 25, pp.361-386.

⁵⁸ Osadolor, 1997, “Survey of,” p.4.

⁵⁹ R. E. Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, P. Morton-Williams (ed.). London: Oxford University Press; R. E. Bradbury, 1968, “Continuities and Discontinuities in Pre-colonial and Colonial Benin Politics (1897-1951). In: I. M. Lewis (ed.), *History and Social Anthropology*, A.S.A. no 7; R. E. Bradbury, 1964, “The Historical Uses of Comparative Ethnography with Special Reference to Benin and the Yoruba”, In: J. Vansina, R. Mauny, L. V. Thomas (eds.) *The Historian and Tropical Africa*. London: Oxford University Press; R. E. Bradbury and P. C. Lloyd, 1957, *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-Speaking Peoples of South-Western Nigeria*, London: International African Institute. The works of Igbafe and Ryder are listed in the bibliography of this study.

research on the more remote Ogiso period, however, compelled Bradbury to dismiss it as semi-mythical. That aspect of the Benin past is yet to be interpreted by historians. Even then, a crucial question concerning historical movement after the Ogiso period is: how do we account for developments in Benin history from the end of that era? To attempt this question, insights from the social sciences as well as those from other times and places are essential for the historians of Benin.

From the works of Africanist scholars, different interpretative themes are emerging which seek to provide general or specific explanation for Benin historical development. Themes dealing with material culture and art, urbanisation, migration, conflict and community, ceremonies and festivals, all of which enrich the sources of Benin history. Although sources for early Benin history are scarce and often difficult to interpret, research results have not been disappointing. Andrew Onokerhoraye's work⁶⁰ has a great influence on historical thought, for it gives insight in much the same ways that historians working on Benin would have done. He asked his own questions, as historians do, and he had to find out new facts to answer the questions from the perspective of a social scientist.

Similarly, other social scientists and humanists are asking new questions about the Benin past.⁶¹ Questions concerning geographical location, environmental conditions, basic subsistence, social system, population pressures, ideology, the nature and function of institutions, etc. Details of evidence which emerge from questions being asked such as what factors led to the development of Benin City as an urban centre or how and why did Benin emerge as a state, are being compared with developments within the region. While their enquiries will enable historians of Benin to gain new information, the reassessment of conflicting interpretations, as in the works of Patrick Darling⁶² often leads to new and perhaps different conclusions and misrepresentation of the precolonial past.

However, in dealing with the period from 1897, more meaningful and sometimes, competing interpretations of historical developments seem to emerge. The British conquest in 1897 marked a new political era in the history of Benin. Historians investigating continuity

⁶⁰ Andrew G. Onokerhoraye, 1995, *Benin: A Traditional African City in Transition*. Benin City: The Social Science Series for Africa.

⁶¹ See for example, Graham Connah, 2000, "African City Walls: A Neglected Source?," In: David M. Anderson and Richard Rathbone (eds.), *Africa's Urban Past*. Oxford: James Currey and Portsmouth (N.H.): Heinemann; Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999, *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth Century Benin*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Isidore Okpewho, 1998, *Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; B. W. Blackmun, 1997, "Continuity and Change: The Ivories of Ovonramwen and Eweka II," *African Arts*, 30, 3; F. Kaplan, 1997, "Iyoba, the Queen Mother of Benin: Images and Ambiguity in Gender and Sex Roles in Court Art," In: F. Kaplan (ed.), *Queens, Concubines and Consorts: Case Studies in African Gender*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press; J. N. Nevadomsky, 1997, "Studies of Benin Art and Material Culture 1897-1997," *African Arts*, 30, 3; S. Picton, 1997, "Review of Great Benin: Museum of Mankind Exhibition," *African Arts*, 30, 3.

and change in Benin society, have found considerable social and economic mobility that moderated class and status distinctions and conflict.⁶³ Local historians who emerged since 1933 have also enriched historical writing by providing ‘facts’ and ‘information’. In spite of their own contributions to the academic debate on Benin history, the problem of different interpretations remain unresolved. Although the effort to resolve the conflicting interpretations of the Benin past is necessary to establish the basis of its historical knowledge, historians have not actually exhausted the study of different aspects of precolonial Benin history. The essence of this research on the military system of Benin has been to provide new information to support and enrich earlier interpretations by providing more concrete details on issues and problems that lacked the newly available information. At the very roots of this study has been the investigations of the transformation of Benin kingdom, whether the process was stimulated by military, political or commercial factors. During this period, Benin was engaged in both domestic and international trade; at the level of internal politics, there were major reforms; and successes in war expanded Benin kingdom beyond the boundaries that were hitherto effectively controlled by existing forms of government and institutions of the state. The stream of this study therefore, flows from a military perspective of the social, economic and political dynamics that shaped society-military relations, and state-military relations during the period under consideration.

The history of military institutions cannot be separated from the general history of a period and of society. In precolonial Africa, historical movements were combined actions and endeavours of socio-political and economic activities as well as military engagements. John Thornton’s recent book,⁶⁴ investigates the impact of warfare on the history of Africa in the period of the slave trade. The book is an important examination of the phenomenon of African warfare, including discussion of the relationship between war and the slave trade, the role of Europeans in promoting African wars and supplying African armies, the influence of climatic and ecological factors on warfare patterns and dynamics, and the impact of social organisation and military technology.

In the same way, the military history of Europe cannot be separated from the general history of the continent. In his study of European warfare, Jeremy Black explains that “preparation for conflict, the conduct of war and its consequences provided an agenda of

⁶² See chapters one and two of this study.

⁶³ See for example, P. A. Igbafe, *The Nemesis of Power: Agho Obaseki and Benin Politics, 1897-1956*. Lagos: Macmillan Nigerian Publishers Limited, 1991; P. A. Igbafe, *Benin Under the British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom 1897-1938*. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979; P. A. Igbafe, *Obaseki of Benin*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1972.

⁶⁴ John K. Thornton, 1999, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa 1500-1800*. London: UCL Press.

concern and activity that dominated the domestic history of European countries.⁶⁵ According to him, “the demands of military preparedness and war pressed differently upon the people of Europe, varying chronologically, nationally and socially ...”⁶⁶ Generally, war was a facet of various cultures, and how warfare was organised has continued to attract the attention of historians.

On the one hand, the purposes for which armies are organised⁶⁷ provide an essential criterion in the analysis and description of political types as well as military systems. On the other hand, the army and the state interact on and influence one another. The level of interaction and influence in the African situation has generated academic debates in the humanities and social sciences since the 1960s and has continued in recent years. In spite of the trend of the debates and resulting outflow of literature, not much is known about the nature and role of the armies in precolonial African states and societies. This is because the focus of research has concentrated more on the colonial and postcolonial military institutions in Africa than the precolonial past. This work deals with precolonial Benin and the military system which evolved for a very different type of society and warfare from anything confronting modern African states. In discussing the system’s structure and problems and whether it evolved in ways which were quite consistent at the level of its ultimate functions, it will be helpful to explain generally, the concept of a military system.

The Concept of Military System

A military system can be defined as a set of units or elements actively interrelated and operating in a regular pattern as a complex whole. These elements include the organisation of the army or armed forces and its command structure, weapons and training, supply and transport, logistics, defence and security framework. Each unit or element is entirely dependent on one another for the success of the military system. There is an interrelationship between organisation, the level of military preparedness, the instruments, and the ideas intended to aid task performance. Throughout human history, military systems⁶⁸ differed from

⁶⁵ Jeremy Black, 1994, *European Warfare, 1660 - 1815*. London : UCL Press Ltd., p. 210.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ For details, see Stanley B. Alpern, 1998, “On the Origins of the Amazons of Dahomey” *History in Africa* 25, pp.9-25; and his main work published in 1998 on the *Amazons of Black Sparta: The Women Warriors of Dahomey*. London: H. Hurst and Co. Ltd., and New York University Press. See also, African Leadership Forum, Farm House Dialogue, *The Military and Society*. Dialogue 27, 23rd - 25th July 1993 at Otta, Ogun State, Nigeria.

⁶⁸ The analysis of a system, particularly military, depend on a number of its attributes: inputs, transformation process, outputs, maintenance boundaries, energy returns, feedback and the environment. Writers from the humanities and the social sciences have interpreted these attributes in different ways. See for example, B. A. Ogot (ed.) 1972, *War and Society in Africa*. London: Frank Cass; Joseph P. Smaldone, 1977, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press; Robert S. Smith, 1976, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa*. Methuen and Co. Ltd.; S. Andreski, 1908, *Military*

one society to another. Of course, this is understandable because there is considerable diversity in the ways in which military systems have evolved in different societies over long periods of time in history. To understand the evolution of a particular military system, it is necessary to consider first, what elements if any, are acting as “driving forces” and second, what level of adaptability is built into the system. In well established polities, the interactions of political institutions with other components of the society or social system are often the most important elements. Therefore, the survival of any system lies in its ability to adapt to inevitable external and internal changes. A system which does not have the capacity to develop own or borrow and adapt ideas from elsewhere can hardly survive. The dynamic nature of a system once it has evolved, is reflected in the complexity of its development. It exhibits some, if not all, of these features: first, the institutionalisation of the units; second, the development of a larger and more diverse task environment; third, the incorporation of new technologies; fourth, the use of the services of specialised personnel in order to attain organisational effectiveness.

As this study shows, from c.1440 AD, and throughout the different phases of the development of the Benin polity up to the conquest by the British in 1897, the organisation of the army and subsequent reforms, were reflections of the attempts to institutionalise the military and create a more diverse task for the Benin army. Several factors were responsible for this development and have been discussed in the various chapters of this work. As the result of this research shows, c.1440 was a critical turning point in the history of Benin. The interpretations of the pattern and significance of the events in the phase before that date, and the phase afterwards, throws some light on the significant new perspectives in the state formation process, not least of which was the change in the character of Benin expansion and warfare. Subsequently, the military system of Benin began to witness the incorporation of new technologies, especially the use of firearms and gunpowder, and the services of specialised personnel as seen in the use of Portuguese mercenaries. This was further enhanced with the division of some of the regiments of the Benin army into specialised units of archers and bowmen or crossbowmen.

The historical developments in the core Benin region, partly affected the organisation of the army and all other units or elements that were necessary for the success of the military system. In the phase before c.1440 AD, the kingdom of Benin had disintegrated into three separate mini states after the collapse of the Ogois dynasty. The mini states were Udo in the west, Ugu in the southeast, and what was left of the old Benin kingdom in the capital and

surrounding villages. Attempts at the reconquest of Udo and Ugu before c.1440 AD by the kings of the Eweka dynasty were not successful. This was further complicated by the fact that the rightful heir and successor to Eweka I, Prince Idu established himself as the king of Ugu after he lost the throne in Benin City, in a power game manipulated by the *Uzama*. Moreover, the severe power rivalries between the Oba of Benin and his chiefs affected support for external military campaigns. These conditions forced Oba Ewuare in about 1440 AD to make changes in the organisational structure of the state. The changes marked the emergence of warrior kings, and the process of the establishment and development of the military system that launched Benin on the path of imperial conquests. Thus, a new phase was opened in Benin history after 1440 AD. The character of the Benin Empire, as soon as it extended beyond the core kingdom was aimed at establishing firm political control through the exercise of military force. These were the conditions which led to the evolution of Benin military system. However, within the political structure which emerged, military power was subordinated to civil authority. This was crucial to the survival of the state because the distribution of power within the political system which hierarchically subordinated all the chiefs to the direct control of the Oba secured civil predominance over the military.

Usually, the separation between civil and military authority is believed to have arisen with the modern state. But I argue in this work that the matter is not that straight forward: In precolonial Benin, however, there was a measure of separation between civil and military authority. This was due to the nature of the social structure and political system which defined roles for the respective cadres of authority. The social structure in which all men were organised in age-grade excluded men who were the fighting force from political participation, which was exclusively for the elders. Apart from the *Iyase* whose position was political, though a commander in the army, all other army commanders were military chiefs whose functions were basically military rather than political. The political head of Benin City was an *Odionwere*, a position that was occupied by the *Esogban* (the second in the hierarchy of Town Chiefs) who was not a military commander. From 1600, the Oba ceased to be a warrior-king. From the same time, the *Iyase* was not allowed to return to Benin City after any campaign, successful or unsuccessful. Generally, no chief in Benin was appointed war commander except those with military responsibilities. The palace chiefs who were engaged in the daily administration of the state were completely excluded from military duties and responsibilities. This was the extent of the separation of military power from political authority, which explains why Benin differed substantially from most precolonial African states and societies

Francisco; and J. Keegan, 1994, *The Mask of Command*. London, 1987; *A History of Warfare*. London.

in its military system. Such a political and military arrangement was pre-eminently to the interests of the monarchy because, despite severe power rivalries which led to instability and civil wars, Benin survived and kept its power with the region.

In most precolonial African states, military systems evolved to create the structures necessary for the enhancement of state power. The aim was the pursuit and defence of the interest of the leadership group which had appropriated power. For the modern nation states, military systems have evolved in defence of national interest, land frontiers, and maintenance of internal security of the state. The pursuit and defence of interests are of particular relevance for understanding organisational politics. Gareth Morgan argues convincingly that “we live in our interests, often see others as encroaching on them, and readily engage in defences or attacks designed to sustain our position”.⁶⁹ This is reflected in conflicts and power plays, and eventually military competitiveness. The level of sophistication of a particular military system may at times, not in all cases, be a reflection of the stage of advancement of the society which owns it. Most scholars may argue that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had an advanced military system and technology but the society was not well developed. There have been many variations in military institutions and philosophy of organisation, and systems which did not have the capacity to borrow and adapt ideas from elsewhere could hardly survive.⁷⁰ This is because weapons are constantly been improved upon, and scientific advances in military technology gives strategic advantages to societies which possess new weapons capable of inflicting high casualties and damages.

The culture and character of societies and the links with organisational life differs from one region to another. Since military systems have evolved for different types of societies and warfare, this makes it difficult to generalise on formal authority and preparation for war. This study has been confronted with this issue in elucidating the magnitude of the research problem and questions concerning war and society in Benin.

The Research Problem

Studies which have investigated the growth and development of military enterprise and empire have focused on specific periods or themes or aspects of the history of warfare. The quest for the understanding of military systems is the historical inquiry into military

⁶⁹ Gareth Morgan, 1997, *Images of Organization*. Thousand Oaks, California and London: Sage Publications, Inc., p. 161.

⁷⁰ See for example, M. S. Anderson, 1988, *War and Society in Europe of the Old Regime 1618-1789*. London; A. Corvisier, 1979, *Armies and Societies in Europe, 1494-1789*. Bloomington, Indiana; A. Jones, 1987, *The Art of War in the Western World*. Oxford, and C. Duffy, 1987, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason*. London.

institutions, organisation and resource mobilisation for war. With the study of the military system of Benin, the fundamental research problem revolves around the assessment of the purpose and function of military power. Did the state structures emerge out of peaceful developments or out of the rise of a military group? Was the function of military power needed to create the structures necessary for the leadership group to stay in power or was it for the expansion of the state for more tributes and booty? These questions were evaluated in this study, in the process of examining the establishment and development of the military in the kingdom of Benin.

There are, of course, still some basic issues which were considered in an attempt to elucidate the research problem. First, there was no standing army except for the *Isienmwewro* which constituted a permanent force of royal guard. Second, in the absence of a standing army, preparation for battle was the only criterion for the composition of the army. Third, political institutions were shaped in accordance with military needs; and therefore, military reforms were in accordance with continually changing circumstances. Fourth, the Oba had the subjects at his command but military service for majority of the warriors carried with it the responsibility to provide their weapons. Fifth, the structure of organisation was flexible enough to permit changes without disruption of command and control. Sixth, war camps and garrisons were built for the purposes of reinforcement and monitoring of enemy advances or threat. Finally, internal arrangement for defence production would appear to be a demonstration of productive power and self-reliance as the key to security.

Most studies which have attempted to explain the process of state formation in Benin⁷¹ from the conceptual framework of the origin of the state have treated military factors as a consequence of power relations. In some other studies, narrow military questions were addressed.⁷² This is, of course, understandable because historians and other writers view the past from different perspectives and they ask different questions and therefore get different research results. Even when historians in particular, and other writers in general, are dealing with the same subject, they may investigate different aspects of the same problems, choosing the data and information deemed to be most significant in support of a particular view.

⁷¹ What seems to have emerged from the interpretation of the evolution of Benin polity and the processes involved in the different phases of its development have been attempts to provide an explanation for Benin historical development from two perspectives: first, the internal processes responding to local geographical factors; and second, external influences leading to a process of stimulation and adaptation. See for example, Ade Obayemi, 1985, "The Yoruba and Edo-Speaking Peoples and their Neighbours Before 1600". In J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds.) *History of West Africa* vol. I, third edition. London: Longman, pp. 255-322. See also, Alan Ryder, 1969, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman, pp. 1-23.

⁷² See for example, Andrew G. Onokerhoraye, 1995, *Benin: A Traditional African City in Transition*. Benin City. See also, A. F. C. Ryder, 1980, "The Benin Kingdom" In : Obaro Ikime (ed.) *Groundwork of Nigeria History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Books (Nigeria) Ltd; Bradbury, *Benin Studies*.

While this work attempts to interpret the Benin past through a frame of reference that is influenced by military history, it is also a contribution to the intellectual debate on the emergence of the state in Africa. In this regard, it seeks to explain the military factor in the building of state power, and the relationship between the structure of coercion and development. Although the structure of its central institutions and the balance between competing groups is often the reason advanced in explaining the strength of the Benin kingdom, it is indeed remarkable that the state suffered no serious internal collapse and its military system succeeded in protecting the society from violence and conquest by her neighbours and other powers in the region. At this point, we ask two related questions: first, can this be interpreted to mean that the military system was effective? Second, at what point in time did the system become effective in aiding its rise or in consolidating its military power? In an attempt to answer these questions, it is necessary to keep in view the proposition that while it is more useful to explain the rise of Benin in terms of local politics, we cannot ignore the interrelationship between power in social relationships and the conflict or integrative process in the emergence of the state. This proposition is elaborated on a theory of state building which attempts to explain the development of Benin polity in different phases of its history from the challenge of survival which confronted the kings of Benin, and which in turn demanded more effective ways of mobilising and deploying its resources. Until 1897 when Benin ceased to exist as an independent state, the development process was sustained by the adaptation of the political system to institutional reforms, not least of which was the ability of the Oba to confront challenges by balancing the competition for power, position and prestige.

Research Questions and Working Hypotheses

The fundamental research problem of this study centres on a number of questions: First, what were the factors which aided the process of the establishment and development of the military? Second, in what form and to what degree, if any, was the military system a reflection of the relations between the state and society? Third, how relevant were the institutional structures and relationships of administration appropriate to or supportive of the military system? Fourth, why did Benin launch expansionist campaigns, and which groups in the society depended on warfare? Finally, upon what economic foundation was the military power of Benin based? On the basis of these questions, the following working hypotheses have been formulated.

First, that every military system has a logic of its own which advances the aims of the state. Second, that the military power of the kingdom of Benin was a factor which transformed the small state in the early fifteenth century to an empire that lasted until British colonisation; the success over a long over a long period of time was due to civil supremacy over the military, which defined the proper relationship of military power to civil authority. It was the mechanism adopted for securing predominance over the army that led to the development of a military system within the political structure of the state. Third, that the interweaving of interests among the different political groups exacerbated conflicts that drifted the state from instability to civil wars, which in turn, created the opportunity for the reorganisation of the army in the different phases of the history of Benin.

The framework of analysis has been the state formation process in order to contribute to the on-going debates in African history. Although certain propositions concerning state system and state formation are still been debated by historians and scholars of early African history, the trend of the debate seems to have resolved itself into two schools of thought: the conflict school and the integration school.⁷³ The vexing issue is whether states emerged out of conflict or it was a voluntary process of integration. As the evidence in this study shows, state formation was a very complex process which could not be explained in terms of military factors alone. As elsewhere in Africa, the process of state formation was slow; local politics being a crucial factor, such that the process was at times botched and usually started again. At certain stages of development, war was inevitable in the state formation process: sometimes wars were fought to secure domination, or to ward it off, which was a desire for security and in some cases, it turned out to be a desire for more power. In the case of Benin, the evidence, however, shows that the process of state formation involved both integration and conquest, particularly in the reconquest of vassal states and the expansion of the frontiers of the empire. It follows therefore, that the dynamics of state formation process in Benin, and in Africa generally, cannot be explained only in terms of integration or conquest arising from expansion. The process of integration and conquest were inseparable dynamics of state formation in the different phases of the development of the state system.

In explaining the reasons for most wars in Africa, Robert Smith has this to say. According to him, “a fundamental cause of most West African wars - indeed, the most prevalent cause of wars in any part of the world - was the desire of the most vigorous societies

⁷³ Since 1982 when Jonathan Haas in his book, *The Evolution of the Prehistoric State*, grouped the debate into two schools of thought - the conflict school and the integration school, proponents of state formation theories or leading protagonists on either side have been making statements in support of their positions. See, Graham Connah, 1897, *African Civilizations: Precolonial Cities and States in Tropical Africa: An Archaeological Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

for territorial expansion and to exercise a measure of physical control over their neighbours”

⁷⁴ While the cause of war can be political, the ability to wage war rests on economic foundations.

Scholars studying the origins of armies in early African history are almost universally agreed on two points. First, the organisation of the army was an aspect of the resource mobilisation for warfare. Hence in the evolution of African armies, they were often reorganised, improved, enlarged and institutionalised to keep pace with other units or elements in the system. Second, where a society did not possess sufficient natural resources for permanent self-sufficiency it usually attempted to gain them by territorial expansion. Those who subscribe to this view argue that the main end of economic policy was land. Although wars were caused by aspirations of the ruling classes or by the need of military security, most of them were closely connected with the desire for wealth and self-sufficiency. This policy was pursued by the kings of Benin in the creation of Benin Empire by forceful territorial expansion.

To understand the basis of most historical hypotheses as it relates to military matters, it is also necessary to point out that in the theory and practice of war, the concept of warfare in its general meaning is usually a state of war, or campaign or being engaged in war. Robert Smith who has been engaged on research relating to warfare in precolonial West Africa points out that since war is taken to imply ‘a state of open hostility between nations’ it therefore implies that “skirmishes, battles, and even campaigns are not wars but incidents comprised within a war.”⁷⁵ To declare war was taken to imply a state of hostility but in actual sense, it was the exercise of force for the attainment of political objectives. The pursuit of political objectives, albeit territorial expansion had often resulted in a conflict of great interests with other states and societies, resulting in the formal declaration of hostility. The Chinese sage, Sun Tzu has put it this way: “the art of war is of vital importance to the state. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or ruin.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Donald Kagan explains the trio of motives most illuminating in understanding the origins of war throughout history as honour, fear, and interest.⁷⁷

While trying to place the understanding of war in the context of the usage of the word in Benin, this thesis contributes to the study of warfare in precolonial Africa. In making this contribution, there is focus on the ‘gun-slave-cycle’ debate which attempts to assess the

⁷⁴ Robert S. Smith, 1976, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial Africa*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., p. 44.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁶ Sun Tzu Wu, 1944, *The Art of War* (translated by Lionel Giles). Harrisburg, p.40.

⁷⁷ Donald Kagan, 1995, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*. New York: Doubleday, pp.8-11.

relationship between warfare and the European slave trade in Africa. This study established a relationship between warfare, warriors and the slave trade which has helped to shape the perception of the history of the period. This point is important for the interpretation of the African frontier of the Atlantic System between 1580 and 1830, particularly, the Atlantic economy, the slave trade and their regional impacts. My argument is that the conditions of exchange of European firearms for slaves gave Benin warriors the opportunity to make wars successfully, and captives became the means of exchange, thus completing the gun-slave-cycle which made Benin a more vigorous state, and placed in the position of subduing her neighbours. The purchase of firearms initially depended on exchange for slaves, cloth and ivory. But at the peak of the slave trade, the warriors provided war captives for the European traders. This study shows that from the time of Portuguese sale of firearms to Benin, the gun-slave-cycle had its own impact on Benin warfare and expansion.

Like any study, the quality of a study of warfare or military systems in early African history is determined by the available sources. Since the historian has no direct access to the past as events happen and disappear, the manner in which the sources have been recovered, closely examined and preserved are important parts of the historical study. This is because they provide a basis for the assessment and interpretation of the past. Military leaders and strategists have always placed great emphasis upon the lessons which can be drawn from military history. Hence, military record or history must be accurate; in which case, attempt must be made to understand how the sources of past military events originated. In the study of Benin military system, a knowledge of the terrain in which battles were fought, the type of weapons and equipment used, made it possible to reconstruct war strategies and tactics in a logical manner from oral history and documentation by local historians of Benin.

Sources and Methodology

The reconstruction of historical knowledge about the precolonial military history of Benin kingdom requires a critical examination of the forms of our sources and how that knowledge has been produced. This is important in order to understand how the past has been interpreted and represented. Benin, like all other non-literate societies, did not practice writing and the people transmitted knowledge orally from one generation to the next. This was knowledge about their society and their environment, either represented in factual traditions with form and content or in fictional traditions such as tales, sayings, songs and proverbs. The theme of this study presses the sources for the reconstruction of Benin military history to its limits because written documents scarcely exist, except for the reports and accounts of European

visitors. The argument often advanced by historians concerning the use of sources has been summarised by Peter Kosso: “History is not possible without appeal to the value of documents as messengers from the past, and without the organisation of the information they provide in accordance with temporary schemes governed by the ideas of historical time and historical process.”⁷⁸ Thus, the historian is able to select evidence and to create evidence only from the sources which constitute historical data. Among the various kinds of historical sources oral tradition occupy a special place.⁷⁹ As Vansina points out, “they are messages, but unwritten; their preservation entrusted to the memories of successive generations of people.”⁸⁰ As opposed to all other sources, oral tradition consists of information existing in memory; “it is in memory most of the time, and only now and then are those parts recalled which the needs of the moment require.”⁸¹ For non-literate African societies, the value of oral tradition as historical evidence demands above all, patient and understanding of the material as regard its nature and its limitations. A great deal of time has to be spent refining methods for the collection, preservation and analysis of oral tradition.

From the 1960s when African history affirmed itself as a university discipline, the use of oral tradition in research and methodology was also a parallel development in African historiography. This parallel development evolved because written documents for most precolonial African states and societies were scarce or did not really exist. Therefore, historians were obliged to develop new techniques in the collection and analysis of oral discourses on the past for the representation of historical knowledge. This methodological development was a movement pioneered by Jan Vansina.⁸² After the Fourth International African Seminar held in 1961 at the University of Dakar, Senegal,⁸³ the ideas of the movement began to flourish as it also began to demonstrate the potential historical value of oral tradition in the search about the African past.⁸⁴ David Henige argues that the interest in oral tradition by scholars who were actually trained as historians was a new departure but it was more than just an accident.⁸⁵ According to him, the belated stirrings of interest stemmed

⁷⁸ Peter Kosso, 1993, “Historical Evidence and Epistemic Justification: Thucydides as a Case Study,” *History and Theory* Vol. 32, p.24.

⁷⁹ Jan Vansina, 1985, *Oral Tradition as History*. Oxford: James Currey Ltd., reprinted 1997, p.xi.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, pp. xi-xii.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.147.

⁸² A historian who trained both as a medievalist and an anthropologist, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. His book, *De la tradition orale* (Tervuren, 1961) included much of the results of his doctoral dissertation (1957).

⁸³ The scientific approach of the movement which focused primarily on the techniques of the historian, was published in J. Vansina, R. Mauny and L.V. Thomas (eds.) *The Historian in Tropical Africa*. London, Ibadan and Accra: Oxford University Press (published for the International African Institute) 1964.

⁸⁴ See for example, Ralph A. Austen, (ed.), 1999, *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance*. Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press. See the contribution of Ivor Wilks, “The History of the Sunjata Epic: A Review of the Evidence,” pp.25-68.

⁸⁵ David Henige, *Oral Historiography*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1982, p.20.

in part from colonial experience, and secondly, the efforts of the pioneers to recruit and train others in the field of oral traditions. Hence the 1960s and the 1970s marked a peak in the self-conscious and scholarly pursuit of oral historiography.⁸⁶ The development in the use of oral tradition has remained a viable movement. This is because the development of oral historiography with its own peculiar character, has been due “to the growing interest in oral historical research,” argues Henige, but that “a more important impetus has been the widening definition of historical enquiry.”⁸⁷ Over the last forty years, many scholarly articles and books have been devoted to the issues, problems and questions arising from the use and abuse of oral tradition. The scholarly debates among historians and scholars from related disciplines on the use and abuse of oral tradition have nevertheless, helped to advance the discourse on the African past. This has also led to innovations in new methods for constructing historical knowledge and the modes of interpretation of that knowledge.

Among the various scholarly communities such as the American Historical Society, the African Studies Association in the United States and United Kingdom, the Canadian Association of African Studies, and the Historical Society of Nigeria the concern has also been the promotion of the study of Africa and improvement in knowledge by facilitating scholarly and scientific exchange as well as the publication of journals. The most prominent of such journals is *History in Africa: A Journal of Methods* published annually by the African Studies Association in the United States. The activities of the scholarly communities opened up the boundaries of historical space in the use of different categories of oral data for the professional study of the African past.

Historians have had no problem in defining the concept of oral tradition. They agree that in theory oral traditions are testimonies concerning the past transmitted from one person to another over time. As Jan Vansina points out, the expression “oral tradition” applies both to a process and its products.⁸⁸ According to him, “the products are oral messages based on previous oral messages, at least a generation old,” while “the process is the transmission of such messages by word of mouth over time until the disappearance of the message.”⁸⁹ Therefore, he argues that “hence any given oral tradition is but a rendering at one moment, an element in a process of oral development that began with the original communication.”⁹⁰ In which case, “the characteristics of each rendering will differ according to its position in the

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p.22.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Vansina, 1997, *Oral Tradition*, p.3.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

whole process.”⁹¹ This view suggests that as oral tradition pass through a chain of transmission, it probably risks a restructuring, and therefore, the process of transmission is as important as the product. On this ground, E. J. Alagoa points out that “both the historian and the informant are important in the proper identification, appreciation and use of oral traditions.”⁹² Thus, the central epistemological complication that arises with the final products of oral tradition is the manner in which the historian creates the facts of history from oral data. In other words, dealing with the problem of epistemology is significant in establishing a relation between the past and the present, and in particular, what the historian must seek out in the representation of knowledge about precolonial Africa.

From the enormous literature on African studies, there is no doubt that the impact of oral tradition has been great in the representation of historical knowledge about Africa. Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe have noted that no one would dare to propose now, as did some scholars in the middle of the twentieth century, that there might be an African past, but for lack of writing its past does not exist.⁹³ In their views, methodological developments of African historiography advanced the frontiers of knowledge, as a feeling of urgency pushed research towards the oldest tradition, for “every time one of the elders dies, a library disappears.”⁹⁴ There has therefore, been the need to always demonstrate, albeit scholarly, that the oral mode of conserving information guarantees its transmission and can just be as faithful to facts as the written.

The need to be empirical, particularly in establishing evidence and justifying interpretations, implies a differentiation between the concepts of tradition and individual knowledge. It is pertinent to point out that not all memory information is tradition nor can it also be claimed that individual knowledge constitutes tradition. Thus a knowledge of the various levels of oral traditions, and the modes of their transmission are quite significant for the historian in examining the forms of the sources of knowledge about the past of a society, and how that knowledge has been produced. Bassey Andah suggests that “since the communication of oral (or even written) tradition takes place between individuals and within groups formed by them, the researcher can only get authentic information of this transmission through detailed analysis and in-depth study of the society.”⁹⁵

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² E. J. Alagoa, “Introduction,” In: *Tarikh (Oral Historical Traditions in Africa)*. Volume 8, 1987, p.1.

⁹³ B. Jewsiewicki and V. Y. Mudimbe, “Africans’ Memories and Contemporary History of Africa,” *History and Theory (History Making in Africa)*, Beiheft 32, 1993, p.1.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, pp.2-3.

⁹⁵ Bassey Andah, “The Nature of African Oral Tradition,” *Tarikh (Oral Historical Traditions in Africa)*. Volume 8, 1987, p.11.

Notwithstanding the methodological problems that initiated the debates among historians on the use of oral data, new awareness of the problems usually arise with the abuse of oral traditions either by the informants or the historian. Thus scholars are often brought to the point of reassessment simply to demonstrate the methodological problems of the discipline, and of course, the viability of the field. In this case, oral traditions or oral discourses in African historiography has continued to provide new theoretical insights and new perspectives on the history of history writing in Africa. Be that as it may, a possible explanation for the use and abuse of oral tradition may be closely related to the ‘use of history in political debate.’⁹⁶ However, John Thornton after a study of Southern Nigeria, in particular, the Ife-Benin relationship, advanced the argument that “documents have raised problems in understanding the history of the area that cannot be fully solved by recourse to the other sources of information, in spite of the comparatively richness of non-documentary sources.”⁹⁷ In this case, both the strength of oral tradition or non-documentary sources can, and has often be turned into a weakness.⁹⁸ The manner in which oral tradition has been abused suggests evidence of manipulation by interested individuals and or groups. Thus, manipulation had often resulted in deliberate distortions for achieving specific objectives, which may be political. The socio-political conflict among some ethnic groups in Nigeria since 1960, and the attempt to distort oral traditions, always take the form of reaction to particular areas of disagreement. In this circumstance, the aim of the distortion of oral tradition may be to serve the interest of a particular group. The various illogicalities of new versions are always very apparent. Such illogicalities do not go unnoticed, and historians therefore, have to reconcile the contradictory appeals in various ways especially where aspects of oral traditions have been omitted or falsified. Although there are many academic studies of the use and abuse of oral traditions, not much has been done by historians to provide new theoretical insights on the methodological approach to the use of evidence from oral tradition. The interpretation and evaluation of oral data, or even documentary sources presupposes that the bits and pieces of historical knowledge are all combined in a single process. In doing this, it may be useful to propose in general terms one or two hypothesis of historical understanding. The data problem may be frustrating and therefore, “scholars have come to recognise,” argues John Thornton “that oral traditions, especially foundation stories, are flexible and can change over time to

⁹⁶ For details, see Karl-Georg Faber, “The Use of History in Political Debate,” *History and Theory (Studies in the Philosophy of History)* Volume XVII, No. 4, 1978, pp.36-67.

⁹⁷ John K. Thornton, “Traditions, Documents, and the Ife-Benin Relationship,” *History in Africa*. Volume 15, 1988, p.351.

⁹⁸ For details, see Ade Adefuye, “The Use and Abuse of Oral Tradition,” *Tarikh (Oral Historical Traditions in Africa)*. Volume 8, 1987, pp.37-42.

reflect changing political conditions or status.”⁹⁹ In this situation, the historian faces the real problem of analysis of oral data and also asking the most relevant questions about the sources.

On the other hand, the dating of oral tradition present an entirely different problem.¹⁰⁰ It is a problem related to the question of chronology – “one of the tools that historians use in order to build large-scale historical interpretations.”¹⁰¹ The nature of this problem in relation to the study of Benin history has been dealt with by Robert Bradbury. He points out that a deeper analysis of Benin traditions, the checking of these against the traditions of neighbouring peoples and the possibility of further information from contemporary sources should help us to arrive at more precise conclusions, at least from the end of the fifteenth century.¹⁰² The genealogies and kinglists from Benin, and the manner in which the people used them to record specific events has made it possible to also obtain a fairly detailed chronological data for the different phases of Benin history.

The foregoing explanation is strengthened by the claims that the oral traditions from Benin are trustworthy. They do not only express the views of those who tell them but they also contain real knowledge of the past. The traditions either as sources of history or as history has continued to serve as the basis of establishing societal identity through its peculiar mode of thought known as the indigenous knowledge system. This mode of thought was an important feature in the transmission and production of oral traditions. The nature of historical explanation and understanding within any indigenous knowledge system was peculiar to the society which owned it. On this basis, the Benin oral traditions are considered to be of good grounds criterion of knowledge especially as they reflect the identity and knowledge of the Benin people, and also serve as their collective memory. The kind of history produced in Benin traditions has therefore, not been concerned with grasping highly abstract and uninteresting ideas, but has focused on their beliefs and values, social and communal life in such a meaningful way that the present for them is inseparable from the past.¹⁰³ In studying the past and present of Benin, oral discourses have to be understood in the light of what tradition represent in the images of thinking and imagination, and how this reflect identity and knowledge of the people.

⁹⁹ Thornton, “Traditions,” p.359.

¹⁰⁰ For details, see David Henige, “Dating the Past from Oral Tradition,” *Tarikh (Oral Historical Traditions in Africa)* Volume 8, 1987, pp.43-52 and M. A. Onwuejeogwu, “The Dating of Oral Tradition,” *Tarikh* Vol.8, 1987, pp.53-67.

¹⁰¹ Henige, “Dating the Past,” p.43.

¹⁰² Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, p.43.

¹⁰³ Robert Ize-Iyamu, Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka and Ekhaguosa Aisien who were among my informants in Benin City repeatedly emphasised that in Benin society the past exerts an influence on present day affairs in several ways. To them, Benin history has value so long as it serves to establish the basis of societal identity.

The indigenous knowledge system of Benin which was also used for the transmission of information or messages from one generation to the next remains somewhat undervalued in Benin studies. There are no studies of the system, yet the questioning of the integrity and credibility of oral traditions vis-à-vis the lingering belief in the superiority of written documents has perhaps, not provided scholars the opportunity to concentrate on a more systematic study of oral traditions based on the indigenous knowledge system of the people. There are actually those who welcome the study of the Benin past but do not seem to find any useful means of representing the historical knowledge.

This study contributes to a methodological development in applying the indigenous knowledge system of Benin in the collection and evaluation of oral traditions. It is an approach that brings out the dimension of the relationship of the society to its past and how the knowledge of that past is represented. This is essential to an adequate understanding of certain problems, questions, issues that arises in constructing the meaning of the past.

Indigenous knowledge system can be explained on three levels, namely, the core knowledge, shared knowledge, and specialised knowledge. The core knowledge is the range of information that is given by individuals or groups who are well-informed on the subject matter. Shared knowledge is the sum of what every individual knows about the society. The specialised knowledge is peculiar and not general - it is specific to an individual or to a specialist who is devoted to a particular task of functions in the society. The careful selection of informants by researchers, based on their perceived knowledge of the subject matter which they were investigating is a demonstration of the application of indigenous knowledge system. The discussion of the ideas in this thesis are a preliminary sketch towards a more theoretically informed model of oral discourse and indigenous knowledge system. The aim here, is simply to show how to move towards more complete theoretical arguments in the development of oral discourses in African historiography.

As shown in this work, a unique contribution of oral tradition to the advancement of historical knowledge of precolonial Africa has resulted in the enormous literature on African history and culture. New publications are appearing every year which combine oral tradition with written documents and archaeological sources. The historians' approach to the African past is, in fact, the subject of a volume of UNESCO General History of Africa.¹⁰⁴ It addresses the problem of methodology and the values of oral tradition in the reconstruction of African past. The example of the pre-colonial history of Bunyoro-Kitara in East Africa, which has

¹⁰⁴ J. Ki-Zerbo (ed.), 1981, *UNESCO General History of Africa I: Methodology and African Prehistory*. Paris: UNESCO, London: Heinemann, Berkeley: California.

mostly been written from oral traditions,¹⁰⁵ reveals the historical values of non-written sources for the reconstruction of early African history. Its use, of course, demands a thorough analysis.

In every society there are multitude and variety of traditions: of the ruling aristocracy, of marginalised people, of women and of the underprivileged. Traditions of the different groups in the society have been transmitted through generations for private purposes or purposes connected with their positions in the society. Thus, individual tradition attempts to illuminate the past experiences of individual families, the underprivileged or other groups in such a manner that it presents historical knowledge with familiar landmarks or milestones in the general history of the society. This kind of tradition presents personal detail in the form of remembered reminiscence of bygone times. The variety of traditions of the Uzama in the Kingdom of Benin, for example, are narratives of the different family histories that constitute that order of chiefs. The traditions are narratives of the most remarkable occurrences that chronicles local events and episodes. The different traditions of the members of the Uzama, therefore, enlarge the range of sources from oral traditions, and further suggests a more intimate frame of reference for historical inquiry on aspects of the history of the Kingdom of Benin. On this ground, there is being contributed something of value to the understanding of epistemological problems in Benin history. An explanation of individual tradition has been given by Bassey Andah who has noted in his study that "the preservation of material from one generation to another by individuals, but not necessarily known by the community would be typical of individual tradition."¹⁰⁶ His contention is that the concepts of tradition and individual knowledge are very different, although many critics of oral tradition have tended to confuse the two as being one and the same thing.¹⁰⁷ From a study of oral tradition, it is very obvious that all memory information is not tradition, nor does all individual knowledge constitute tradition. On the one hand, group traditions of different families, of the marginalised people, of women and the underprivileged constitute the informal traditions of the society. On the other hand, group traditions of age-grade associations, of guilds, the ruling aristocracy, all belong to a different level of formal traditions. The rationale for formal

¹⁰⁵ See David L. Schoenbrun, 1999, "The (in)visible Roots of Bunyoro-Kitara and Buganda in the Lakes Region AD 800-1300," In: Susan Keech McIntosh (ed.), *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa*. Cambridge University Press; C. C. Wrigley, 1996, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty*. Cambridge University Press; R. L. Tantala, 1989, "The Early History of Kitara in Western Uganda: Process Models of Religious and Political and Political Change," Ph.D dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison; C. A. Buchanan, 1975, "Of Kings and Traditions: The Case of Bunyoro-Kitara," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*. 7, pp.516-527; C. A. Buchanan, 1974, "The Kitara-Complex: The Historical Tradition of Western Uganda to the Sixteenth Century," Ph.D dissertation, Indiana University.

¹⁰⁶ Andah, 1987, "The Nature of African Oral Traditions," p.11

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

traditions has been the need to monitor the knowledge being imparted, albeit within the world view of that particular society. In precolonial Benin, the essence of the society's control was to preserve its customs, mores and value systems for an adequate understanding of its past which had continued to exert an influence on its present-day affairs in a multitude of ways. Its history, was therefore seen as the past experience of the society. What is of importance to the historian of tropical Africa is that "some forms of oral tradition, to be sure, are subject to gross distortion; but others are protected by regulations so strict as to keep the possibilities for their alteration well within the range of tolerated by Western historians."¹⁰⁸ This view has been strengthened by the arguments of Bassey W. Andah, David Henige and Jan Vansina already discussed in this chapter. As it were, the variety of traditions in different societies have drawn some of the intellectual interests in searching out the elements in the oral traditions that are reliable as sources of data, and the ones which are either unreliable or provide clues to other sources.

Source material for history writing falls into three groups which are written, material and traditional.¹⁰⁹ As already pointed out in this chapter, traditional sources are messages or information that have been transmitted orally from one generation to the next. For the historian of Africa, comparison with parallel source material and knowledge of current interpretation will normally show him whether his particular source can be presumed true, partially true, or faked.¹¹⁰ The problem of the trustworthiness of oral traditions, therefore, has led to the difficulty in the reconstruction of specific aspects of the past of a society. In the study of Benin, traces of the past surviving in works of art, European travellers' accounts and traditional sources have made the past compelling in and of itself. The early Portuguese texts,¹¹¹ other European travellers' accounts,¹¹² and the Intelligence Reports generated during the period of British colonial rule are valuable documentary sources which help to clarify the contents and intentions of oral traditions from Benin. Archaeological research also supports some of the contents of oral traditions, in providing data and survey evidence. For example, Patrick Darling, an archaeologist who has worked on Benin, points out that "no account of the iya (moats) can be complete without the opinions and oral records of the people now living in

¹⁰⁸ Phillips Stevens, Jr. 1978, "The Uses of Oral Tradition in the Writing of African History," *Tarikh (Historical Method)* Vol. 6 No. 1, p.21.

¹⁰⁹ *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 20, 15th Edition. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1986, p.636.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹¹ See A. F. C. Ryder, 1965, *Materials for West African History in Portuguese Archives*. University of London: The Athlone Press.

¹¹² See Adam Jones, 1983, *German Sources for West African History* Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH; and also, Noel Matthews, 1973, *Materials for West African History in the Archives of the United Kingdom*. University of London: The Athlone Press.

the area in which they were built.”¹¹³ His argument is that the oral data are linked to fairly stable settlement continuity over the centuries.¹¹⁴ The excavations and researches in and around Benin City by Graham Connah were also examined in the light of oral references and against the objective dating from archaeology. This demonstrates the extent to which oral tradition can be relied upon.

While there are minority traditions of the underprivileged or of the marginalised people, most of the Benin traditions closely concern specific events connected either in relationship between the Oba and his chiefs or allegiances to the monarchy. For all hereditary chieftaincy title holders, oral traditions are transmitted from father to son in the line of direct descent or from father to children as the case may be. An example is Chief Ogamien of Benin, who till this day, maintains a family court history, in order to keep their own historical records vis-à-vis the royal palace history. For the non-hereditary chiefs, some traditions are transmitted within the order of chiefs - Town and Palace Chiefs - but there still remains a basic problem of the contents and intentions. For the period c.1440 to 1897, evidence from some traditions matched information acquired through early European documentation. For example, two independent sources, the description of West Africa by Duarte Pacheco Pereira published in about 1507, and the account of Portuguese expansion written by the chronicler Joao de Barros in 1552 are the early and most important text material used by scholars working on Benin. Pacheco Pereira maintained that he had visited Benin four times at the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth, and based his information, presumably, on local informants.¹¹⁵ The present day evidence in Benin traditions concerning the warrior kings were also recorded independently by Olfert Dapper in his book first published 1668 in Amsterdam. Some information provided by Dapper on Benin wars and the organisation of the Benin army of the period, have been corroborated by some Benin elders who have had no access to the original European texts. During the field work for this research, my informants gave evidence of the use of Portuguese visitors by Oba Esigie in his wars. The evidence of Duarte Pires in his report published in 1516,¹¹⁶ and Alessandro Zorzi,¹¹⁷ confirm Portuguese military assistance to Oba Esigie in his wars against Idah and

¹¹³ Patrick J. Darling, 1984, *The Ancient Linear Earthworks of Benin and Ishan Parts 1 and 2*. Cambridge Monographs in Archaeology II, BAR International Series, p. 34.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Duarte Pacheco Pereira, *Emeraldo de situ Orbis*, Book 2. Cited in John K. Thornton, 1988, “Traditions,” p. 352.

¹¹⁶ Duarte Pires to King of Portugal, 20 October 1516, Brasio, *Monumenta*, I, p.370. Cited in Thornton, 1988, “Traditions,” p.358.

¹¹⁷ Alessandro Zorzi, “Informatio hauuto io da portogalesi .1517. I Venecia,” fol. 140v., published with notes in F. Leite da Faria and Avelino Teixeira da Mota, *Novidades Nauicas e Ultramainas* (Lisbon, 1977), a *separata*

Udo. This Portuguese military assistance was also documented in Benin art works, as evidence that gives insight into the lives of the Benin people. Other information from European travellers' accounts dealing with the seventeenth to the nineteenth century add some evidence to Benin oral traditions that suggests their trustworthiness.

As already noted, the primary sources for the reconstruction of early Benin history are scarce due to the deficiencies of written data. However, for the purpose of this study, the range of materials from archives and libraries were collections of documents most of which were generated during the colonial period as intelligence reports compiled by colonial administrative officers; annual reports; papers from CSO files; provincial papers from Benin District and Benin Province. Information from these documents were supplemented with historical texts, which are basically written accounts by European traders, travellers and explorers who visited West Africa between c.1400 A.D and 1900 as well as with materials in European archives and libraries.¹¹⁸ Scholarly articles and books, and the works of non-academic historians of Benin have been very useful. Existing literature shows the present state of knowledge and the trend of research.

In the absence of primary documentary evidence which were either generated by the events or produced to record the events immediately, data from Benin oral traditions opened up the boundaries of historical space in a way that made it easier to advance the range and quality of historical knowledge of the Benin past. The data were assembled from interviews conducted in and around Benin City. Those interviewed were the first class Benin chiefs, resource persons in the palace of the Oba, village community leaders, non-academic historians who are informants to visiting scholars and researchers. The fieldwork was in two phases: the first from 1992 to 1994, and the second from October 1996 to March 1997.

The oral traditions from Benin were critically assessed in the light of competing interpretations of its precolonial past. At Urhonigbe and Udo for instance, most of the elders had no idea of Egharevba's works, and gave information as they have known it through the reproduction of the tradition from one generation to the next. Interviews with groups of elders were even more rewarding. As an elder recalls the events of the past, they all agree on *what* happened, but disagree, in some cases, on *why* it happened. The memory of events seems to be fresh in them. They did not seem to lack a sense of interpretation or explanation of the events. In Benin City, the situation was different. An informant who was not too convinced of 'his memory of recall' will refer the researcher to another 'authority' for confirmation of the

from *memorias da Academia das Ciencias de Lisboa*, classe de Ciencias, 20 (1977). Cited in Thornton, 1988, "Traditions," p.358.

details of the oral tradition in order to avoid what some of them considered to be ‘public embarrassment.’ The chiefs also agreed to give information because the present Oba of Benin, Omo N’Oba N’Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Erediauwa who had earlier granted me audience and supported the fieldwork financially, had advised them to co-operate with me. The evidence from my informants, no doubt, were beyond their lifetime, but demonstrate the essential continuity of Benin history and culture in the present generation. The traditions had their limitations in terms of the problems of chronology, distortion - deliberate or accidental, and selection of what was considered to be the correct and accurate description of the past.

Data analysis after the field in terms of selection and interpretation of sources, the context and content of data, would appear to demonstrate that in all societies, the past is the subject of continuing debate. At its best, historical study, whether based on written sources or derived from oral evidence, contributes to this debate by giving history a purpose through illuminating some aspects of the past as faithfully as it can. On the one hand, the means to this end are the same: to gather, scrutinise, interpret, and array as many sources and arguments as possible. On the other hand, differences emerge among writers due to the presentation of conflicting views of particular periods and problems, albeit within the context of general interpretations.

When differences to some extent, provides the opportunity to deepen understanding of the historical details, the sources of historical knowledge become very crucial. In this study, the use of oral history and traditions has been one of the most hopeful means of filling the yawning gaps in the interpretation of Benin military history. Because oral traditions are still alive and have a larger and more important place in Benin history, its impact was bound to be great in studies of early history. The people of Benin transmitted substantial bodies of knowledge from one generation to the next and sustained complex political and socio-economic hierarchies, all without practising writing.

History as a discipline is not isolated from other disciplines. Hence, this study also relied on the role of non historical data in historical reconstruction. Other sources, basically data from archaeology, ethnography, anthropology, and evidence from linguistics promoted an interdisciplinary approach in the collection and evaluation of material for the military system of Benin. The data from these sources were required for a satisfactory historical understanding of the Benin past, and were utilised in such a manner without departing from the accepted critical canons of historical research. The Benin past has been reviewed in the light of information that has not been available previously or that has long been overlooked.

¹¹⁸ See, Adam Jones, 1983, *German Sources*; Noel Matthews, 1973, *Materials for West African History*; and A.

The evidence were weighed and the opinions of other writers were assessed - the opinions were sometimes contradictory - but it was necessary to determine the correct theory or set of facts. This was an effort to give the history a purpose through illuminating some aspects of the past as faithfully as it was possible.

The justification for the use of data from other disciplines is because of the often repeated problems of early African historiography. J.D. Fage explains it as “the comparative scarcity of documentary source materials for early period and the consequent need to develop other sources such as oral tradition, linguistics and archaeology.”¹¹⁹ Whether early African history is still very popular with African historians or not, is the subject of on-going debate between Michel Doortmont and Jan Vansina. In the opinion of Doortmont, sources for early African history are scarce, often difficult to interpret and in many cases the results of research are disappointing.¹²⁰ Vansina disagrees with this view, and argues that even a cursory comparison of the present state of historical knowledge about Africa before 1800 with the state of knowledge a generation, or even a decade ago, suffices to demonstrate how much new bits of knowledge has led to much altered and better informed understanding of this past.¹²¹ The interesting aspect of this debate is the concern with the problems about the past, what they consist of, and the reasons why the problem of historical knowledge has become a central philosophical issue.

The writing of Benin history has been to a considerable extent the efforts of academic and non-academic historians, working to extend the bounds of knowledge of Benin before 1900. This work is a contribution to that effort and attempts have been made to make a critical and comparative use of a wide variety of sources in order to produce an intelligent and meaningful description of the past. In doing this, the methodology adopted is the analytical approach, in the strict sense of historical discourse rather than narratives centred on events, albeit, within the framework of interdisciplinary dialogue. This will enable us to demonstrate the character of historical knowledge and understanding of the past of pre-colonial Benin society.

In his work on methodological issues in Africanist interdisciplinary research, Ato Quayson has put forward an argument that “the question as to the precise nature of the knowledge that the interdisciplinary configuration produces may never be satisfactorily

F. C. Ryder, 1965, *Materials for West African History*.

¹¹⁹ J. D. Fage, 1981, “The Development of African Historiography”. In J. Ki - Zerbo (ed.) *UNESCO General History of Africa I : Methodology and African Prehistory*. Paris: UNESCO, and London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., p. 41.

¹²⁰ See M. R. Doortmont, 1996, “Texts without Context,” *Journal of African History* 37 , pp. 490-492.

¹²¹ For details, see Jan Vansina, 1997, “The Doom of Early African History?” *History in Africa* 24, pp.337-343.

settled,” adding that “the crucial thing, perhaps is always to be rigorously conscious of the options that are exercised.”¹²² To him, however, an interdisciplinary approach by graduate students might be construed as concealing some measure of confusion as to what exactly is being researched.¹²³ “But on the other hand”, he argues, “there is little doubt that the most adventurous students are defining their areas of concern at the boundaries between disciplines.”¹²⁴ Of course, in African studies generally, the definition of theories and development of ideas within an interdisciplinary dialogue usually raises a number of questions relating to epistemological problems. Therefore, scholars of early African history seem to perceive the tension in interdisciplinary analyses, and have approached their subjects within the framework of their research problem and questions. The methodological approach adopted by the historians, no doubt, had advanced the construction of historical knowledge about Africa before 1800.

The propositions of this study constitute the core of theoretical or analytical framework in discussing the process of the establishment and development of the military during the period of expansion and consolidation in the history of Benin kingdom. It is not an attempt to write African history from an African perspective, the theoretical framework has been a guide to perception. This was to ensure that analyses of a more qualitative nature can be organised within a framework in order to add conceptual richness to the search for adequate solutions to the problems of historical research of precolonial African states and societies. Thomas Kuhn also explains the need for theory to organise scientific research:

In the absence of a paradigm (theory) or some candidate for a paradigm, all the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant. As a result, early fact gathering is a far more nearly random activity than the one that subsequent scientific development makes familiar.¹²⁵

The problematic for this study in organising the facts within a theoretical framework was the selection of evidence deemed most significant, as the less significant records were either not examined at all or merely acknowledged in the footnotes. The choice as to which fact to use was based on the working hypotheses of this research. This should by no means suggest that facts which conflicted with the main argument were left out - definitely not - for to have done that would mean a denial of the validity of history. In a sense, a framework of analysis was necessary for this research. Allen Davis and Harold Woodman are convinced that:

¹²² Ato Quayson, 1998, “Means and Meanings: Methodological Issues in Africanist Interdisciplinary Research,” *History in Africa* 25, p.318.

¹²³ *ibid.*, p.307.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ T. S. Kuhn, 1970, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p.15.

historians cannot even begin their investigations without adopting some theory, even if it is expressed vaguely and held tentatively. In the course of their investigations they might alter or refine the original theory or replace it with another. But their final product will always rest upon some kind of theoretical base. Thus, if two historians become convinced by their evidence that different factors motivated the behaviour of the people involved in a particular event, they will disagree, presenting different facts and giving different meanings to the same facts.¹²⁶

They argue further that historical facts have no intrinsic meaning, but take on meaning and significance only when they are organised and presented by historians with a particular point of view.¹²⁷ It is true that facts are searched for with a purpose in mind. The facts once ascertained may be organised within a hypothesis to arrive at what is called theory: a total view of related events. The role of theory in historical investigation has been a matter of historiographical and methodological concern to professional historians. To some African historians who are yet to be convinced about the need for theory, the organisation of data with an appropriate logical sequence of the issues, seems to be their main concern. Of course, it is always interesting to note that historians sometimes disagree because they organise and present historical facts with a particular point of view.

In the course of this doctoral research, five historiographical problems of the precolonial history of Benin were identified. The problems have been rephrased as questions. First, can we establish the chronology of the period? In other words, is it possible to establish the chronological order and genealogical relationships of the kings? or when we focus on the Benin society, can we establish a chronological order of historical development since few informants have any conception of the absolute time-scale of the historical process? Second, can we determine what happened in the past and why it happened? Third, how useful will the study and evaluation of oral tradition be by using the rules of evidence to place every data in the widest known context of period and place? Fourth, how relevant were the data from archaeological, anthropological, ethnographic and linguistics sources? Finally, what are the difficulties posed by the problem of exact or proper dating and interpretation of Benin bronzes and crafts as historical records? These were the questions that raised basic historical and methodological problems in the study of the military system of Benin.

In confronting these problems, an analytical approach was adopted in evaluating the oral traditions from Benin. Its consideration as messages from the past were assessed with other evidence. Archaeological discussions of the issues involved in the state formation

¹²⁶ Allen F. Davis and Harold D. Woodman, 1992, *Conflicts and Consensus in Modern American History*. Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, p.5.

process in Africa concerning certain recurrent aspects of African society such as the notion of ritual power and leadership, helped to address the problematic aspects of this study of the establishment and development of the military in Benin. The debates on the “gun-slave-cycle” which addresses the relationship between war and slave trade in Africa from 1500 to 1800 have been useful in validating the authenticity of the messages from oral traditions. This is because the update of literature on the extent and impact of the slave trade on African societies has been used to balance the evidence from non-written sources. As John Thornton points out, “the full study of African war, like the study of African history in general, is greatly hampered by the source material available to the historians.”¹²⁸ This problem has challenged historians to be very critical in the analysis of warfare and society in precolonial Africa.

Looking at the historiographical problems identified in this study, the information collected for this work were compared to the oral traditions recorded in colonial intelligence reports which covered the Edo-speaking peoples and eastern Yorubaland. The reports were compiled by British colonial officers for an accurate knowledge of a people without literary tradition. They were compiled at a time when the forces of modern economic and social change had not made their full impact on Nigeria. To a reasonable extent, they were able to record the “facts” about states and societies in pre-colonial Nigeria. My informants, with the exception of Prince Ena Basimi Eweka and Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, had no access to these intelligence reports, which are deposited at the Nigerian National Archives. Their information on the reforms and changes in the military also agrees with the colonial intelligence reports. The main problem was that of chronology.

The chronological problems in Benin history have received considerable attention from scholars.¹²⁹ The problem arises because the chronology is based mainly on the Benin kinglist for the period before 1897. Although this list names 38 kings of Benin and covers past centuries with seemingly great accuracy, some writers find it problematic to take it as historically factual. Hence, the analyses of chronological data for Benin remains a major task for the historian. In confronting this problem, the process of history-making in Benin was relied upon, in order to determine the relative sequence of events and situations in precolonial Benin. As already pointed out, the Benin people relate such events as wars and conquests, the

¹²⁷ *ibid.*, p.7

¹²⁸ Thornton, 1999, *Warfare*, p.17.

¹²⁹ See, Stefan Eisenhofer, 1997, “The Benin kinglist/s: some questions of chronology.” *History in Africa* 24 (1997), pp. 139-156; R. E. Bradbury, 1959, “Chronological Problems in the Study of Benin history.” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* Vol. 1 No. 4 pp. 263-287. See also, David Henige, 1974, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

founding of social and political institutions, the creation of titles and title-groups, the planning of Benin City, the progress of ritual and occupational specialisation, developments in bronze-casting, and the introduction of new cults to the reigns of specific Obas.¹³⁰ “By setting these events against our dynastic chronology,” argues Bradbury, “it should be possible to obtain a fairly coherent picture of at least the broad phases of Benin history.”¹³¹ This is one of the advantages in the use of oral traditions in historical reconstruction of the Benin history. This advantage is further reinforced by the data from the thousands of royal art works from Benin.

The historiographical problem is basically the assessment of the bronzes and crafts as sources which complement other data from field research and archival work. The Benin works of art¹³² were made for records as well as for ritual and ornamental purposes. This presents a problem as to what proportion of the Benin plaques and other bronzes were intended to record persons and events, even though a considerable number were intended to convey some specific information about specific events or particular persons. Nevertheless, it remains true that the bronzes contain much potentially valuable information about Benin society, culture and history over a very long period.¹³³

The value of Benin works of art as historical records derive from the fact that history consists of whatever relics of the past which have survived - scripts, artefacts, words, etc. Of course, the art of a society is also its archive. History becomes a living reality to us through art. This is because it is the art of each society that gives civilisation its distinct character and rhythm. It reflects the whole manner of life of a period. The oral traditions critically assessed vis-à-vis the royal art of Benin and other complimentary sources, have had to bear the brunt of historical reconstruction. In spite of the degree of its limitations which has been acknowledged in this work, scholars working on precolonial Benin cannot afford to ignore the evidence which they provide. The evidence have been useful in working out the structure of this work.

Periodisation

The structure of this work has been based on the periodisation of history as marked by political movements and developments, which has provided a framework for general

¹³⁰ Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, p. 43.

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² See, F. Kaplan (ed.), 1981, *Images of Power: Art of the Royal Court of Benin*. New York; F. Kaplan, 1991, “Benin Art Revisited: Photographs and Museums”, *Visual Anthropology* 4,; F. Kaplan, 1991, “Fragile Legacy: Photographs as Documents in Recovering Political and Cultural History at the Royal Court of Benin Nigeria” *History in Africa* 18; K. Ezra, 1992, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Collection*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; J. N. Nevadomsky, 1997, “Studies of Benin Art and Material Culture 1897-1997”, *African Arts* 30, 3.

assessment of the process of the establishment and development of the military during the period of expansion and consolidation in the history of Benin Kingdom. As already noted in this chapter, researchers will find fairly detailed records of change for the period between 1440 AD and 1897. History deals with chains of change, and the chapters in this work have been grouped chronologically to reflect continuity and change in Benin history. The title - *The Military System of Benin 1440-1897* - not only gives a fair warning about the contents, but also sets the limits within the field of military history, and which rather more accurately captures the context and dynamics of Benin military history. This has made it possible to organise the main theme of this research into the following sub-themes: Benin military history before 1440 AD; the era of warrior kings, c.1440 to 1600; the period of its military power, 1600 to 1800; the century of political exigencies, 1800 to 1897; and the response of Benin military system to British invasion in 1897 and finally, the concluding chapter.

The discussion of the research perspective of this study has been the main focus in this chapter one. It dealt with the state of the art, and presents the essence of the contribution of this study to international research, in particular, how the findings of this doctoral research have helped to advance three important on-going debates in African historiography. The first is the debate on civil supremacy over the military. Second, is the contribution to the debate on the place of the military in the formation of states, and the reasons why historians tend to disagree over conflicting interpretations. Third, is the contribution to the 'gun-slave-cycle' debate which attempts to assess the relationship between warfare and European slave trade in Africa. As already discussed in this chapter, this study introduces the concept of 'military system' and the reasons why there is considerable diversity in the ways in which military systems have evolved in different societies over long period of time in history. It also discusses the research questions and problems. Finally, it addresses the problem of sources and methodology, in particular, how the sources were recovered and closely examined. The study specifically identifies with the unique contribution of oral tradition to the advancement of historical knowledge of the Benin past.

Chapter two addresses aspects of Benin's political and military history before 1440 AD. The discussion of the historical process before 1440 attempts to examine the historical legacy of the first millennium which formed a variety of influences that shaped the political culture and patterns of authority of the historical developments in the second millennium. The fundamental weakness of previous interpretations of the origins of Benin, and the Benin-Ife relationship, and the effort of historians to reconcile the contradictory appeals in various ways

¹³³ Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, p.252.

have been reconsidered in this chapter. Other issues concerning the development of politico-military ideas, warfare and state building, and the war potential of Benin before 1440 have also been examined with the aim of throwing more light on the significant events that changed the course of Benin history. The discussion of these issues gives a background of the conditions which led to the transformation of the state by the warrior kings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Chapter three focuses on the development of the military during the era of warrior kings from c.1440 to 1600, a period that witnessed the expansion of the state through warfare mounted virtually in all directions. It begins with the reforms introduced by Oba Ewuare the Great (c.1440-1473), the first of the warrior kings, whose reign marked the beginning of the transformation of the character of the kingdom of Benin. The reforms he introduced were calculated to eliminate rivalries between the Oba and his chiefs, and establish political monopoly over the exertion of military power. On the basis of Ewuare's reforms, this study examines the nature of the military system which evolved during this period with focus on the socio-economic background of the system, the political foundation of the system, organisation of the army, defensive fortification and establishment of military camps, weapons of war, strategy and tactics of warfare, as well as intelligence and logistics. The process of the establishment and development of the military during this period reflects the distribution of power within the Benin society.

Chapter four discusses changes in the military during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries within the context of domestic political constraints, leading to fluctuations in the military power of Benin. The changes were the results of the conflicts between the Oba and his chiefs, producing new political configurations in the structure of the state, which in turn significantly influenced the process of development of the military. The first shift in power relationship was the displacement of the Oba as the supreme military commander of the army, leading to a decline in the personal influence and authority of the Oba, and the chiefs who gained power came to overshadow the king. The complexity of the processes involved in the historical development of this period was due partly to the rise of commerce. This was a period of active trade between Benin and the Europeans, affecting the balance of power between rival elements. The effects of this development on warfare and warriors, economic foundations of military power, reorganisation of the army, the new weapons system, logistics, strategy and tactics of warfare have been discussed in this chapter.

Events closely associated with the development of the military in the nineteenth century - the most critical century in the history of Benin - are dealt with in chapter. It is

difficult to point to any critical turning point during this period, but a central issue in the transition process was the impact of domestic power politics and foreign trade on the military power of the state. The central problems encapsulated in the concept of nineteenth transition have been analysed in the context of the connection between internal dynamics and international forces that decisively altered the fortunes of Benin Empire. Moreover, the continued process of development of the Benin military system during this century of political exigencies has been examined vis-à-vis the interrelationship between the political economy and changing perspective on warfare, the reforms in military organisation, surveillance and collaboration, weapons build-up, new strategic plans, and the idea of a standing army. During this period, the interweaving of interests serves to illustrate the conflicting goals of the Oba and his chiefs.

Chapter six re-examines the Anglo-Benin military confrontation of February 1897, which was a drama without parallel in the annals of the military history of Benin, and offers a new perspective on the events which led to the conflict and its aftermath. While the Benin way in warfare, strategic thought and practice met its first and greatest test, this chapter critically analyses the resistance to British aggression, theatres of the war, and the guerrilla warfare which continued after the fall of Benin. In this chapter, attempt was made to answer the following questions: First, was the defeat of Benin due to miscalculation largely derived from erroneous appraisal of British strategic operations? Second, was the defeat of Benin due to the advantage of British superior military technology? Third, did the problem of internal political distress in Benin affect their threat perception of the British? However, this study points out that the conquest of Benin by the British imperialists was part of the manoeuvres to expand their influence and economic role in Africa in the age of new imperialism.

The concluding chapter discusses the relevance of the findings of this study for current debates in Benin historiography. The results explicitly reveals the relationship between military power and political control in the kingdom of Benin, and the reasons why the kingdom was so successful, militarily and politically. One of the findings was the strategy adopted by the state for securing civil predominance over the army which led to the development of a military system within the political structure of the state. In addition, the concluding chapter elucidates the empire-building initiative of Benin, and the question of the expansion of the frontiers of Benin through warfare which has continued to generate debates in Benin historiography. As the conclusion shows, in studying the military system of Benin during the period from c.1440 to 1897, it has been possible to offer new interpretations on the

dynamics of state formation process, and to understand why Benin was the centre of one of the most powerful political systems in precolonial Africa.

The bibliography contains the archival notes and references, the oral sources and list of informants, and the bibliographic notes and references of unpublished theses and papers, journal articles, and books or chapters in books which were either consulted or selected in the preparation of this thesis. Although not all the books or articles listed in the bibliography have been used in the preparation of this work, they remain important sources for those who wish to pursue further inquiries, as a guide to a type of comprehensive reading list frequently consulted by scholars working on aspects of Benin history and culture. In this way, the bibliography connects this work with the corpus of past scholarship on Benin.

CHAPTER TWO

ASPECTS OF BENIN MILITARY HISTORY BEFORE 1440 AD

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is not so much to present a complete military history of Benin before 1440 AD, as to provide an account which will be useful as part of the background to the understanding of the military system which evolved from the mid fifteen century until 1897 when Benin ceased to exist as a sovereign state. The discussion of the historical process before 1440 will attempt to examine the historical legacy of the first millennium which formed a variety of influences that shaped the political culture and patterns of authority of the Eweka dynasty from circa 1200 AD to the end of the nineteenth century. With this in view, it seeks to explain how the main institutional and social forces in the society interacted with the process of the establishment and development of the military. The period under consideration in this chapter is the exceedingly difficult phase in Benin history, with basic problems and main questions which are yet unresolved. On the issues why the historians of Benin disagree, attempt has been made to reconsider the major lines of interpretation of the origin of Benin, and the political upheavals during the first half of the fifteenth century. Other issues concerning the development of politico-military ideas, warfare and state building, and the war potential of Benin before 1440 AD have also been examined with the aim of throwing more light on the significant events that changed the course of Benin history.

The earliest history of Benin is shrouded in obscurity. However, what is easily discernible from glimpses of the past is a history with different phases of development, but accurate dates of historical events are not possible for the more remote phases of development. The difficulties are illustrated by the nature of the chronological problem. Since history deals with chains of change, the solution to this problem of chronological data begins with the division of Benin history into four periods: First, the period before the emergence of the Ogiso dynasty; second, the Ogiso period up to the interregnum; third, the period of the second dynasty up to 1897; and fourth, the period from 1897 to the present day. The basis of this periodisation is the enduring legacy of political movements and development in the last two thousand years, with relative sequence of events and situations in which change was the consequence of causality.

Not much is known of the pre-Ogiso period - the age of no kings in Benin society - but the social and political institutions which had their origins in that period partly explains the interaction of human activities in the locality for some thousands of years.¹ The emergence of the Ogiso dynasty in the first millennium was a major political development, a historical landmark in the state formation process. The Ogiso rulers were able to evolve strong monarchical traditions such that new social and political institutions which originated to strengthen the institution of monarchy led to the emergence of fundamental pattern of authority, from which title systems and more complex political units began to develop. The traditional institutions which emerged seems to have had their origins in this social movement that required concert and continuity of action over a considerable length of time.

However, at a date sometime in the mid-fifteenth century, in the second millennium, Benin had emerged with strong institutions of statehood. The institutions were formal methods of social organisation designed for the organisation of politics, state administration, economic and military activities. As will be seen later in this chapter, the character of the kingdom of Benin was transformed. The evidence of this transformation points to the beginning of the era of warrior kings in the line of the Eweka dynasty. From the second half of the fifteenth century, the politico-military consolidation of the state was pursued as a military policy by the warrior kings, and this was achieved through extensive warfare and expansion. This age was not the starting point for Benin kingdom, it was the beginning of another phase of expansion and consolidation. Relationship with Europeans began during this period, first with the Portuguese, the Dutch and then the British followed. The pattern of development of Benin political institutions seem to suggest evidence of internal state-building initiatives responding to local politics. The foundations for the attainment of political and military strength from the fifteenth century onwards were laid in the preceding centuries.

While it has been difficult for historians to provide exact dates for the foundation of the first dynasty or for the first glimmers of state formation, Alan Ryder argues that “to reconstruct its growth it is therefore necessary to work backwards from nearer and better events which suggest that the process was not one of a number of groups coalescing, but the expansion of a city-state nucleus”, which in his view, was probably “something more akin to the emergence of states in classical Greece than in northern Europe.”² The impression given by Ryder with this interpretation seems that Benin evolve through a process of integration of

¹ See for example, J. A. Atanda, 1991, “Kings in the Nigerian Society through the Ages,” an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan on 24 January, pp.9-16. See also, Obaro Ikime (ed.), 1980, *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd; J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds.), 1976, *History of West Africa* Volume I. London: Longman Group Ltd.

² A. F. C. Ryder, 1969, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd., p.2

different communities within the nucleus of a city-state.³ Perhaps in these circumstances, the social groups or communities were compelled to come together, and then, submitted to a governing authority in order to gain the military and economic benefits of centralisation. It is also possible that Benin evolved in response to conflict between classes or groups of individuals whose interests were determined or limited by their leadership roles or appropriation of power in the society.

There are persuasive reasons in the interpretation of Ryder. Nevertheless, it may be reasonable to view the first glimmers of state formation within a conceptual framework which explains the evolution of political institutions and government as a consequence of social change. This is because pre-dynastic structures and traditions provided the traditional values as sources of legitimisation of the new institutions which began to emerge. From the *Odionwere system* that is, the pre-Ogiso structures and traditions, each of the institutions of the Benin society was complex, which reflect several factors of change and continuity. Power dynamics seem to be the main causal factor of change because new institutions were needed to express new political dispensations. Given these uncertainties, it is pertinent to discuss the origins of Benin in some detail. This may throw more light on the different factors which contributed to change and development during the period.

Origins of Benin: A Reconsideration

Scholars and non-academic (local) historians studying the origins of Benin do not yet agree on the origins of the people. The fundamental weakness of some of the interpretations is the misunderstanding of the theories of migration with explanations of the connection between Benin and Ile-Ife. They have also not adequately explored why and how the relationship between Benin and Ile-Ife developed. Historians have tried to reconcile the contradictory interpretations of the origin of the Eweka dynasty. Some simply admit the Yoruba version and condemn the Benin version as abuse of oral traditions. In reality, the arguments have raised a number of issues concerning the limits and possibilities of historical explanation, not least, of which are a number of problems in the methods for reconstructing historical knowledge about non-literate societies. However, the significant advances in the range and quality of historical

³ The importance of urbanisation as a historical force has not been given any attention by historians of Benin. Anderson and Rathbone also points out that generally, there is no one urban history of Africa, and no single paradigm that can be imposed to explain the growth, development or decline of African towns. See David M. Anderson and Richard Rathbone, 2000, "Urban Africa: Histories in the Making," In: *idem, Africa's Urban Past*. Oxford: James Currey and Portsmouth (N. H.): Heinemann, pp. 1-17.

knowledge based on oral traditions,⁴ and background data from linguistics, archaeology and ethnography have necessitated a reconsideration of the origins of Benin.

There is reason to think, that for upwards of three millennia, people speaking varieties of the Edo (Benin) language have occupied an area some 31,000 square kilometres (12,000 square miles) in extent, to the west of the River Niger in present-day southern Nigeria.⁵ From these people the kingdom of Benin was established. The name by which these people were identified, or of their territory has not been established with reasonable confidence. The Benin people call themselves Edo and not 'Benin'. Their Yoruba neighbours to the west call them 'Ado', while the Igbo neighbours to the east call them 'Idu'. Among their southern neighbours, the Urhobos call them 'Aka' while the Ijaw and Itsekiri call them 'Ado' and 'Ubini' respectively.⁶ Ekhaguosa Aisien argues convincingly that the Itsekiri passed on the name 'Ubini' to the first Portuguese explorers, and that the word 'Benin' is the 'Portugalisation' of 'Ubini'.⁷ The basis of his argument is probably because the Itsekiris were the escorts of the Portuguese to Benin City. Alan Ryder disagrees with this view, pointing out that "the possibility that the Portuguese took the name 'Benin' from some coastal people before coming into contact with the State is an unlikely one, because no southern Nigerian language offers a reasonable source for it."⁸ There is reason to accept the view of Ryder because the 'Beni' associated with the Nupe comes nearer in form to the 'Beny' of Portuguese records than any of the derivations of the name current in Benin tradition.⁹

From the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the name 'Beny' for the territory and capital of the king of Benin began to appear in the reports of Portuguese explorers and traders. However, it would appear that the people or their territory was originally called Ubini, the name that was known to the Itsekiri neighbours. In fact colonial intelligence reports confirm

⁴ In spite of the quality of oral sources, they have their limitations. See for example, David Henige, 1998, 'Twixt the cup and the Lip: Field Notes on the Way to Print' *History in Africa*. 25, pp.119-131; Jan Vansina, 1985, *Oral Tradition as History*. Oxford: James Currey Ltd., reprinted 1997; P. R. Schmidt, 1990, "Oral Traditions, Archaeology and History: A Short Reflective History," In: P. Robertshaw (ed.) *A History of African Archaeology*. Portsmouth, N. H: Heinemann, pp.252-270; Robin Law, 1984, "How Truly Traditional is our Traditional History? The Case of Samuel Johnson and the Recording of Yoruba Oral Tradition," *History in Africa*. 11; David Henige, 1982, *Oral Historiography*. London, New York and Lagos: Longman Group Limited; Rolf Kuschel and Torben Monberg, 1977, "History and Oral Traditions: A Case Study," *Journal of the Polynesian Society*. 86; Jan Vansina, 1965, *Oral Tradition*. Chicago.

⁵ A. F. C. Ryder, 1997, "Benin State and Region, History", in: John Middleton (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Africa South of the Sahara*. Vol. 1 New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, p.179.

⁶ Ekhaguosa Aisien, 1995, *Benin City: The Edo State Capital*. Benin City: Aisien Publishers, p.12.

⁷ *ibid.*, pp.12-13.

⁸ A. F. C. Ryder, 1965, "A Reconsideration of the Ife-Benin Relationship," *Journal of African History*. Vol. VI No. 1, p.31.

⁹ *ibid.* p.32.

that “the original name is said to have been Ubini”.¹⁰ Omo n’Oba n’Edo Erediauwa, the present Oba of Benin confirmed this. According to the Benin monarch, “of course we know that there was a period the territory was known as Ubini.”¹¹ He did not specify which period nor give approximate date of when the territory which later became the kingdom of Benin was known as Ubini.

This lack of historical knowledge on the origin of the name Ubini, complicates the search for the origin of the people. At a particular time, for instance, in the early history of Benin, the territory was also known as Igodomigodo.¹² The origin of the name Igodomigodo is well known in Benin traditions. During the first millennium when the institution of monarchy - the Ogiso dynasty - was established in Benin, the first king, Ogiso Igodo, called the numerous village communities which were joined together in a political union under him as Igodomigodo. His village at Ugbeku was the capital where he built the royal palace. His successor, Ogiso Ere “is reputed to have transferred the Ogiso palace to *Uhunmwidunmwun*, which was a more favourable seat of government for the dynasty than Ugbeku.”¹³ But the name Igodomigodo for the territory, which means the ‘area of jurisdiction’ of Igodo as king with authority from above remained unchanged after the transfer of the seat of government. Philip Igbafe explains it this way: “Igodo claimed to have a divine mission from the gods to rule the ever-increasing communities around Benin” and “under him, these became collectively known as *Igodomigodo*, meaning ‘town of towns’ as well as ‘the land of Igodo’, thus reflecting the origin of the Benin kingdom and the genesis of its monarchical system under Igodo and his successors.”¹⁴ Igodomigodo may not be ‘town of towns’ as claimed by Igbafe, but ‘the land of Igodo’ is a closely acceptable meaning. It is possible that the name Igodomigodo was to claim superiority over the other emerging communities, which was directly identified with the first ruler or founder.

In any case, with the emergence of Igodomigodo as a political territory, the semblance of an urbanisation process would appear to have led to increased production and exchange of goods and services, resulting in ‘surplus’ which may have been the reason why the people

¹⁰ National Archives Ibadan (hereinafter referred to as NAI), Ben Prof. 4/3/4. H. N. Nevins and H. G. Aveling, 1932, Intelligence Report on Benin Division of the Benin Province, p.8.

¹¹ Erediauwa, CFR, The Omo N’Oba N’Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba of Benin, Address Delivered During the International Conference on Benin Studies held at the University of Benin, Benin City on Tuesday, 24 March, 1992 p.11.

¹² R. N. Agheyisi, 1986, *An Edo-English Dictionary*. Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, p.66.

¹³ P. A. Igbafe, 1974, “Benin in the Pre-Colonial Era,” *Tarikh* (No.17) *Peoples and Kingdoms of West Africa in the Pre-Colonial Period* Vol. 5 No. 1, p.6.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.5.

began call the area Ubini.¹⁵ A Benin writer explains the meaning of Ubini as “*Ehe ne emwi i na vbe*”¹⁶ which is interpreted to mean “the land of inexhaustible resources” or “the land where there is no scarcity.”¹⁷ It is not very clear whether the name Igodomigodo was used interchangeably with Ubini, or whether the name Ubini was first used before the name Igodomigodo, to describe the area by the people themselves. This is because what is now Benin City was at the time of Ogiso Igodo a cluster of over thirty village settlements, a number sufficient to advance the argument that the area was a fertile land suitable for human habitation. Surely, the name Ubini was used as a geographical description of the territory.

During the reign of Oba Ewedo, about the mid thirteenth century, as the fourth in the line of kings of the Eweka dynasty, he insisted that the kingdom should be called by its original name Ubini.¹⁸ Sometimes, writers get their facts mixed up between Ubini and ‘*Ile-Ibinu*’. *Ile-Ibinu* was the Yoruba expression used by Prince Oranmiyan from Ile-Ife to describe Benin City as “the land of vexation” when he was rejected and frustrated by the Benin people during the period of interregnum after the end of the Ogiso dynasty. The circumstances surrounding the coming of Prince Oranmiyan to Benin are complex, but it seems that the Binis did not identify themselves with that expression at any time.¹⁹

The name ‘Edo’ or Oredo for the capital of Benin kingdom is also claimed in Benin tradition to have originated through royal proclamation by Oba Ewuare the Great who reigned in the second half of the fifteenth century. The circumstances surrounding the proclamation are not well known except that the name Edo, became an expression of love. In this case, the tradition which claim that Ewuare’s aim was to immortalise his deified friend, Edo, for his love and goodness, seems more acceptable. Hence, the City became known as ‘Edo N’Evbo Ahire’ meaning ‘Edo, the City of Love’.²⁰ The name did not, apply to other towns and villages within the territory of the Benin kingdom. It was common for other Benin people outside of the capital to say ‘*Irrie Edo*’ meaning ‘I am going to Benin City’. On the other hand, those travelling out of Benin City will say, ‘*Irrie Udo*’ or ‘*Irrie Ugo N’Iyekorhionmwon*’ or ‘*Urhonigbe*’, meaning, ‘I am going to Udo’ or ‘I am going to Ugo in

¹⁵ This claim has not been authentically ascertained, although my informants in Benin City, namely Prince Ena Basimi Eweka, Chief Otasowie Oliha, Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, Pa. Omoruyi Azehi; and Pa. Isaac Uwabor at Udo; and at Urhonigbe Edede Omogboru Uwadiae (nee) Igbinoba, Pa. Sunday Ogbomo, Mr. Okunrobo Obarisiagbon and Pa. Aiyunurhiorhue Ogbomo were all convinced that the capital city of the Benin kingdom was known by the name Ubini at a particular time in its history.

¹⁶ Osaren S. B. Omoregie, 1987, *Ozedo 6*. Ilupeju, Lagos: Nelson Publishers Limited, p.1.

¹⁷ Dr. O. S. B. Omoregie, educationist and local historian, and a former research assistant to Jacob U. Egharevba, interviewed in Benin City on 15 March, 1997.

¹⁸ J. U. Egharevba, 1954, *The Origin of Benin*. Benin City: African Industrial Press, p.8; and the author’s *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1968, p.10.

¹⁹ Interview with Prince Enawekponmwon Basimi Eweka, Secretary of the Benin Traditional Council and local historian, in Benin City, on 18 June 1993.

Iyekorhionmwon'. Ivie Erhahon explains why this is so. In a study on Benin, she points out that "the Benin man speaks of himself as a child of his village or of the region of the kingdom where he is resident."²¹ Edo, popularised in the City of Benin, was accepted as the language classification for the Benin people which became their identity as 'Ovbi Edo' meaning an Edo person. This is the background of the name Edo in Benin history. Therefore, in 1992, the king of Benin, Oba Erediauwa could decree "that our territory properly speaking is Benin and the people are either Edo or Benin People."²²

The attempt to establish with reasonable confidence the origin of the name 'Benin' has not been as problematic as tracing the origins of Benin. The question has always been: where did the people come from? The use of a Benin political vocabulary - *ivbioto* - meaning "children of the land" but often interpreted as "children of the soil" suggests there were some people who are the original inhabitants of the land. In fact, an area in Benin City is called *Idunmwun Ivbioto*, which is a well known neighbourhood. This may also suggest that the original inhabitants were joined by immigrants from other areas. The question is: from where did they come from?

European colonial writers were the first to speculate that the Benin people came in three waves of migration: First, those who came from Nupe, a place in the Middle Belt of Nigeria; second, those who migrated from the Sudan; third, those who came from Egypt through the Sahara and Ile-Ife.²³ Jacob Egharevba seemed to have been influenced by early colonial historiography; labouring too, under Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* which was widely read in Nigeria at that time. Perhaps, to ensure his own successful writing career,²⁴ Egharevba adopted the views of Benin migrations in early colonial historiography which he blended with Johnson's view. He adopted the views in his own books²⁵ without critically assessing the implications. This marked the beginning of conflicting interpretations in Benin history, with Egharevba's *Short History*, of course, opening the intellectual debate in tracing the origins of Benin. The debate so far has centred on four points of view: First, the mythological version of the origin; second, the Benin people as the original inhabitants of their localities; third, the theory of migrations from Nupe, Sudan/Egypt and Ile-Ife; and

²⁰ Egharevba, 1954, *Origin of*, p.8.

²¹ I. B. E. Erhahon, 1995, "Aspects of Edo Phonology: An Autosegmental Approach), unpublished M. A. Thesis, Department of Linguistics and African Languages, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria, December, p. x.

²² Erediauwa, CFR, Omo N'Oba N'Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba of Benin, *op. cit.* p.11.

²³ See H. L. Roth, *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors*. London: Routledge and Paul Kegan Limited, 1968 (first published by F. King and Son, Halifax, 1903), and P. A. Talbot, *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*. 4 volumes. London: Oxford University Press, 1926.

²⁴ Jacob Egharevba claimed that the *Orunmila* divination of his great-grandfather predicted in 1909 that he would be successful in life as a writer. See J. U. Egharevba, 1972, *Itan Edagbon Nwen*. Benin City, p.8.

²⁵ See J. U. Egharevba, *Short History; Origin of; and, Fusion of Tribes*. Benin City, 1966.

fourth, an Ile-Ife origin of the present ruling Eweka dynasty, often confused and mixed up with the origin of the people of Benin.

According to Benin mythology, their land is the cradle of the world which was founded by the first king who was the youngest son of *Osanobua* (also called *Osanoghodua*) the Supreme God, the Almighty.²⁶ At the time the Supreme God sent his children to the world, the earth was all water and void, and He gave them the option to choose their heart desires. One of his children chose wealth, the other chose knowledge, and another chose medicine or mystical knowledge. The youngest child had nothing apparently to choose and looking around, he saw a snail shell which was found to contain sand. When they got to the world, they found it covered with water. On the instructions of a divine bird, the youngest son upturned the snail shell in an area which is now Edo (Benin) and the place became land. Thus, the youngest son became the owner of the land, which made him powerful and wealthy, and on the request of his elder brothers, he had to share portions of it with them for their settlement. This is why the Benin man says '*Oba yanto ya se evbo-ebo*' meaning 'Oba of Benin owns the land up to European countries'.

A local historian of Benin, Christopher Ugowe also attempts to support this mythology. He argues that "a glance at the atlas or map of the world shows that Benin is located close to the centre of the earth near that point where the zero latitude, known geographically as the Equator, intersects with the zero longitude, known as the Greenwich Meridian."²⁷ This argument is an attempt to introduce some logic to the Benin mythology of creation, but it does not seem to be empirically based. It is possible the mythology attempts to explain the world view of the ruling class as original owners of the land, and this was basically an ideology of land ownership for the royal family. It justifies the king as the owner of land, which has made him powerful and wealthy. This Benin mythology may also be the world view of the people as original inhabitants of their land.

The claim by some Benin people as the original inhabitants of their land is more justifiable than the mythology which explains the creation of the world. In several wards in and around Benin City, the people assert that their ancestors have been on the spot from the very beginning. Linguistic evidence suggests that the Binis have occupied the area for thousands of years.²⁸ Glottochronological considerations which were based on linguistic and

²⁶ For details, see Erediauwa, CFR, Omo N'Oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba of Benin, "The Evolution of Traditional Rulership in Nigeria", being a paper presented under the auspices of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Nigeria on 11 September, 1984.

²⁷ C. O. O. Ugowe, 1997, *Benin in World History*. Lagos: Kosayaz Nigeria Limited, pp. 1 and 3.

²⁸ See for example, R. G. Armstrong, *The Study of West African Languages*. Ibadan, 1964, pp.12-13; and J. Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa*. Bloomington, Indiana, 1963.

ethnographic data further suggest that the period of separation between Edo-speaking peoples, Yoruba and Igbo vary between 3,000 years and 6,000 years. Archaeological excavations in and around Benin City have revealed that the settlement pattern was an aggregate of small groups in separate enclosures living in proximity to one another in the forest area. This was further confirmed by Robert Bradbury in his anthropological research in which he indicates that there were three main characteristic features of the social organisation that distinguish all the communities from those of their neighbours: the compact, discrete village settlement as the basic unit of the wider political organisation; the three-tier age grade organisation; the agnatic descent system with its marked emphasis on primogeniture.²⁹

Oral tradition supports the existence of well defined social structure and political institutions based on the government of elders before the emergence of the Ogiso dynasty. The social system which developed in the City was also a feature in other Benin settlements within the territory of the Kingdom. For thousands of years, developments which resulted in continuity and change in the traditional values and mores may have endeared in the Benin people a sense of history and tradition as part of their ways of life. Benin City has its origin in this kind of historical consciousness to always think of developments that are firmly rooted in the past but which will not endanger the future. When the seat of monarchy evolved, the settlement was a cluster of thirty-one villages which were in close proximity one to the other. These villages have been identified as: Alaka, Itébite, Oroghotodin, Ugbague, Efa, Iguisi, Okhorho, Adaha, Eyaenugie, Ohunmwidunmwu, Errie, Ughoha, Iboyanyan, Utantan, Irhuuasa, Ikpokpan, Ugbo, Idunmwivbioto, Ugbekun, Ihinmwirin, Emehi, Ebuya, Isekherhe, Uzebu, Ihogbe, Irre, Urubi, Uselu, Ukhegie, Aragua, and Ogba.³⁰ It was a sense of common identity based on history and tradition, and the lore of the society which may have spurred the movement towards the formation of a state.

The villages were aggregates of family units. The families were identified by the morning salutations which still exist among the people. As families were brought into working relationships, their adaptation resulted in changes in the system of which they were part. This resulted in socio-cultural change, upon which features of social and political organisation began to emerge. This developmental pattern characterised all the village settlements at different phases of their evolution. In his study of the origin of Benin as an urban centre, a Nigerian geographer, Andrew Onokerhoraye suggests that two major factors were involved in its development. The first relates to the natural environment of the Edo-speaking area which was able to support human settlements; and the second factor was the

²⁹ R. E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, P. Morton-Williams (ed.) London: Oxford University Press, 1973, p.149.

integration of the large political systems into a larger and centralised one.³¹ Based on this, his hypothesis is that the need to co-ordinate the socio-economic and political activities of the centralised political system from one point led to the development of Benin as the capital.³²

The spread of the people can be explained from the demographic movement, which partly account for the consequent expansion to cover large areas of the Edo-speaking territory. The question which now arises is: at what time did the Benin people migrate to their present location? This question leads to the discussion of the aforementioned theories of Benin migrations from Nupe, Egypt/Sudan and Ile-Ife which attempts to explain the origin of the people.

The first Benin writer to propose the view of Egyptian origin was Jacob Egharevba when he published his *Short History of Benin* in 1934. According to him, “many, many years ago, the Binis came all the way from Egypt to found a more secure shelter in this part of the world”, arguing that this was “after a short stay in the Sudan and Ile-Ife, which the Benin people call Uhe.”³³ In 1954, Egharevba restated this view when he published *The Origin of Benin*. This statement opened a key debate among scholars and non-academic historians of Benin history.

Egharevba’s position supports the view of migration from Egypt. As noted earlier, European colonial writers who could not explain the origins of the indigenous political institutions in Nigeria concluded that Egypt was the common source for this development. This claim in colonial historiography denied Africans of any initiative for change, emphasising that the historical advance of the African peoples had always depended on stimulus arising from contact with one or the other branch of the Caucasian race.³⁴ European writers glorified the supposed oriental source of culture and civilisation. This was to lead to the formulation of spurious hypotheses: theory of the Nile Valley Civilisation, the Hamitic hypothesis, the Sudanic State theory, etc.

The colonial climate in which these views were welcome influenced the writings of some early African writers who began to trace the origins of their people to Egypt or the Middle-East. Among these early African amateur historians were the Revd. Samuel Johnson who published the *History of the Yorubas* in 1921, and Jacob Egharevba who published *A Short History of Benin* in 1934. The limitations of colonial historiography were quite

³⁰ Osaren S. B. Omoregie, *Ozedo* 6. p.1.

³¹ A. Onokerhoraye, 1995, *Benin: A Traditional African City in Transition*. Benin City: The Benin Social Science Series for Africa, pp.42-43.

³² *ibid.*, p.44.

³³ Egharevba, 1968 *Short History*, p.1.

³⁴ See H. L. Roth, *Great Benin*; P. A. Talbot, *Peoples of*; Charles Orr, *The Making of Northern Nigeria*. London, 1911; Alan Burns, *History of Nigeria*. London, 1942 (first published in 1929).

understandable; not much scholarly work had been done to advance the historical knowledge of sub Saharan Africa and early colonial writers who could not understand the histories and cultures of the people generalised on a common origin. This common origin, they speculated, was connected with divine kingship which first emerged in Egypt and diffused to other parts of Africa. Egharevba got caught up in this web of an attractive theory of Egyptian civilisation.

From the discussion so far, the theory of Benin migration from Egypt had its origins in colonial historiography when writers not only laboured under the myth of European superiority but also 'blackmailed' Africa as a continent of 'benighted' people, lost in primitive barbarity and without history. Colonial historiography did not consider Egypt as part of Africa, rather, it was seen as a product of the European and Mediterranean civilisation. This is because the mainstream of human progress was believed to be the Mediterranean and Europe. The effect of deliberate distortions in colonial historiography was the acceptance of the theories of imperial conquerors and administrators by Jacob Egharevba, the amateur Benin historian, that the Benin people migrated from Egypt.

For several reasons, the theory of Benin migrations from Egypt or Sudan is lacking in substantial evidence. First, there are no surviving traditions in Benin of families whose ancestors migrated from Egypt. Second, on comparative basis, the ethnographic data from Benin are at variance with that of Egypt in terms of the relations to one another of the people and their characteristics or physiognomy. Third, the language classification of both peoples differ considerably. Fourth, the Egyptian writing culture is significantly absent in Benin culture. Fifth, the socio-political organisation of Benin has no resemblance with any group of people in Egypt. Together, all this is hardly enough to come to a sound scholarly historical explanation for the theory. On the basis of these reasons, it will be reasonable to propose that historians of Benin should admit the shortcomings of Jacob Egharevba, and begin to research into the origins of Benin from the prehistory of Nigeria and the inter-group relations between peoples and cultures.

The other theory is the link between Benin and Ile-Ife; one aspect of inter-group relations between peoples and cultures in the Nigerian region that has generated a great deal of intellectual debate. This is because the origin of the Eweka dynasty is often confused and mixed up with the origins of the Binis, thereby attempting to ascribe a Yoruba origin for the people of Benin. Historians of Yorubaland are agreeable on one point: the coming of Oduduwa to Ile-Ife marked a significant turning point in the history of the region. In fact, "at the heart of the life of all the Yoruba lies Ile-Ife," argues Robert Smith, because "all roads in

their religion, history, government, and art seem to lead there.”³⁵ The primacy of Ile-Ife in Yoruba history cannot be denied, but there are conflicting versions of how Oduduwa came to Ile-Ife. The people of Benin believe he was their fugitive prince. The Yoruba people have both traditions of his creation and of migration.³⁶ According to the Yoruba tradition of creation, Ile-Ife is the cradle of the ethnic group where Oduduwa descended from heaven on the primordial waters and created the world. On the other hand, the migration stories relate how Oduduwa and his party migrated from an eastern direction to Ile-Ife. This eastern direction has often been interpreted by some Yoruba writers as Middle East and others simply admit the east to be somewhere around the Niger-Benue confluence. In any case, all the traditions of creation and migration agree on Oduduwa as the common ancestor of the Yoruba.³⁷

The Benin account of the emergence of Oduduwa at Ile-Ife is a different and conflicting version from the Yoruba traditional accounts. The present Oba of Benin, Omo n’Oba Erediauwa, argues that “we in Benin believe, and there are historical landmarks for such belief, that the person whom the Yorubas call Oduduwa was the fugitive Prince Ekaladerhan, son of the last Ogiso of Benin by name Ogiso Owodo; he found his way to what is now Ile-Ife after gaining freedom from his executioners and wandering for years through the forests.”³⁸ His name, the Binis claim was derived from either *Izoduwa*, meaning ‘I have chosen the path of greatness’ or *Imadoduwa*, meaning ‘I have not missed the path to prosperity’.³⁹ G. A. Akinola, a historian of Yoruba origin, has attempted to discredit the Benin version,⁴⁰ but has neither been able to explain how Oduduwa came from heaven nor to establish a historical basis of the migration of Oduduwa to Ile-Ife. Even spurious is the hypothesis proposed by I. A. Akinjogbin in explaining the origin of the relationship between Benin and Ile-Ife. In his study of Yorubaland before Oduduwa, Akinjogbin points out that

³⁵ Robert S. Smith, 1988, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*. London: James Currey, Third Edition, p.13.

³⁶ For the traditions of creation and migration stories, see for example, S. Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas*. Lagos: C.S.S. Bookshop, reprinted 1973, pp.3-4; E. A. Kenyo, *Origin of the Progenitor of the Yoruba Race*. Lagos: Yoruba Historical Research Co., 1951, pp.9-10; S. O. Biobaku, *The Origin of the Yoruba*. Lagos: Government Printer, 1955; T. J. Bowen, *Adventures and Missionary Labours in Several Countries in the Interior of Africa from 1849-1856*. London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd., 1978, p.265.

³⁷ See R. C. C. Law, “The Heritage of Oduduwa: Traditional History and Propaganda Among the Yoruba”, *Journal of African History*, XIV, 2, 1973; Robert Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*. London: Methuen, 1976.

³⁸ For details, see Omo N’Oba Erediauwa, Oba of Benin, “The Evolution of Traditional Rulership in Nigeria”, text of lecture given under the auspices of Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, on 11 September, 1984.

³⁹ Most members of the Royal Family of the ruling dynasty in Benin believe that *Imadoduwa* was the appropriate expression, which actually symbolised the painful exile from his fatherland. Some others in Benin also believe that *Izoduwa* was the expression of his acceptance as a leader in a new society. The history of Ile-Ife before Oduduwa supports the view that the people were awaiting the arrival of a ‘saviour’.

⁴⁰ G. A. Akinola, 1976, “The Origin of the Eweka Dynasty of Benin: A Study in the Use and Abuse of Oral Traditions”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. Vol. 8 No. 3, December.

there was a society already well established when Oduduwa seized authority in Ife and his “sons”, who may have included his followers, waged wars all over Yorubaland and seized authority in various places as well.⁴¹ He argues that though the case of Benin with the Ogiso rulers is well known but, “that Oranmiyan had to fight various battles before finally overcoming their resistance”, which, according to him, “is enshrined in the re-enactment ceremonies of the installation of the Oba of Benin.”⁴² In Akinjogbin’s hypothesis, it is attempted to prove that Oranmiyan, the son of Oduduwa and his party were the conquerors who established the kingdom of Benin. Second, that the conquest occurred during the period of the Ogiso rulers. Third, that the conquest led to the establishment of Oranmiyan as king who began a new dynasty. Fourth, that his principal proof is the Benin resistance of the conquest as expressed in traditional rites during the coronation of the Oba of Benin.

This Akinjogbin’s hypothesis belong to the conflict school of thought which attempt to explain the emergence of the state in Africa as a consequence of military conquest. The most detailed statement of the conflict position has been provided by the leading protagonist of the view.⁴³ From a critical assessment of his hypothesis, it is plausible to argue that Akinjogbin’s misinterpretation of the events may be another source of error in tracing the origins of Benin and the relationship with Ile-Ife. In evaluating his views, there is evidence of Akinjogbin’s misunderstanding of the significant historical developments in the history of the kingdom of Benin.

First of all, the most recent coronation of the Oba of Benin was on 23 March 1979. The events of the coronation were recorded by newspaper reports and interviews, in magazines and journals, in diaries, by tape and video recordings. The events of the coronation also generated other documents such as official reports and statements, speeches, letters and memoranda. Also, there were many witnesses to the historical events of the coronation. But in all these, there is no trace of the ‘Oranmiyan battles’ which Akinjogbin claim to be re-enacted during the ceremonies of the installation of the Obas of Benin. Data on the coronation of Oba Eweka II (who reigned from 1914 to 1933), and Oba Akenzua II (from 1933 to 1978), gives the same picture. The evidence cannot be denied by a historian who has worked on political development in the kingdom of Benin. Yet Akinjogbin fabricated his history, in following the line of argument of Yoruba historians whose works are also ideologically loaded.

⁴¹ I. A. Akinjogbin, “Yorubaland before Oduduwa”, *Ife Journal of History*. Vol. 1 No. 1 Jan.-June 1993, p.7.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Morton H. Fried, 1967, *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology*. New York: Random House. See also, Barbara J. Price, 1978, “Secondary State Formation: An Explanatory Model”, in: R. Cohen and E. L. Service (eds.) *Origin of the State: The Anthropology of Political Evolution*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, pp.161-186; J. Lonsdale, “States and Social Processes in Africa: A Historiographical Survey,” *African Studies Review* 24 (2 & 3), 1981 pp.139-225.

This is not to deny the fact that there were no military events re-enacted during the coronation of the Oba of Benin. These were the skirmishes at Isekherhe, often referred to as the Battle of River Omi, and the Battle of Ekiokpagma, both of which took place during the reign of Oba Ewedo, the fourth king in the line of Eweka dynasty, who ruled about the mid thirteenth century. Neither Oranmiyan nor any member of his party was involved in the military conflicts. The skirmish at Isekherhe involved Oba Ewedo and Ogiamien III. The cause of the skirmish at Isekherhe was a military action initiated by the Ogiamien to prevent Oba Ewedo to enter the capital city for the relocation of his palace from Usama, which was a small village outside the city.⁴⁴ The Ogiamien dynasty had been in effective political control since the period of interregnum and more importantly, each successor in the dynasty was in possession of the Royal Stool which was not handed over to the kings of the Eweka dynasty. The skirmish at Isekherhe was the continuation of the opposition of the Ogiamien and his loyalists to the new dynasty, which had the support of the principal chiefs in Benin. Although, the royal troops of Oba Ewedo were able to overcome the forces of the Ogiamien, the latter refused to accept defeat, and a period of seven days was fixed for another battle. Meanwhile, Oba Ewedo was able to take up his residence on the site of the present palace and Ogiamien retired to his quarter.⁴⁵

The Battle at Ekiokpagma was very decisive for both rival dynasties. The Ogiamien lost the war. His troops were defeated; the commander of his army killed, and he had to surrender. A peace agreement known as the Treaty of Ekiokpagma was endorsed by the Ogiamien and Oba Ewedo. By the terms of the treaty,⁴⁶ first of all, the Ogiamien and his loyalists accepted a policy of reconciliation and proclamation of peace, and all hostilities arising from the political crises which began during the period of interregnum were to cease immediately. Second, the Ogiamien accepted the kingship of Ewedo as the Oba of Benin kingdom. Third, the Ogiamien ceased to identify himself as the king of Benin kingdom and subsequently, handed over the Royal Stool of the Ogiso rulers to Oba Ewedo. Fourth, the Ogiamien was made a hereditary chief, retaining his kingship title as his new title, which will enable him and his heirs to be identified as one of the nobles of Benin. Fifth, except the Oba of Benin (*Sopkonba*) no other chiefs can be directly involved or interfere or exercise any form of political control over the Ogiamien in his domain. Sixth, there will be no resort to armed

⁴⁴ Interview with Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, on 7 June, 1993 in Benin City.

⁴⁵ Egharevba, *Short History*. p.10.

⁴⁶ Details of the terms of the treaty were given by Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, the Esogban of Benin, interviewed on 19 June, 1993 in Benin City; Prince Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka, Secretary to the Benin Traditional Council, interviewed on 18 June, 1993 in Benin City; and Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed on 7 June, 1993 in Benin City.

struggle and bloodshed or renewal of conflicts once the agreement has been endorsed. Finally, the peace treaty will be renewed by every new Oba of Benin with the Ogamien, with guarantees for no action against supporters of both rival dynasties for their past political activities.

From the terms of the treaty, Oranmiyan was not involved in the military events which led to the peace accord, neither were the Akinjogbin invented “Oranmiyan battles” enshrined in the re-enactment ceremonies of the installation of the Oba of Benin. Since the thirteenth century, as Egharevba explains, “every Oba has to cross a bridge at Isekherhe quarter on his coronation day, and on the seventh day, fight with Ogamien in memory of the victory of that day.”⁴⁷ This could be the imaginary ‘Oranmiyan battles’ that Akinjogbin is referring to, for which he has no evidence.

In Benin, it is believed that Oranmiyan came to Benin City not to fight battles but on request of the elders who were convinced that his father Oduduwa at Ile-Ife was the fugitive Prince Ekaladerhan, and the elders led by Chief Oliha, were interested in the restoration of royal line of kings from the Ogiso dynasty.⁴⁸ Because of the strong opposition from the new dynasty which emerged during the period of interregnum, Oranmiyan could not enter the city, and had to live in Egor, a village far away from Benin City where he married the daughter of the chief, through whom he had a son who later became Eweka I. His son was born after he had left Benin - the city which he described as *Ile-Ibinu*, meaning ‘the land of vexation’. Benin traditions claim that Oranmiyan returned to Ile-Ife, and having claimed to have reigned briefly as a king in Benin kingdom, he could not stay with his father, and was compelled to move in northerly direction where he founded Oyo and became the Alaafin.

The chronological events in the history of Ile-Ife and the Oyo Empire beginning with the coming of Oduduwa can be compared with the historical movement in Benin. For centuries before the emergence of Oduduwa, the Ogiso dynasty had begun a process of state formation so that the fall of the last Ogiso ruler, Owodo, was an important process as the rise of the kingdom. There was no invasion from Yorubaland. The Benin-Ife relationship which led to the establishment of the Eweka dynasty is not an explanation for the origins of the Benin people. Comparative ethnography in Benin and Yoruba,⁴⁹ points out that while Ife and Oyo belong to the same linguistic and cultural bloc, the Benin kingdom was part of an entirely different one. Also, the characteristic principle of organisation among the Edo-speaking peoples differed considerably from the Yoruba. Take for example, the different

⁴⁷ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.10.

⁴⁸ Interview with Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the Uzama n’Ihinron, on 7 June 1993, in Benin City.

⁴⁹ See, Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, pp.3-16.

principles to which political power was distributed. “One striking difference” argues Bradbury, “lies in the fact that, while among the Yoruba the titles conferring most political authority are generally the property of particular lineages, in Benin this is never so.”⁵⁰ Benin titles passed from father to son or opened to competition among free-born men. Thus, while the effective based lineage was an effective unit in Yoruba political organisation, it was not so at Benin.⁵¹

Separate historical movements partly account for this differences in socio-political development. This view has been reinforced by certain rituals, customs and beliefs which uniquely and differently affect the behaviour and institutions of Benin and Yoruba. It may be possible to explain it from the nature of the social system in pre-Oduduwa society at Ife before the migration from Benin - ‘the east’ in Ile-Ife traditions. Ade Obayemi, is however, of the view that “if any Eastern origin is to be asserted for the Yoruba, “east” must refer to the Niger-Benue confluence area, rather than to Egypt or Yemen.”⁵² The basis of his argument is that modern linguistic research supported with archaeological evidence “suggest that Yoruba, Edo, Igala, Igbo, Nupe, Epira, and Gbari form a cluster of languages within the larger kwa group, centred roughly on area of the Niger-Benue Confluence.”⁵³

The Niger-Benue Confluence theory⁵⁴ provides scientific explanation for a common origin of the people who belong to the same language family. It also explain probable period of separations and population expansion, leading to cultural differentiation. The implication is that both Benin and Yoruba have a common source in tracing their origins, and the constant reference to migrations from the ‘east’ in Ife traditions may be interpreted to mean that the last of the series of movements for the peopling of the Yoruba region began from the Benin area. Oduduwa and his group came from the east of Ife which, by geographical location is the Benin area. In fact, the Benin mythology of its origin was adopted by Oduduwa after the conquest of Ife to build an aura of divine authority and legitimacy for the kingship.

The ideologically loaded views of Benin and Yoruba writers on the Benin-Ife relationship can be interpreted to be the influences of contemporary Nigerian political dispensation. Within this political context, writers continue to disagree, leading always to the challenge of prevailing views. So long as the issues are not presented in one of the versions from either Ile-Ife or Benin, they remain important sources of disagreement among historians.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.14.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Ade Obayemi, 1985, “The Yoruba and Edo-speaking peoples and their neighbours before 1600”, in: J. F. A. Ajayi and M. Crowder (eds.) *History of West Africa*. Vol. 1, third edition. London: Longman, p.260.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p.259.

⁵⁴ See for example, A. E. Afigbo, 1997, “Southeastern Nigeria, the Niger-Benue Confluence, and the Benue in the precolonial period: some issues of historiography”, *History in Africa*. 24, pp.1-8.

Alan Ryder admits that the Eweka dynasty in Benin is related by tradition to Oduduwa, the founder of Ife. However, “through four centuries of contact between Benin and various nations of Europe no hint of this relationship with Ife emerges in any record until the British occupation of the kingdom in 1897.”⁵⁵ After reviewing the evidence in Benin and Ife traditions, Ryder draws his conclusion by suggesting “that many conflicts in the evidence could be resolved by adopting a hypothesis which would ascribe a more northerly origin to the dynasty.”⁵⁶ According to him, the Nupe-Igala area straddling the confluence of the Niger and Benue emerges as the key area in such a reconstruction of Benin dynastic affiliations.⁵⁷ He is convinced that “the Yoruba states would seem to be related to the same general complex, but the chronology and direction of dynastic movements still remain obscure.”⁵⁸ This view is also not different from the propositions in the Niger-Benue Confluence theory, which may help to refocus the major lines of interpretations of the relationship between Ife and Benin.

Thinking along a similar line, Robert Smith believes that “the search for new evidence continues in the realisation that present theories may have to be abandoned in the light of discoveries to come.”⁵⁹ In this case, more rational interpretations can only emerge after archaeological investigation and comparative studies. Smith admits the “difficulties in establishing a coherent account of the past of Ife,” because “the present town does not stand upon its original site.”⁶⁰ He also drew attention to the disagreement between the historians of Ife and the historians of other Yoruba kingdoms; a fact which may distort comparative studies. This notwithstanding, the place of Ife in the history of the Yoruba cannot be denied.

A better and clearer understanding of the issues reconsidered in tracing the origins of Benin can be critically evaluated from the period when new and remarkable form of social and political organisation began to development. In tracing the origins of Benin, it is not clear enough from where to locate migrations at a particular point. Before the emergence of the seat of monarchy in Benin, beginning with the Ogiso dynasty, the region was already peopled. The Ogiso dynasty may not have been the first attempt in state formation. It is probable that the state formation process was frequently botched and started again, and the attempt to resolve basic political problems led the development of ideas, which resulted in the emergence of institutions as solutions to the problems.

⁵⁵ Ryder, 1965, “A Reconsideration,” p.25.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.37.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Smith, 1988, *Kingdoms of*, p.26.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p.17.

Development of Politico-Military Ideas

The earliest known form of government in Benin before the emergence of the Ogiso rulers during the first millennium,⁶¹ was the rule of elders. Before this rule came to be superseded by the authority of kings, it was the main feature of the form of social and political organisation at the village level in the Benin area. The village community was the expression of sovereignty - the idea of the right of each village to be free from any outside control of their political life. A Benin village was probably the aggregate of households, farming groups, families and different lineage which reflected a settlement pattern of either blood tie or lineal descent. The kinship system was patrilineal which meant that the population was grouped in descent lineage that united individuals in bonds of obligations but not as co-members of corporate groups. The family or extended family unit played a vital role in the conception of authority, which was manifested in the structures and processes of village administration. The basis of the administrative structure seems to have been a social system in which the male population⁶² was ranked in a three-tier age grade organisation known as *otu: Iroghae* (youths) 15- 30 years; *Ighele* (adults) 30-50 years; and *Edion* (elders) above 50 years. Each grade had specific rights and duties vis-à-vis the community. The role expectations were exercised in terms of common membership rights and secondly, in terms of relative seniority.⁶³

One important influence of the social system on the evolution of political culture was the pre-dynastic development which took the form of a rapid growth of gerontocratic rules.⁶⁴ The head of the village was the eldest man known as *Odionwere* or *Okaevbo*. The criteria for selection as an *Odionwere* or *Okaevbo* were the following conditions: first, membership of the village community; second, membership of the edion grade; third, the actual age of the candidate; and finally, must be the oldest free-born man in the village. There was no election or selection process of candidates. Once an *Odionwere* or *Okaevbo* has been named as the village headman, he immediately took responsibility for internal affairs and external relations. The village headman was assisted by four elders known as *edion nene*, who were ranked in order of seniority. They were set apart from other *edion* in status and respect. Any of the

⁶¹ The exact dates and relative sequence of events and situations relating to the emergence of the Ogiso dynasty constitutes one of the main problems in the chronology of the kingdom of Benin. Almost all writers accept, uncritically Egharevba's suggestion that the dynasty emerged in 900 AD. The sites of the palaces of the Ogiso rulers in Benin City have not been excavated. Tentatively, the date for the emergence of the dynasty may be the middle of the first millennium, about 500 AD considering the long reigns of some of the 31 rulers of the Ogiso dynasty.

⁶² For the female population, there was no age grade organisation. Women were excluded from active political participation, but they had considerable influence on internal and external policies of the community through the men. The women were in most cases the 'behind the scene political actors'.

⁶³ R. E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*...p.130.

⁶⁴ Bradbury first adopted the term 'gerontocracy' in discussing Benin political culture. It was an idea developed by Max Weber in his book, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*. London: Hodge, 1947.

edion nene acted for the village head in his absence. Hence, relative seniority between those at the highest level in the age-grade organisation was thus, at any particular time, rigidly defined.⁶⁵

One striking feature of the pre-dynastic village age-grade organisation was the lack of any specifically military or warrior elements organised in age-grade. Rather, the *ighele* were the work force, who were (also) responsible for implementing and executing the decisions of the elders and the village headman. Before the emergence of the Ogiso dynasty, this group of the male population was not organised into warrior class. First, warfare at the inter-village level was rare, except for minor conflicts or disputes over boundaries, claims or encroachment which did not degenerate into wars. Second, since each village community was seen as the expression of sovereignty, this hindered expansionist policy and therefore, there was no need to organise a village army.

However, during this period of pre-dynastic political development, the first expression of military idea was the move made by the *Odionwere* in creating *Odibo-Odionwere* which was a group of reliable and conscientious assistants as private guards. They were selected from the *ighele* age-group and were usually the brave, courageous and loyal. Their number varied according to the discretion of an *Odionwere*. This move by an *Odionwere* to attend to his own security and strength with the creation of *Odibo-Odionwere* was probably the beginning of military thought for the purposes of government. If the idea was to combat any threat to internal security, it was the foundation of a system of defence of the elders for political purposes.

It has not been established with certainty which village head first developed the idea of *Odibo*, nor can its origin be dated with some precision. The diffusion of the idea to other Benin villages was greatly aided by the migration of people from one village to another. In other words, men who took up residence in other villages were the agents of the idea. Migration from one Benin village to another or the founding of new village settlements provided the opportunity for interactions. It is possible that marriages between the people of one village community and another may have also led to the spread of the idea. The eventual outcome of the interactions was the laying of the foundation for future political integration because innovations in a particular village were probably seen as a challenge, for which such ideas begun to be taken up with almost equal enthusiasm.

The reception of political ideas with enthusiasm may have contributed to the take-off of the Benin kingdom. When a monarchical form of government was established in the first

⁶⁵ R. E. Bradbury, *Benin Studies*, p.175.

millennium with the integration of a cluster of villages which later constituted the capital of the emerging kingdom, this may have to do with the reception of such ideas. With the beginning of the Ogiso dynasty at Ugbeku village, the new kings of Benin confronted with new political problems, began to adopt new approaches to the general problems of political and military thought. The first king, Ogiso Igodo accepted the traditions of the Odionwere system as the foundations of his government. Philip Igbafe's claim supports the view that "the monarchical principle implied in the Ogiso rule emanated from the Odionwere system which existed before the establishment of the Benin kingdom."⁶⁶ Igodo was a product of the gerontocratic political culture of the *Odionwere* system. As the *Odionwere* of Idunmwivbioto, he is credited with the establishment of the Benin kingdom and remembered in Benin traditions for his leadership qualities, in particular, the manner in which he united wisdom with eloquence, effectively communicated his message, and had his influence on the conduct of public affairs.⁶⁷

A Benin local historian, Dr. Osaren Omoregie points out that the *Odibo-Odionwere* of Igodo was seen to be the strongest group of the time. According to him, "it was said that when Igodo opened his mouth to speak in the midst of his peers, every other mouth would shut up. Igodo thus took advantage of this towering situation to change the philosophy of his ascendancy as the leader of the people."⁶⁸ The legitimacy of his authority as king was the link with the authority of the sky God. Hence, he adopted the title of *Ogiso* meaning "king with authority from above or the sky".

This source of royal legitimacy had its implication. The authority to govern on the basis of the new kingship system was no longer on the basis of membership of the *edion* age group which was based on gerontocracy and elderhood, but on the basis of a new line of royal family with political power from the sky God or above.⁶⁹ Consequent upon this, the development of political and military ideas began to be influenced by the kings. This was because of the supposedly perceived confidence in the ability of the kings in the management of state affairs as the claim of political wisdom from above was combined with a consciousness of history, albeit, in a proper understanding of the past. This may be interpreted

⁶⁶ P. A. Igbafe, "Benin in the," p.4.

⁶⁷ This account is based largely on Benin traditions which were derived from interviews with Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, the Esogban of Benin; Chief S. I. Asuen, the Eson of Benin; Pa. Omoruyi Azehi, a traditional medicine practitioner; Prince Ena Basimi Eweka; and Chief Otasowie Oliha, head of the Uzama n'Ihinron during my field trips in 1993.

⁶⁸ Osaren S. B. Omoregie (Ph.D), "Ogiso Odoligie and the Creation of the Benin Army", an anniversary lecture delivered on the occasion of the 10th Anniversary Celebrations of the Edo Club, Benin City, at Urhokpota Hall, Ring Road, Benin City, on Friday, 10th June 1988, p.6.

to mean that the people believed that either the new political dispensation was providentially ordained or that it was a combination of human responsibility and ideas or both.

At the level of central government, the institution of *edionnisen* (five elders) was created by the first Ogiso. Until the creation of this political institution, the *edion nene* (four elders) was the main institution of governance which supported the *Odionwere* in the pre-Ogiso era and which still existed in Benin villages. This means that the first Ogiso added one to the original number in an effort to build a support base for the new monarchy. The five elders were Oliha, Edohen, Ero, Ezomo, and Eholo N'irre. During the reign of Ogiso Ere, the second king who succeeded Igodo, the positions of Oliha, Edohen, Ero, and Eholo N'irre became hereditary chieftaincy titles. The position of Ezomo was not made hereditary but reserved for the most powerful warrior in the kingdom, and had responsibility for security and military matters. Perhaps, the idea of a warrior chief became necessary because of the rivalry with Udo.⁷⁰

We noted earlier that the creation of *Odibo-Odionwere* in Benin villages in the pre-monarchical period was the beginning of military thought for purposes of government. When the institution of monarchy was established, Igodo created *Odibo-Ogiso*, as a kind of military institution, apparently for fear of the threat to internal security. The idea was to ensure that a loyal fighting force will always be available to defend the king and his kingdom. The *Odibo-Ogiso* may not have constituted an effective fighting force, but probably suited to perform the task of internal defence and protection of the Ogiso rulers. Rather than consolidate the *Odibo-Ogiso* as an effective fighting force, Ogiso Ere created the *Avbiogbe* as a special squad within the *Odibo-Ogiso* with the same common task: the personal security of the king, the announcement and enforcement of royal proclamations, and the supervision of land allocation.⁷¹ It was such a unified force that “no one dared to contradict Ere when the *Avbiogbe* were on the prowl.”⁷² They were also his instrument for enforcing peace. Jacob Egharevba points out that “if there was fighting or quarrelling among his people a crier would be sent out by him to announce to the fighters the term ‘*A wua ne Ere*’ meaning ‘quarrelling is

⁶⁹ This claim cannot be substantiated due to paucity of data. It is possible that a new political arrangement emerged in which he became the first among equals, and by whatever means, maybe coercion or persuasion, his son succeeded to the royal throne.

⁷⁰ The elders of Udo, a Benin village in Iyekovia, did not accept the authority of Ogiso Igodo. The reasons for this refusal have been discussed under the subject ‘warfare and state-building’, which is the next sub-title of this chapter.

⁷¹ Prince Ena Basimi Eweka argues that the evidence to support this claim is the traditional institution of the *Avbiogbe* which has survived till the present day.

⁷² Osaren Omoregie, 1997, “The Royal Guards of Great Benin: Fortunes of Isienmweno People”, *Sunday Observer* (Benin City, Nigeria), February 9, p.8.

forbidden by Ere' and at once, peace would be restored."⁷³ The king may not have been personally involved in such peace settlements but his messengers did so in his name, which was sufficient to guarantee law and order considering the 'police' role of the *Avbiogbe*.

Throughout the Ogiso period, and also during the period of the second dynasty up to 1897 the *Avbiogbe* did not develop into a special military squad. They were established as a guild, and when the state was reorganised during the reign of Oba Ewuare in the second half of the fifteenth century, it was affiliated to the Iwebo palace society of the *Eghaemwen N'Ogbe*. In the second millennium, they had the responsibility to announce new laws and declaration of war and treaties of peace.⁷⁴ Beyond this role, they also accompanied a new *Enogie* to his domain to announce his new appointment and demarcate his territory.⁷⁵ These functions, did not, give them the corporate identity of a military group.

The semblance of a military institution began to evolve during the reign of Ogiso Odoligie, the twenty-fourth king of the dynasty. He is reputed to have organised the first group of Benin warriors called *Ivbiyokuo*. Initially, the fighting force was restricted to the *Avbiogbe* but it was expanded to include all the *Ighele* age group, and this marked the beginning of a civic militia in Benin history. Thus, Odoligie became the first ruler in Benin to succeed in organising an army of his subjects. He was not a warrior king nor did he assign himself the responsibility of being the war commander of the army, nor was the Ezomo given the responsibility to be the commander of the Benin army. Rather, he created two new war chieftaincy titles, the *Esagho* 'as the greatest war chief' and the *Olou* as another 'great war chief.'⁷⁶ They had the responsibility to co-ordinate and command the war leaders who were called *Okakuo*, and to also lead the militia in war. This was, indeed the birth of a really fighting force, although the extent in which they were trained in military discipline is not well known.

The military ideas of Ogiso Odoligie seemed to have developed from two sources. According to the explanation given by Osaren Omoregie, the first was his father's formation of the *Esuekhen* (trader's guards), through the mobilisation of his loyalists to ensure the security of the *Ekhen* (guild of traders) who were mostly women trading to distant markets.⁷⁷ The *Esuekhen* became a regular body and Odoligie got the idea that he could also mobilise the people and get them armed to fight political insurrections or invasions.⁷⁸ The second source

⁷³ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.1.

⁷⁴ Ena Basimi Eweka, *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*. Benin City: Uniben Press, 1992, p.57.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Jacob U. Egharevba, *Benin Titles*. Benin City, 1956, p.5.

⁷⁷ Osaren S. B. Omoregie, "Ogiso-Odoligie..." p.8.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

was his personal experience with the guild of elephant hunters (*Igbeni*) who used the most sophisticated warring weapons of the time such as *Umozo* (a type of machet), poisoned arrows and poisoned spear.⁷⁹

There are two key points in this explanation. First, it is linked to the issue of protection and security with the idea of training men for war. The issue of protection and security was not really new to Ogiso Odoligie as his predecessors were also pre-occupied with it, but the training of men for war was a fundamental political insight in military thought. Second, the command structure of the army which he created was to engineer a tensely-balanced equilibrium which ensured that neither the Ogiso as the king nor the *Edionnisen* as the central political institution were able to oppress or ignore the interests of the other, which had its consequences in Benin politics.

However, the collapse of the Ogiso dynasty after the exile of Owodo, the thirty-first king and the period of interregnum which followed, led to new developments in the evolution of military ideas. The political crisis provided opportunity for the emergence of many war lords who organised their small armies or took over the command of already existing companies of warriors. The Edohen, one of the king makers and member of the *Edionnisen*, emerged as a warlord with a small group of loyal warriors who became known as the *Isienmwentro*. The Ero, also one of the king makers and member of the *Edionnisen*, was the mentor of the *Isienmwentro* but later became a warlord with an organised army of his own. At the same time, the position of the Ezomo as a warrior chief was vacant because only a crowned king could appoint someone to the position. Apparently, the Edohen and the Ero began to perform the military functions of the Ezomo because of the necessity of having an advantage for the position of the *Edionnisen* in the political conflict. In fact, the tendency towards “militarisation” was so strong that the Ogiamien who succeeded Evian as the *Okaevbo* (administrator) after the collapse of the Ogiso dynasty, also emerge as a warlord and organised other warlords from his supporters to counterbalance the threat from competing warlords.

The emergence of warlords,⁸⁰ during the period of interregnum was a demonstration of the trial of strength of the moral and physical forces of the contending parties in the Benin political crisis. There were frequent skirmishes, the ultimate goal of Ogiamien and his supporters being the submission of the *Edionnisen* to their will of having a new dynasty. On

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, pp.8-9.

⁸⁰ William Reno argues that warlord politics does not merely reflect the preferences of the most powerful individuals in weak states. This may be so because the calculus of information, risks, threatening rivals, new arrivals, accident and luck plays out a process of political bargaining and conflict. See W. Reno, 1998, *Warlord Politics and African States*. Boulder, Colorado & London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

the other hand, the *Edionnisen* led by Oliha were opposed to the Ogiamien and his supporters, and hence, had to proportion their military effort to the powers of their resistance. In these circumstances, an approximation of the strength of the power to contend with, would imply a regular review of the means available which can be increased so as to obtain a preponderance in the political conflict. Therefore, the emergence of many warlords during this period was mutual enhancement aimed at creating fresh effort towards an extreme.

The extreme was a possible outbreak of war which was more difficult to determine by the flux of events but could only be estimated by the strength of the motives of the contending groups. Incidentally, the position of Esagho as the greatest war chief in the kingdom at that time, and whose position in the crisis could have been decisive, was vacant. With the emergence of the Eweka dynasty in about 1200 AD, that position of a military chief had ceased to exist. The warlords were split between the new Eweka dynasty and the Ogiamien dynasty. This situation remained so until the Battle at Ekiokpagha, c.1255 AD during the reign of Oba Ewedo.

The military idea of Ewedo after the victory at Ekiokpagha was the fusion of military and political functions in the superstructure of the state. He created the title of Iyase as a war chief but with political responsibilities. The title of Iyase, meaning “*Iye-Ona-Se-Uwa*” (This I create to be higher than you all)⁸¹ reflect the final solution to the power struggle between the king and the six members of Uzama (formerly *Edionnisen* before the emergence of the Eweka dynasty), three of whom were warlords. “That title” concludes Enawekponmwen Eweka, “thenceforth assumed a precedence over the Uzama group of titles.”⁸²

Having established the position of a supreme war chief, whose commitment and loyalty was beyond doubt, Oba Ewedo took the next and most decisive step in curbing the powers of the Uzama. He prohibited the Uzama from having swords of state (*ada*) carried before them into the palace or through the streets like the Oba himself; he decreed that the Oliha should only crown the Oba, and that all the Uzama should not confer titles any more.⁸³ In fact, “the power of investiture of titles was afterwards given to the Iyase of Benin who did so in the name of the Oba.”⁸⁴ With this restrictions, the main channel of influence of Oba Ewedo had become the new set of chiefs which he created in addition to the position of the Iyase. The chieftaincy titles were the Esogban, the Uwangué, the Osodin, the Uso and the Isekhurhe. Oba Ewedo was forced to make changes in the organisational structure of the state because of the manner in which the *Uzama* asserted themselves. “In the end, the Oba emerged

⁸¹ Eweka, 1992, *Evolution of*, p.41.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ See Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*...p.10.

in supreme control,” argues Okpewho, “and the respective cadres of authority were subordinated to the monarchy, holding their powers and privileges only by his grace.”⁸⁵

Although, the new policy and drastic changes in the ruling superstructure which were targeted at the *Uzama* provoked hostility towards the monarchy for sometime, at the end the *Uzama* had to give in and perceive themselves essentially as advisers since it was now the new chiefs who were fully involved in the day-to-day administration of the state.⁸⁶ Practically, the *Uzama* had few administrative duties, controlled relatively few fiefs, and attended policy-making and judicial councils at the palace only on the most critical occasions.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, as guardians of custom and of the kingship, they retained considerable prestige and moral authority.⁸⁸

From the discussions so far, conflicts between the monarchy and state functionaries, albeit, within the power dynamics of the period, partly explains the need for administrative reforms. Could it be that since the state did not possess sufficient resources for self sufficiency that it attempted to gain them by territorial expansion? Or was it the need to prevent the state from collapse that necessitated the need for wars during the period? These questions are necessary in understanding why Oba Oguola c.1280 AD is claimed in Benin traditions to initiate the digging of moats around Benin City. Although Egharevba explains that the aim was “to keep out enemies, especially his greatest and most powerful enemy, Akpanigiakon of Udo, to the west of Benin river,”⁸⁹ it is possible that new centres of power were already challenging Benin. The creation of the *Ighizamete* title, meaning, “I will pay no heed to the invaders or rebels,”⁹⁰ gives credence to this view. The question is how and when did warfare become a factor in the state formation process in Benin?

Warfare and State Formation in Benin Before 1440 AD

Two questions are often asked in relation to the organisation of the Benin kingdom: first, was warfare an expression of the internal process of state formation or of external challenges? The second, linked to the first question is: was the process of state formation a response to internal developments or external influences? To answer these questions, it is necessary to understand how writers have interpreted the issues of warfare in the process of state formation in Africa.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Isidore Okpewho, 1998, *Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.69.

⁸⁶ Interview with Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, in Benin City, on 7 June 1993.

⁸⁷ Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, p.57.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.11.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

Among the writers who have studied war and society in Africa is Richard Roberts, who suggests that warfare can be interpreted as an expression of state power. He put his argument this way: “Armies marched. Sometimes they conquered and were defeated”, and “the success of a military venture had deep ramifications within the structure of the state.”⁹¹ “Too few successes” he continues, “cast doubt on the legitimacy of the state power in its present form”, while “too many successes expanded the state beyond the limits effectively controlled by existing forms of rule and institutions of state.”⁹² Roberts also considers warfare as an expression of state involvement in the larger social formation. According to him, “to make war successfully, and thus fulfil the expectations of the warriors and the groups involved in support services” he argues, “required conscious intervention in the economy in order to replenish the material conditions for making war.”⁹³

Similarly, in his interpretation of the Sudanic state system c.1000-1800 AD, Joseph Smaldone points out that the fortunes of Sudanic states were dependent largely on military considerations. According to him:

An active, efficient, and mobile army was the principal instrument of territorial expansion, security for strategic trade routes, and political control of far-flung but loosely knit empires. Continuous campaigning was necessary for conquest and reconquest, imperial defence, and internal control. Annual expeditions were dispatched to stabilise frontier regions, suppress revolts, and overawe ambitious viceroys and vassals.⁹⁴

This argument is an explanation for the reasons why Sudanic military organisation and warfare during the second millennium achieved their classical expression. The classical Sudanic mode of warfare was characterised by a complex army organisation, larger military forces, a specialised panoply of weapons and equipment, and tactics of mass and manoeuvre.⁹⁵

Also, in his study of warfare in pre-colonial West Africa, Robert Smith concluded that “war was itself a force, and probably the greatest force, in the creation of statehood, so that the attainment of statehood - that intangible concept - was fostered as well as characterised by the development of means by which the interest of the state could be forwarded.”⁹⁶ His

⁹¹ Richard L. Roberts, 1987, *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700-1914*. Stanford University Press, pp.19-20.

⁹² *ibid.*, p.20.

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Joseph P. Smaldone, 1977, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.10.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Robert S. Smith, 1976, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., pp.187-188.

argument is that in the maintenance of states, as in their formation, “war and diplomacy retained their importance and continued to be agents of change.”⁹⁷

From the views of these writers, formation of states in West Africa involved not only centralisation of power, but development of the means for internal control, defence and expansion. For the example of the Benin kingdom, it has been stated in this perspective by Robert Bradbury that in the late fifteenth century, it was a well-established state with a large army conducting long campaigns far afield.⁹⁸ From 1440 AD, expansionist policy was pursued by the kings of Benin probably after the consolidation of internal control necessary for assistance in war because territorial expansion required a well organised army. However, one question arises: has this internal cohesion the essential prerequisites for attainment of the policy of expansion? Was Benin conquered by another power and a military state established?

Patrick Darling, a proponent of the “conquest” school, suggests that between 800 and 1000 AD up until the late fifteenth century, much of the area was conquered by a local African power later known as the Benin Empire.⁹⁹ His conclusion from the study of Benin City’s vast communal earthworks suggests that they date from before the birth of Benin kingdom from which the empire evolved. According to him, new examinations of the 60-foot high Benin ramparts show that they were merely part of the original early earthwork system, which suggests that an important political and religious centre developed there before it was conquered by the founders of Benin kingdom and empire.¹⁰⁰

Darling has the benefit of archaeological data to support his argument. This is not sufficient, as a grasp of the historical movements and phases of development of Benin polity from the time in which the institution of monarchy was established would also throw more light on conflicting interpretations. His view appears to be a complete misinterpretation of historical facts with speculations that his own archaeological findings have not elucidated. The weakness of his argument is his failure to identify the ‘important political and religious centre’, the conquerors and their origin, and the institutional legacies which were incorporated into the conquered state.

The rise of Benin Kingdom and Empire was a long and complex process of state formation. It is possible that in the very beginning, the establishment of the seat of monarchy at Ugbekun during first millennium was not acceptable to most of the villages in the Benin area, whose political leaders (*edionwere* and *edionnene*) felt that the idea was incompatible

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p.188.

⁹⁸ Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, p.48.

⁹⁹ Cited in David Keys, 1994, “Digging in the Dirt”, *The Independent* (UK) 25 January, 1994. Quoted in ACASA Newsletter No. 39, April, p.16.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

with their ‘village sovereignty’. The picture is not very clear whether the founder of the monarchy, Ogiso Igodo, did not declare war against them. What appears to be the integration process of most villages into the kingdom indicate evidence of persuasion rather than the use of force for the purpose of unification. Udo, which was a powerful large Benin village in the west, and already emerging as a city-state, may have objected to the unification scheme.¹⁰¹ The elders of Udo subsequently mobilised other villages in Iyekovia to defend their ‘sovereignty’ against the Ogiso of Igodomigodo. Why did Udo object to the new king?

The story is told in Benin tradition that Ogiso Igodo was the son of the marriage between Odudu who had migrated from Udo, and the daughter of the *Odionwere* of Ugbekun where he settled. The political success of Igodo at Ugbekun was regarded as an achievement of the son of Udo, being the original home of his father.¹⁰² The elders of Udo argued that he would have built his palace at Udo and not Ugbekun, his mother’s village. To appease the elders of Udo, Ogiso Ere who ruled after Igodo sought a rapprochement with Udo and moved his palace from Ugbekun to Uhumwindunmwu.¹⁰³ However, after Ere, Benin experienced a period of nineteen ‘weak’ rulers of the Ogiso dynasty.¹⁰⁴ Udo capitalised on the weakness of the Ogisos to reassert its sovereignty from Igodomigodo. From this time, Udo and her allied villages in Iyekovia began the process of the formation of a new state.

The first evidence of warfare to maintain internal cohesion and stability of the kingdom in the state formation process, was the War of Unification during the reign of Ogiso Odoligie, the twenty-fourth king of the dynasty. Odoligie is remembered for using the first military action on Udo in the effort to subjugate it and stabilise the monarchy.¹⁰⁵ The conquest of Udo was a weapon which temporarily destroyed the ability of the rival chiefdom in Iyekovia to continue its state formation process. The loss of territory coupled with military defeat meant that Udo had to submit to the authority of the Ogiso in Benin City.

If war was necessary to subjugate the Iyekovia territory, why was war not declared against the villages in Iyekorhionmwon (south east of the kingdom) whose *Enigie* and *Edionwere* had stopped paying tributes during the period of the weak Ogiso rulers? The argument advanced by Omoregie is that the situation in Iyekovia was more organised than that of Iyekorhionmwon. According to him, “the Enogie of Udo was strongly in control of

¹⁰¹ Isidore Okpewho addresses this rivalry between Benin and Udo in his book, *Once Upon a Kingdom*.

¹⁰² Interview with Pa Isaac Uwabor, retired Colonial Native Council staff, now trado-medical practitioner, at Udo on 13 March, 1997.

¹⁰³ O. S. B. Omoregie, “Ogiso-Odoligie...” p.6.

¹⁰⁴ In epics of the Ogiso era, Benin traditions recall the reigns of nineteen rulers of the Ogiso dynasty who made little or no contributions to the advancement of the state. The list of such rulers in the epics usually begin after glorious praises to Ogiso Ere. This gives the impression that the nineteen weak rulers were after Ere.

¹⁰⁵ Evidence of oral traditions in Benin city and Udo.

Iyekovia was already collecting all homage gifts from them for himself. No such united front against the Ogiso existed in Iyekorhionmwon, as each *Enogie* asserted himself in his own way.”¹⁰⁶ The military defeat of Udo, however, sent warning signals to the elders of the villages in the south east of the kingdom. Ogiso Odoligie chose not to declare war. Instead, he sent military emissaries and instructed the soldiers to compel the rebel chieftain to surrender and demonstrate it by coming to the City to pay obeisance to the to the Ogiso.¹⁰⁷ The rebel chieftains may have diplomatically warded off war by accepting the alternative proposals of reconciliation and submission.

The cause of the War of Unification was political, but the ultimate motivations were economic considerations. Tributes and levies had stopped coming to Benin, and in the case of Udo, it was growing in strength which was a possible threat to Benin. The war was therefore, a conflict of interests between Benin and Udo. This also can be interpreted to mean that the process of state formation during this phase of Benin history was achieved by coercion and not consensus. The use of force therefore, turned the state into a physically governing institution.

With the collapse of the Ogiso dynasty, most of the villages if not all, in Iyekorhionmwon and Iyekovia reasserted their independence from the central government in Benin City.¹⁰⁸ During the period of interregnum, that is after the collapse of the Ogiso dynasty and before the emergence of the Eweka dynasty, the kingdom of Benin was reduced to the villages in and around Benin City.¹⁰⁹ The argument of the rebel chieftains was that they owed allegiance not to the elders or administrators in the City but to the Ogiso, and with the collapse of the dynasty, it led to the situation of ‘every village for itself and God for them all’. Since every Benin village had its own character, which was preserved by its inhabitants, perhaps, the need was felt for political autonomy. Even though the villages would appear to have been subordinated to the state established in Benin City, collapse of the state meant that their activities and interests could no longer be protected by the state.

The collapse of the first dynasty can be interpreted as a botch of the state formation process. It started again with the effort of the Benin elders led by the Oliha to restore the institution of monarchy. In this situation, the fall of the kingdom was an important a process

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p.10.

¹⁰⁸ Informants in Udo, Pa. Isaac Uwabor and Mr. A. Igbinoba argue that the rulers of Benin could not tolerate the rival state of Udo even though the people of Udo were already using their territory to their ‘full’ potential.

¹⁰⁹ For a list of these villages, see Ministry of Local Government Library, Benin City (hereinafter referred to as MLG Library/BC), R. A. Vosper Esor (District Officer), “A Political Intelligence Report on the Benin City District, Benin Division”, 10th April, 1940, pp.3-6.

as its rise. With the restoration of monarchy in the second millennium,¹¹⁰ and the beginning of Eweka dynasty in c.1200 AD, the state formation process started again. From the reign of Eweka I, the title *Oba*, first came into use by the Benin monarch. The institution of the *Edionnisen* was enlarged to six, to include the Oloton who was one of the advisers and guardian of Oba Eweka that came from Ile-Ife to look after him as a Prince.

As the *Edionnisen* changed to six members, its name was later changed to the Uzama. Until the reign of Ewedo c.1255, the Uzama were territorial lords with powers of succession to land and property; they dressed like the Oba and kept retainers in the same way as the king; each with a palace like that of the Oba, and had the attributes of kingship and were treated with the Oba on the basis of near equality. And finally, they regulated and influenced succession to the throne.

The beginning of Eweka dynasty led to the situation of two rival dynasties in Benin: the Ogiamien ‘dynasty’ which was established by the son and successor of Evian, the first administrator after the banishment of Ogiso Owodo, and the second, the new Eweka dynasty. While the Ogiamien and his supporters had effective control of Benin City, “Eweka and the two succeeding Obas remained at Usama surrounded by the Uzama who treated them more as equals than as kings.”¹¹¹ In fact, the greater part of the people living on the banks of the Ikpoba river did not recognise the Oba’s authority.¹¹² In fact, it was during the reign of Ewedo, the fourth Oba that “the immediate neighbourhood was brought under the control of the Oba.”¹¹³ This was after the victory of Oba Ewedo over the rival dynasty at the Battle of Ekiokpaga in c.1255AD.

At the time of this victory, the kingdom of Benin had disintegrated into three mini states, each with its ruling dynasty. Benin kingdom under Ewedo was limited in territory to Benin City, its immediate neighbourhood, and villages in the north east and Iyekuselu. The second kingdom which was known as the Kingdom of Ugu emerged in Iyekorhionmwon, in the south east. Benin City was some seven kilometres from the borders of the new kingdom and its southernmost limits terminated at the River Ethiope. The king was known as the *Oba N’Ugu* (king of Ugu).

The foundation of the kingdom of Ugu, with its capital at Umoghunwun has been traced to prince Idu, the eldest son of Oba Eweka I.¹¹⁴ The Uzama who regulated and

¹¹⁰ The coming of Prince Oranmiyan from Ile-Ife was instrumental to the restoration of monarchy in Benin. Oranmiyan came on the request of the elders of Benin.

¹¹¹ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. H. F. Marshall (Assistant District Officer), “Intelligence Report on Benin City”, 12th August, 1939, p.9.

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ For details, see Eweka, *Evolution of*, pp.124-125.

influenced succession to the throne did not accept Prince Idu as successor to the throne but favoured his younger brother Prince Uwakhuahen. The Uzama conspired and requested Prince Idu “to provide a cow with a birth’s nest built upon its head for the purpose of their father’s royal funeral ceremonies.”¹¹⁵ The Prince was persuaded to go to Umoghunmwun, his mother’s village to procure the cow. Meanwhile, “his rival brother remained in Benin where a cow was procured and a bird’s nest planted upon its horn”, and “the cow was then presented before the elders who immediately declared Uwakhuahen successor to the throne.”¹¹⁶

After Uwakhuahen was crowned Oba, Prince Idu protested vigorously the attitude of the Benin elders towards him, and threatened to declare war. He had the sympathy of his mother’s people and most elders in Iyehorhionmwon, who also vowed to go to war to avenge the injustice.¹¹⁷ Benin elders were panic-struck, and “to appease Prince Idu, the kingdom was divided.”¹¹⁸ The whole of south east was ceded to him. This was how the kingdom of Ugu was founded. Because the people were very warlike, the kingdom of Ugu rivalled Benin. It was not until the late sixteenth century that the kingdom was conquered and subjugated by Oba Ehengbuda, the last of the Benin warrior kings.

The third kingdom was the kingdom of Udo. Its development as a powerful state was affected by the military defeat during the Ogiso era. The period of interregnum provided another chance for Udo to regain its lost territory in Benin West. It gained control of all the land between the Osse and Siluko rivers. As its influence spread, it provided a haven for dissatisfied people who migrated from Benin City. We have noted earlier in this chapter that the threat perception of Udo by Oba Oguola compelled him to begin the project of moat digging and defensive walls around Benin City.

When the marriage of the daughter of Oba Oguola to Akpanigiakon of Udo did not work out, Akpanigiakon threatened to declare war against Benin. The Oba of Benin was anxious to eliminate completely the power and influence of Udo and subjugate it to enduring Benin control. A military expedition from Benin, commanded by Ogiobo defeated the forces of Udo at the Battle of Urhoezen. Akpanigiakon was killed, and the elders of Udo who were held as prisoners of war were executed in Benin City. Ogiobo, the military commander from Benin, was installed as the *Enogie* of Udo. The final military subjugation of Udo was not achieved until the early sixteenth century during the reign of Oba Esigie, one of the warrior kings of Benin.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.* p.124.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Interview with *Edede Omogboru Uwadiae (nee)Igbinoba*, farmer and trader, at Urhonigbe (south east of Benin kingdom) on 16th June, 1993.

¹¹⁸ Eweka, *Evolution of*, p.124.

The evidence from Benin military history shows that warfare was indeed an expression of the internal cohesion of the kingdom, and that the state formation process responded to both internal developments and external influences. While there is no evidence of the conquest of Benin by external invaders, the fortunes of Benin were dependent on warfare, and the necessity for peace negotiations was no longer stressed as the most important means for resolving the issues left over from war. In this way, the idea of conquest and reconquest, became the expression of internal cohesion.

The War Potential in Early Fifteenth Century

Before the emergence of the warrior kings in the history of Benin kingdom, beginning with Ewuare in about 1440 AD, political conflicts had degenerated the state to a situation of war. Ryder is of the opinion that “the magnitude of the changes in the form of government subsequently carried through by Ewuare might be interpreted as evidence of a new wave of foreign influence.”¹¹⁹ While it may not be an external invasion, there is evidence from Benin tradition that power struggles led to conflicts and rivalry that wracked damages in the state. In the end, Ewuare who also “claimed Ife origin”¹²⁰ from the line of the Eweka dynasty, emerged victorious.

From the mid-fifteenth century up to 1897, one of the determinants of the foreign policy of Benin was a proper assessment of its resources, and particularly of its military strength and potential. The era of warrior kings was a demonstration that war was for Benin, the exercise of force for the attainment of political objectives. Just before the era of warrior kings, what was the situation? It would be misleading, to give the impression that Benin in the early fifteenth century was a powerful kingdom. While Benin had temporarily subjugated Udo, it was engaged in rivalry with the kingdom of Ugu in the south east of its former territory over frontier lands. Also, for a good part of the early fifteenth century, the dynastic problems had led to the exile of Ogun, the heir-apparent to the Benin throne, and his brother Uwaifiokun from Benin City. After the death of their father, Oba Orobiru, civil war erupted in Benin when Uwaifiokun deceived the Uzama and usurped the throne. Ogun who was later crowned as Oba Ewuare in c.1440 AD after the assassination of Uwaifiokun, was said to have used ‘powerful juju’ and magical powers to wreck havoc in the City as almost one-third of the houses went up in flames at night, causing enormous destruction and economic loss.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ A. F. C. Ryder, 1969, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd, p.8.

¹²⁰ John Iliffe, 1995, *Africans: The History of a Continent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.78.

¹²¹ Interview with Mr. John Ohonba (Palace informant), in Benin City on 20 June, 1993.

In these circumstances, it is doubtful if Benin had a well-disciplined and formidable army in the early fifteenth century for expansionist programme in pursuit of a foreign policy for the coercion of other states. What was at the disposal of the Oba was a civic militia - contingents of the *Ighele* age group which were subject to military service. The contingents were grouped according to military-administrative units of the villages or federation of villages. The affairs of each military-administrative units were run by a council of elders which included the war leader (*Okakuo*). The strong central control from Benin City probably laid the foundations of the means of strengthening the power of the Oba in mobilising them for war. The incentive for a Benin warrior was honour, and the qualities which had developed in the warriors was sacrifice, courage, loyalty, and group spirit. This may be partly so because of their commitment to the warrior kings in the expansion of the state. It was these qualities made it possible, perhaps, for any Oba to rely on the warriors for immediate operational commitment. In fact, European sources confirm that the Oba of Benin could mobilise thousands of warriors within a short notice. This means that the larger the proportion of adult males for military service, the more it contributed to military potential.

At the most favourable opportunity, which was witnessed by the political reforms and transformation of Benin during the reign of Ewuare the Great c.1440, the process of the establishment and development of the military began to launch Benin on the path of imperial conquests. The co-ordination of the army in terms of authority structure, weapons, logistics, strategic thinking and war plans, matters of surveillance and collaboration, combined to produce a military system which had the logic of its own in advancing the aims of the state.

The next chapter focuses on the development of the military during the era of warrior kings from c.1440 to 1600, a period which also witnessed the expansion of the state through extensive warfare mounted virtually in all directions. It begins with the reforms introduced by Oba Ewuare the Great (c.1440-1473), the first and the greatest of the warrior kings. The reforms marked the beginning of the transformation of the character of the Benin state as they were calculated to eliminate rivalries between the Oba and his chiefs, and to establish political monopoly over the exertion of military power. On the basis of these reforms, a new military system emerged. The socio-economic background of the system, and its political foundation, organisation of the army, defensive fortification, weapons of war, strategy and tactics of warfare, as well as intelligence and logistics, have been examined in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

BENIN MILITARY SYSTEM DURING THE ERA OF WARRIOR KINGS, c.1440 - 1600 AD

Introduction

The period beginning with the accession of Ewuare as the Oba of Benin, circa 1440 AD and closing with the reign of Oba Ehengbuda in about 1606, in the early years of the seventeenth century, was the era of warrior kings in the history of Benin Kingdom. The warrior kings of this era, except for the brief reign of Oba Ezoti and Oba Olua, made important contributions to the process of the establishment and development of the military system of the kingdom of Benin. This chapter examines the nature of the military system which evolved during this period, with focus on the socio-economic background of the military system, the political foundation of the military system, organisation of the army, defensive fortification and the establishment of military camps, weapons of war, strategy and tactics of warfare, as well as intelligence, logistics and supply. Similarly, the external influences on the system as well as economic dependency on military power will be discussed.

This discussion will be against the backdrop of the main currents of historical developments, beginning from the mid-fifteenth century which was a significant turning point in the history of Benin. From the mid fifteenth century, the kingdom emerged as an imperial power. The Benin army led by the Oba who was the supreme military commander, embarked on military campaigns which extended virtually into all directions. The military activities only slowed down by the beginning of the seventeenth century when the era of warrior kings ended in Benin history. Military policy was aimed toward the expansion and consolidation of the kingdom which had developed into an empire. At its height during this period, the empire reached its boundaries at the River Niger to the east and the sea to the south, and established suzerainty over Yoruba areas to the west and south west up to the border of what was to become Dahomey; in the late sixteenth century, it reached a common boundary with Oyo.¹ This was an era in which the warrior kings were influenced by their perceived military

¹ S. J. Barnes and P. Ben-Amos, "Benin, Oyo, and Dahomey: Warfare, State Building, and the Sacralization of Iron in West African History", *Expedition* (The University Magazine of Archaeology/Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania) Vol. 25 No. 2, Winter 1983, p.8.

strength and the ability to apply that strength efficiently in waging wars. It was indeed an era which witnessed extensive warfare in comparison to any other period in Benin history. The question arises: was Benin a military state? This question has become necessary because of the military activities of the warrior kings and what appears like the military character of the state.

In the kingdom of Benin, the basic political unit was the village. As the village and village groups differed in their social and political organisation, so also was there a difference in the manner these units were regarded and treated by the state. The concept of the “state” in this sense, meant the imposition of a paramount political authority upon the local system of government in which the Oba assumed the position of supreme ruler above all local rulers, imposed his own tribute and taxes, and reserved to himself as his prerogative a certain part of the jurisdiction. This was made possible because the formation of the state in Benin required the running of the political affairs of the kingdom with the monarchy and its bureaucracy. The system of state control varied with the political status of the village. This depended on whether the villages were directly under the Oba, or they were the fiefs of his chiefs. In all cases, the relationship between the state and the villages reflected a system of territorial administration between the central government in Benin City and the villages, each of which maintained its identity and link with the Oba.

At the level of central government in Benin City, the political reforms of the 1440s embarked upon by Oba Ewuare led to the emergence of new institutions of state: the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* (Town Chiefs) and *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* (Palace Chiefs). These two institutions, combined with the institutions of the monarchy and the *Uzama*, constituted the central political institutions of the state in the second half of the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, Oba Esigie (circa 1504 to 1550) created the institution of the Queen Mother (*Iyoba*), thus increasing the number of central political institutions to four. None of the institutions had their origins in military organisation. A military state presupposes that the structure and activities of government are basically designed for organised violence. The character of any specific military state is the emergence of a junta as the class of ruling elite after a revolution or *coup d'état*.

In the kingdom of Benin, traditions and customs constituted the constitutional framework for participation in the politics of the state. The severe power rivalries and conflicts were no evidence of military intervention nor was violence employed in organising political power. The *Eghaevbo n'Ore* constituted the civil authority of the state and the *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* was the palace bureaucracy. Though the Oba had full and supreme power,

he was bound to take the advice of the *Uzama*, and consulted both the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* and *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe*.² The *Iyoba* had her own domain and fiefs and she was the political and spiritual protector of the Oba. Due to the power dynamics of the period, she functioned as a member of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore*.

None of the central political institutions of the state had their origins in military organisation. In fact, the institutions were not structures meant for the co-ordination of military activities. The process of the establishment and development of the military during this period reflects the distribution of power within the Benin society. Military organisation was within the context of power relations rather than a conscious evolution of a basic framework for organised violence. It follows, therefore, that Benin was not a military state since the structure of its political organisation for purpose of decision-making was a manifestation of the dynamics of political evolution. There were basic factors: social, economic and political, which influenced the process of the establishment of the military. It will be useful then, to examine first, the socio-economic background of the military system.

The Socio-economic Background of Benin Military System

The nature and character of the military organisation of the state suggests that though the process of its establishment and development was a response to the creation of a new political order by Oba Ewuare, circa 1440 to 1473, the constraints of the socio-economic structure of the state were crucial factors. Among these constraints were: First, the social status of the men which was dependent on their positions in the society; second, the political organisation to a great extent was connected with the social and economic structure of the state; third, the granting of titles which involved the payment of fees and the presentation of gifts to the Oba, was for the Oba a powerful economic weapon; fourth, the Oba depended on his subjects for tribute and taxes to maintain the royal family and retinue of palace officials; fifth, the people of Benin were mostly farmers, and few were engaged in trade, crafts and industries; and finally, the social set-up of Benin society accommodated the institution of slavery within the structure of the state.

In discussing these constraints, it is useful to begin with the domestic economy of the Benin society of this period which was dependent on the households, farming groups, and families, albeit, within the village community.³ The family was the basis of village life,⁴ from

² National Archives Ibadan (hereinafter referred to as NAI), Ben Prof. 4/3/4. H. N. Nevins and H. G. Aveling, 1932, "Intelligence Report on Benin Division of the Benin Province," p. 43.

³ For the organisation of the Benin village and its social structure, see Ministry of Local Government Library, Benin City (hereinafter referred to as MLG Library/BC), R. A. Vosper-Esor, 1940, "A Political Intelligence Report on the Benin City District, Benin Division," 10th April, pp.1-11. See also R. E. Bradbury, 1973, *Benin*

which households, farming groups, and families organised their social and economic activities. The basic unit of economic co-operation and social solidarity was the nuclear or polygamous family. Nearly all the Benin people were farmers, because farming was the main industry.⁵ After farming, the manufacture of palm oil was undoubtedly the most important industry.⁶ These agricultural activities required large family units to provide an effective labour force. This was probably how polygamy originated in the society; the need to increase the numerical strength of family units to meet the labour force required for agricultural purposes. Increased productivity from the farms, enhances a man's status which in turn, determined his position in the society.

All land for farming purposes or residence was communal and held by the Oba on behalf of the people.⁷ This probably explains the origin of the payment of tribute by each village to the Oba through his *Onotueyevbo*.⁸ The *Onotueyevbo*⁹ was a chief appointed by the Oba, who had the right or privilege to the Oba's court, and through whom each village approached the king. Many of the Town and Palace Chiefs were the *Onotueyevbo* of one or more villages through whom the villages paid their tribute to the Oba, and they retained some part of the tribute for themselves.¹⁰ The tribute payment was also organised within each village for the *Odionwere* or *Okaevbo* (village head) who had his customary or traditional tribute twice in a year.¹¹ Generally, the payment of tribute was one aspect of the economic support for both the local and central government in the kingdom of Benin.

Studies (edited with an introduction by Peter Morton-Williams). London, New York and Ibadan: Oxford University Press, pp.150-209.

⁴ MLG Library/BC. Vosper-Esor, 1940, "Intelligence Report," p.9.

⁵ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932, "Intelligence Report," p.136.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*, p.72.

⁸ NAI CSO 26/ 31225. H. L. M. Butcher, 1936, "Intelligence Report on Ekpoma Village Group, Ishan Division, Benin Province," paragraph 52; MLG Library/BC. H. F. Marshall, 1939, "Intelligence Report on Benin City," 12 August, pp.34-35; Vosper-Esor, 1940, "Political Intelligence Report," p.11; J. E. Jull, 1937, "Notes on the Ehor and Ugboko Districts and the Usonigbe-Urhomehe and Ughu Village Groups of Benin Division, Intelligence Report," pp.12-13.

⁹ Every village in Benin had its *Onotueyevbo* who was not the overlord of the village. H. F. Marshall, *op. cit.*, in his "Intelligence Report" argues that the "correct interpretation of the term seems to be 'one who salutes for' and this precisely describes the function of the *Onotueyevbo*." Evidence of Benin chiefs namely, Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama*; Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, the Esogban of Benin; Chief S. I. Asuen, the Eson of Benin, interviewed in Benin City during my fieldwork in the summer of 1993, agrees with the interpretation. From the information given by the chiefs, not everyone had access to the Oba except those who had the entree and who alone could introduce any person desiring to see the Oba. The function of the *Onotueyevbo* was to introduce persons from the village to the Oba, not to speak for them or act as their overlord. He was merely their sponsor in the palace.

¹⁰ An *Onotueyevbo* was permitted by the Oba to retain part of the tribute as reward for his services. The services include his role in ensuring the payment of tribute, and acting as a judicial channel between the Oba and the villages because petitions or supplications to the Oba from each village had to go through the "sponsor" in the palace.

¹¹ The evidence of my informants namely, Pa. Aiyunurhiohue Ogbomo, Mr. Okunrobo Obarisiagbon and Edede Omogboru Uwadiae (nee Igbino) at Urhonigbe, south-east of Benin Kingdom seems to suggest that the

The re-organisation of the structure of the state by Oba Ewuare in about AD 1440,¹² would appear to have led also to changes between the state and social groups; the stimulus for change being the socio-economic background of the society. The link between the state and the villages were altered as the competition for power and wealth in the society ascended to the level of rivalry and conflict. This situation led to the emergence of “royal domains,” of villages directly under the Oba,¹³ and of the “fiefs”¹⁴ under the *Eghaevbo n'Ore*. In the case of royal domains, the Oba delegated authority to a representative from the palace who rarely interfered with the local management of affairs, whereas in the fiefs of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, the situation was quite different. The chief did not live in his fief but his sons, members of his household, slaves or servants, settled there permanently as his representatives; acted on his behalf, took part in and influenced local government to a great extent.¹⁵ For the villages within those fiefs, there was no direct approach to the Oba except through the medium of the overlord.¹⁶ Therefore, the power and wealth of a member of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* was in direct proportion to the extent of his fief. It is pertinent to point out that some *Enigie* who were village heads by virtue of being brothers to the Oba who appointed them, had direct access to the Oba, and second, in all Benin villages, the Oba also exercised his influence through the *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* who were constantly going to the local communities on a variety of secular and ritual missions.

The importance of local structures in state-society relations was such that it was in the interest of the state not to allow the relations between the overlord and his fiefs to become too strong or permanent. A fief of this nature which developed in the fifteenth century, was therefore not hereditary nor was it the prerogative of particular persons or certain families, but was linked with title and office.¹⁷ Change of title meant change of fief; the higher the title the larger the fief. There were also the fiefs which belonged to and privately controlled by the heir-apparent, the Edaiken, and the queen-mother, the Iyoba, and members of the aristocratic

village head received gifts regularly from farmers, hunters and traders though there fixed times in the year for communal tribute. In 1997 at Udo, my informants Pa. Robert Agbontaen, Pa. Isaac Uwabor, Pa. Igbinoba and Mr. Abyssina Eriemator also claimed that gifts came in regularly to the village head, but tribute form different wards was obligatory at least twice in a year.

¹² The pattern of state-society relations in Benin was radically transformed when the Ewuare in a bid to create political order after the upheavals of the early fifteenth century, reformed the political system by establishing new political institutions and creating new titles.

¹³ MLG Library/BC. J. Macrae Simpson, 1936, “A Political Intelligence Report on the Benin Division of the Benin Province,” 26 April, p.28.

¹⁴ A fief is one's sphere of operation or control. In the kingdom of Benin during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, fiefs were villages directly under the control of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore*.

¹⁵ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936, “Intelligence Report,” p.28.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.29.

family who were intimately connected with the ruling family by marriage or descent.¹⁸ The fiefs of the members of the aristocratic family were farming settlements founded by their slaves, bondsmen or clients, which were administered privately by them, were their own possessions and inherited by their descendants. In the case of the Edaiken and the Iyoba, the fiefs were villages attached to their offices, given them by the Oba for their maintenance, and were administered by a group of officials, modelled on the household officials of the Oba, and residing at the courts of the Edaiken and Iyoba at Uselu.¹⁹

Within the framework of state-society relations, two perspectives of Benin society of political life began to develop. First, was the class of nobles whose positions in the state was determined by their power and prestige. Second, the local community was recognised as the basis of the socio-economic process. The two perspectives highlights the internal dynamics of the socio-economic system of Benin of this period. Interestingly, importance came to be attached to political and military leaders as it was possible for them to create and establish their own authority within the state structure.

The degree of “personal authority” within the state structure was further demonstrated by many of the chiefs who used slaves to establish villages, farm settlements or camps, and the Oba who also established personal villages with slaves. With this competitive spirit, “both the Oba and the founding chief collected personal tax and used the inhabitants to cultivate the soil for their own economic advantages.”²⁰ Such villages having their origins as slave settlements could attain the position of independence through redemption,²¹ but continued the payment of customary tribute to the Oba. It follows, therefore, that the use of slaves in the socio-economic organisation of Benin during this period was one of the features of state-society relations.

The possession of a large number of slaves was an index of the social status and prestige of a man or chief in the society. This explains why the institution of slavery had its own place in the structure of the state.²² “Its origins,” argues Philip Igbafe, “lay deep in the economic, military, social and political necessities of the kingdom.”²³ The manner in which slaves were used in Benin gives credence to this view. The Oba had his own slaves while the state functionaries and the people also had theirs. Slaves were used as the labour force in the

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ P. A. Igbafe, 1980, “The Pre-Colonial Economic Foundations of the Benin Kingdom,” In: I. A. Akinjogbin and S. Osoba (eds.), *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History*. Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., p.24.

²¹ Redemption or emancipation fees were paid to the founders, or in some cases, the chiefs or the Oba who established such villages could voluntarily emancipate the slaves.

²² For details, see P. A. Igbafe, 1979, *Benin Under British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom 1897-1938*. London: Longman Group Ltd., pp.23-27.

domestic economy, in wars of conquests or expansion, for human sacrifices, and finally, the Oba used them in the maintenance and expansion of the guild system. Only slaves who had regained their freedom could aspire for titles in the state. The Iyase of Benin under Oba Ewuare, who became the first General Commander of the Benin army, was a slave emancipated by the king and “as fortune smiled on him,” he rose to the position of prominence in the society.

Besides the institution of slavery in the socio-economic organisation of Benin, the widening of commercial frontiers of the kingdom as a result of contacts with Europeans, first with the Portuguese, would appear to have had its impact on trade and military activities. The beginning of trade with the Portuguese,²⁴ led to the pressure for the exchange of slaves with manillas and cowries (used as medium of exchange) and other commodities such as cloths of mixed colours and guns.

The “gun-slave-cycle” probably began in the early sixteenth century, during the reign of Oba Esigie (circa 1504 to 1550). The use of firearms by the Portuguese mercenaries who accompanied Esigie to the war with Idah in about 1515 to 1516, had a decisive effect on the outcome of the war. This arose interest and curiosity in the acquisition of firearms by the kings of Benin for use in the wars of conquest and expansion of the kingdom. The Portuguese, in exchange for firearms and cloths, demanded for slaves; Oba Esigie prohibited the sale of male slaves, to discourage European traders, and prices were high on the slaves.²⁵ The Portuguese did not seem pleased with this development.²⁶ The policy of the Oba in response to European demand for slaves was due to the economic value placed on slaves in Benin kingdom. However, while the commercial contacts with Europeans promoted the development of trade within the kingdom and its hinterland, the need for expansion through warfare was continued by the kings of this era. Expansion meant more tribute for the Oba, and wars also meant booty or war captives for the military leaders.

In the power dynamics of the period, expressed in severe power rivalries between the Oba and his chiefs, the Oba emerged as the supreme commander of the army. This was to enable the monarchy have supreme control over all the resources accruing from war. Thus, the era of warrior kings began in the history of Benin kingdom; in the seventeenth century, the era ended, as the military and administrative chiefs came to overshadow the king in the power

²³ *ibid.*, p.23.

²⁴ See A. F. C. Ryder, 1969, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd., pp. 32 ff.

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp.57-29. See also, A. F. C. Ryder, 1959, “An Early Portuguese Trading Voyage to the Forcados River,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* Volume 1 No. 4, pp.512-535; T. Hodgkin, 1975, *Nigerian Perspectives*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Second Edition.

²⁶ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932, “Intelligence Report,” p.12-13.

struggles of that period. The political conditions in early fifteenth century created the conditions for the emergence of the warrior kings. It will be useful, therefore, to offer an outline account of the political foundations of the military system which will provide an insight into the historical developments that prompted the process of its establishment.

Political Foundations of the Military System

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the kingdom of Benin was on the verge of ruin. A chain of failures and errors occurred in the political system already weakened by what Jacob Egharevba describes as the “several civil wars” between Oba Egbeka, circa 1370 AD, and the *Uzama*.²⁷ The threat posed by the rivalry between the Oba and the *Uzama* created difficulties to the extent that state collapse was imminent. Two members of the royal family, Ogun and Uwaifiokun, who were the sons of Oba Ohen had been banished from Benin City, and there was also reported widespread migration from the City.²⁸ The banishment of the two princes may have arisen from the implacable hostility which had superseded tense relations between the monarchy and the *Uzama*. In this case, the migration from Benin City during this period was probably due to the political upheavals.

However, as conflict and rivalry wracked the body polity, there were indications that the state would be destroyed. There were reported cases of the burning of houses and destruction of agricultural products,²⁹ and of the inability of the state to perform its basic functions.³⁰ Although Jacob Egharevba claims that at a particular time, during the reign of Oba Orobiru, (in the early fifteenth century?), there was peace and prosperity,³¹ there is evidence that during the reign of his successor, Uwaifiokun, who probably usurped the throne, societal cohesion could not be enhanced as the state was paralysed and inoperative. His brother, Ogun, assassinated him in a dynastic struggle for the throne.³²

Ogun became the next Oba of Benin,³³ with the title of Ewuare; by which time, more than one third of the Benin City was in ruins as a result of political upheavals. The extent of destruction would appear to give the semblance of a civil war or an external invasion. Alan

²⁷ J. U. Egharevba, 1968, *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, Fourth Edition, p.13.

²⁸ Evidence of Mr. John Ohonba, a former sceptre bearer to the Oba of Benin, one of the palace resource persons on history and culture, and now the Chief Security Officer in the palace of the Oba of Benin, interviewed in Benin City on 20 June, 1993.

²⁹ Evidence of Mr. John Ohonba.

³⁰ Evidence of Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 7 June, 1993.

³¹ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.13.

³² *ibid.*

³³ There are two versions of the circumstances surrounding how he was placed on the throne. The first claims that the *Uzama* accepted him as the rightful heir. The second version claims that he declared war and emerged victorious, which gave him the recognition of the *Uzama* as the Oba, being a member of the royal family and a direct descendant of Oba Eweka I.

Ryder argues that the “upheaval bears all the hallmarks of conquest by an external power, possibly Udo.”³⁴ He admits that “Oba Ewuare, the victor, rebuilt the devastated capital in accordance with a plan that gave paramount importance to the royal palace.”³⁵ It seemed that the reign of Oba Ewuare marked the beginning of recovery and reform, which opened a new pathway to the power and advancement of the kingdom of Benin. The indexes were the internal political reforms which transformed the character of the state, and the wars of conquests which expanded the frontiers of Benin Kingdom.

Ewuare’s political intelligence, unmatched by any other Oba of Benin in the pre-colonial period,³⁶ was demonstrated in the creation of a new political order. Macrae Simpson points out in his colonial intelligence report that “Oba Ewuare seems to have been an able administrator and a great warrior.”³⁷ He created two groups of *Eghaevbo* (councillors of state), namely, *Eghaevbo n’Ore* (Town Chiefs) and *Eghaevbo n’Ogbe* (Palace Chiefs), whose titles were non-hereditary. The two groups of *Eghaevbo* with the hereditary *Uzama*, “constituted the three great orders of chieftaincy which, between them, were responsible for the continuity and government of the state.”³⁸ Ewuare increased the number of the hereditary *Uzama* from six to seven, by including the Oba’s eldest son and heir-apparent, the Edaiken.³⁹ Hence, the institution became known as the *Uzama n’Ihinron*, that is, the seven hereditary nobles and kingmakers that constituted the highest-ranking order of chieftaincy in Benin kingdom.

These reforms were manifestations of the birth of a new age which brought about a deep transformation of the political culture of Benin. As the political organisation of Benin began to take definite shape, Oba Ewuare, divided the city into two parts, namely, *Ogbe* and *Orenokhua*,⁴⁰ corresponding to Palace-Town dichotomy of great political significance. Such an arrangement was pre-eminently to the interest of the Oba and his chiefs because the Oba and his household, including palace officials lived in *Ogbe*, while the Town Chiefs lived in *Orenokhua*. The seven *Uzama* lived in their villages, outside the city wall. Politically, this was an arrangement that was calculated to check conflict and rivalry in state-society relations.

³⁴ A. F. C. Ryder, 1997, “Benin State and Region, History,” In: John Middleton (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Africa*. Volume 1, p.180.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ The popular saying in Benin tradition is the claim by Oba Ewuare, who was recognised as *Ogidigan*, meaning “the Great,” that he will remain in Benin history, as the last reference point of any Oba that will ascend the throne after him. Evidence of Prince Edun Akenzua, Enogie, interviewed in Benin City, on 23 February, 1997.

³⁷ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936, “Intelligence Report,” p. 5.

³⁸ Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, p.55.

³⁹ Evidence of Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n’Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 7 June, 1993.

⁴⁰ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936, “Intelligence Report,” pp.5-6.

These developments laid the foundations or groundwork for the establishment of a military system that launched Benin on its imperial conquests for the purpose of extending the frontiers of the empire. The developments further demonstrates how political thinking in its various forms, transformed the kingdom of Benin >from the verge of ruin in the early fifteenth century to a formidable military power in the region at the end of the same century. Within the very specific structure of Benin politics, the Obas of this new age emerged as warrior kings. Nevertheless, there were other issues of internal political cohesion and larger economic priorities to contend with.

The first of these issues was the determination of the kings to use military action in reintegrating the kingdom of Ugu in the south-east and the kingdom of Udo in the south-west, that had declared their independence from the emerging kingdom of Benin since the crisis of the early thirteenth century. After the reign of Oba Eweka I, and up to the early fifteenth century, the Benin Kingdom of the Ogiso era had disintegrated into three independent states namely, the kingdom of Benin, the kingdom of Ugu and the kingdom of Udo. For both political and economic reasons, the warrior kings beginning with Ewuare, began the reconquest of those independent states of Benin.

Secondly, at the end of Ewuare's reign, a reign which seemed harsh and intolerable, leading to protest migrations from Benin City, his eldest son and successor, Ezoti was assassinated on the day of his coronation and died fourteen days later. Ewuare's second son Oluwa ascended the throne with reluctance⁴¹ and reigned for about five years. After his death, Benin witnessed a period of interregnum. "This only lasted for three years" argues Egharevba, "for those placed in authority were unable to manage the affairs of the country rightly and were not obeyed."⁴² Moreover, the political problem degenerated to the level of insecurity as the city was constantly being pillaged by invaders until Okpame after being persuaded by the Benin elders, accepted the invitation to occupy the ancestral throne of the royal family with the title of Ozolua. On his return to Benin, he found both the town and the Benin territory in a state of revolt but with the help of his followers from Ora and of certain loyal sections in Benin he subdued first the town and then the whole of the Benin territories.⁴³

Oba Ozolua as a warrior king was determined to continue the campaigns begun by Ewuare, and to expand the fortunes of the state through warfare. His successor, Oba Esigie

⁴¹ Evidence of Prince Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka , local and palace historian of Benin, and Secretary to the Benin Traditional Council, interviewed in Benin City on 18 June, 1993, suggests that Oluwa feared that his brother, Okpame who was a renown warrior living in exile in Ora would attack him. As soon as he accepted the crown, he sent his younger son who became the *Ogiegor*, to head a garrison at Ehor, northern limits of the kingdom, to keep watch over Okpame.

⁴² Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.22.

⁴³ MLG Library/BC. Marshall, 1939, "Intelligence Report," 12th August, p. 13.

continued with the policy of consolidation and expansion. Esigie finally subjugated Udo and also defeated the Igalla army which invaded Benin kingdom. The tradition of warrior kings was maintained by Oba Orhogbua, from 1550 to 1578, who embarked on the conquest of other states westwards, and built a war camp (*eko*) on Lagos Island from where he launched his campaigns. He installed one of his grandsons, Esikpa by name, to be the Eleko of Eko. Oba Ehengbuda (1578 to 1606) who succeeded Orhogbua, consolidated the gains of his predecessors. He died in a sea tempest on his way to Eko (Lagos). It was his tragic death which ended the era of warrior kings as “it was arranged that the Benin war chiefs or warriors be commanding the Benin troops henceforth and not the Obas of Benin any more.”⁴⁴

Historians of Benin seemed to have focused more on Ewuare the Great and Ozolua the Conqueror than other warrior kings. Writing about Ewuare, Jacob Egharevba says he “was powerful, courageous and sagacious” and “fought against and captured 201 towns and villages in Ekiti, Ikarre, Kukuruku, Eka and Ibo country on this side of the river Niger.”⁴⁵ According to Philip Igbafe, “he waged successful wars to launch Benin on its imperial drive...”⁴⁶ Ryder supports this claim, and explains that “leading his armies in person” Ewuare “waged war in all directions and far beyond the previous bounds of the state.”⁴⁷ In fact, Ewuare combined military competence with remarkable statesmanship, qualities which enabled him to revive the dwindling fortunes of Benin.⁴⁸ In Benin tradition, Ewuare is remembered as bequeathing basic qualities - courage, loyalty, group spirit, and sacrifice - for which the memories of victory and even endurance in adversity encouraged full sense of participation in war.

Similarly, Egharevba explains that Ozolua who ascended the throne, circa 1483 was a great warrior king who “fought many desperate battles and waged war upon war...”⁴⁹ He was delighted in waging wars. Benin tradition still remembers him as a foremost strategist who “would sometimes march against the enemy with very few soldiers in order that he might feel the weight and seriousness of the fight.”⁵⁰ In fact, each time he prayed, he would always pray to his ancestors to give him war.⁵¹ Traditional accounts of the military exploits of Ozolua may have exaggerated his strength and valour as a warrior king. It is possible he prayed for war to

⁴⁴ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.29.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴⁶ P. A. Igbafe, 1974, “Benin in the Pre-Colonial Era”, *Tarikh*, vol. 5 no. 1, p. 7

⁴⁷ A. F. C. Ryder, 1980, “The Benin Kingdom”, in Obaro Ikime (ed.) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Limited, p. 115.

⁴⁸ A. A. B. Aderibigbe, 1972, “Peoples of Southern Nigeria” in J. F. Ade Ajayi and I. Espie (eds.) *A Thousand Years of West African History*. Ibadan, p. 198.

⁴⁹ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p. 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

enable him acquire more slaves through booty and tribute. Ozolua fought and won two hundred battles which merited his agnomen *Ozolua n' Ibaromi* meaning, Ozolua the Conqueror. He was known for his ideas in strengthening the army for sudden exigencies and his constant warning that not even the best plan of operations could anticipate the vicissitudes of war. In his strategic thought, individual tactical decisions must be made on the spot during wars.

Subsequent kings of this era, namely, Esigie (1504-1550), Orhogbua (1550-1578), and Ehengbuda (1578-1606) who reigned in succession, maintained the military tradition of Ewuare and Ozolua. Through the military activities of these warrior kings, Benin reached the peak of her fame and glory and emerged as a military power in the forest region. Not much is known of the military ideas of Esigie. He is still remembered for impressing upon his successors the danger of being too confident in war, and therefore, the need to align the fighting efficiency of an army with the demands of warfare.⁵²

The military ideas of the warrior kings had influences on the process of the establishment and development of the military. The ideas were useful in the organisation of the army and had considerable impact in the preparation for, and waging of war. Since the fortunes of the state appeared to be linked to warfare, military considerations became important in the organisation of the state. Internal political crisis in the early fifteenth century, and lack of cohesion in the kingdom were factors which combined to bring about the dwindling fortunes of the Oba and the ruling class. The need for internal consolidation and expansion as a policy pursued by the kings was therefore to ensure regular tribute, taxes, tolls and booty. As already pointed out, Ewuare's political reform was a fundamental approach in the reorganisation of the state, and which placed military affairs under the supreme command of the Oba. With military responsibility under the command of the king, the institution of monarchy was able to kindle a military spirit which aided the development of Benin military power. Military affairs achieved a reasonable degree of administrative and directive competence, which became vital to the growth of an imperial tradition.

The Benin army was used to check acts of insurrection within the state, and also embarked on distant campaigns, which had to be planned and supported. It is necessary to begin this discussion of the military system with the organisation of the army. Military

⁵¹ John Ohonba, a former sceptre bearer, one of the palace historical resource persons, and now the Chief Security Officer in Oba 's palace, interviewed in Benin City, on 20 June, 1993.

⁵² Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, a Consultant Surgeon and local historian of Benin, interviewed in Benin City on 20 June, 1993 suggests that although Oba Esigie was a warrior king, he was preoccupied with establishing diplomatic relations with the Portuguese. He further suggests that the Benin-Idah War influenced the military ideas of Oba Esigie.

leadership in Benin was determined by the constraints of power politics. In this sense, the continuing security crises which faced the monarchy seems to have subordinated everything else to military preparations to ensure supreme control. The prolonged crises, though weakened the state, exerted competitive pressure for social status and prestige. This was the context in which leadership of the army was planned.

Organisation of the Army

The military organisation of pre-colonial Benin was basically the structure, command and control of the army for the co-ordination of activities meant to ensure success in warfare. In some pre-colonial Africa states and societies, the armies varied in their organisations and fighting strength. The army of a particular African society was based on infantry or cavalry or a combination of both. The army, whether it was infantry or cavalry was divided into units for purposes of land warfare. The purpose of the division was the creation of a command structure to enhance organisational effectiveness. The key issues of military organisation involve command and control, on the one hand, and mission and purpose, on the other.⁵³ Both issues come together in the problem of “unification,” or centralisation, versus decentralisation.⁵⁴ In most pre-colonial African states and societies, the tendency was toward more and more centralised direction and control over the military forces.⁵⁵ In the kingdom of Benin, the military organisation was towards centralised direction, reflecting the inevitable distribution of power within the central government and the outlying territories. During the period under consideration in this chapter, the military organisation of pre-colonial Benin was an integral part of the political system. The armies in the metropolis and the villages offered separate services but functioned within the framework of the centralised political institutions. Military affairs achieved a reasonable degree of administrative and directive competence which became vital to the growth of an imperial tradition.

The military hierarchy which emerged from about AD 1440 would appear to exhibit relationship in authority, command and control of the various units; possessing a clearly defined structure with defined powers of control. The way in which the political system was structured had an important bearing on the distribution of power within the society, and on the degree to which the military leaders were selected or appointed by the state. In theory, the

⁵³ S. P. Huntington, 1968, “Military Policy” : In David L. Sills (ed.) *International Encyclopedia of the Social sciences*. Vol. 10. The Macmillan Company and The Free Press, p.322.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ See for example, Joseph P. Smaldone, 1977, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives*. Cambridge University Press; Bethwell A. Ogot, 1972, *War and Society in Africa*. London: Frank

Oba had authority and control over the army since the soldiers were his subjects. In practice, the military set-up was that of a loosely integrated unit between the central administration in Benin City and the villages which constituted the regiments of the army. The features of the military set-up can be summarised as follows: First, the regiments were mobilised for war on the request of the Oba, as part of the larger force; second, royal authority laid the foundation of the civil administration of the army as a means of strengthening the power of the monarch; third, a unit of the army was considered as the private property of the village which owned it, and only two of the units were under the control of warlords who were village heads and war commanders; fourth, there was no standing army for the state except that organised and controlled by the Oba which constituted regiments of the Benin army. The semblance of a standing army was the royal regiment divided into two units, namely the *Ekaiwe* (royal troops) and the *Isienmwentro* (royal guards) which had the appellation of *Asaka no s'Okhionba*, meaning the 'soldier ants that stings the king's enemies.' Finally, the army high command was constituted by four officers: the Oba as Supreme Military Commander, Iyase as General Commander, Ezomo as Senior War Commander, and Edogun as a war chief and commander of the royal troops.

These features of the military, reflecting the distribution of power within the society, were the consequences of the linkage of political instability and economic insecurity in the state-society relations. Power was distributed in such a way that "the functioning of the state depended as much, and probably more, upon an elaborate and finely balanced political organisation which channelled ambition and ability into its service."⁵⁶ Hence, the army was structured and organised within the framework of the complex political and social hierarchy in which the warrior kings avoided the concentration of military leadership in any of the three orders of chieftaincy - the *Uzama*, *Eghaevbo n'Ore* and *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe*. The idea was to check any military threat to royal authority because each order of chiefs was very powerful and influential in the society.

The command structure and organisation of the Benin army was at three levels: first, the metropolitan army (*Ivbiyokuo Oredo*) in the capital city; second, royal army (*Ekaiwe* and *Isienmwentro*), and third, the district armies (*Ivbiyokuo Ikinkin Agbon-Edo*) in the villages. The metropolitan army was the main regiment and was divided into several companies or troops. The village armies were constituent regiments. Each village dealt directly with the

Cass; J. F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith, 1964, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁶ A. F. C. Ryder, 1968, "The Rise of the Benin Kingdom" In: R. O. Oliver (ed.) *The Middle Age of African History*. London: Oxford University Press, p.31.

Oba.⁵⁷ Although ties existed between the villages in some cases, the palace policy of political control was aimed at centralisation and this tended to discourage the federation of neighbouring villages. All the villages looked upon the Oba as their supreme spiritual and temporal head, and the supreme law giver. In theory, all the villages owed him tribute, not only in kind but also in service.⁵⁸ The series of campaigns embarked upon by the military leaders, and which were also directed against some Benin villages, suggests that there were conflicts between the central administration and the villages. The conflicts may not be unconnected with the payment of tribute and the imposition of taxes or request for military service.

The Oba as head of the state was the Supreme Military Commander of the Benin army. With his military position, the Oba had the highest or supreme power in the army high command and took responsibility to lead the soldiers to war personally. This tradition of warrior kings began with Oba Ewuare (c.1440-1473). All the army commanders, warlords and warriors were under him. He had the monopoly of mobilising soldiers anywhere in the kingdom for war, and in this regard, he was assisted by his chiefs who were not necessarily commanders in the army.

The military position of the Oba vis-à-vis his political office, placed him in a position to receive the largest share of tribute and fines, and of plunder taken in war.⁵⁹ This made him the richest member of the state, and had the most followers and the most slaves. It may be reasonable to argue that one of the reasons why the Oba had to lead the soldiers to war personally was the need for the accumulation of wealth for the fulfilment of certain obligations. He had an obligation to his nobility, whom he had to give presents on ceremonial occasions on which they appeared before him, on their marriage, and at their death ceremonies.⁶⁰ He had also to maintain his enormous number of retainers, sustain his host of household officials, and satisfy his personal supporters.⁶¹

By virtue of the Oba being the Supreme Military Commander of the army, partly for the reasons outlined above, it can be interpreted to mean that the warrior kings did not accept the role of mere ritual figurehead nor of a passive constitutional monarch. In fact, the warrior kings demonstrated the essence of acquiring power in order to maintain competition and dissension between the chiefs. This may be the background to Bradbury's argument that the

⁵⁷ MLG Library/BC. Vosper Esor, 1940, "Intelligence Report," p.10.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁹ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936, "Political Intelligence Report," 26 April, p.34.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p.35.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

Oba of Benin was “a political king actively engaged in competition for power.”⁶² According to him, the main political weapon of the Oba was his ability to manipulate the *Eghaevbo* central political institutions. By making appointments to vacant titles, creating new ones, transferring individuals from one order to another, introducing new men of wealth and influence into positions of power, and redistributing administrative competencies, the kings tried to maintain a balance between competing groups and individuals.⁶³

As it were, the reforms introduced by Ewuare opened the political space for competition for position, power and prestige. The Oba would need to possess power and wealth sufficient to enable him manipulate the system to his advantage. As a warrior king, he was in the vantage position of controlling the source of wealth from vassal states which paid regular tribute to him. Hence, “most of the Obas declared war against some country or town about three years after their accession.”⁶⁴ Egharevba explains the reasons for the declaration of war: “After a new Oba had visited the Aruosa shrines at Ogbelaka, Idumwerie and Akpakpava, chalk as a sign of rejoicing, would be sent to all the ruling princes (Enigie, Obis or Ezes, Owas, and Olojas) of the Empire. If anyone dared to refuse to accept this sacred chalk he was counted as a rebel, and war was at once declared against him.”⁶⁵ The declaration of war meant that the Oba had to lead the troops to war personally.

This military responsibility of the Oba has also been interpreted as “a great sacrifice for the state” rather than the desire to secure the source of his wealth.⁶⁶ Ena Eweka, the protagonist of this view, argues that the warrior kings regarded the fortune of Benin as their fortune and vice versa, and that Ozolua and Ehengbuda lost their lives during campaigns was a great sacrifice for the state. Eweka’s argument do not seem too convincing. This is because by the beginning of the seventeenth century, the era of warrior kings ended in Benin history when Oba Ehengbuda drowned in one of his sea coast wars. Subsequent Obas did not seem too keen in continuing with the responsibility of being warrior kings even though the chiefs decided after the sea coast tragedy “that the Benin war-chiefs or warriors be commanding the Benin troops henceforth and not the Oba of Benin anymore.”⁶⁷

Whether the military position of the Oba was a desire for more wealth or a great sacrifice, it is evident that during the era of warrior kings, they exploited their military successes to enhance their power and increase their wealth. It is also to their credit that due to

⁶² Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, p.70.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.80.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Evidence of Prince Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka, interviewed in Benin City on 18 June, 1993.

⁶⁷ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.33.

their role, the military establishment expanded under their supreme command and Benin did not witness any civil war. They were also able to eliminate rival states contending for military power with Benin or as dominant influences in the forest region. Being the first in the hierarchy of army high command, the Oba as supreme military commander used his position to serve the interest of the monarchy, thereby protecting his royal interest vis-à-vis the power and influence of the chiefs with whom he was involved in competition for power.

Next in command to the Oba was the Iyase, whose role in the state, in the first instance, was political and also functioned as a war-chief.⁶⁸ The Iyase was the General Commander of the combined armies of the state, a position which made him the generalissimo of the Benin army. As General Commander, he was not obliged to go to war if the Oba had to lead the troops as a Front Commander. He was put in charge of the army, defence matters and state security. His command position notwithstanding, the Iyase was the leader of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore*,⁶⁹ and “was seen as the chief protagonist of the people against the power of the palace.”⁷⁰

The first Iyase and General Commander of the Benin army during the era of warrior kings was one of Oba Ewuare's slaves known by the name, Idiaghe. The reason for the conferment of the title on him was the desire of Ewuare “to avoid unnecessary rising and opposition, and also to enjoy peace and security throughout his reign.”⁷¹ Idiaghe was known to be a quiet, obedient and easy going matured man.⁷² As soon as he was invested with the title of the Iyase, Oba Ewuare married his eldest daughter to him. By virtue of his new position in the state and society, Iyase Idiaghe chose not to be Ewuare's tutelage. Jacob Egharevba recalls that “Ewuare encountered more worries, more rising and more opposition from his own slave than he would have from any ordinary man in the land.”⁷³ Ewuare's response was to angrily place a curse (anathema) that every succeeding Iyase of Benin should never cease arguing points with the Oba, and made a royal proclamation that the lower jaw of every Iyase from Idiaghe should, upon his death, be sent to the Oba in consequence.⁷⁴

The evidence is very thin as to whether or not Iyase Idiaghe was a renowned warrior. He died at the close of Ewuare's reign and did not seem to have accompanied the warrior king in his military campaigns. After his death, Ogboe, a free-born subject was invested with the

⁶⁸ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and H. G. Aveling, 1932, “Intelligence Report,” p. 46.

⁶⁹ *Eghaevbo n'Ore* were the Town Chiefs who constituted one of the central political institutions in Benin Kingdom.

⁷⁰ Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*. p.68.

⁷¹ J. U. Egharevba, 1946, *Concise Lives of the Famous Iyases of Benin*. Lagos: Temi-Asunwon Press, p.9.

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

title of the Iyase and put in charge of the army as the General Commander. He served under Ewuare, Ezoti and Olua. Iyase Ogboe led the Benin chiefs to resist Olua's eldest son Iginua from succeeding to the throne because of his mischievousness. As a result, "there was no peace of any kind between the chiefs of Benin and Oba Olua, throughout the rest of his days:"⁷⁵

After the death of Oba Olua, circa 1478, Benin chiefs set up an interim government which lasted about three years. They were unable to organise themselves and co-ordinate the units of the army to protect and defend the state from invaders. In the absence of an Oba, Binis did not obey the chiefs nor was there any form of co-operation with them, and invaders from neighbouring states and villages pillaged the City. As noted earlier, Ozolua became the Oba in circa 1481 and appointed Emovon as the Iyase and General Commander of the Benin army. Emovon was a warrior, but did not lead the army to war throughout the reign of Oba Ozolua, for the Oba chose to lead the soldiers personally. However, he took charge of defence and state security, and headed the chiefs in directing the administration of the state whenever Ozolua was away on a long campaign.

However, Iyase Emovon undertook his first military campaign as General Commander of the Benin army during the reign of Oba Esigie, 1504-1550. On the instructions of Esigie, he embarked on a reconquest of Uzea and Udo territories in order to consolidate the military successes of Ozolua. The strategic thought of Esigie for the reconquest of the two territories was to use it as a powerful weapon in destroying their ability to rebuild their armies. Emovon was succeeded by Odia as the Iyase and General Commander of the Benin army. The Iyase Odia was actively involved in the Idah war of 1515 as one of the Front Commanders. Oba Esigie rewarded him with the drum called *Em'Ighan*, being one of the spoils captured by the Benin troops from the defeated Idah soldiers and was brought to Benin City by Atakparhakpa, early in 1516, and since then, became the ceremonial drum of the chiefs of Benin.⁷⁶

The role of the Iyase as General Commander of the army with responsibility of leading the warriors as Front Commander in battle began in the early sixteenth century during the reign of Oba Esigie. It was not a compulsory assignment for the Iyase because Idehen who served during the reign of Oba Orhogbua, 1550-1578, did not undertake any campaign. He was engaged in the day-to-day administration of the state whenever his supreme military commander was engaged in the sea coast wars. The political vis-à-vis military position of the Iyase seem to explain his role in the management of the affairs of the state whenever the Oba was on campaign.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.10.

At the end of the sixteenth century, during the reign of Oba Ehengbuda, the central problem in Benin military thought was a reconsideration of the role of the Iyase as a political leader and General Commander of the army engaged in military campaigns. This thinking was the result of the domestic political problem which was generated by the conflict between the Iyase and Oba. Ekpennede, the Iyase was at the centre of the domestic political problem. He was known to be a great man of war, honoured and respected in Benin. In support of the foreign policy objectives of the state, he “led the Benin armies against the Oyos and after many fierce battles a treaty of peace was made which set the Benin and Oyo territorial boundary at Ekan in Otun.”⁷⁷ The cause of the domestic political problem of which he was involved is worth quoting in full as recorded by Jacob Egharevba:

On returning home from his campaign, Ekpennede’s only son was executed for having committed adultery with one of the Oba’s wives. He was killed regardless of his father’s plea. He therefore had his wife Princess Isiuwa, the only daughter of the Oba killed as a reprisal. As Oba Ehengbuda found it impossible to kill Ekpennede openly, he had him excommunicated, and forbade anyone in Benin to go to his house. Ekpennede in return forbade Osokhirhikpa, the then Uwangue who was the prime instigator of his son’s execution, to pass through his gate, and also had him cursed, which was believed to produce the desired effect. Ekpennede murdered every member of his household who was detected out to conspire against him through the instigation of the Oba and he began a wholesale massacre against the people who were hunting for his life by the pressure of the Oba, and ultimately committed suicide by hanging himself.⁷⁸

This account given by Jacob Egharevba is likely to be one version of the conflict. Other versions are not easily remembered in Benin traditions. However, the account recorded by Egharevba may be the palace version, which reveals not only the conflict between the Iyase Ekpennede and Oba Ehengbuda, but how political coalitions within the ruling class and fractions of the ruling class, generated to intra-class and inter-class rivalry and conflicts. The coalitions may have been determined by the political and economic dynamics of the period. Hence, in responding to the crisis, other coalition groups within the state structure revealed their grievances against the Iyase title-holder. This was reflected in the resolution passed by the state council.

The State Council, composed of the three orders of chiefs and the Oba, responded to the crisis by insisting that the Iyase of Benin should no longer be allowed to reside in the Ogbe quarter near the palace, nor to return to Benin City after conquering any large town, and no other Iyase would be appointed until after his death.⁷⁹ This idea of not allowing the Iyase as General Commander of the army to return to the City after a military campaign was

⁷⁶ Egharevba, *Concise Lives...* p.12.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.16.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, pp.16-17.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p.17.

probably an attempt to check the abuse of military success. On a critical assessment of the resolution, it would appear to have hindered rather than helped the growth of the body politic. First, it weakened the military power of the Iyase as the General Commander of the army as he could no longer exploit military successes to enhance his position and prestige in the society. In fact, the weakening of Iyase's power can be interpreted as an attempt to balance those factors which contributed to the strength of the Oba's position against those factors which weakened it. Second, the resolution of the State Council was a reflection of the poor management of military affairs by the ruling class. The case of Iyase Ekpennede was not a problem of personal loyalty to the Oba, or of incompetence in discharge of military duties, but of sentiments displayed by some coalition groups in support of the Oba in resolving a vexed domestic problem. Third, that the Iyase could not return after a military campaign meant that a vacuum was created in his position as head of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* and chief protagonist of the people against the power of the palace.

As it were, the position of the Oba and the Iyase as the two top commanders in the Benin army was to maintain a military value hierarchy which placed other officers in the army high command under them. Of course, the organisational structure which split the Benin army at three levels of command: metropolitan regiment, the royal regiment, and village regiments, was a quest for internal order rather than a policy of developing a large and complex military organisation. This was reflected in the internal authority structure which designated a line-of-command authority and control, and the basis of advancement into positions of responsibility. The top political leaders who also constituted the army high command decided on war plans, declarations of war and force deployment. The number of warriors and the unit commanders the Oba could mobilise as the Supreme Military Commander was a reflection of his political strength rather than a reflection of the capacity of the military system. On the other hand, the Iyase could not mobilise soldiers without the consent of the Oba, whose provincial rulers were responsible for the task. Between the Oba and the Iyase, there was a wide gap in command and control of the army.

On the one hand, the conflict between Iyase Ekpennede and Oba Ehengbuda was basically political even though it involved some issues of morality for which the sanctions of tradition were effectively applied. On the other hand, the response of Benin chiefs not only reveals evidence of the reordering of political power, but the regular definitions or re-definitions of the state's power in responding to crises. This was a significant factor in the survival of the political system, which, in spite of the rivalries and conflicts among different political groups that threatened the cohesion of the state, it did not collapse. From about AD

1440 when the state was reorganised, its conduct has always been conditioned by the social structure of the society. The state itself carried out its functions within the structure of hierarchy determined by the relative powers of the configuration of class forces. Viewed from this perspective, the Iyase became a victim of the state and political coalitions, which in his own particular case, involved conflicts and rivalries. The military position of the Ezomo as a war commander also reveals the evidence of interconnection between formal political institutions and political coalitions, though not at the same level of the relationship between the Iyase and the Oba.

The Ezomo was the next war chief to the Iyase in the hierarchy of army command. He was the Senior War Commander of the Benin army and was directly in charge of the metropolitan regiment in Benin City. During the era of warrior kings, the Ezomo was a non-hereditary title of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*⁸⁰ which was usually a reward to an outstanding warrior from any part of the Benin Empire who had demonstrated exceptional qualities of bravery and courage in warfare. He was the only member of the *Uzama* that had a military position in the army high command. However, his military role had little to do with the *Uzama* status.

As the Senior War Commander, the Ezomo was directly responsible to the Oba.⁸¹ The specific character of his military function meant that his relationship to the king was sharply defined and lacked the element of polar opposition which bedevilled the king's relations with the Iyase.⁸² It should be noted that the Ezomo's direct military responsibilities to the Oba did not place him above the Iyase in the hierarchy of command. The position of the Ezomo was unique being one of the great offices of the state but his military position enabled him to accumulate many slaves, subjects and fiefs. He was in charge of most national campaigns. As the Senior War Commander, there was no standing army at his command. When warriors were needed they were recruited by the Oba through his fief-holders, most of whom were *Eghaevbo*.⁸³ The army for which he was Senior War Commander was not purposely designed for defence and security but for aggression against other states. He was therefore, active in campaigns for conquests and reconquest of vassal states and the expansion of the empire through extensive warfare.

⁸⁰ The *Uzama* was reconstituted into a membership of seven by Oba Ewuare, circa 1440-1473 who added Edaiken, the heir-apparent and crown prince. Members of the order were: Oliha, Edohen, Ezomo, Ero, Eholo n'Ire, Oloton and Edaiken. They were the elders of the state, and formed the highest ranking order of chiefs. They possessed villages of their own on the environs and outskirts of Benin City.

⁸¹ Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, p.60.

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*

Next to the Ezomo in the hierarchy of command was the Edogun. He was a war chief and commander of the *Ekaiwe*, the royal regiment of the Benin army. The name, Edogun, meaning “the day of the god of war” was a hereditary war title created by Oba Ewuare. The military importance attached to the title explains why “as a rule, the Edogun must not be killed in any campaign undertaken by the Benin royal troops.”⁸⁴ He was responsible for briefing the Oba on war plans, prosecution of war, strategies and tactics of specific war or campaign, and general appraisal of military strength. Beyond this role, the Edogun was responsible for the declaration of war by a display of the battle shield, “Asa” and the cessation of hostilities by returning the shield.⁸⁵

The war value of the royal regiment largely depended upon the value of the Edogun whose leadership role in war as a Front Commander assured them of possible victory.⁸⁶ The fighting strength of the royal regiment varied because it was not based on recruitment but on conscription by birth.⁸⁷ Those conscripted by birth were the sons of the king’s daughters. The daughters of the king were usually married to the Town Chiefs and their sons were the *Ekaiwe* which constituted the royal regiment of the Benin army. They were generally conferred with the grade of titles referred to as *Egie Ologhoro* within the group of titles known as *Ibiwe n’Ekhua* headed by the Edogun.⁸⁸ Titles of the *Ibiwe n’Ekhua* were:

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Edogun (hereditary) | 10. Ana |
| 2. Oza | 11. Edamaza |
| 3. Eso | 12. Obasogie |
| 4. Ezomurogho | 13. Ezoba (hereditary) |
| 5. Edaza | 14. Derogho |
| 6. Obaloza | 15. Uso n’Ekhua |
| 7. Esogua | 16. Ine n’Ekhua |
| 8. Ikegua | 17. Zelebi |
| 9. Arala | |

This class of warrior chiefs was probably created for “reasons of power struggle” between the Oba and *Eghaevbo n’Ore*.⁸⁹ The Town Chiefs under the leadership of Iyase Idiaghe, who was the General Commander of the Benin army during the reign of Ewuare, frequently protested against the Oba’s policies, and further demonstrated their displeasure by

⁸⁴ J. U. Egharevba, 1969, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Benin Museum*. Benin City: Eribo Printers, p.18.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, the Esogban of Benin and second in the hierarchy of *Eghaevbo n’Ore*, interviewed in Benin City, on 19 June, 1993.

⁸⁷ Compulsory enlistment for state service of those born into the family of royal warriors.

⁸⁸ Eweka, 1992, *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*. P.45.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, pp.45-46.

withdrawing occasionally from state activities and palace ceremonies. To some extent, the withdrawal of Town Chiefs paralysed palace activities. In response, Ewuare created the titles of *Ibiwe n'Ekhua* from the *Ekaiwe*. They were to act and perform palace functions only in the absence of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore*. It would appear that they were tolerated by the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* because of the 'blood lineage' both to them and the Oba.

From this titled chiefs of the warrior class of *Ekaiwe*, two were Front Commanders of the Benin army: the Oza and the Ezomurogho.⁹⁰ They were not unit commanders of *Ekaiwe*, for that was the official military responsibility of the Edogun. While the Edogun's position was hereditary, the positions of the Oza and the Ezomurogho were given to the two most outstanding warriors within the royal regiment. They had responsibility for the training of the royal forces and to organise them so that they carried out their duties to the best of their abilities. Preparing the royal forces for any combat mission was not their only assignment. As Front Commanders, they acted for the Edogun if he was too old to go to war or if he was too young to lead men to war.

The next in military ranking to the Edogun was the Ekegbian, who was in charge of the unit of royal guards of the royal regiment known as *Isienmweno*. Ewuare created the title of Ekegbian as head of the guards,⁹¹ but the origin of *Isienmweno* has been traced to the period of interregnum following the collapse of the Ogiso dynasty.⁹² The founding father was Edohen, the second in rank among the *Uzama*, while Ero, also a member of the *Uzama*, was their mentor.⁹³ Each member of the *Isienmweno* took an oath of loyalty to the king to protect and defend his royal interests. Recruitment into the group was restricted to those born within the *Isienmweno* family, and who were identified with the morning salutation of the *Latose*.⁹⁴ In the early history of the Ewaka dynasty, the fulfilment of the oath of allegiance taken by the *Isienmweno* led to a resentment between them and their *Uzama* leaders. The *Isienmweno* supported Oba Ewedo (ca.1255-1280) whose political reforms had led to a conflict with the *Uzama*, and in reaction, Edohen and Ero withdrew as leaders of the royal guards. Convinced that they were defenders of royal interests, Oba Ewedo allocated a permanent quarter to the royal guards at the Iboyanyan and Utantan areas of the City, which was adjacent to the palace of Ogiamien. The Strategic thought of Ewedo was to use the *Isienmweno* as a 'defence army'

⁹⁰ See also, Peter M Roese, 1992, "Kriegführung und Waffen in alten Benin (Südigeria)," *Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift*, Jahrg 33, Heft 2, p.366.

⁹¹ Ewaka, 1992, *Evolution of*, p.69.

⁹² Osaren Omoregie, 1997, "The Royal Guards of Great Benin: Fortunes of Isienmweno People," *Sunday Observer* (Benin City/Nigeria), February 9, pp.8-9.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p.8.

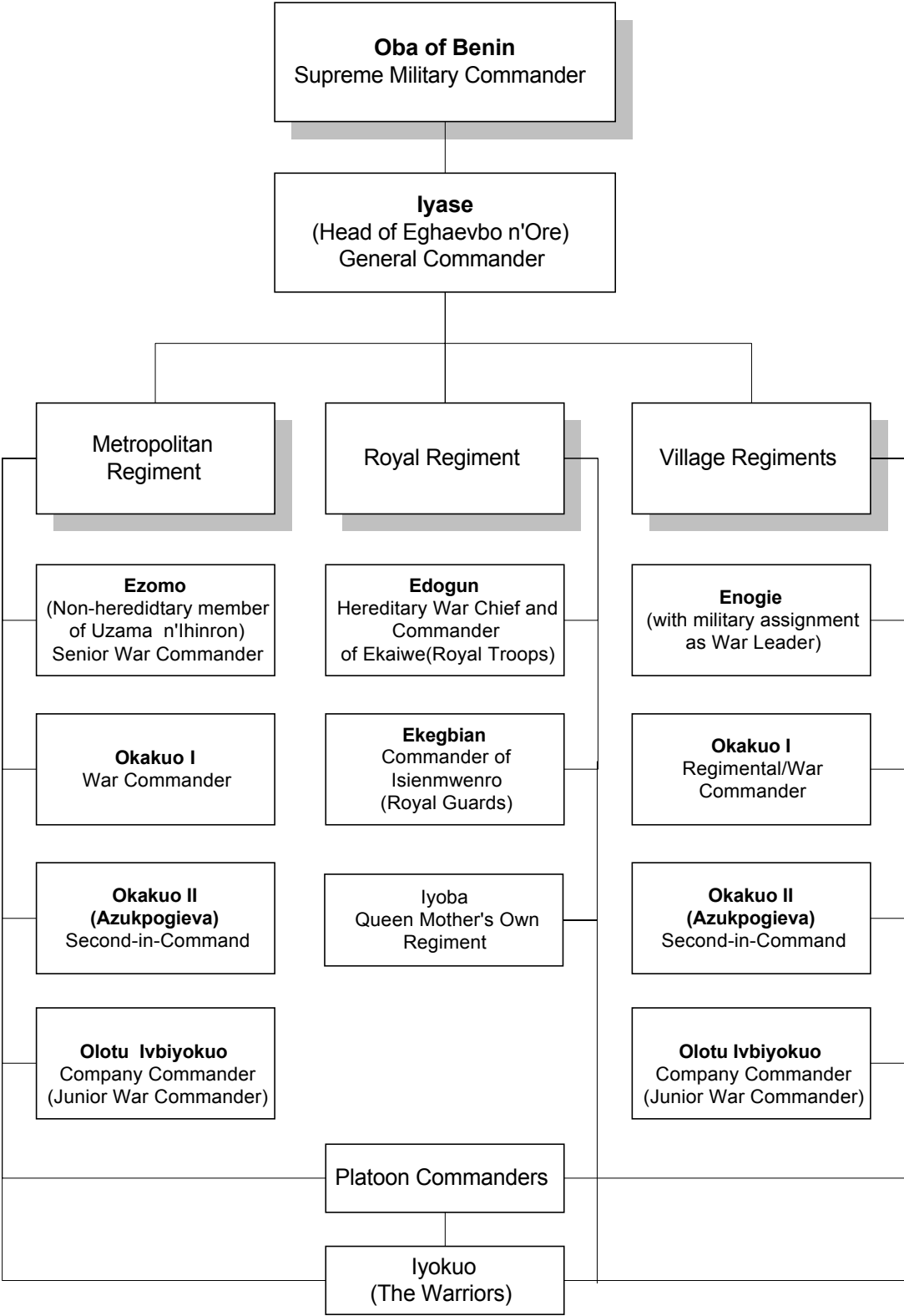
⁹⁴ See Ewaka, 1992, *Evolution of*, p.158.

to check any future attempt at the resurgence of the power of the Ogiamien after his defeat at the battle of Ekiokpaga in 1255 AD.

The Benin Army High Command, 1440-1600 AD

Position in the State	Military Position/ Honours
The Oba of Benin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Supreme Military Commander of the army. ii. Hereditary military position. iii. All war and regimental commanders under his command. iv. Front Commander of the Benin warriors. v. Issued orders for the recruitment and mobilisation of soldiers, with the assistance of his chiefs. vi. Received the largest share of tribute, and war booty.
The Iyase of Benin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. General Commander of the army by virtue of being the Iyase of Benin, and head of the <i>Eghaevbo n'Ore</i>. ii. Non-hereditary military position. iii. Next in military position to the Supreme Military Commander. iv. Had the option of going to war or not, and headed the state administration if the Oba was on campaign. v. From the end of the sixteenth century, the Iyase was no longer allowed to return to Benin City after any campaign.
The Ezomo of Benin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Senior War Commander of the army, and third in the hierarchy of military command. ii. Non-hereditary military position, being a reward to an outstanding warrior from any part of the Benin Empire. iii. Commander of the Metropolitan Regiment of the Benin army, and directly responsible to the Oba. iv. Directed most national campaigns. v. Non-hereditary member of the <i>Uzama n'Thinron</i>.
The Edogun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Hereditary war chief and Commander of the <i>Ekaiwe</i>, the royal regiment of the Benin army. ii. Fourth in the hierarchy of military command in the state. iii. Responsible for public declaration of war and cessation of hostilities. iv. Responsible for briefing the Oba on war plans, prosecution of war, and general appraisal of military strength. v. The military importance attached to the position of the Edogun means that as a rule, he must not be killed in battle.

Command Structure of Benin Army, 1440-1600



Between 1440 and 1473 AD, Ewuare created the titles of the Ekeghughu and the Ekegbian as leaders of the *Isienmwunro*. The titles were given to two of his companions who were with him in exile. The Ekegbian was assigned responsibility for the royal guard in Benin City while the Ekeghughu was posted to Okha, a village outside the City.⁹⁵ The *Isienmwunro* adopted the appellation of ‘*Asaka no S’Oghionba*,’ meaning the soldier or army ants⁹⁶ that stings the Oba’s enemy. As a demonstration of their fighting spirit, the upper end of their body marking (tattoo) was a spear-point which they referred to as ‘*Ogala Ewuare*’ meaning ‘Ewuare’s spear.’⁹⁷ They were easily recognised by this body marking. A detachment of the *Isienmwunro* existed in most of the towns of the empire, and each was responsible to the Ekegbian in Benin City.⁹⁸ They had the sole responsibility for the execution of persons condemned to death who were not used for human sacrifice.⁹⁹

The royal guards were mobilised for war as part of the royal forces through the Ekegbian, their commander, only on the instructions of the Oba. As a community serving the Oba, the *Isienmwunro* was constituted as the first guild of the Iweguae society of the *Eghaevbo n’Ogbe*. They were part of the war and security forces of the Oba rather than an army serving the interest of the State. In a sense, the royal guard was planned primarily for deterrent purpose but had the semblance of a standing army.

At the level of command and control of the Benin army, the metropolitan and royal regiments in Benin City were organised in such a manner that the leadership had direct relationship and responsibility with the Oba. Beyond the line of command in the following order of hierarchy - Oba, Iyase, Ezomo, Edogun and Ekegbian - the Oba as Supreme Military Commander had no direct relationship with untitled War Commanders (*Okakuo*), who were unit commanders of the regiments of Benin army in the towns and villages. The Oba dealt with these commanders through the *Okaevbo* or *Odionwere* who were directly in contact with provincial rulers called *Onotueyevbo*,¹⁰⁰ whose offices were not hereditary. Many of the Town and Palace Chiefs (*Eghaevbo*) were appointed by the Oba as the *Onotueyevbo* of one or more villages.¹⁰¹ The independence of Benin villages in relation to one another, and the tendency to have as much control over their own affairs¹⁰² meant that each village or

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Army ants are fierce hunters. They are angrily combative and form another distinctive ant group.

⁹⁷ Ekhaguosa Aisien, 1986, *Iwu: The Body Markings of the Edo People*. Benin City: Aisien Publishers, p.40.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ Eweka, 1992, *Evolution of*, p.69.

¹⁰⁰ MLG Library/BC. Marshall, 1939, “Intelligence Report,” 12 August, p.34.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p.35.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p.34.

federation of villages organised their armies as independent units each under its War Commander.

The *Okakuo* of a village regiment was both the war commander of his unit and Front Commander of the warriors in battle. As a military leader, the *Okakuo* was assisted by a company or troop commander identified as Second-in-Command (*Azukupogieva*). A company commander was called *Olotu Ivbiyokuo* (leader of a company of warriors). While a regiment was identified by the name of the village, a company of warriors was identified by the name chosen for it by the group. Such names reflected the fighting spirit of the warriors. However, individual combatants had their own weapons and equipment, and in some cases, when they were on national campaigns, the Oba provided them with some weapons from his arsenal. The development of iron technology was one aspect of the organisation of the resources of the state for warfare.

Iron Technology and the Weapons of War

The use of iron and development of its technology in Benin kingdom has had influences in the state-building process. Iron technology led to the development of weapons which changed the character of war. Generally, in West Africa, the states that rose to power in the period between 1400 and 1700 such as Benin, Nupe, Igalla, and Oyo in present day Nigeria, dominated others partly because of the advantages in the development of iron technology. The earliest known iron working in sub-Saharan Africa was discovered at the site of Taruga in present day Central Nigeria, where an advanced iron technology existed as early as the sixth century BC.¹⁰³ Archaeological excavations unearthed a number of iron-smelting sites at Taruga, with radiocarbon dates from the fifth to the third centuries BC.¹⁰⁴

Evidence from radiocarbon dates suggest that by the end of the first millennium AD, iron use and iron working were widespread throughout the present day Nigeria: in the northern savannah by the first or second century and by the ninth in the southern forested area.¹⁰⁵ Certainly at Benin by the thirteenth to the fourteenth centuries, iron smelting was well

¹⁰³ See B. E. B. Fagg, 1968, "The Nok Culture: Excavations at Taruga", *West African Archaeology Newsletter*, 10, pp.27-30; B. E. B. Fagg, 1969, "Recent Work in West Africa: new light on the Nok Culture", *World Archaeology* I, pp.41-50. See also, A. J. Priddy, 1970, "An Iron Age Site near Yelwa, Sokoto Province: Preliminary Report", *West African Archaeology Newsletter*, 12, pp.20-32; Angela Fagg, "Excavation of an occupation site in the Nok Valley, Nigeria", *West African Journal of Archaeology*. Vol. 2, 1972, pp.72-79. Earlier works by B. E. B. Fagg include, "The Nok Culture", *West African Review*, XXVII, 1956, pp.1083-1087, and "The Nok Culture in Prehistory", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. Vol. I, No.4, 1959, pp.288-293.

¹⁰⁴ T. Shaw, 1978, *Nigeria: Its Archaeology and Early History*. London: Thames and Hudson, pp.79-80.

¹⁰⁵ Barnes and Ben-Amos, 1983, "Benin, Oyo, and Dahomey," p.6.

established.¹⁰⁶ The argument of Barnes and Ben-Amos is that “the smiting and smelting of iron was a prerequisite for state formation in the Guinea Coast of tropical Africa.¹⁰⁷ According to them, “without an advanced iron technology the weaponry that made political expansion possible could not be manufactured”, arguing that “control of iron and its sources, therefore, meant control of military force.”¹⁰⁸

Rich iron ore deposits were not available in Benin and had to be imported from the Etsako area - north of Benin - which had large deposits. Benin was able to develop an indigenous capacity to work the iron material into weapons of war. It is probable that this indigenous capacity which was basically the possession of iron smelting knowledge was acquired through training and apprenticeship of Benin blacksmiths in Etsako. By the second half of the fifteenth century when Benin expanded its Empire virtually in all directions, it established control over the iron ore sources which was considered to be essential to the development of iron technology in the state.

In Benin, iron smelting knowledge was restricted to the guild of blacksmiths called *Igunematon*.¹⁰⁹ This guild of craftsmen lived in three quarters in Benin City: Igun-N’Ekhua, Igun N’Eyaen-Nugie, and Idumwigun-N’Ugboha. The guild was affiliated to Iwebo Palace Society and headed by Inneh-N’Igun, a hereditary title. This title belonged to the Igun-N’Ekhua quarter which was founded in the time of Oba Oguola.¹¹⁰ Next in position was Obazuaye, the hereditary title head of the Igun N’Eyaen-Nugie quarter which was established by Oba Esigie.¹¹¹ As a specialised guild, *Igunematon* produced weapons and other implements of iron. Philip Igbafe explains it this way: “While ironsmiths supplied swords, spears, arrowheads to the hunters, the carpenters obtained their chisels, implements and cutlasses from ironsmiths as well.”¹¹² In the sixteenth century, a Dutch account confirmed the sale of iron goods in the markets: “They ...bring great store of Ironworke to sell there, and Instruments to fish withall; and many weapons, as Assagaies, and knives also for the Warre.”¹¹³

The internal arrangement for defence production, basically weapons of war, was made possible with the services of *Igunematon*, rather than the reliance for supplies from outside the

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ The guild system under which various craft industries functioned and developed, became an integral part of the economic structure of the pre-colonial Benin state.

¹¹⁰ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932, “Intelligence Report...”p.140.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² Igbafe, “Benin in the Pre-Colonial Period,” p.12.

state. The weapons produced enabled Benin warriors to use a variety of weapons such as bows and poisoned arrows, spears, swords, assegais and the crossbow. The variety of weapons used for war made it possible to compose the warriors into divisions of swordsmen, archers, spearmen and crossbowmen.

The swords produced in Benin were the curved single-edged swords (*umozo*) which is remembered in Benin tradition as one of the oldest of all fighting weapons. It was broad-bladed and short, which was better for attack than defence. Benin warriors also used two types of spear (*asoro*) - the long and the short - which ranked next to *umozo* as the chief weapon used in battle. Among the spearmen were those who were famous for their skill in using the assegais - a type of slender iron-tipped spear of hardwood. Benin warriors also used bows (*uhanbo*) and arrows (*ifenwe*) long before the crossbow was introduced. The crossbow (*ekpede*) fired heavy arrows which made it a significant weapon of war. To successfully use the bow and arrow, and the crossbow, the warriors had training in target and field archery.

It is plausible to argue that since Benin warriors were successful in most of their campaigns,¹¹⁴ they and their commanders may have excelled in the strategy and tactics which were appropriate to the use of the locally produced weapons. The use of weapons alone was not the only factor which enhanced success in warfare. The overall strength of Benin was the result of the strength of its component parts which possessed armies that could be called upon to perform its tasks. Dutch sources have pointed out that the Oba of Benin could mobilise twenty thousand soldiers in a day, and raise an army of eighty thousand to one-hundred men.¹¹⁵ The number of warriors the Oba could mobilise may have been exaggerated by this Dutch account, but it demonstrates that Benin warriors were easily available for mobilisation by the Oba. Olfert Dapper described the soldiers in arms:

The arms of these people consist of pikes and shields, assegais, bows and poisoned arrows. Gentlemen who are on their way to take part in a campaign, and who want to display themselves, wear a fine scarlet coat, a necklace of elephants' and leopards' teeth, and a red furred turban trimmed with leopard or civet skin, from which hangs a horse's tail. The soldiers go naked from the waist up, and on the rest of their body wear a garment of stuff as fine as silk.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ 'D. R.' (may have been Dierick Ruiters), *The Dutch in Benin*, published with other accounts in Amsterdam, 1602 and translated out of Dutch, by G. Artus Dantisc. Cited in T. Hodgkin, 1960, *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology*. London: Oxford University Press, pp.121-122.

¹¹⁴ The evidence of military success can be judged from the expansion of the frontiers of the empire.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, p.129.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.128.



Figure 1: This work of art shows a Benin war chief in a ceremonial war dress, with two other warriors and attendants probably during the annual war festival (*isiokuo*) in Benin City. The shields and long spears were weapons used in war and the helmets for protection. Source: Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Pearls Collection in The Museum of Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1992, p. 134.



Figure 2: The Queen Mother (*Iyoba*) with attendants. She organised her own regiment of the Benin army which was based at Uselu. The first *Iyoba* to be installed was Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie who reigned from about AD 1504 to 1550. Idia has the reputation in Benin history as the only woman who went to war, in support of the war effort of the son, Oba Esigie. Source: Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Pearls Collection in The Museum of Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1992, p. 78.



Figure 3: A Benin warrior wearing a protective helmet, with a long spear and shield, battle-ready for military operations. Source: Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Pearls Collection in The Museum of Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1992, p. 137.



Figure 4: A Benin warrior with Flint-lock, a type of firearm imported to the kingdom of Benin by the Portuguese from the sixteenth century. Source: Bryna Freyer, *Royal Benin Art in the Collection of of the National Museum of African Art*. Washington D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1987, p. 55.

After each battle, the arrows which remained unshot were brought back to the king's arsenal, and the fetish-priests poisoned new ones to replace those which were lost.¹¹⁷ Although the warriors had responsibility to own their weapons but in the king's palace, there was a huge arsenal of iron weapons produced in readiness for war. In the arsenal were bows and arrows, swords and spears.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Benin expanded without the aid of firearms¹¹⁸ or European military technology. Although Portuguese traders accompanied Oba Esigie during the Idah war of 1515, papal prohibitions on the sale of arms and iron to non-Christians was conscientiously observed by the Portuguese traders.¹¹⁹

As it were, the army and weapons were not the only reasons for the military supremacy of Benin during this period. Military successes or failures also depended on their approach to any war and the tactics employed in battle. Hence, the issues of strategy and tactics were of considerable importance in the military system.

Strategy and Tactics of Warfare

Sources on this period, 1440-1600 AD, are limited, for the reconstruction of the strategy and tactics of war in the military history of Benin. Information on the subject from fieldwork have been critically evaluated based on an assessment of the terrain in which battles were fought. Secondly, the war tactics have also been reconstructed from evidence of the weapons and equipment used in battles. Benin expanded in the tropical rain-forest region of West Africa, a different military zone from other regions of Africa.¹²⁰ In the Benin military zone, the use of soldiers on horse-back was not possible because of the density of its rain-forest which not only affected the breeding of horses due to the problem of tsetse fly but their movements in the region. As a result, the art of war based on cavalry was not developed for military operations. The regiments of Benin army, were therefore, based on infantry for the conduct of offensive operations.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.129.

¹¹⁸ Firearm is any weapon such as shotguns and rifles that uses gunpowder to fire a bullet or shell. Non one knows who invented the gun. But historians believe that the first guns may have been cannon-like weapons used by Arabs in North Africa during the 1300's.

¹¹⁹ Ryder, 1969, *Benin and*, p.41.

¹²⁰ It is possible to divide Africa into several military zones in which a clearly perceptible art of war was predominant in the strategic thought of military leaders. The distinguishing factor of each zone may have been determined by the geographical area of the African state and direction of its expansion, not least, of which was the political culture of the African society.

The weapons of war and the methods of fighting during this period did not seem to change, not even with the introduction of European firearms. In spite of this, the art of war was highly developed as reflected in the organisation of the troops and their positions on the battlefield. Also, the use of martial sounds and war drums was a strategic calculation to give orders to the warriors and provoke a decisive battle. On the battle field, Benin warriors were disciplined such that they faced death rather than they disobey their commanders. Two battle songs demonstrated the loyalty and bravery of the warriors: the first song, “*Ogha re gha nion, I gha si'mwin Oto eramwen,*” meaning, “no matter how difficult, I will defend my fatherland,” and the second, “*Ebiebi so vbe Okaligban, Nowegbe doo gha la,*” meaning, “it is dark in the zone of the brave and mighty, only the strong can dare to pass by.”¹²¹ These songs of battle instilled courage on the warriors to ‘die in battle than taking to flight’ in the face of enemy advance or pressure. Most campaigns were carefully planned.

Before any campaign, the war council in Benin City met to discuss matters relating to the war, all the necessary preparations and how the campaign should be embarked upon. Its main concern was the command of the warriors and the handling of forces in battle, and other matters relating to military intelligence, logistics and supplies.¹²² Any military operation was therefore, the test of elaborate preparations made long beforehand. Such preparations depended on the kind of war - whether it was internal war which was more or less limited conflict or external war of aggression against other states and societies. An accurate knowledge of the exact nature of war was necessary for the war council to determine the number of military forces and subsequent reinforcements for the theatre of war. After what was considered to be elaborate preparations, failure in war was attributed to the problem of command and control of the warriors in battle.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, most of the wars that Benin waged were series of sieges (*Isiatua*).¹²³ In Benin tradition, it is claimed that sieges were the main plans of a campaign, aimed at destroying the enemy fortress and compelling them to surrender. The era of warrior kings may have witnessed more sieges than pitched battles (*okhonmu*), but where military confrontation was inevitable as in pitched battle, Benin warriors were equally prepared.¹²⁴ The Uzea War and the invasion of Uromi in 1502-1503, which took place in the north of Benin kingdom, gives an insight into the strategic primacy of a war of siege and

¹²¹ Evidence of Chief Otasowie Oliha leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City, on 7 June 1993.

¹²² Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, Consultant Surgeon and local historian, interviewed in Benin City, on 20 June 1993.

¹²³ Evidence of John Ohonba, a former sceptre bearer of the Oba, a palace resource person on Benin history and culture, and now Chief Security Officer in the palace of the Oba of Benin, interviewed in Benin City on 20 June 1993.

¹²⁴ Evidence of Mr. John Ohonba interviewed in Benin City on 20 June 1993.

pitched battle. In his strategic calculations, Oba Ozolua marched on Uromi by going through Uzea. “As usual when he (Ozolua),” writes Christopher Okojie, “marched with his blood-thirsty soldiers, the inhabitants along the road fled into the jungle - but at Uzea, the Onojie offered resistance. In the battle that followed, the Uzea ruler was slain.”¹²⁵ It is understandable from the point of ethnocentric writing why Okojie called the Benin warriors “blood-thirsty” but, in fact, this means that Benin warriors were dreaded by their neighbours. In Esan tradition, it is claimed that one of their bravest warriors, Idedekpanele from Ekhue “thought he alone could face Ozolua tested men,” but “was slain where he stood.”¹²⁶ Such challenges were not uncommon in Benin and Esan traditions, which did not even signify the end of the war if the challenger was killed. Okojie explains that while the war lasted a whole year, no farming was possible in Uromi, and that “men had deserted their homes and were living in the jungle,” and as they were “packed in hovels and starving, epidemic diseases took heavier toll of the men than were actually lost at the battles.”¹²⁷ In a war of siege and pitched battles, Benin warriors seemed to have been successful in their campaigns. In the case of Oba Ozolua, it would appear that he improved on his war strategy and tactics after the war with Egbaen of Iwu, in which he was captured, held as a prisoner, escaped, reinforced his army and gained memorable victory over the Egbaen.¹²⁸

As it were, weapons used by Benin warriors were hand-held, and tactics for use of the swords were based on hand-to-hand fighting by closing on their enemies. The swordsmen were supported by units of other warriors carrying spears, bows and arrows. All the warriors in their battle formations carried protective weapons, which were more or less defensive arms, such as body armour, helmets and shields. The archers, using bows and arrows as missile were often the first to shoot in order to harass the enemy and disorganise their formations.¹²⁹ This was followed by warriors using the spear not as missile, but to target the enemies in their disorganised positions.¹³⁰ In the confused situation, Benin swordsmen attacked the enemy soldiers, perhaps gaining tactical advantages from their strategic positions on the battlefield. It is difficult to ascertain who among the warrior kings, first developed this tactics in warfare. A possible conclusion is that strategies and tactics were aspects of the preparations discussed by the Benin war council, and front commanders and military leaders were given instructions on

¹²⁵ C. G. Okojie, 1994, *Esan Native Law and customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*. Benin City: Ilupeju Press Ltd., (first published in 1960), pp. 368-369.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p.370.

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

¹²⁸ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.23.

¹²⁹ Evidence of Mr. John Ohonba, a palace resource person, interviewed in Benin City on 20 June 1993.

¹³⁰ John Ohonba, interviewed in Benin City on 20 June 1993.

what to do. Although the conditions of one war were never repeated exactly in another war, commanders were given instructions for individual tactical decisions on the battlefield.

The method of fighting by Benin warriors required training and acquisition of skills in the different category of battle formations: swordsmen, spearmen and archers. Since the regiments of Benin army were brought together only for the purpose of war, it may be reasonable to argue that regimental and war commanders were given instructions from the military leaders in Benin City, to drill their troops on the use of weapons and positioning on the battlefield. It was for this possible that some regiments were divided into companies and platoons to ensure that warriors were highly trained, drilled, and skilled for offensive operations. The extent to which they were also trained in the tactics of camouflage and ambush is not well known, but martial sounds and war drums were used as signals for taking cover or advancing on the enemy.

During the Benin-Idah War (of 1515-1516 ?), in the reign of Oba Esigie, defensive operations in strategy and tactics were used to starve off defeat. The invasion of Benin by the Idah army prompted Benin war leaders to adopt a defensive strategy as a temporary expedient to gain time for mobilisation, and then, launch an offensive action. The first defensive strategy was the use of scarecrow to deceive the invading enemy. Three carved wooden soldiers in human figures called *Emuemuen*, were posted at Oregbeni, east of Benin City which was the line of invasion of the Idah soldiers.¹³¹ Benin tradition claim that Idah soldiers shot their arrows at the scarecrow, until Benin soldiers assisted by Portuguese mercenaries who used guns for the first time in Benin warfare, forced the enemy to retreat. This gave Benin warriors some strategic advantages in the war, and which eventually led to the defeat of Idah. >From a study of Benin war strategy and tactics, it is evident that the level of success and the extent to which they were practicable depended to some degree on the military intelligence and logistical principles behind them.

Intelligence and Logistics

Benin traditions claim that the success of the warrior kings depended partly on military intelligence, not least of which was the system of logistics.¹³² In the area of military intelligence, it is doubtful if special units were established in Benin army for the collection and evaluation of information relevant to military decision-making. Most of the prisoners of war were questioned in Benin City, possibly after they were distributed as slaves, for the purpose of collecting specific information considered to be important for future campaigns or

¹³¹ J. U. Egharevba, 1949, *The Murder of Imaguero and the Tragedy of Idah War*. Sapele: Central Press, p.24.

to the proper preparations for future military operations. In this regard, information from war captives were corroborated with the information from Benin long-distance traders and their guards who were often consulted for information about other peoples and societies. Whatever information that was gathered in this process, formed the basis of the systematic evaluation of enemy strength and weaknesses.¹³³ The extent to which Benin military leaders were able to use military intelligence for the planning of campaigns can at best, be tentatively be deduced from the ease or difficulty with which they were able to overcome enemy forces.

During the era of warrior kings, the essence of military intelligence was for the conduct of military operations in order to enhance strategic and tactical advantages on the battlefield. The organisation and procedure of the intelligence network during this period is not well known. At least, the war commanders and their units were informed of matters concerning the terrain, roads and pathways, waterways, and possibly fortified areas whenever they were on campaigns.

While on the one hand, intelligence was at its rudimentary level of development during this period, on the other hand, Benin warriors had their own approach to the logistics of war. The warriors were often accompanied by carriers, and as they advanced by felling trees and ‘scorching the earth,’ they looted farms on the way to sustain themselves. In the war against Uromi, 1502-1503, “Ozolua of course, could not maintain his supply line from Benin and his men depended upon the food pillaged from Uromi deserted homes and farm.”¹³⁴ This claim by Christopher Okojie can be interpreted to mean that the Benin army under Ozolua had problem of logistical commands, hence the problem of re-supply from Benin City. But the action of Ozolua showed a strong tendency to weaken Uromi in the war by looting their food because their continuation of the war would probably have depended among other factors, on a regular supply of food. Lack of food would also mean lack of endurance for maximum combat.

The system of logistical support for the Benin wars of expansion in the fifteen and sixteenth centuries was often associated with strategy and tactics.¹³⁵ Each front commander or war leader had to plan the movement of the soldiers and the selection of camps and other necessary arrangements for food supplies. Logistics was more of the function of combatants during military operations than actual preparations for the war.¹³⁶ On a critical note, military

¹³² For details on logistics and supply, see Peter M. Roese, 1992, “kriegführung und Waffen,”pp.369-372.

¹³³ Evidence of Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n’Thinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 7 June, 1993.

¹³⁴ Okojie, 1994, *Esan Native Laws*, pp.370-371.

¹³⁵ Evidence of Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, the Ezomo of Benin and member of the *Uzama n’Thinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 5 and 6 June, 1993.

¹³⁶ Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo.

logistics had a function to perform in providing the human and material means for the conduct of war. In both ways, whether it was preparation for any war, or during military operations, logistics had been concerned with the primary requirements such as food, camp sites, and weapons needed by the soldiers. The carriers who were behind the army and the battlefield, directly or indirectly, supported the fighting force in the lines of communication. However, it was not only in war that the strategy and logistical principles were given considerations. It was also reflected in the plans for the defence of Benin City, with fortified walls and moats, which afforded maximum control of the road networks that led to the nine gates of the City.

Defensive Fortification and Military Camps

Parallel with the organisation of the Benin army and the development of logistical support for its military system, was the strategic idea of enhancing the defensive fortification of the capital city of the kingdom and the empire. During the mid-fifteenth century, Oba Ewuare the Great directed the digging of the moat in the heart of the city as part of his military building programme. This idea of building walls as defensive structures would appear to have been guided by some unifying strategic conception. The walls were advantageously situated because the moats were dug in a manner that the earthen banks provided the outer walls to the deep ditches on the inside of their banks, such that the moats and the walls were both complimentary barriers which served as integral defensive works.

Several reasons motivated this unifying strategic conception. First, it was to serve dual purpose as the main base for the launching of offensive military campaigns, and as refuge for the people. Second, there was the need to control the access roads into the capital. Hence, the walls had nine gates with military guards and were locked at night. Royal proclamation did not permit the entry of visitors to Benin at night.¹³⁷ This was probably for security reasons. Third, as a bastion of fortress, it was to place the enemy in difficult situation of attack or sustaining any siege. Fourth, it was to control the collection of tolls >from traders and foreigners as trade and commerce was under royal monopoly. Finally, this strategic conception was to reinforce the defence and security of the capital city.

The walls were described by Graham Connah, an archaeologist, as a bank of dumped earth with its sides at the natural ‘angle of rest’ of the geological material involved.¹³⁸ “There is not only a wall or bank”, argues Connah, “there is also a ditch” which “forms an integral

¹³⁷Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, the Esogban of Benin and second in the hierarchy of *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, interviewed in Benin City, on 19 June, 1993.

¹³⁸ G. Connah, 1967 “New Light on the Benin City Walls”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol. III no. 4, June, p.593.

part of the intended barrier but also forms a quarry for the material to construct the wall or bank, that quarry being not in continuous proximity to the structure being created but also at any one place directly proportionate to it.”¹³⁹ In other words the bigger the wall or bank the bigger the ditch.¹⁴⁰

Guinness Book of Records describe the Benin City walls as the world’s second-largest man-made structure (after China’s Great Walls), and that the series of earthen ramparts is the most extensive earthwork in the world. Patrick Darling has been developing a series of possible explanations on why West Africans built the earthworks. First, he thinks it is probable that the earthworks functioned as communal boundaries delineating the agricultural land belonging to local extended families and lineage groups.¹⁴¹ Darling believes that the earthworks probably functioned as a communal status symbol because his survey reveals that the ramparts become more impressive closer to entranceways.¹⁴² Thirdly, he suggests that the banks and the ditches may at some stage have acted in ritual terms, as a symbolic boundary between the real world and the spirit one - apparently because historical research has revealed that hundreds of years ago the corpses of childless men were placed in the boundary ditches - literally between this world and the next.¹⁴³

Beside these generalisations by Darling, he also attempts to explain the reasons for the construction of the earthworks of Benin. His study suggests that the earthworks date from before the birth of the Benin kingdom from which the empire evolved. According to him, new examinations of the 60 - feet high Benin ramparts show that they were merely part of the original early earthwork system, which suggests that an important political and religious centre developed there before it was conquered by the founders of the Benin kingdom and empire.¹⁴⁴ Patrick Darling estimates that most of the complex was built progressively over the years from between 800 and 1000 AD up until the late fifteen century, when much of the area was conquered by a local African power known as the Benin Empire.

There are basic problems in the suggestions of Patrick Darling. First of all, he fails to identify the ‘important political and religious centre’ to which he traces the origin of the walls before it was conquered by the founders of the Benin kingdom and empire. Second, he also admits that because of the man hours of work involved in the construction of the earthworks, “to find out quite why the constructors went to so much trouble is not a straightforward

¹³⁹ *ibid.*,p.594.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Cited in David Keys, 1994, “Digging in the Dirt”, *The Independent* (UK) 25, January, 1994. Quoted in ACASA Newsletter no. 39, April, p.16.

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*

task.”¹⁴⁵ Third, confronted with the problem of historical knowledge, Darling’s presuppositions and basis of claim to his interpretation of the earthworks is doubtful. This is because, he points out that “the Bini know the earthworks as *iya* - a word which can be applied to any valley or hole in the ground.”¹⁴⁶ Certainly, the word *iya* can be applied to any valley but not a hole,¹⁴⁷ for the Bini describe any hole in the ground as *uvun*.¹⁴⁸

There are no conflicting historical traditions in Benin as regards the origins or purposes for which the moats or ditches were constructed. Oba Oguola, according to Benin explanation of events in dynastic terms, began the construction of the moats and he was responsible for the digging of the first and second moats surrounding the city. “By the order of Oba Oguola”, points out Egharevba, “all the important towns and villages in Benin copied the example and dug similar moats or ditches round their villages as ramparts against enemies.”¹⁴⁹ As noted earlier, the third moat in the heart of the city was dug during the time of Oba Ewuare. The moats or walls can be interpreted as linear earth boundaries of village settlements which served as defensive fortifications. Binis did not engage in farming activities within the enclosures of the walls. Therefore, the walls could not have been demarcation of agricultural territories.

Records of early European travellers seem also interesting to this debate. In about 1500 Duarte Pacheco Pereira, a Portuguese explorer who took part in the exploration of the West African Coast at the end of the Fifteenth century described the Benin City walls this way: “This city is about a league long from gate to gate; it has no wall but is surrounded by a large moat, very wide and deep, which suffices for its defence...”¹⁵⁰ A more accurate description was given by the Dutchman D. R. (may have been Dierick Ruiters) in c.1600:

At the gate where I entered on horse backe, I saw a very high Bulwarke, very thick of earth, with a very deepe broad ditch, but it was drie, and full of high trees...That Gate is a reasonable good Gate, made of wood after their maner, which is to shut, and there alwayes there is watch holden.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁵ Patrick J. Darling, 1984, *The Ancient Linear Earthworks of Benin and Ishan*. Part 1 and 2. Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology, B.A.R. International Series 215, p.303.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p.6.

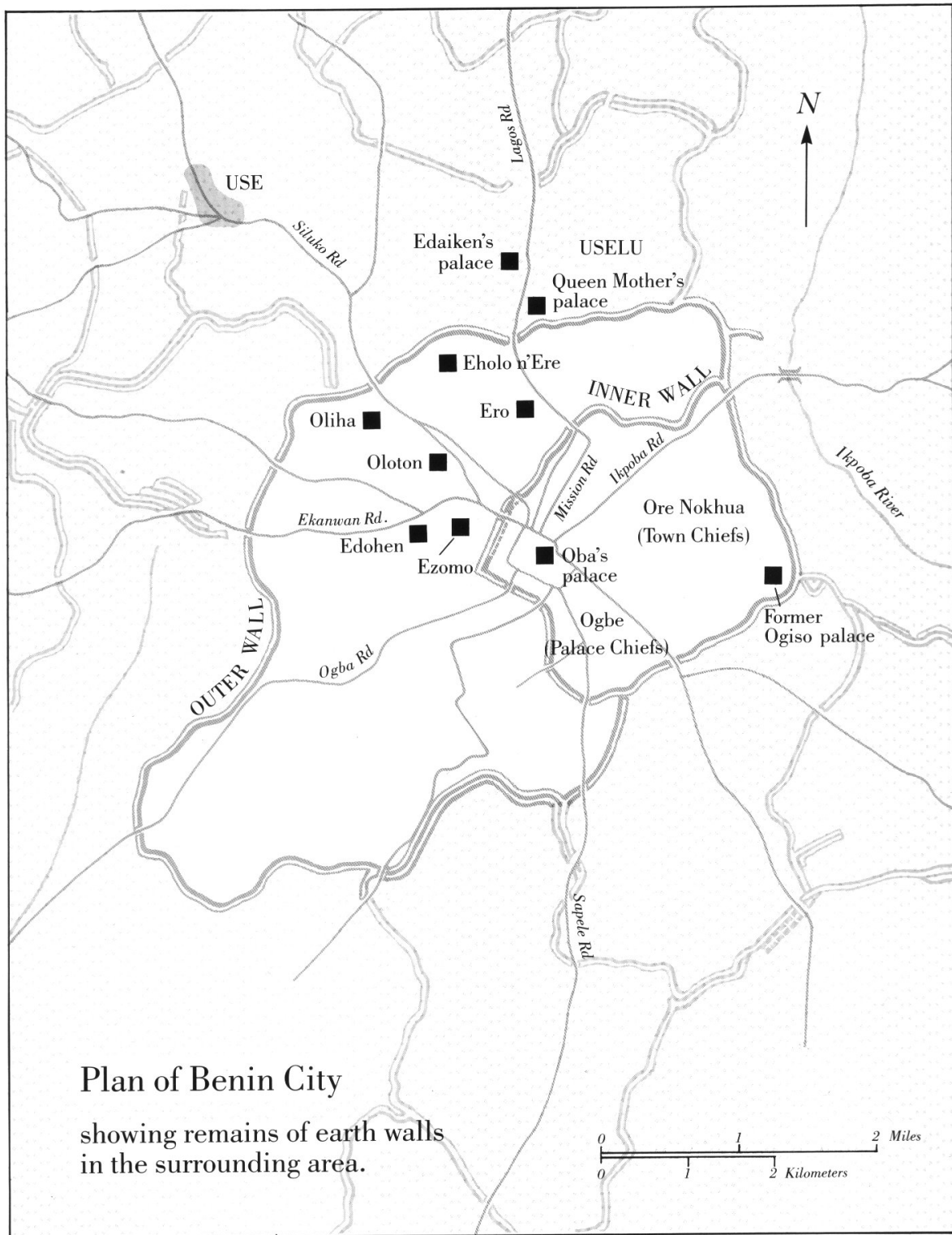
¹⁴⁷ See R. N. Agheyisi, 1986, *An Edo-English Dictionary*. Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, p. 77. As far back as 1937, Melzian had published a Bini dictionary which defined *iya* as ‘(1) ditch; the term includes natural cavities similar to a ditch. (2) the big ditch (and wall) round Benin City said to be built by Oba Oguola’. See H. J. Melzian, 1937, *A Concise Dictionary of the Bini Language of Southern Nigeria*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., p.106.

¹⁴⁸ Agheyisi, 1986, *Edo-English*, p.155.

¹⁴⁹ Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.83.

¹⁵⁰ Duarte Pacheco Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, edited by R. Mauny, Centre de Estudos da Guine Portuguesa, No. 19, Bissau, 1956, pp.130 - 147. Cited in T. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives: An Historical Anthology*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p.93.

¹⁵¹ Cited in T. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, p.120.



Map 2: The earth walls and plan of Benin City. The palace of the Oba and the *Ogbe* Quarter (residential area of the Palace Chiefs) and *Ore Nokhua* (residential area of the Town Chiefs) are located within the inner wall. Six of the Uzama are outside the inner wall, while the Queen Mother and the Edaiken, the heir-apparent and seventh member of the Uzama are outside the outer wall. Source: Kate Ezra, 1992. *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc.

In a work published in 1668, Olfert Dapper described the walls as follows:

The town is enclosed on one side by a wall ten feet high, made of a double palisade of trees, with stakes in between interlaced in the form of a cross, thickly lined with earth. On the other side a marsh, fringed with bushes which stretches from one end of the wall to the other, serves as a natural rampart to the town. There are several gates, eight or nine feet high and five feet wide: they are made of wood, all of one piece and turn on a stake like the hurdles which enclose meadows.¹⁵²

Archaeological research points to the fact that the earthwork system was built progressively over a 200 year period.¹⁵³ The evidence of oral tradition is very strong on the exact origin and time span of the construction. At the time the construction of the earthworks began, Benin had no well organised and heavily equipped army. Strategic thought was therefore focused on the best kind of fortification which will make it difficult for sustainable siege by the enemy. This idea was the strategic imagination of Oba Oguola in the late thirteenth century due to the threats of invasion from the kingdom of Udo and the kingdom of Ugu which emerged in the same Benin region as rival states. It marked the beginning of a military building programme of the war potential of Benin, and not just presumed security against enemies. It will be reasonable to conclude therefore that the earthworks were aspects of the military resources of Benin, and in particular, they reinforced the defence of the capital for its strategic importance because the city was the hub around which all events revolved. In other words, the moats and walls were of primary military concern, providing defence against any enemy, and military security for the inhabitants.

The study of Benin City walls, when placed in context of the building of city walls in other pre-colonial African states and societies,¹⁵⁴ is more likely to reveal a varied function from domestic to formal military defence. Beyond this, “African city walls constitute a source of information concerning African urban history which has not been exploited sufficiently.”¹⁵⁵ The lack of adequate information about Benin City Walls only appears to be the constraint in

¹⁵² Olfert Dapper, *Description de l'Afrique*, Amsterdam, 1686 (The Dutch edition was published at Amsterdam in 1668). Cited in T. Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives...* p.123.

¹⁵³ See for example, the works of G. Connah: “Archaeological research in Benin City, 1961- 1964”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 2 no. 4 1963, pp. 456-77; “Radiocarbon Dates for Benin City and further Dates for Daima, N.E. Nigeria”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. IV No. 2, June 1968, pp.313-320; *The Archaeology of Benin: Excavations and other Researches in and around Benin City, Nigeria*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975. See also, the works of P. J. Darling: “The Earthworks of Benin”, *Nigerian Field*. XXXIX, No. 3 September 1974, pp. 128-137; “The Earthworks of Benin: Some Cross-profiles”, *Nigerian Field*, XL, No. 4 1975, pp. 159-168; “Notes on the Earthworks of the Benin Empire”, *West African Journal of Archaeology*. 6, 1976, pp. 143-149; “The Benin Earthworks - Some lines of Enquiry”, Outline of paper for the 22nd Annual Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria, Benin City, 1977; and *The Ancient Linear Earthworks of Benin and Ishan*. Parts 1 and 2. Cambridge Monographs in Archaeology II, BAR International Series 215, 1984.

¹⁵⁴ Graham Connah, 2000, “African City Wall: A Neglected Source?” In: David M. Anderson and Richard Rathbone (eds.), *Africa's Urban Past*. Oxford: James Currey and Portsmouth (N.H.): Heinemann, pp36-51.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.48.

the disagreement among writers about the purpose for which they were built hundreds of years ago.

The next chapter discusses changes in the military during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries within the context of domestic political constraints, leading to fluctuations in the military power of Benin. The changes were the results of the conflicts between the Oba and the chiefs, producing new political configurations in the structure of the state, which in turn significantly influenced the process of the development of the military. The first shift in power relation was the displacement of the Oba as the supreme commander of the army, leading to a decline in the personal influence and authority of the Oba, and the chiefs who gained more power, came to overshadow him.

CHAPTER FOUR

MILITARY SYSTEM OF BENIN DURING THE PERIOD OF ITS MILITARY POWER, c.1600 - 1800

Introduction

Within the power dynamics of the state-society relations in the kingdom of Benin during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the conflicts between the Obas and the chiefs produced new political configurations in the structure of the state, which in turn, significantly influenced the process of the development of the military. The first shift in power relationships was the displacement of the Oba as the supreme military commander of the Benin army, leading to a decline in the personal influence and authority of the Oba. The chiefs who gained in power, came to overshadow the monarchy. One of the political consequences of this development was the outbreak of civil wars. The consequent devastation, and depopulation due to migrations from Benin City, contributed to the fluctuations in the military power of Benin. At the end of one of the civil wars in early eighteenth century, the Obas began to reassert their power, but what was crucial to the balance of power between the rival elements within the structure of state-society relations that had emerged, depended on the control of the army. With this in view, the kings strengthened the positions of existing military chiefs, and created new military titles which were held by the privileges of the Oba. The strategies adopted for the redistribution of power by the kings in the eighteenth century were merely ways to consolidate the power of the monarchy.

The complexity of the processes involved in the historical development of this period was partly due to the rise of commerce. The shift in trade from the Oba's dominions probably contributed significantly to the shift in power relationship.¹ One reason for this was the competition in the seventeenth century between the Obas and the chiefs on the one hand, and between the different grades of chiefs on the other. They were all involved in the power struggles which seemed to have shifted base to the desire to maintain control of power through economic leverage. Although the control of political power was not based on clear correlation with economic power, the competition for position, power and prestige shifted

¹ P. A. Igbafe, 1980, "The Precolonial Economic Foundations of the Benin Kingdom" In: I. A. Akinjogbin and S. Osoba (eds.) *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History*. Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., p.33.

emphasis to the new strategic economic resources offered by commercial relations with the Europeans.

Generally, at the turn of the seventeenth century, the kingdom of Benin had experienced a remarkable advance from the politico-military conditions which prevailed before the era of warrior kings when the state was on the verge of collapse. With the reforms introduced by Oba Ewuare the Great ca.1440-1472 AD, a new political arrangement enabled the warrior kings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to mobilise the resources of the state for the expansion of the kingdom through warfare. Campaigns were regularly planned and calculated for the expansion of Benin kingdom. One consequence was the establishment of Great Benin Empire and the foundation of Benin's reputation as a formidable military power.² The actual or potential military strength of Benin was acknowledged by her neighbours because of the use of force or the threat of the use of force by Benin to compel other states to accept her imperial authority.

The history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is the history of the heritage of its immediate past as Benin still possessed the power or capacity to influence other states. In fact, it was a period which witnessed fluctuations of its military power, and which was lost as one of peculiar significance that could have been the Golden Age in the history of Benin but for the conflicts, rivalries and civil wars. However, during this period, the prestige of her military power increased as it regulated trade relations with other states, and the Oba attempted to exercise royal monopoly³ over trade with Europeans. Of no less importance for the state's power was the military system which was developed for security requirements and military preparedness of the state.

This chapter examines the process of the development of the military during this period. As part of the background to the understanding of this development, it examines first of all, the relationship between warfare, warriors and the slave trade as well as the economic foundations of Benin military power. After this, the chapter focuses on the reorganisation of the army and its command structure, new weapons system, changes in war strategy and tactics, and military surveillance. The process of the development of the military during this

² The conception of military power used in this study has been particularly applied to its external relations and not the distribution of power within the state in terms of the structure of its political organisation. In the context of external relations, power rests on the capacity of physical force which can be used in such a way as to affect the behaviour of other states.

³ There is evidence from European documents that Benin chiefs gained power over the power of the Oba when they got involved in commercial activities. The bolstering of their power was the result of important commercial changes which placed them in vantage position over that of the Oba in the struggle for access to wealth. The rise of commerce during this period was an opportunity for the chiefs to seek power through wealth to enhance their positions and prestige.

period has been examined within the complexity of the Benin polity which witnessed stress and strains due to the interweaving of interests among the Obas and the chiefs.

The military system which developed was partly the product of internal political crisis of the period, and of the civil war which cut across dynastic struggle, producing conflicts of unrestrained bitterness. In spite of these circumstances and conditions, the prestige of Benin as a leading military power remained undiminished. Alan Ryder explains the situation this way: "...the state remained to the end a heterogeneous empire only held together at the centre by the prestige of the ruler, and of the watchfulness of the palace and the title-holders and by the armed might which they could muster against any rebellious town or province."⁴ Therefore, in studying the exertion of power by Benin, the military organisation which was the means that made it possible occupies a special place in the political history of the kingdom of Benin.

Beginning with the accession of Oba Ohuan in about 1606 AD, and closing with the reign of Oba Akengbuda in 1804 AD, no king went on campaign to command military operations. In the power dynamics of the period, Benin chiefs took the decision which led to loss of direct military command by the Oba. While the administrative and military chiefs gained power, the authority of the Oba as divine king was reduced to a secluded ritual figure in the palace. The ritual functions seemed to also fit with the idea of been divinely ordained by God, supreme, and invested with majesty as the *Uku Akpolokpolo*, meaning the mighty that rules. This new authority of the Oba notwithstanding, revolts, conflicts and manipulation of the system by the chiefs weakened the monarchy to a great extent. The monarchy survived partly because of the constitutional arrangement for the distribution of power within the state which hierarchically subordinated all chiefs - hereditary and non-hereditary to the direct control of the Oba. In reality, the rotation of the kingship among claimants of the royal family to the throne in the seventeenth century weakened the power of the Oba vis-à-vis the power of the chiefs.

At least, three motives seem necessary in understanding the crisis and dynamics of the relationship between the kings and the chiefs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: power, position and prestige. These were the outcomes of competition, conflict, and compromise within the political organisation rather than the result of the complex internal political culture. With the loss of position as supreme military commander of the army, the kings seemed weakened in power as they were placed in a dependent position to the military chiefs, "if for no reasons" argues Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, "than this made the monarch

beholden to them for their victories on his behalf.”⁵ On the one hand, as the history of the period shows,⁶ the kings became weaker and more vulnerable to the chiefs who were the source of royal prestige. Power motivation therefore, determined the extent to which the kings were concerned with controlling and influencing the investiture of titles and the creation of new ones. This was their main political weapon - the ability to manipulate the system of Palace and Town offices.⁷ On the other hand, the kings seem weakened because of the linkage of economic insecurity⁸ with the political instability of the period. It is important to recognise these two factors as prelude to the civil wars in Benin during this period.

The political history of Benin in the seventeenth century began with the revolt in the early years of the century, of Iyase Ogina against Oba Ohuan. Though the rebellion was finally suppressed, after the reign of Ohuan, “Benin monarchy became seriously weakened in the mid-seventeenth century as a result of internal succession disputes and the increasing power of chiefs”, and “the problem escalated until civil war erupted in the last decade of the century.”⁹ Both economic situation and political conditions dictated the internal functioning of the state and the transformation process.¹⁰

The process shows that military development during this period was not a response to the European slave trade in West Africa, rather it was the outcome of internal political developments, albeit within the complex power relationships in the state. The nature and character of the wars of this period and the military activities of the warriors which also partly responded to the European slave trade, necessitates some reflections on the role and place of the Benin military in the slave trade which was man’s greatest inhumanity to man. The question arises: if the Benin military system was developed to maintain the frontiers of the empire what role did it play during the era of the slave trade?

⁴ Alan Ryder, 1968. “The Rise of the Benin Kingdom”, Roland Oliver (ed.) *The Middle Age of African History*. London: Oxford University Press, p.33.

⁵ Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999. *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth Century Benin*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.34.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp.30-52. See also, J.U. Egharevba, 1968. *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, pp.33-42.

⁷ For details, see R. E. Bradbury, 1973. *Benin Studies* (Peter Morton-Williams, ed.). London: Oxford University Press, pp.70-75.

⁸ The issue of economic insecurity was due to the dependency of the kings on their military chiefs to ensure regular booty and the enforcement of the payment of tribute, taxes and tolls. This situation was quite different from the period when regular wars provided the warrior kings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the largest share of booty and tribute.

⁹ P. Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999. *Art, Innovation, and Politics*, p.33.

¹⁰ This was basically the state building process, expressed in political transformation in the pre-war crisis and post-war reconstruction efforts, the changes in politico-military organisation, and renewal of confidence between the king and his chiefs.

Warfare, Warriors and the Slave Trade

The era of warrior kings in Benin kingdom witnessed the enhancement of state power through extensive warfare which extended virtually into all directions. The regular campaigns seem to have changed, as most writers think,¹¹ when the era of warrior kings ended in Benin history. It is true that the wars of the period from 1600 to 1800 were not as extensive as the wars of the previous era, but were significant because of its link with the pursuit of “wealth and power” by Benin warriors and the ruling class who organised “raids” for slaves that were demanded for by European traders. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, in about 1680, the Ezomo, a Benin war chief “sacrificed an elephant to the god of war.”¹² It was not a mere ritual ceremony. The sacrifice was an expression of gratitude to ogun, the god of war for the personal achievements of the Ezomo, being a manifestation of success in military ventures which had enhanced his wealth and power in the society. The question which arises is the extent to which slave trade generated the wars of this period.

In the sixteenth century, the transatlantic slave trade was already a significant new dimension in the Portuguese commerce with Benin;¹³ the end of Portuguese monopoly was occasioned by the coming of the English and the Dutch, and in the first half of the seventeenth century cloth trade flourished between Benin and the Europeans. From the second half of the seventeenth century, slaves began to feature prominently in the articles of trade. In the triangular trade which developed, European traders, and in particular the English, bought slaves which they carried directly to their colonies in the West Indies and North America,¹⁴ and exported guns and gunpowder to Benin and other West African states,¹⁵ thereby, completing the ‘gun-slave-cycle’ trade.

Except for the civil wars and a few other wars to deal with recalcitrant states, the series of wars referred to in Benin tradition during this period, were slave-oriented skirmishes. This is also evident from the recurrence of military “victories and exploits” recorded as part of the achievements of some Benin chiefs during this period,¹⁶ and of other stories of several raids for slaves (known in Benin as *odomuomu*) by warriors.¹⁷ Though the slaves were also needed in Benin for agricultural production and military services, they were conditions for

¹¹ See for example, Peter M. Roese, 1992. “Kriegführung und Waffen in alten Benin (Südnigeria),” *Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift*, Jahrg 33, Heft 2, p.364.

¹² J. U. Egharevba, 1965. *Chronicle of Events in Benin*. Benin City: Kopin-Dogba Press, p.23.

¹³ A. F. C. Ryder, 1969. *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd., p.68.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp.196-238.

¹⁵ See J. E. Inikori, 1982. “The import of firearms into West Africa, 1750 to 1804: a quantitative analysis,” In: J. E. Inikori (ed.), *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies*. London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa, pp.126-153.

¹⁶ See J. U. Egharevba, 1969. *Some Prominent Bini People*. Benin City: Ribway Printers.

European gun sales.¹⁸ It follows therefore, that warfare and the slave trade to some extent, became inseparable components of the political economy of Benin during the period.

The information in a colonial Intelligence Report on Benin that while the slave trade lasted “the supply was maintained by captures and the bulk of the slaves came from Akure, Ishan and Urhobo”¹⁹ is evidence of continuing warfare during the period of the European slave trade. The location of the three areas: Akure in eastern Yorubaland, Ishan the immediate neighbours of Benin in the north, and Urhobo in the south-east of Benin also means that either the wars for slaves were waged in all directions or those were the areas from which the slaves were organised and sent to Benin. The mention of Akure is significant for both commercial and military reasons.

Akure was the *entrepot* of Benin trade in eastern Yorubaland, and a considerable number of Benin people settled permanently there.²⁰ It is probable that the relationship between Benin and the states and societies in eastern Yoruba first developed as a result of trade. This is not enough evidence to support this claim. There is, of course, evidence to support the claim of the relationship which developed after military conquests of the area. The Benin army, during the era of warrior kings, first invaded Akoko and Ekiti in the reign of Oba Ewuare, in the mid fifteenth century,²¹ “and between that time and the nineteenth century, the Edo invaded Akoko and Ekiti at various times.”²² Benin established two military outposts in eastern Yorubaland, the first at Akure where Benin warriors penetrated into the Ekiti interior through conquests, and the second post was established at Ikere.²³ The evidence of conquests of the Ekiti states was the penetration as far as Otun, the extreme north of Ekiti where the Benin soldiers were attempting to go beyond until a treaty was signed with Oyo.²⁴ Robin Law argues that “it may be inferred that the war between Oyo and Benin was fought for control of the Ekiti area, and the establishment of a frontier at Otun in northern Ekiti marked the

¹⁷ Evidence of Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, the Ezomo of Benin and member of the *Uzama n’Thinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 5 and 6 June, 1993.

¹⁸ Evidence of Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, Chief Otasowie Oliha, Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, Prince Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka, in separate interviews in Benin City in 1993 and Dr. O.S. B. Omoregie, interviewed in Benin City in 1997.

¹⁹ National Archives Ibadan (hereinafter referred to as NAI), Ben Prof. 4/3/4. H. N. Nevins and H. G. Aveling, 1932, “Intelligence Report on Benin Division of the Benin Province,” p.115.

²⁰ NAI Ben Dist. 3/1/1. Benin Political Papers, “Akures to Political Officer (Captain Roupell) of Benin, 26 April 1897.

²¹ R. E. Bradbury, 1959. “Chronological problems in the study of Benin History,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 1 No. 4, pp.263-287.

²² S. A. Akintoye, 1971. *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland 1840-1893*. London: Longman Group Limited, p.26.

²³ *ibid.*

²⁴ J. U. Egharevba, 1968. *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press (Fourth Edition), p.31.

abandonment of Oyo claims in the area.”²⁵ This probably means that Otun formed a sort of neutralised buffer state between Benin territories in Ekiti and Oyo territories in Igbomina, rather than the Oyo kingdom extended as far as Otun.²⁶

Ekiti and Akoko traditions usually attribute the success of Benin wars of expansion to firearms introduced by Europeans.²⁷ Since most of the wars were fought in the sixteenth century, it means that the Portuguese traded the guns with slaves. As noted above, in the sixteenth century, the transatlantic slave trade was already a significant new dimension in the Portuguese commerce with Benin. By the second half of the seventeenth century, the Dutch also began to sell firearms in the Benin River.²⁸ The use of the firearms in the seventeenth century gave the Benin army decisive military advantages in the reconquest of eastern Yorubaland in order to consolidate the Benin Empire. Akintoye argues that while “the Ekiti and Akoko were too fragmented to offer much resistance to the mighty power of Benin,” in a few other places like Akure and Ado which offered resistance eventually submitted to Benin.²⁹ He also points out that the Igbomina too began to feel the Benin threat from about the seventeenth century when Benin armies attempted to penetrate beyond Otun.³⁰ Finally, Akintoye posits that “on the whole, the available evidence points to the conclusion that before the nineteenth century the eastern Yoruba kingdoms, especially those of the Ekiti, Akoko and Owo, were drawn more towards the centre of the Benin kingdom in the south-east than westwards and north-westwards towards the main centres of Yoruba civilisation.”³¹ The influence of the military might of Benin, in spite of occasional fluctuations in her power, was so great that two other Yoruba rival powers could not penetrate eastern Yorubaland. The first of these two powers was Oyo, which, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the largest and most powerful state in Yoruba. In fact, Oyo started its imperial expansion in the early years of the seventeenth century, when Alafin Obalokun Agana Erin placed the first Ajele in Ijana in Egbado district.³² Oyo expanded in south-west direction to include the Yoruba kingdoms of Oyo, Egba and Egbado. The other power which emerged in Yorubaland

²⁵ Robin Law, 1977. *The Oyo Empire c.1600-c.1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.130.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.87.

²⁷ Akintoye, 1971. *Revolution and Power*, p.26.

²⁸ A. F. C. Ryder, 1965. “Dutch trade on the Nigerian Coast during the 17th century,” *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 3 No. 2, p.208.

²⁹ Akintoye, 1971. *Power and Revolution*, p.27.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.28.

³¹ *ibid.*, p.29.

³² For details, see I. A. Akinjogbin, 1980. “The Economic Foundations of the Oyo Empire” In: I. A. Akinjogbin and Segun Osoba (eds.) *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History*. Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., pp.35 ff.

during the period was the kingdom of Ilesha, which could also not rival the military power of Benin in eastern Yorubaland.

The impact of Benin influence on the many eastern Yoruba states and societies, is shown in the similarities between their culture and the Benin culture, especially in the strong influence of the Edo language on their dialects.³³ The use of the Benin ceremonial sword as the official ceremony sword, and the pattern of court rituals, ceremonies and royal regalia are indications of the Benin aftermath. In fact, some chieftaincy titles such as *Ologbosere*, *Sasere*, *Olisa*, *Oloton*, *Ojomo* were probably derived from Benin as three of those titles were associated with the highest grade of warrior titles in the command leadership of the army, and political roles in the kingdom of Benin.

From the analysis so far, Benin expansion in eastern Yorubaland was followed with a high level of cultural civilisation. The tensions and conflicts between the states and the kingdom of Benin were due to the deliberate wars which were fought in the area for the purpose of acquiring captives for the slave trade. Slaves were among the tribute paid to the Oba of Benin.³⁴ Tribute units of Benin existed in the conquered areas of eastern Yorubaland and the representatives of the Oba of Benin, known locally as *Bale-Kale*³⁵ were put there to represent the interests of Benin. The evidence from Benin tradition is that whenever these Benin representatives had difficulty in enforcing the payment of tribute, military contingents were sent from Benin City to fight wars to enforce the payment of tribute and also to deliberately acquire slaves for sale and export. The level of cultural assimilation of Benin culture was already high among such eastern Yoruba states, which in fact, developed into strong economic and military relations but for the tensions and conflicts arising from deliberate raids for slaves. The evidence to support this contention is the number of 805 different types of guns which were imported into the Bight of Benin by European slave traders between 1757 and 1806.³⁶ The records of the gun-slave-cycle trade from about 1600 to 1750 are not well known.³⁷ The attribution of successes in Benin wars to the firearms used

³³ See for example, S. A. Akintoye, 1969. "The North-Eastern Yoruba Districts and the Benin Kingdom," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol.4 No. 4. See also, P. C. Lloyd, 1987. "Political and Social Structure" In: S. O. Biobaku (ed.) *Sources of Yoruba History*. Ibadan: University Press Limited; R. E. Bradbury, 1967, "The Kingdom of Benin" In: D. Forde and P. M. Kaberry (eds.), *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*. Oxford University Press.

³⁴ Evidence of Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, the Ezomo of Benin, interviewed in Benin City, on 5th and 6th June 1993.

³⁵ *Bale-Kale* or *Abilekale* is the Ekiti name for representatives of foreign powers. Cited in Akintoye, 1971. *Revolution and Power*, p.28.

³⁶ See Inikori, 1982. "The import of firearms into West Africa, 1750 to 1807," pp. 142-143.

³⁷ Alan Ryder who has attempted to investigate this period of Benin's economic relations with the Europeans claim that the destruction among the records of the Dutch West India Companies and the English African Companies has left us very ill-informed about European trade with Benin in the second half of the seventeenth century. See Ryder, 1969, *Benin and the Europeans*, pp. 124 ff.

during this period is strong evidence to support the view that hundreds of guns were probably sold in exchange for slaves.

The tensions and conflicts which began to characterise the relationship between the kingdom of Benin and the Esan chiefdoms in the north of Benin and also the Urhobo chiefdoms in the south, from the seventeenth century, were probably the political consequences of the occasional raids for slaves. The reference to “Ishan” and “Urhobo”³⁸ as sources for the slaves which Benin sold to European slave traders means that occasional military activities were organised by Benin warriors to raid for slaves in those areas. It is possible that the raids extended beyond the Esan chiefdoms, for example, in the Etsako and Owan areas. Also among the Ughara clan of the Urhobo, the powerful Benin overshadowed them, so were they oppressed by their Itsekiri neighbours.³⁹ In spite of the tribute the Ughara clan had to pay to the Itsekiri and Oba of Benin, “they were constantly oppressed and raided from the south by the more mobile Jekris (Itsekiris) who traded up and down the Benin River, and from the north by more numerous and more powerful people of the Oba of Benin.”⁴⁰ The raids of the Itsekiris and the people of Benin had one purpose: the capture of slaves for the transatlantic slave trade. In the Ughelli clan of the Urhobo, the slave trade perhaps generated inter-village and inter-clan skirmishes, although cases of adultery and abduction were also responsible for the raids, “and in such cases it was usual not to kill anybody but to take prisoners and sell them into slavery.”⁴¹ This also explains the nature of the turmoil in those societies that experienced the activities of the slave raiders. Such was indeed, the agony of the societies in Africa, and of Africans in the making of the Atlantic World during the era of the slave trade.

Although most of the clans in Esan derived their origins from Benin,⁴² and some of the Urhobo people were probably earlier migrants from Benin, they may have organised the slaves from hinterland. If that was the case, skirmishes organised for slaves caused disturbances in those societies. In essence, the slave trade was a factor that may have disrupted inter-group relations between Benin and her neighbours.

³⁸ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932, “Intelligence Report,” p.115.

³⁹ NAI CSO 26/3 26588 “Intelligence Report on the Ughara Clan of the Sobo sub-tribe, Warri Province 1929,” p.9.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ NAI CSO 26 / 27997. C. T. C. Ennals, 1932, “Intelligence Report on the Ughelli Clan of Sobo Sub-tribe, Warri Province,” p.11.

⁴² See the several colonial intelligence reports listed in the bibliography of this study, and also C. G. Okojie, 1994. *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*. Benin City: Ilupeju Press Limited (first published in 1960).

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, and in early eighteenth century, Benin experienced political instability and civil war.⁴³ The crisis was due to the power dynamics of the period such that the reorganisation of the state under Oba Akenzua I (circa 1713 to 1735), took into consideration the need to balance power between rival elements within the state. This affected the military forces of Benin as new military titles were created to ensure the balance of military power within the state. There is no evidence in Benin tradition that the civil war provided captives for the transatlantic slave trade. This may be due to the relationship between the institution of slavery in Benin and the external slave trade. As noted in the preceding chapter, the institution of slavery had its own place in the structure of the state in Benin kingdom and its origins lay deep in the economic, military, social and political necessities of the kingdom. On the other hand, Europeans sought slaves in Africa almost entirely for a single purpose: the working of plantations in the tropical regions of the New World.⁴⁴ The demands for these slaves created great turmoil in the Benin territories of the forest region of West Africa as more firearms were frequently used in the military activities.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the major wars of political significance in the consolidation and expansion of the frontiers of the Benin Empire were the suppression of three revolts within the empire: the revolts at Agbor and Ubulu-Uku outside the Benin kingdom, to the east of Benin, towards the River Niger and the revolt at Ugo in Iyekorhionmwon, the south-eastern frontier of the Benin kingdom. The other war was the military campaign in the Lagos area (Eko). In the suppression of the Agbor rebellion during the reign of Oba Eresoyen (circa 1735-1750), Benin warriors were commanded by Ezomo Ehennua. The people of Agbor were defeated, and the Obi (king) was captured and beheaded, and sent to the Oba of Benin and they remained loyal until the reign of Oba Ovonramwen (1888-1897) when they revolted again.⁴⁵

In the case of the Ubulu-Uku War in the second half of the eighteenth century, during the reign of Oba Akengbuda, Benin tradition claim that the murder of Adesuwa, the beautiful daughter of the Ezomo of Benin by the Obi of Ubulu-Ukwu,⁴⁶ triggered the conflict between the Obi and the Oba of Benin. Two contingents of Benin warriors under two war commanders, reinforced with the troops from Opoji,⁴⁷ finally crushed the rebellion of the Obi,

⁴³ For details, see Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999. *Art, Innovation, and Politics*, pp.41-47. See also, Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, pp.37-40.

⁴⁴ Ralph Austen, 1987. *African Economic History: Internal Development and External Dependency*. London: James Currey Limited and Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books Inc., p.86.

⁴⁵ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p.40.

⁴⁶ J. U. Egharevba, 1969. *Some Prominent Bini People*. Benin City: Ribway Printers, pp.13-14.

⁴⁷ NAI CSO 26/4 31226. H. L. M. Butcher, 1935, "Intelligence Report on the Opoji Village Group of the Ishan Division, Benin Province," p.11.

whose head was sent to the Oba of Benin by the Imaran, one of the war commanders.⁴⁸ The third revolt which occurred at Ugo, also necessitated a military action against Emokpaogbe the Agbohidi (Enogie) and after many battles he was defeated, and to avoid being captured, he probably drowned himself in the Jamieson (*Igbagbon*) river.⁴⁹ The three wars, planned and organised to suppress the three revolts, were calculated to maintain the frontiers of the Benin Empire and not necessarily deliberate wars organised for slave raids.

However, the eighteenth century wars in the Eti-Osa area of present day Lagos in Nigeria, were not directed in suppressing rebellions. They were wars of continued expansion of the frontiers of the Benin Empire. During the Benin invasion, refugees fleeing from Iddo were said to have resettled and founded the villages of Ikate and Ajiran.⁵⁰ The village of Aja traces its origin to this period of Benin invasions and the ancestry of its first settlers to Benin itself.⁵¹ It is probable that the invasions were renewed attacks because the area had come under the suzerainty of the Oba of Benin in the sixteenth century, during the era of warrior kings.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there were fluctuations in the power of Benin. That notwithstanding, wars in the general sense of political conflicts, seemed to be obnoxious to the ruling class in the kingdom of Benin unless such wars were strictly instrumental to the protection of economic interests, the suppression of revolts and the reconquest of vassal states. Perhaps, the ability to wage war surely connected with the decision to wage it, would always rest on economic foundations. Hence, military power has clearly been employed on behalf of economic objectives so recurrently throughout history.⁵² Therefore, it will be appropriate to discuss the economic foundations of Benin military power, which may be helpful in understanding the crucial economic vis-à-vis military factors which enhanced the power of Benin.

Economic Foundations of Benin Military Power

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the trade between Benin and the Europeans triggered the rise of commerce. State intervention in commerce was calculated to enhance political and military power such that the interaction of commercial strength on the one hand, and political and military strength on the other, was one which involved constant intervention

⁴⁸ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p.41.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, pp.41-42.

⁵⁰ NAI CSO 26/1 53103. T. F. Baker, 1949. "Intelligence Report on the Eti-Osa Area of the Ikeja Division, of the Colony Province," p.6.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.7.

by the kings against the increasing power of the chiefs. It is probable that this intervention was calculated on the basis of building the military power of Benin upon economic foundations. Of course, the military power of Benin was the result of the consolidation of internal order through the development of a political structure by the warrior kings which was sufficient enough to support the military system in expanding the frontiers of Benin kingdom. Alan Ryder points out that “by the time Europeans first visited Benin at the end of the fifteenth century the structure was already complete, and so well-founded that it survived essentially unchanged through many upheavals for another five hundred years.⁵³ It is true that the political structure survived many upheavals, but there were several changes. These changes were reflected in administrative restructuring that affected the role of the Oba, the power and influence of the three orders of chiefs, and in particular, the significant changes in the military organisation of the state. The political system was not static as the views of Ryder seems to suggest, rather, its dynamic nature and character enabled it to respond to the political instability and civil wars of the period.

The political conflicts during this period may be interpreted as loss of control in the management of state affairs by the Oba. In spite of this, the kings had security of tenure, and “once the Oba had survived the initial succession crisis it became progressively difficult to remove him,”⁵⁴ the only exception was the dethronement of Oba Ahenkpaye, ca.1675-1684.⁵⁵ One factor which explains the survival of the kings was the use of their power to maintain competition and dissension among the chiefs. This was possible because the Oba was the main pillar of the political organisation, and the pivot of economic arrangements. To maintain the elaborate political system, the Oba’s support and maintenance of his palace was probably accepted as a basic economic responsibility of the people.⁵⁶ The appointment of the Oba’s representatives from the palace to enforce the payment of tribute suggests that the payment of tribute was not a voluntary responsibility accepted by the local communities. Apart from the Benin communities paying tribute twice a year in support of the economic responsibility for the Oba, tribute was also regular from the vassal states. Taxes were also levied as well as tolls at fixed gates and entrances to the City.

⁵² Klaus Knorr, 1973. *Power and Wealth: The Political Economy of International Power*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., p.114.

⁵³ Alan Ryder, 1968. “The Rise,” p.33.

⁵⁴ Bradbury, 1973. *Benin Studies*, p.73.

⁵⁵ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, pp.35-36.

⁵⁶ P. A. Igbafe, 1974. “Benin in the Pre-Colonial Era” In: Obaro Ikime and S. O. Osoba (eds.) *Tarikh No.17 Peoples and kingdoms of West Africa in the Pre-Colonial Period*. London: Longman, p.12.

In an era in which the ruling class relied on tribute and levies, and more importantly on wealth accruing from commerce instead of war booty,⁵⁷ this meant that military power was calculated to be built upon economic foundations. The conflicting interests of the kings and chiefs notwithstanding, the evidence of investment in agricultural production by using slaves in their farms, and of their commercial activities in order to maintain their dominant positions, suggests that more than anything else, economic activities were been given considerable attention. The Oba and the chiefs used their slaves to work in the farms, and as carriers and porters in trading activities. The economy of Benin was basically agricultural which embraced farming, animal husbandry, fishing and hunting. This was supported by trading, and manufacturing, organised under a guild system in which various craft industries functioned and developed as an integral part of the state's economic structure.

The household was the most important economic unit in Benin society, and the guilds in which more than one household was represented, exercised control in most craft production and other manufactures. Guilds exercised control over entry to a craft, methods of production, standards of workmanship and prices.⁵⁸ Consequently, membership of a craft was usually inherited, though it was sometimes possible for outsiders to join a guild once they had completed an apprenticeship.⁵⁹

The basis of the guild system⁶⁰ was that each was formed to supply the needs of the Oba. For instance, the guild of blacksmiths and ironsmiths supplied the weapons of war and other implements, while the guild of bronze casters and carvers supplied all objects required by the palace; so were the guilds of doctors, leather-workers, drummers, leopard hunters, dancers and carpenters. In return for their services, each guild was given a monopoly in its particular trade or craft. Transfer between guilds was, however, permitted and in certain cases usual. For example, if a man from the leather-workers guild married a wife from the blacksmiths' guild and had many sons by her, he would probably put one of his sons in the blacksmiths' guild as a mark of respect for this wife. When that son grew up and had sons of his own he might put one of them into the leather-workers' guild as a mark of respect to his father. However, new guilds were formed as new needs arose, usually by the emancipation of

⁵⁷ Among the causes of war, there was none which suggests a competition over limited resources provided by nature.

⁵⁸ A. G. Hopkins, 1973. *An Economic History of West Africa*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1990 edition, p. 49.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, pp.49-50.

⁶⁰ The guilds were affiliated to the three Palace Societies that constituted *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe*: Iwebo 25 guilds; Iweguae 14 guilds; and Ibiwe 6 guilds.

slaves, though in some cases freemen were taken to form a new guild.⁶¹ Some guilds were more profitable than others. Whenever the strength of a guild was declining, the Oba remedied the situation by emancipating slaves and adding them to the guild.⁶²

While the guild system supported the Oba in particular, tribute usually twice a year, came from single villages, groups of villages and chiefdoms in empire, in the form of foodstuffs, livestock and slaves. The *Eghaevbo n'Ore* and *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* fiefholders were responsible for the collection of tribute for the Oba in areas under their jurisdiction. The tribute payment afforded the Oba to maintain his interests in the state through the distribution of gifts to his chiefs on ceremonial occasions.

Thus, the economic foundations of the military power of Benin during this period can be interpreted as a system of exploitation based on supra-economic coercion in the context of fiefs and slave-owning systems. Perhaps, this is why Macrae Simpson, a British colonial officer in Benin noted in his Intelligence Report that “the peasantry were battered by the ruling class.”⁶³ The economic structure provided the ruling class the opportunity, without which the collection of tribute would not have been convenient. The exploitative character of the economy was well demonstrated in the pattern of state-society relations, and in particular, between the aristocratic class and the peasantry. Simpson noted in his Intelligence Report that “the former were generally well-built, of high complexion, and intelligent of face, and while the latter were squat, darker, and unprepossessing in appearance.”⁶⁴ In Benin, the relationship between the state and social groups was such that the conduct of the state was conditioned by the social structure. This kind of relations expressed the interests of the farmers, peasants, craftsmen, petty manufacturers and merchants in relation to their relative positions within the political structure. The merchants of Benin emerged to prominence due to trade with Europeans, although royal monopoly attempted to ensure strict control and regulation to enable the monarchy benefit from the commercial enterprise. While royal intervention in economic affairs was directed toward enhancing political and military power, the nature and character of power politics which emerged sought to increase the power of the Oba which was waning, against the power of his prominent chiefs, and which in turn, exposed Benin society to the conflicts and rivalries that wracked the state, and which threatened societal cohesion.

⁶¹ Ministry of Local Government Library, Benin City (hereinafter referred to as MLG Library/BC), H. F. Marshall, 1939. “Intelligence Report on Benin City,” 12 August, p.17.

⁶² For details of how each guild was organised, see H. F. Marshall, 1939. “Intelligence Report,” appendices A-C, pp.1-19.

⁶³ MLG Library/BC. J. Macrae Simpson, 1936. “A Political Intelligence Report on the Benin Division of the Benin Province,” 26 April, p.2.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p.1.

In the first half of the seventeenth century, the rivalry between the Dutch and the English afforded the Obas of this period the opportunity to regulate the conduct of overseas trade with Europeans. Each Oba had retained chiefs Uwangué and Eribo of the Iwebo Palace Society, and a few merchants to conduct foreign trade in the waterside and also attempt to enforce royal monopoly in many of the products such as cloth, pepper and ivory. Royal monopoly meant that considerable part of the output and sales of the products had the approval of the Oba. This made it possible for the establishment of control and domination over trade for the purpose of giving the monarch vast economic power.

Overseas trade was lucrative⁶⁵ to the kings of Benin, as Dutch and English merchants competed fiercely for Benin's ivory and cloth. To meet that demand, the Oba's agents and private traders travelled far inland, and it is probably from this period, the seventeenth century, that we may date the trading associations that controlled the long-distance trade of Benin.⁶⁶ Ekhuosa Aisien points out that the most enduring of these trading associations were *Ekhen Egbo*, *Ekhen Orhia* and *Ekhen Irhuen*.⁶⁷ While *Ekhen Egbo* were "forest traders" which had the monopoly of trade in the Akure, Ilorin and Oyo areas, the *Ekhen Orhia* controlled the trade with the Ishan areas, and the *Ekhen Irhuen* controlled the trade with the Afemai and Akoko-Edo areas and beyond to Idoma and probably Tiv lands.⁶⁸ To ensure royal control of the long-distance Benin traders, they were supervised by Chiefs Uwangué and Eribo, with the Oba of Benin as their patron.

One significant aspect of trade control in the commercial relations between Benin and the Europeans was restriction in the sale of male slaves because they were needed for military service. Secondly, the slaves were also needed to work in the farm and village settlements established either by the Oba or the chiefs. Thirdly, the possession of a large number of slaves was an index of a man's social status and prestige in Benin Kingdom. In other words, it was for military, economic and social reasons that Benin actually stayed out of the large-scale slave trade,⁶⁹ and most of the Benin males sold as slaves were criminals who were considered nuisance to the society. Many female slaves were also sold, as well as captives from slave-

⁶⁵ Trade with Europeans brought the rich dues paid as taxes and tolls by the traders to the Oba, but the Benin chiefs also benefited from the trade by organising the articles of trade that were demanded by the European traders.

⁶⁶ A. F. C. Ryder, 1980. "The Benin Kingdom" In: Obaro Ikime (ed.) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd., pp.118-119.

⁶⁷ E. Aisien, 1995. *Benin City: The Edo State Capital*. Benin City: Aisien Publishers, p.23.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, pp.23-24.

⁶⁹ The prevalence of slavery in Benin kingdom was due to the fact that slaves were generally either war captives, indemnity or criminals. Originally, slaves were used to work the farms and for such public works as road construction and building town walls, etc. After the advent of the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century, a very large trade in slaves grew up to supply the labour for the Gold Coast mines in present-day Ghana, and later to supply the needs of the Europeans for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

raids.⁷⁰ It was Oba Esigie, in 1516, that began the restriction of the sale of male slaves, and the restriction soon became a complete embargo on exporting males that lasted until nearly the end of the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, the embargo on male slaves was lifted, but the slave trade nevertheless, remained a minor current.

The figures of the slave trade from the Bights of Benin and Biafra,⁷¹ indicates that the number of slaves traded was low, approximately in hundreds compared to the several thousands that were sold in parts of the present day eastern Nigeria and the Niger-Delta. As already noted in this chapter, the conditions for the European sales of guns included human beings as cargoes for the European slave trade in West Africa. Considering the importance of firearms to the development of the military in the kingdom of Benin, the embargo on the sale of slaves, was lifted. Warriors who wanted to benefit from the trade organised slave-raids to meet the demands of European traders. The process of enslavement and the slave trade,⁷² had generated debate among scholars. However, while it lasted, the supply was maintained by captures and the bulk of the slaves came from Akure, Ishan and Urhobo.⁷³ Prices were high, and the Europeans had cheaper sources elsewhere. In this situation, there was the bargain by the European and Benin traders on the sale of slaves which probably included a condition for being allowed to trade in other goods, but the total numbers traded over the years were very low.

The extent of royal monopoly over foreign trade was described by Olfert Dapper in his travel accounts.⁷⁴ According to this account, no one had the right to buy anything from the Europeans except the chiefs and merchants whom the king had appointed for that purpose. Hence, as soon as a ship had anchored on the coast, the king was informed, who then gave authority to his appointed chiefs to transact business with the Europeans. The motive was to

⁷⁰ Evidence of Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, the Ezomo of Benin and member of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 5th and 6th June, 1993. This was supported by the evidence of Prince Enawekponmwun Basimi Eweka, local historian of Benin and Secretary to the Benin Traditional Council, interviewed in Benin City on 18 June 1993.

⁷¹ See Inikori, 1982. "The import of firearms into West Africa, 1750 to 1804," pp.126-153.

⁷² See for example, John Thornton, 1998. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800*. Cambridge University Press, Second Edition; Paul Lovejoy, 1989. "The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on Africa: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of African History* 30, pp.365-394; Paul Bohannon and Philip Curtin, 1988. *Africa and Africans*. Prospect Heights, Illinois; Martin Klein and Claire Robertson (eds.), 1983. *Women and Slavery in Africa*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press; J. E. Inikori (ed.), 1982. *Forced Migration: The Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies*. London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa;

⁷³ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. H. N. Nevins and H.G. Aveling. 1932. "Intelligence Report on Benin Division of the Benin Province," p.115.

⁷⁴ O. Dapper, 1668. *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Africaensche gewestern*. Amsterdam.

make maximum profit out of the commercial enterprises⁷⁵ since the trading port was in the kingdom under the rule of the Oba.

European records of this period indicate the usurpation of royal prerogatives by the chiefs who seemed to have taken over crucial commercial activities from the kings, and perhaps even more importantly, the production of Benin's exports shifted from commodities that the king traditionally controlled such as slaves, gum, ivory, and pepper, to cloth which was widely produced throughout the kingdom and gave a number of people potential access to wealth.⁷⁶ The loss of direct royal control over one of the main economic foundations of the monarchy occurred in 1644 when the Dutch opened a factory at Arbo (Arbon, Arebo, or Oriboo) as an alternative to Ughoton, the main port of Benin.⁷⁷ At Arbo, a new class of brokers emerged, who were more dependent on their village and the factory than on the king.⁷⁸

In spite of the problems between the kings and the chiefs in the organisation of trade with Europeans, the rise of commerce successfully diverted the activities of the Oba's subjects into such channels of production which further enhanced the political and military power of Benin. The control of external trade and the regulation of domestic economy rendered Benin independent of her neighbours for military and other essential supplies. This was necessary to the perfection of body politic as well as the welfare of the society.

The trade relations with Europeans, and the number of firearms acquired, should not be interpreted as suggesting evidence of improvement in military preparedness of Benin, rather the prestige of her military power may have increased. This was reflected in the capacity to control, regulate, or even direct other states without punitive expeditions.⁷⁹ On the one hand, the relations between the kings and chiefs of Benin shows that it was not possible to separate economic power from political power. On the other hand, at the centre of the interrelationship, royal intervention was crucial to the enhancement of the military power of the state. Simply put, there was the need to build military power upon economic foundations.

⁷⁵ European traders brought in a number of goods: assorted cloths of different colours and design, drinking vessels, all kinds of fine cotton, linen, red velvet, iron bars, manila, Indian cowries which served as local currency, fine coral, brass bracelets, etc. The goods which the Europeans took in exchange were slaves, ivory, pepper, striped cotton garments, blue cloths, leopard skins, jasper stones, etc.

⁷⁶ P. Girshick Ben-Amos. 1999 *Art, Innovation, and Politics*, pp.38-39.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p.39.

⁷⁸ A. F. C. Ryder, 1969. *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd., p.92.

⁷⁹ The revolts of Emokpaogbe Agbohidi, the Enogie of Ugo, and the people of Agbor, a vassal state of Benin, were two cases of rebellion during this period, and this may be closely linked with political instability in Benin City, which was not necessarily an issue of economic insecurity that could possibly have led to military struggle for supremacy.

Without royal intervention, the kings would have suffered considerably from the linkage of economic insecurity⁸⁰ with political instability.⁸¹

The power relations between the kings and chiefs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries created one of the most difficult problems in the pattern of state-society relations. This was the distribution of power within the state structure, and the degree to which the political groups characteristically developed some kind of military arrangement. While military struggle for power was avoided because the proper relationship of internal military power to the civil authority was well defined in Benin traditions or constitution, there were sustained efforts to systematise and order the structure of the army. This led to institutional restructuring and reorganisation of the army. The question arises: was the reorganisation at different stages guided by some unifying strategic conception? This question can be answered after analysing the conditions which preceded the reforms and development of the military. It is also necessary to point out here that fluctuations in the military power of Benin can be interpreted to mean that military power is, of course, relative. The form of the distribution of military power among the rival elements within the state, partly explains the nature of the reorganisation of the military.

Reorganisation of the Army

In the power dynamics of this period, the factors which led to the reorganisation of the army were not changes in the socio-economic situation, but political factors which illustrates a number of points. The first of these factors was the interrelationship between the state and political coalitions. In the closing years of the sixteenth century, the conflict between Iyase Ekpennede and Oba Ehengbuda produced different political alliances among the chiefs, with interweaving of interests that serve to illustrate the gravity of the conflict and rivalry in the polity. The second factor was the distribution of power within the structure of the state and this meant also the need to ensure balance in the distribution of military power among the rival elements within the state. Thirdly, the protracted struggle for power in the seventeenth century put the Oba in a weak position vis-à-vis the principal chiefs, and the need to reassert that power led to new changes in the organisation of the army in the eighteenth century.

The traditions which established adequate safeguards against military despotism by war chiefs or powerful groups during the era of warrior kings were the instruments, in many

⁸⁰ The kings had been deprived of the highest military position in the army that afforded them the largest share of war booty, tribute, etc.

⁸¹ The dynasty was on the verge of collapse due to the pressure of political conflicts, but its survival was also partly due to the inevitable distribution of power within the Benin political system which hierarchically subordinated the chiefs to the direct control of the Oba.

respects, which provided the basis for the reorganisation of the Benin army of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The reorganisation of the army would appear to have responded to the political developments in terms of power politics, which the different political groups calculated as the means to enhance their political and military strength. To achieve this end, the political coalitions made use of the opportunity of the turn of events or conflicts to introduce reforms in the army, either as a means of enhancing their political power or weakening the power of the other political groups. The first of such reforms took place at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Following the death of Oba Ehengbuda, who was believed to have drowned in one of his sea coast wars in the early 1600s, the coalitions within the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* and the *Uzama n'Ihinron* which constituted two political groups, succeeded in persuading the *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe*, another political group, to relieve the Oba of Benin of his responsibility as supreme military commander of the army. This political action, rather than ideas of strategic considerations in the organisation of the army, terminated the era of warrior kings in Benin history. With this development, the Oba was no longer to lead the soldiers to war personally, and also lost the highest position of honour and power in the army. It marked the beginning of reorganisation of the army at the level of command and control in the top hierarchy of the military.

There were two factors of considerable importance in this development in military affairs. First, the three political groups which constituted the state council, headed by chief Uwangue, leader of *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe* in the absence of an Oba, explicitly stated and re-emphasised the principle of supremacy of the Oba over the war chiefs.⁸² This principle of supremacy was reflected in the oath of allegiance of all chiefs before the Oba, and their loyalty demonstrated during different ceremonies and rituals in the palace. Second, it would appear that the state council and no longer the Oba, became the sole source of authority for regulating military affairs and internal discipline in the army. This was also reflected in the manner of subsequent reforms of the command structure, and opposition to the Oba where there were no such consultations with other political groups.

However, in all matters of administration, at least in theory, the Oba acted in council with his nobility.⁸³ The state council was summoned⁸⁴ when questions which affected the

⁸² Evidence of Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, the Ezomo of Benin and member of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 5th and 6th June 1993. This was corroborated also by the evidence of Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 7 June 1993 and Prince Enawekponmwun Basimi Eweka, local historian of Benin and Secretary to the Benin Traditional Council, interviewed on 18 June 1993.

⁸³ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936. "Intelligence Report," p.40.

state as a whole, the necessity for war, the levying of a special tribute, or similar subjects. It met in the *Ugha Ozolua* (Ozolua Chamber) in the palace, dedicated to the memory of Oba Ozolua the Conqueror.⁸⁵ In the first meeting, a decision was seldom arrived at, giving the political groups the opportunity to meet separately to formulate their opinion before the reconvened meeting.

In spite of the conflicts and crises generated by the power politics in the seventeenth century, the state council functioned to stabilise the polity. The council became more of a forum to resolve conflicting political views among the different political coalitions than in the formulation of policies to advance the interest of the state. Although there was the weakening of the Oba's power which was due first, to his removal from direct military command, and second, because of the direct confrontation between the Oba and different political coalitions, military matters, in terms of expansion or consolidation of the frontiers of the empire, were given priority over all other personal interests. However, during the eighteenth century, political competition was another means of creating and shaping the command structure of the army. This was the influence of politics rather than military values in the reform of organisational structures. What evolved were processes of political and social domination where the Oba found ways of imposing his will on other political groups as demonstrated with the appointments of two new war commanders and the institutionalisation of the Ezomo title in a particular family with hereditary rights and privileges.

The abolition of the Oba's military position as supreme military commander was a development which shifted full military powers to the Iyase as Commander-in-Chief of the Benin army.⁸⁶ The commander-in-Chief became the highest military position in the state. The title holder of the Iyase had functioned as General Commander next to the Oba during the era of warrior kings. Since the Iyase was the leader of *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, his military leadership in the new command structure was probably calculated to ensure the co-ordination of all the units of the army as well as ensure the co-operation of war and regimental commanders.

The Iyase as Commander-in-Chief of the army was appointed by the Oba, and in theory, entirely dependent on the Oba and whose summons must be obeyed at once.⁸⁷ In practice, the king lost control over his army chief. The first Iyase to become Commander-in-

⁸⁴ In questions relating to the household or to the "royal domains" the full council was rarely if ever consulted, the Oba being content with the advice of his household officials, the *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe*. Before consulting the full council the Oba invariably sought the advice of this class of nobility, and particularly the six senior nobles, namely Uwangué, Eribo, Esere, Obazelu, Ine and Oshodin. They acted as his "privy councils" and it was their recommendations that were finally laid before the state council.

⁸⁵ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936. "Intelligence Report," p.41.

⁸⁶ The evidence of Benin oral history is very strong on this.

⁸⁷ NAI, Ben. Prof. 4/3/4, 1932, "Intelligence Report," p.46.

Chief was Ogina during the reign of Oba Ohuan, ca. 1606 to 1640 AD. The Iyase Ogina, as the highest ranking military leader, rebelled against Oba Ohuan, three years after Ohuan succeeded to the throne. This was probably the continuation of the conflict between the former Iyase Ekpennede and Oba Ehengbuda. In the power struggle between the new Iyase Ogina and Oba Ohuan, “Ogina won all powers to himself,” and “became overlord and sole ruler of the state.”⁸⁸ As the military chief gained the support of other chiefs and political groups, “council meetings were no longer held in the Oba’s palace but in that of Ogina regardless of the Oba.”⁸⁹

A vague picture of events which followed the conflict is still remembered in Benin traditions. All surviving traditions agree that Oba Ohuan did not succumb but was forced to retreat to Evbohuan village to mobilise support for military action against the Iyase Ogina and his group, in order for him as the Oba to regain his power. In the ‘great struggle’ for power between the Oba Ohuan and his war chief, the king was victorious, and Iyase Ogina defeated. The final victory for Ohuan was the banishment of Ogina to Okogbo, where later he died.

Although the reign of Ohuan was peaceful⁹⁰ after the ‘great struggle’, the confrontation left an imprint on the military history of Benin. Throughout the seventeenth century, no other Iyase was installed by any Oba. This can easily be interpreted as a political strategy adopted by the kings to ensure that the position of the Commander-in-Chief of the Benin army was vacant in order to avoid any polar opposition which had bedevilled the king’s relations with the Iyase. On the other hand, the struggle for kingship after the death of Oba Ohuan,⁹¹ and the rotation of the throne for six reigns weakened the monarchy and led to considerable loss of power by the kings.

It was during this period that the non-command positions in the army were established, in which the senior chiefs of the *Eghaevbo n’Ore* were brought into a new organisational relationship with the Oba in terms of well-defined tasks, each bearing a measure of authority, responsibility, and accountability. These developments were perhaps

⁸⁸ J. U. Egharevba, 1946. *Concise Lives of the Famous Iyases of Benin*. Lagos: Temi-Asunwon Press, p.18.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, pp.18-19.

⁹⁰ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936 “Intelligence Report,” pp.6-7.

⁹¹ Writers and historians of Benin agree on one point: that the political conflicts in the seventeenth century were intensified to the level of unbridled bitterness because Oba Ohuan died childless, without a son or brother as the designated successor. As a result, different political groups manipulated the choice and rotation of kingship among members of the royal family who were not in the line of direct descent, and whose genealogy could not be traced. It was a turning point in Benin history which probably marked the end of the line of kings from Oranmiyan and Eweka I as the kings who succeeded one another, namely Ahenzae, Akenzae, Akengboi, Ahenkpaye, Akengbedo and Oreoghene - all in the seventeenth century, and Ewuakpe who reigned in the first decade of the eighteenth century had not the same genealogical relationship. For details, see P. Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999. *Art, Innovation and Politics*, pp.33-45; J. U. Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, pp.33-37; M. Jungwirth, 1968. *Benin In den Jahren 1485-1700: Ein Kultur-und Geschichtsbild*. Vienna, p204, and P. Amaury Talbot, 1926. *The Peoples of Southern Nigeria*. Vol. I. London, pp.166-167.

security requirements for the institution of monarchy in Benin. The senior chiefs brought into the army non-command relationship with the Oba were: the Esogban, the Eson and the Osuma. This was intended as a means of creating and maintaining order and loyalty among the order of Town Chiefs.

The Esogban, who was next to the Iyase in the hierarchy of *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, was directly linked with providing security for the Oba in times of war.⁹² He had no command responsibility in the army nor was he a Front Commander in war, but “had to stay with the Oba whenever the Iyase went to war.”⁹³ This was an attempt by the kings to have the support of the Esogban,⁹⁴ but the idea was basically for both the Oba and the Esogban to consult and collaborate with each other on issues of mutual interest. The reason, being that the Esogban was the political head (*Odionwere*) of Benin City, and among other functions of state, was put in charge of the shrine of *Edion Edo* (ancestors of Benin).⁹⁵

The Eson, who was third in the hierarchy of *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, was assigned the responsibility of acting for the Iyase during this period, if the title was vacant.⁹⁶ This responsibility did not place him in the command position of Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Benin army, rather he was designated as the acting (*edayi*) Commander-in-Chief in the absence of the Iyase. Whenever he acted, he had the responsibility to co-ordinate the activities of unit commanders of the army. In a sense, the military role assigned to the Eson was more or less honorary, for the Ezomo who was Senior War Commander of the metropolitan regiment of the Benin army, began to take over, in practical terms, the position of Commander-in-Chief of the Benin Army. Another interpretation of the military assignment of the Eson is what may be referred to as contingency theory of military leadership.⁹⁷ The conduct of the campaigns in the seventeenth century by the Ezomo has made it difficult to assess the effectiveness of this type of military leadership.

⁹² Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, the Esogban of Benin and second in the hierarchy of Town Chiefs, interviewed in Benin City on 19 June, 1993.

⁹³ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4, Nevins and Aveling, 1932. “Intelligence Report,” p.46.

⁹⁴ The chieftaincy title of Esogban was created by Oba Ewedo, ca.1255 to 1280 AD. The title holder was regarded as one of the four pillars of the state (*Ikadele n'Ore*), the others being the Iyase, the Eson and the Osuma.

⁹⁵ Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, the Esogban of Benin and second in the hierarchy of Town Chiefs, interviewed in Benin City, on 19 June, 1993.

⁹⁶ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4, Nevins and Aveling, 1932. “Intelligence Report,” p.46.

⁹⁷ With this type of military leadership, the decision making process involved consultations with the military commanders of the army in discussing a particular problem, and whose decisions are very crucial in finding solutions to the problem. The contingency leader may not have the skills required to examine the problem in question, and his effectiveness depends on the commitment and performance of officers to whom he had assigned responsibility.

The Osuma, who was fourth in the hierarchy of *Eghaevbo n'Ore*, was assigned a non-command position in the army, to co-ordinate military intelligence and surveillance.⁹⁸ This placed him in the position as the head of the Ogbe quarter,⁹⁹ the south-west of Benin City where the king and most of his palace chiefs resided. He had the responsibility, in addition to other state functions as a Town Chief, to collate information at a strategic level which were relevant to military decision making. As head of the royal quarter, he was put in charge of security, directly responsible to the Oba and not the Commander-in-Chief of the army. This arrangement can be interpreted as a deliberate re-organisational strategy by the kings of the seventeenth century to have the support of the Town Chiefs for the survival of the monarchy.

The motivation for the involvement of the three Town Chiefs in military and security relationship with the Oba, was also to diffuse potential opposition by sharing aspects of military matters between the king and the senior chiefs. The fear of opposition from the chiefs was genuine. They wielded a lot of influence in the society, each with a select core of warriors directly under their control, although their primary responsibility was the administration of their fiefs.¹⁰⁰ Commonly referred to as the *Eghaevbo N'ene* (the four pillars), they were land-owning nobility, who formed the most important bloc in the state council, and exacting a far-reaching influence on every phase of state life. This class of nobility, however, held one privilege which placed them in a unique position. They had the right of founding settlements with slaves or bondsmen, which they administered privately, keeping the rents to themselves, and rendering this group of nobles the wealthiest class in the state.¹⁰¹ Their titles were therefore much coveted and jealously guarded by the few families who could afford to obtain them.

Apart from the Iyase, in this group of the powerful four, the other three, together with the Oba had no command role in military campaigns. As already noted, the positions of the other chiefs were created as a management strategy to forestall further hostilities from the political group. The spectrum of conflicts and crises during this period in which the Obas faced rebellions and one of them, Oba Ahenkpaye was actually deposed, explains the inevitable failure of the kings who were in quest for internal order. The concern about royal security which brought the Esogban, the Eson and the Osuma into non-command positions was in itself, a rational adaptation to the political situation. As it were, the restriction of the

⁹⁸ Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 7 June, 1993, and information corroborated by Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, and Chief Stephen Igbinador Asuen, the Eson of Benin interviewed in Benin City on 19 June, 1993.

⁹⁹ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4, Nevins and Aveling, 1932. "Intelligence Report," p.46.

¹⁰⁰ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936. "Intelligence Report," p.36.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*

king to the palace raised ‘great dangers and difficulties’ for the monarchy, providing room for important chiefs to manoeuvre themselves into positions of greater and greater power.¹⁰²

In about 1701 AD, Oba Ewuakpe who reigned from c.1700 to 1712, installed Ode as the Iyase.¹⁰³ In that capacity, Iyase n’Ode took charge of the army as Commander-in-Chief. Jacob Egharevba has noted in his book on the *Concise Lives of the famous Iyases of Benin* that Ode “was a great warrior, very powerful and renowned through his victories and other exploits.”¹⁰⁴ The Iyase n’Ode and other chiefs revolted against Oba Ewuakpe,¹⁰⁵ and in support of the action of the chiefs, the people also abandoned the king by their refusal to pay tribute and render services in the palace. The immediate cause of the revolt may be the attempt by Oba Ewuakpe to physically eliminate his opponents or weaken the opposition against him. A truce between the leaders of the rebellion and the king led to the cessation of hostilities. It was an agreement of political compromise between the chiefs and the king, leading to the re-establishment of confidence in the monarchy, but which could not avoid the outbreak of another civil war by the beginning of the second decade of the eighteenth century.

The contradictions and crises of the period combine to provide a complex explanation of the events which led to the outbreak of the eighteenth century civil war. A new crisis after the death of Oba Ewuakpe turned out to negate the power of the political groups as the process of control and counter-control of royal succession finally led to conflicts that resulted in the war. Power politics had provided the ruling aristocracy with a variety of means for enhancing their interests. The socio-political relations between the political groups and the royal family, would appear to have been characterised by some kind of dependency. This was reflected in interpersonal and inter group alliances as powerful or dominant forces in Benin politics of the period.

This development accounts for the changes which were brought about in the reorganisation of the army at the end of the civil war. When the kings of Benin began to rebuild the security apparatus and defences of the state after the war, what could guarantee security of the future dominated political considerations.

The eighteenth century kings seemed to have been preoccupied with one major problem: the Iyase as Commander-in-Chief of the army. The military position of the Iyase had not created friendly relations between the title-holder and the Oba. The immediate and even

¹⁰² P. Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999. *Art, Innovation, and Politics*, p.38. See also, A. Ryder, 1969. *Benin and the Europeans*, p.16.

¹⁰³ Egharevba, 1946. *Concise Lives*, p.20.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ For the different interpretations of the causes of the revolt, see P. Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999. *Art, Innovation, and Politics*, pp.41-43; Ryder, 1969. *Benin and the Europeans*, p.18, and Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, pp.37-38.

long-range effect had been political instability and insecurity for the monarchy. The Iyase n'Ode was the leader of the rebellion against Oba Ewuakpe at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In fact, he was a threatening foe and powerful magician,¹⁰⁶ who, though imaginative and thoughtful, could not return to Benin City after his victories and exploits. He resettled at Ugha village in Ehor District because of the custom which forbade any Iyase to return to Benin City after any campaign.

After the death of Oba Ewuakpe, "the Bini elders secretly sent to solicit for his (Ode's) approval to place Ozuere the second son of Oba Ewuakpe on the throne of Benin."¹⁰⁷ This was a demonstration of the interweaving of interests among the various political coalitions in the state. The Iyase n'Ode supported Ozuere who usurped the throne from the legitimate heir.¹⁰⁸ Uprisings would appear to have replaced the conflicts between the chiefs, leading to implacable hostility. Events which followed led to the outbreak of civil war, which was basically a struggle for the throne between the two sons of Oba Ewuakpe. The main problem as pointed out by Bradbury, was their respective claims in terms of conflicting criteria of legitimacy:

Each candidate proceeded to build up a faction by seeking two kinds of support: (a) by assembling a personal following of "strong," ambitious younger men, recruited on the basis of friendship, clientage, matrilineal kinship, affinal ties, etc., and (b) by seeking the patronage of influential chiefs in each sector of the political elite.¹⁰⁹

This explanation of the immediate cause of the war reinforces the argument of interpersonal and inter group alliances which emerged as powerful forces in the political conflicts and dynastic struggle. What emerged from these alliances were affiliations and coalitions of people who were prepared to trade support and favours to either gain political power or further their individual interests.

The immediate post-war reorganisation of the army was the reform of the command structure which was aimed at balancing power relations underpinned by the basic structure of the political organisation. Oba Akenzua I about 1713 to 1735, who finally emerged victorious was determined not to put his trust in the personal element of the Iyase as Commander-in-Chief of the army. He was constrained by the various kinds of power play to appoint a new

¹⁰⁶ P. Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999. *Art, Innovation, and Politics*, p.44.

¹⁰⁷ Egharevba, 1947. *Concise Lives*, p.21.

¹⁰⁸ Ozuere was not the rightful successor to Oba Ewuakpe. His temporary victory and strength were short-lived by the determination of the political groups that aligned with the rightful heir to defend the tradition of primogeniture. In the effort towards the restoration of monarchy after the rebellion against Oba Ewuakpe in the early eighteenth century, one aspect of the political compromise between Ewuakpe and his influential chiefs was to put an end to the rotation of kingship among members of the royal family and revert to the tradition of primogeniture. The aim was to stop dynastic struggle and conflicts of unbridled bitterness, and the manipulation of succession to the throne which had characterised the last six reigns of kings in Benin history.

¹⁰⁹ R. E. Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, pp.83-84.

military commander for Benin army in place of the Iyase. The choice was *Okakuo* Ogbonmwan, who was one of the two war commanders of the loyalist troops during the civil war. The incumbent Iyase n'Ode, living in exile at Ugha in Ehor village,¹¹⁰ would appear to have recognised his limitations in the new structure of power, and consequently, revolted against Oba Akenzua I, leading almost to another civil war. In the “battle of wits,” the Oba avoided a military confrontation with the Iyase n'Ode, the Commander-in-Chief of his army, by declaring that his loyal friend Ogbonmwan, had been invested with the title of *Ologbo Iyase*, meaning Iyase's cat, and not a replacement for the Iyase. The Oba's action may be interpreted as a manifestation of weakness, which may not necessarily be the case. It was a demonstration of the understanding and management of Benin politics of the eighteenth century in terms of the interplay among rival interest groups, conflicts and the balancing or weakening of political power. Perhaps, if not for the Oba's wit, the Iyase n'Ode and Oba Akenzua I would have ended up destroying each other in another war.

This development led to a change of the title of the new war chief to *Okakuo* Ologbosere, whose status was enhanced to a senior member of *Eghaevbo n'Ore*. Akenzua I also made the military position of the Ologbosere a hereditary chieftaincy title for the family.¹¹¹ He was placed in a command leadership position next to the Ezomo. To strengthen the position of *Okakuo* Ologbosere, a detachment of the metropolitan regiment composed of different companies of warriors, was placed permanently under his command.

The scheme for the reorganisation of the army by Oba Akenzua I was characteristic of the effort to regain power by the monarchy. To enhance the cohesion of the metropolitan regiment of the army, the military position of the Ezomo as Senior War Commander was made hereditary. Up to this time the title had been given at the discretion of the Oba to any notable warrior. The reward of the title of the Ezomo to Ehennua was rooted in a critical interdependence among the power groups, albeit within the context of close and collaborative relations in the unpredictable Benin politics of the eighteenth century.

¹¹⁰ J. U. Egharevba, 1969, *Some Prominent Bini People*. Benin City: Ribway Printers, p.7.

¹¹¹ Egharevba, 1969. *Prominent Bini People*, p.8. The evidence of Madam Elizabeth Ologbosere and Mr. Edenabuohien Ologbosere interviewed in Benin City on February 24, 1997 is in support of the claim by the Ologbosere family in Benin City that the title has been hereditary since the reign of Akenzua I. Colonial Intelligence Report suggests that the title became hereditary since the reign of Oba Akengbuda 1750 to 1804. See NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4, 1932, “Intelligence Report,” p.46. There is no evidence in the history of the evolution of Benin chieftaincy titles that Akengbuda made the Ologbosere title hereditary. It is possible that the first *Okakuo* Ologbosere was succeeded by his son without any dispute during the reign of Oba Akengbuda.

One account claims that both Ehennua and the prince who later became Oba Akenzua I were supposed to have been born into the royal household of Benin,¹¹² and placed under the guardianship of Iyase n'Ode.¹¹³ Due to the Iyase's threat on his life, Ehennua later took refuge at Ewohimi (Evboihkinmwin),¹¹⁴ which seems to have had a fairly warlike past.¹¹⁵ At the time he relocated to Benin, he was already a renowned warrior, and took charge as commander of the loyalist forces of Akenzua I during the civil war. A second account claims that Ehennua's father relocated from Evburhu village, Ewohimi Clan in Esan, to Okhuokhuo in Isi, north-east of Benin Kingdom during the reign of Oba Ewuakpe where Ehennua was born.¹¹⁶ His father placed him under the guardianship of the Iyase n'Ode for training in the art of war.¹¹⁷ It was probably in the household of Ode that Ehennua came in contact with the prince who later became Oba Akenzua I. The relationship between both of them seems to have developed at that time, which prompted Ehennua to support his friend during the civil war. His victory earned him the title of the Ezomo and other privileges granted by the King.¹¹⁸ Coming to prominence as a result of the civil war, the Ezomo Ehennua emerged as one of the most powerful leaders in eighteenth century Benin, "at which time his title first begins to appear in visitors' accounts."¹¹⁹ His main military assignment was to head the team of war commanders and build up the Benin army to combat strength, in a post-war reconstruction effort.

Two factors contributed to the emergence of the Ezomo as Head of war commanders: First, although the Iyase n'Ode was living in exile, the war against him by Akenzua I dragged on, and this led to the declaration of a special vigilance on him. The Iyase's absence from command post of the Benin Army provided the Ezomo Ehennua the opportunity to begin to take over his role as Commander-in-Chief of the army. Second, Akenbo who became the next Iyase after Ode was not a warrior but one of the most successful traders, who lived over one

¹¹² D. N. Oronsaye, 1995. *The history of ancient Benin Kingdom and Empire*. Benin City: Jeromelaiho Printers, p.117. See also, C. G. Okojie, 1994. *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*. Benin City: Ilupeju Press Ltd., pp.508-509.

¹¹³ Egharevba, 1969. *Some Prominent*, pp. 7 and 10.

¹¹⁴ Ewohimi was one of Esan chiefdoms which derives its origin from Benin.

¹¹⁵ NAI, CSO 26/4 31319, H. L. M. Butcher, 1932. "Intelligence Report on the Ewohimi Clan, Ishan Division, Benin Province," p.6.

¹¹⁶ Egharevba, 1969. *Some Prominent*, p.9.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ The following privileges were granted: (1) title of the Ezomo made hereditary; (2) the wearing of a coronet of royal beads; (3) the authority to have sword bearers (Emuada) with brass anklet; (4) the wives of the Ezomo to be called Iloi, like the Oba's wives and subject to similar restrictions and rules of conduct; (5) the conferment of titles in Uzebu village, which was already in practice by other members of the Uzama in their villages. Did the granting of these privileges which equals the Ezomo with the Oba suggests strong evidence of the royal link between Akenzua I and Ehennua? Or did the Ezomo Ehennua as a warrior and commander of the loyalist forces forced Oba Akenzua I to compromise some of his powers? Or was it just the game of power politics? Most of the writers on Benin have not been able to answer these questions. See for example, D. N. Oronsaye, 1995. *The history*, pp.117-118; J. U. Egharevba, 1969. *Prominent Benin People*, pp.9-10, and H. F. Marshall, 1939, "Intelligence Report on Benin City," p.28.

hundred years to see the reigns of five kings up to Oba Osemwede in 1816. In theory, the Iyase Akenbo was the Commander-in-Chief of the army, but in practice, the role was taken over by the Ezomo Ehennua and his descendants.

However, the guiding consideration for the reorganisation of the army by Akenzua I was pursued by his son and successor, Oba Eresoyen 1735 to 1750. The compelling urge was to weaken the military power of the Iyase, by creating a new chain of command, and foster in each and new commander an aptitude for independent, resolute and bold action. In pursuit of this objective, Oba Eresoyen created the title of Ima (Imaran) as a war commander,¹²⁰ and placed the title holder in *Eghaevbo n'Ore* order of chiefs. A select core of warriors was attached to him, and he was to ensure their combat readiness regardless of the numerical strength.

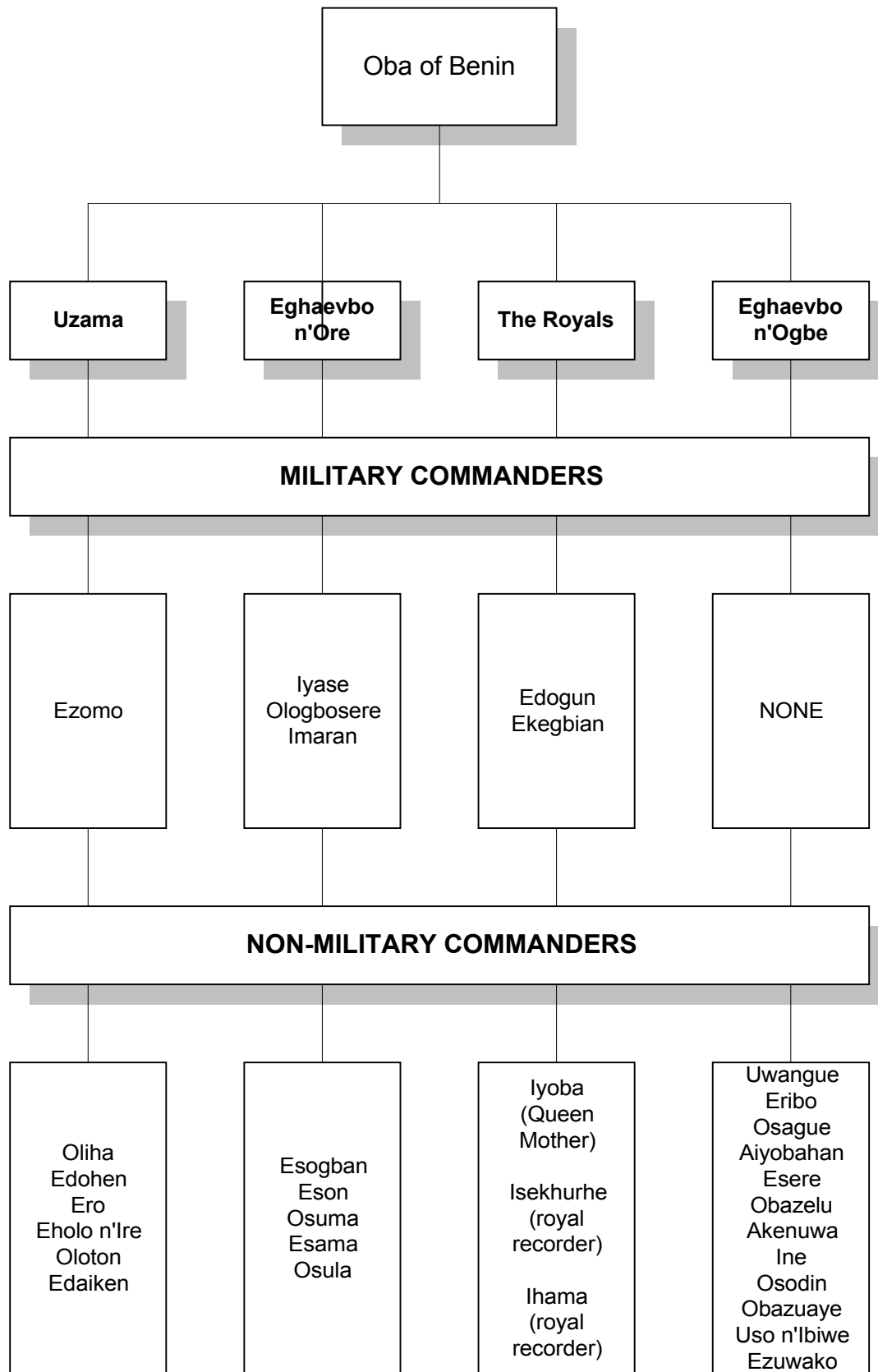
With this development in the eighteenth century, a new core of military elite emerged in Benin society. On the one hand, the prestige of the titled war chiefs increased vis-à-vis their position and power, and in the case of the Ezomo, it which was gradually been linked to the control of wealth as the actual manifestation of his power. On the other hand, the emergence of this group of military leaders was a basic element of organisational structure in Benin political system which was crucial for the power base of the Oba. The building of the power base which involved changes in the military and political organisation of the state, was an enormous task of reorganisation after the civil war.

Nevertheless, in the reorganisation of the army, the real challenge which faced the Oba and his new war commanders was the hierarchy structure of the army in which all commanders were subordinate to the Iyase, who himself was practically independent of the Ezomo. For the Iyase, this relationship empowered him to direct subordinate commanders to perform certain duties, but the commanders also had the responsibility to carry out duties assigned by the Oba. In any case, the Commander-in-Chief and all war commanders were accountable to the Oba by virtue of the hierarchical political system which placed the Oba as head of the state, with the chiefs deriving their authority from him. This was the framework on which the military system was planned and developed. Thus, if the Oba decided to create a new title with war responsibilities, another link was introduced into the chain of command. This meant that the structure of organisation was flexible enough to permit changes without disruption of command and control.

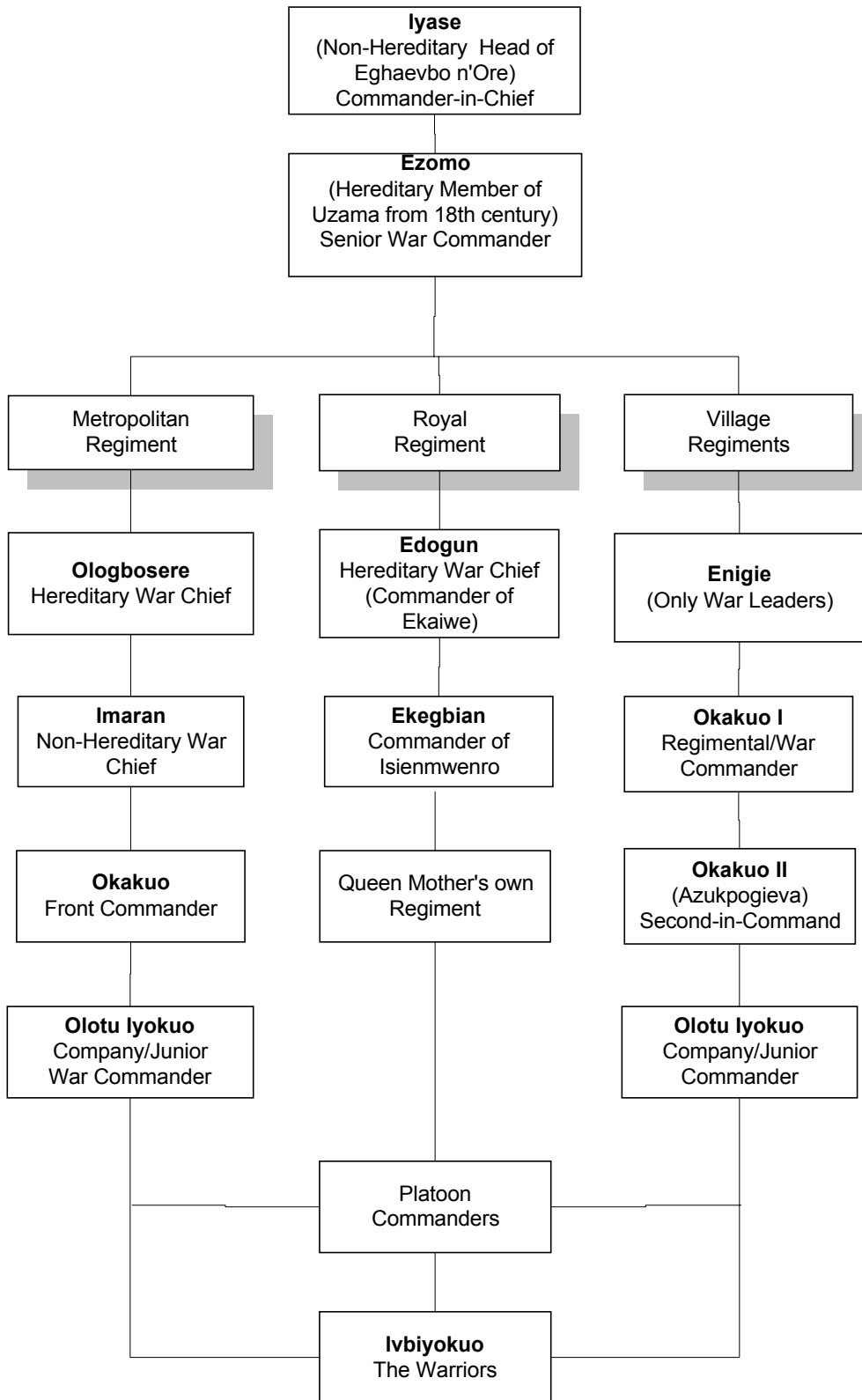
¹¹⁹ P. Girshick Ben-Amos, 1999. *Art, Innovation, and Politics*, p.49.

¹²⁰ E. B. Eweka, 1992. *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*. Benin City: Uniben Press, p.42.

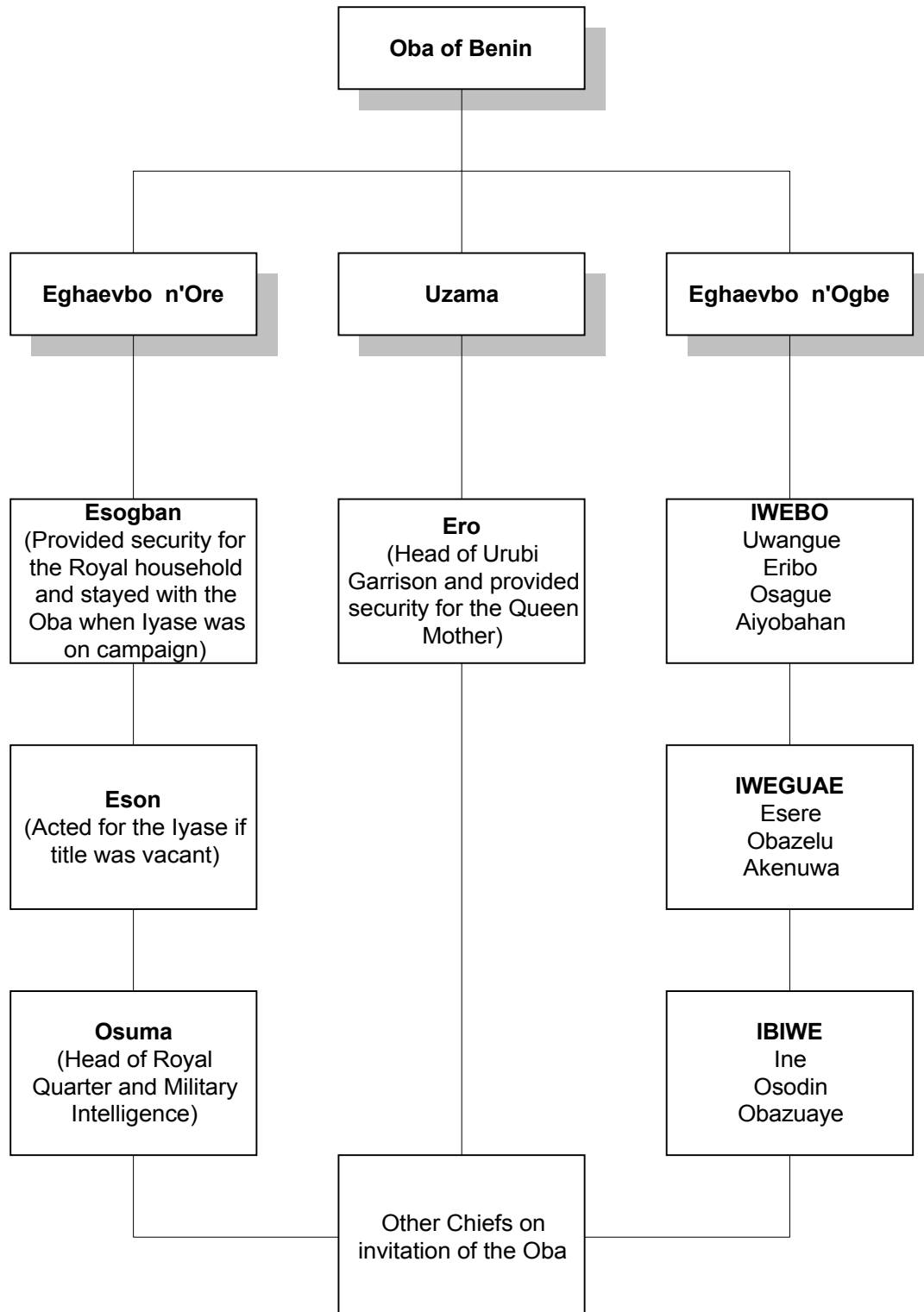
Members of the War Council 1600-1800



New Command Structure of Benin Army 1600-1800



The Oba's Security Council 1600-1800



Strategic thinking in the reorganisation of the army during this period was probably based on the premise of security as a direct function of military superiority vis-à-vis prospective enemies. Such initiatives as may have been taken by the kings to guarantee security of the future, would rest on the knowledge and perceptions of those who were assigned basic responsibilities in military matters. Hence, the question of planning in military leadership became a central problem in military thought.

The development of a military system required more than a well organised army and its leadership. The possession of weapons was a factor which also determined success in war. The kind of weapons available was a factor in the efficient preparation for battle. In Benin, the appearance of new weapons would appear to have led to military innovations and the need for improvement in organisation, discipline and equipment. This view has been the subject of considerable interest to those interested in the development of iron technology and the emergence of the state in Africa.¹²¹ Our discussion of the weapons system of Benin in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries will provide us with the understanding of the development of indigenous knowledge capacity and its interaction with other cultures in influencing the organisation of basic economic needs of Benin.

New Weapons System

The emergence of new military leaders, and improvement in the organisation of Benin army were major developments that were primarily due to the growing importance attached to the consolidation of the fluctuating military power of Benin in the eighteenth century by Akenzua I, who also showed considerable interest in the weapons used by Benin warriors. The possession of arms, basically the firearms,¹²² acquired through trade with Europeans was considered a factor in the strength of the army. This thinking may have been due to the decisive outcome of the eighteenth century civil war. As noted by Alan Ryder, the ultimate success of Oba Akenzua I in the civil war, other wars and indeed in the general restoration of his authority “possibly owed something to the firearms with which he was able to equip his forces once European traders, led by the Dutch, began to sell them to Benin in large quantities

¹²¹ See for example, J. Goody, 1971. *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa*. London; S. J. Barnes and P. Ben-Amos, 1983. “Benin, Oyo, and Dahomey: Warfare, State Building, and the Sacralization of Iron in West African History,” *Expedition* (The University Museum Magazine of Archaeology/Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania. Vol. 25 No. 2 Winter.

¹²² The term is used for light firearms such as rifles, guns and pistols that used gunpowder to fire a bullet. Heavier firearms were generally referred to as artillery. The first firearms were cannons, followed with the development of light firearms. For details, see Jeremy Black, 1994. *European Warfare 1660-1815*. London: UCL Press Ltd., pp.38-66. See also Jack O’Connor. 1984. “firearm” and “flintlock,” In: *World Book Encyclopaedia* Vol. 7. Chicago: World Book Inc., pp. 129 and 209.

at the end of the seventeenth century.”¹²³ The success of Benin expansion and consolidation of its frontiers in eastern Yorubaland, and other wars, in particular with Oyo, was due partly to advantages in fire-power.

The contact between Benin and the Europeans which began towards the end of the fifteenth century facilitated the acquisition of new weapons system. The use of the weapons (firearms) was a military innovation which probably changed the character of Benin warfare. As pointed out in chapter three of this study, the first firearms in Benin were probably those brought by the Portuguese towards the end of the fifteenth century. On political and religious grounds, and perhaps also because of their own dependence on Flemish and German gunsmiths, the Portuguese government forbade its nationals to sell firearms to West Africans.¹²⁴ This ban seems at first to have been successfully maintained in the case at least of Benin, and few guns reached the kingdom until late in the sixteenth century.¹²⁵

During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the kings of Benin became interested in the acquisition of new weapons brought by Europeans to the coast. The first firearms which were developed in Europe were the cannons, but as soon as they developed firearms that they could carry, the rifles began to replace cannons from about 1500 AD. The guns which were imported into Benin were the hand-guns of three types: the matchlock, the wheel-lock and from 1635, the flintlock. Flintlock firing mechanisms were used on firearms from the 1600's to about 1850. Its technology was an improvement on the first type of firearms as it had a piece of flint in the cocking hammer. When the trigger was pulled, the flint struck a piece of steel. This made sparks, which set off the powder charge and fired the bullet.

Since war in precolonial Africa, as perhaps elsewhere in Europe and Asia, was a matter of combat and battle, the introduction and use of gunpowder seemed to have assured soldiers the possibility of quick victory because of its importance and possibly decisive advantages in warfare. In Benin, the use of firearms was restricted by the Oba to those authorised to use it, especially war and regimental commanders, most of whom were also the Front Commanders in battle. The use of firearms was not only symbolically relevant to military positions in the army, they were also effective in deciding the outcome of battle. Writers working on south-western Nigerian history have pointed out that the success of Benin wars of expansion was usually attributable to the fire-power of the Benin army.¹²⁶ Between

¹²³ Ryder, 1980. "The Benin Kingdom," p. 120.

¹²⁴ R. S. Smith, 1976. *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa*. London, p. 107.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ See for example, D. C. Ohadike, 1994. *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People*. Athens: Ohio University Press; S. A. Akintoye, 1971. *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland 1840-1893*. London: Longman Group Limited.

1600 and 1800, the use of firearm was not popular for hunting in Benin kingdom, apparently because of royal monopoly and the handling process which required training for the acquisition of skill and method in their firing.

All in all, in the military sphere, the rise of commerce had set in motion a new operational development of Benin military system which separated the era of warrior kings (ca. 1440 to 1600 AD) from the next phase of reorganisation of the Benin army (ca. 1600 to 1800 AD). This suggests that Benin kingdom may have been part of the movement which separated modern from medieval military systems. As elsewhere, “the transition has been steady, facilitated by an increasing spectrum of interaction among cultures in the West and in the world.”¹²⁷ At least, in the use of weaponry, firearms and gunpowder had placed the kingdom of Benin in the developing military mainstream which was botched at the end of the nineteenth century when the independence and sovereignty of the kingdom was lost to the British imperial conquerors.

The Benin kings of the eighteenth century were conscious of the implications of dependency on European sources of supply of firearms, which in all cases involved the security of the state, no matter the economic gains arising from commerce. To them, the issue of security was fundamental to all other problems of government. This may have been the driving force which impelled Oba Akengbuda, 1750 to 1804, to encourage and support the production locally, of light firearms. The Oba reorganised the guild of blacksmiths (*Igunematon*), who were specialists in iron-casting by creating a new quarter at Igun n’Ugboha.¹²⁸ The new quarter was headed by the Okaigun, whose title possibly became the Obasogie n’Ugboha,¹²⁹ although the overall head of the blacksmiths was the Ine N’Igun Nekhua.¹³⁰ Colonial Intelligence Report describes the guild as having “simple instruments and yet do clever work.”¹³¹ The other two groups of blacksmiths were the Igun N’Ekhua founded in the time of Oba Oguola (ca. 1250 to 1295) and the Igun N’Eyaen-Nugie established during the reign of Oba Esigie (ca. 1504 to 1550).¹³² All the three groups were specialists in the production of weapons used for war, especially the sword, and iron spearhead. It is not known when a fourth group of blacksmiths at Igun N’Iwegie was established to produce iron weapons of all kinds.

¹²⁷ Dennis Showalter, 1997. “Gunpowder and Regional Military Systems,” In: James C. Bradford (ed.) *The Military and Conflict between Cultures: Soldiers at the Interface*. Texas A & M University Press, p.49.

¹²⁸ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. 1932. “Intelligence Report,” p.140.

¹²⁹ Eweka, 1992. *Evolution of*, p.56.

¹³⁰ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932. “Intelligence Report,” p. 140

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² *ibid.*

In establishing a new guild to attempt the local production of European firearms, “the strategic imagination of Oba Akengbuda,” argues Enawekponmwen Eweka, “was perhaps to avoid a situation in future, of dependence on foreign firearms for the prosecution of wars.”¹³³ From this argument, two issues emerges. First, the motivation of Akengbuda was more of security consideration than strategic imagination because weapons production was in itself a component of the security of the state possessing that industry. Second, it was a fact of military policy viewed from a foreign policy perspective such that the identification of a particular need in weapons acquisition was in itself a strategic conception.

The most critical and absorbing problem which confronted Benin kings in the eighteenth century were issues of state security and security of the monarchy, which could not be ignored in the formulation of military policy. It is reasonable to argue therefore, that in advocating a policy of depending on its own sources of military supply, Oba Akengbuda demonstrated that the ability of a state to wage war depended on its productive capacity, which in the long run, would enhance the political and military power of the state. But the evidence of success in the local production of firearms is not known. Of course, the intellectual environment did not exist for the development of such a military technology. European sources only indicate the evidence of acquisition of more firearms during the period.

In the eighteenth century, little or no evidence exist to indicate improvements in cast-iron technology¹³⁴ in Benin for the development of cast-iron guns. Moreover, the technique for casting them was also not known to the Benin casters. This is important because knowledge in improved casting was a crucial technical aspect in the production of European firearms. Perhaps, by the close of the eighteenth century, iron-casting had reached the point of technical take-off but further development may have been constrained by technological backwardness.

The possession of weapons was not the only factor in military operations. Two crucial factors: first, the logistics of moving, lodging, and supplying troops and equipment; and second, the art of directing a campaign and handling forces in battle were also fundamental issues. The importance of these two factors is evident from the re-planning of the war in the conflict between Benin and the vassal states of Ubulu-Uku and Agbor in the second half of the eighteenth century, and the revolt of the Enogie of Ugo, also in the eighteenth century. The military confrontations offered the opportunity for changes in war plans, and the methods of fighting.

¹³³ Prince Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka, local historian of Benin and Secretary to the Benin Traditional council, interviewed in Benin City on 18 June, 1993.



Figure 5: Benin art work which shows the Oba of Benin in a war dress, with shield and spear, and three attendants, two of whom were his war aides. The evidence of European visitors to Benin is represented at the background. This may represent Oba Esigie, one of the warrior kings of Benin, who reigned from about AD 1504 to 1550. Source: Bryna Freyer, *Royal Benin Art in the Collection of the National Museum of African Art*. Washington D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1987, p. 50.

¹³⁴ For details of the role of iron technology in warfare, see John Keegan.1994, *A history of Warfare*. London: Pimlico edition.



Figure 6: A Benin warrior in a war dress, putting on a defensive helmet, holding a defence shield with the left hand and sheath of arrows in the right hand. Source: Bryna Freyer, *Royal Benin Art in the Collection of of the National Museum of African Art*. Washington D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1987, p. 35.



Figure 7: One of the numerous Benin art works in bronze. It shows two Benin warriors, the bowmen, of the archery division of the army. Source: Bryna Freyer, *Royal Benin Art in the Collection of the National Museum of African Art*. Washington D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1987, p. 46.



Figure 8: Benin art work showing a war chief holding a long spear with his left hand and a sceptre in the right hand. The two warriors are carrying the protective shields and some other weapons which are not quite visible with the exception of one of them who is holding the long spear. At the background are two attendants. Since the Oba had his sceptre bearers, and the Ezomo was also granted the privilege of having his sceptre bearers by Akenzua I (circa 1713 to 1735), this may represent the Iyase of Benin who occupied the second military position during the era of warrior kings, became the top commander from about 1600 to 1800, and one of the chief war commanders in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, this work of art may probably represent the Edogun, commander of *Ekaiwe* (royal troops).

Logistics, Strategy and Tactics

In the military system of Benin during this period, logistics was associated with strategy and tactics, which were basically concerned with the art of warfare. In this case, logistics came to be connected with the plans of the military chiefs or war commanders in ensuring the success of campaigns. Such plans were usually the movement of troops, the selection of war camps, gathering of intelligence, planning the security and welfare of the warriors in terms of their food.¹³⁵ While this was basically the art of managing the warriors in battle, or in the theatre of war, logistics in general, functioned to provide the means for the conduct of war or the re-planning of war.

The civil war in early eighteenth century Benin, Ubulu-Uku war and the suppression of the revolt in Agbor, both in the east of the empire, and the suppression of the revolt at Ugo, in the south-east of Benin kingdom, produced a new view of the crucial factors of logistics, strategy and tactics in warfare. Prior to the eighteenth century, Benin had waged wars of attrition (*isiatua*) and the outcome depended on which side could endure longer. The endurance was dependent on the question of supplies which was probably the most important. *Isiatua* as a type of siege warfare was aimed at wearing out the enemy forces by preventing them from going out of their town or having access to food, sources of water supply, etc. The strategy of attrition was a two-edge weapon, and even when skilfully used by Benin warriors, it put a strain on them. The success or otherwise depended on how long the besieged could endure and how long the supplies, etc., of the invaders could last. This necessitated in most cases, a major re-planning of the war. Of course, there was still a lack of systematic operations.¹³⁶

A basic influence in the formulation of war strategy and tactics by Benin military chiefs was the assessment of the enemy's combat capabilities, as other issues such as geographical locations and possible alliances of neighbours were taken for granted.¹³⁷ This explanation seems to maintain that Benin war chiefs had basic knowledge or intelligence reports of possible war theatres. It may have been one of the reasons for the military successes of Benin warriors, but their war experiences were significantly different in the conduct of battles or campaigns. Knowledge of the enemy usually varied, and therefore, attempts to

¹³⁵ Evidence of Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, the Ezomo of Benin and member of the *Uzama n'Thinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 5th and 6th June, 1993.

¹³⁶ Instead of concentrating upon the gathering of overwhelming force at the critical point in battle, the aim of Benin war commanders was to wear down the enemy troops by inducing them to attack in force over terrain able to provide a series of strong lines of defence. From each of these, the defenders could withdraw to take up position and fight again on the next line.

¹³⁷ Evidence of Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo; corroborated by the evidence of Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Thinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 7 June, 1993.

adhere to methods used in a past campaign had resulted in initial defeat as it was in the war against Ubulu-Uku or the military confrontation with the Enogie of Ugo.

The Benin type of warfare suggests that the personal views of military leaders considerably influenced the formulation of strategy and tactics of war. This was a problem of particular concern because such an influence was in disregard to the training of the soldiers in their different regiments. One of the assets of the army which the war chiefs relied on was perhaps the discipline of the warriors.¹³⁸ They preferred death to the disobedience of their commanders. Ekhaguosa Aisien argues that discipline and obedience were basic aspects of the training of Benin soldiers, and given the conditions of those wars, the tactics of resistance were also aspects of the training.¹³⁹ The factual situation was the ability of the commanders to co-ordinate the full combat power of the warriors. This was possible by developing in the warriors the confidence they had in their war commanders. With this manner of military thinking, the problem of front command and control of forces would appear to have had its complexity and scope in the choice of the correct line of operations.

The problem of choosing the correct lines of operations, for example, led to the defeat of Benin warriors twice, during the Ubulu-Uku war in the second half of the eighteenth century. Although considerations were being given to the use of 'magical arts',¹⁴⁰ the main issue was the rethinking on war plans and other matters of strategy and tactics. The decision of the Oba to send a large army led by Imaran and Emokpaogbe, the Enogie of Ugo as the Front Commanders seem to suggest that the earlier two military operations may have been led by junior war commanders. During the third battle, the choice of correct line of operations by the war chiefs was a contributory factor which led to the victory of Benin soldiers.

In this Ubulu-Ukwu war, Benin military forces avoided directed group confrontation (*okhonmu*), and adopted the encirclement strategy (*ifianyako*).¹⁴¹ This was a strategic offensive action calculated to defeat the enemy forces through penetration and encirclement. The cause of the war,¹⁴² and the initial under-estimation of the power of resistance of Ubulu-Uku forces made it one of the most remembered events in the military history of Benin. In the third encounter, Benin forces avoided fighting in continuous battle lines, and concentrated in selected localities, from where they penetrated to encircle the enemy. Jacob Egharevba recalls

¹³⁸ Informants listed in footnote 137 above.

¹³⁹ Evidence of Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, consultant surgeon and local historian of Benin, interviewed in Benin City on 20 June, 1993.

¹⁴⁰ Egharevba, 1969. *Prominent Bini*, p.15.

¹⁴¹ Evidence of Dr. Osaren S. B. Omoregie, educationist and local historian of Benin, interviewed in Benin City on 15 March 1997. See D. C. Ohadike, 1994. *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People*. Athens: Ohio University Press. This work has details of the war, the strategies adopted by both Benin and Ubulu-Ukwu warriors.

that “after terrible fighting the town was captured and the head of the Obi was sent to the Oba at Benin City.”¹⁴³ The actual tactics used in the handling of Benin forces in the war by the Front Commanders is not well known.

A clearer picture of the strategy of encirclement emerged in the war against Ugo. This was in the second half of the eighteenth century, a few years after the Ubulu-Ukwu war. Emokpaogbe, the Enogie of Ugo who was one of the war commanders, was apparently dissatisfied with the rewards given him by the Oba for the victory. He, then decided to declare war against the Oba. Jacob Egharevba explains that the Oba “at first refused to engage in conflict with this general who had distinguished himself in the Ubulu-Ukwu campaign, and offered to pardon him,” but the Enogie remained recalcitrant and began to harass the City.¹⁴⁴ The *casus belli* was the massacre of Benin traders and emissaries of the Oba in Ugo.¹⁴⁵

Benin soldiers involved in the military operations were three companies of warriors from the metropolitan regiment - Obakina, Igbizamete, and Agobo- under the command of the Ologbosere and the Imaran. They camped at Ugboko-niro from where they fought several battles. It appears that the strategic offensive action of concentrating the units within supporting distance of the battlefield may have been responsible for the casualties on the side of Benin. However, the fall of Ugboko-nosote, one of the villages allied to Ugo, enabled the Benin army to encircle the enemy town and wreck havoc from the rear. Although the rebels retreated from the battle lines to defend their town, they were finally defeated.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the strategy and tactics of warfare had begun to change. The strategies of attrition (*isiatua*), and direct group confrontation (*okhomu*) had become of less importance to the warriors as more emphasis shifted to the strategy of encirclement (*ifianyako*). The roots of this new strategy is not known. Its origin was probably in the eighteenth century when the new military leaders of Benin were engrossed with problems of tactics in warfare and organisational reform of the army. That notwithstanding, this period from 1600 to 1800 which witnessed the fluctuations of the power of Benin may have been the crucial moments that provided the basis for the regular reassessment of the most logistical exploits in the development of the military system.

However, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Benin military system had provided the means of consolidating the frontiers of the empire. The rapid expansion of Benin’s influence through wars during the era of warrior kings had given way to the spread of Benin culture as a means of expansion and consolidation of the empire in the period from 1600 to

¹⁴² For details, see Egharevba, 1969. *Short History*, p.41 and *Prominent Bini*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁴³ Egharevba, 1969. *Prominent Bini*, p.15.

¹⁴⁴ Egharevba, 1969. *Short History*, p.41.

1800, and the military system was more of a check on attempts towards disintegration of the state than further expansion through conquests. It was this period that most of the states in the empire began to adopt aspects of Benin political culture and social organisation. The western Igbo and Esan communities were the most receptive of the political ideas of Benin. The Benin high ranking titles of Oliha, Edohen, Ezomo, Iyase, Esogban, Ero, Uwangue, Edogun and Ine were adapted by the communities in varying degrees of their political needs.¹⁴⁶ Among the Urhobo, three of such titles - Izomor, Iyase(re), Eni - were adopted while the Itsekiri had Iyasere, Ero and Uwangue.¹⁴⁷ In Kwale, such titles as Ozoma, Iyasele, Isagba and Uwangue¹⁴⁸ are evidence of the expansion of Benin influence although the western and southern clans were formed as a result of successive migrations from Benin.¹⁴⁹ The absence of such Benin titles among the Edoid group of Akoko-Edo, Etsako and Owan has been attributed to the influence of the Islamic religion.¹⁵⁰ Perhaps, the non-existence of any such titles among those northern and north-western neighbours of Benin was a kind of subtle resistance to the power and influence of Benin. As already noted in this chapter, such Benin titles, palace rituals and ceremonies were adopted by most of the states in eastern Yorubaland which came under the Benin Empire. The expansion of the influence of Benin continued in the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century presented new challenges to the development of the military system. The dimension and complexity of nineteenth century political and economic developments, generally in West Africa, were significantly different from what prevailed in the period from 1600 to 1800. It was a century that witnessed political transformations. For example, it witnessed the fall of Oyo Empire and the rise of new states in Yorubaland such as Ibadan. The Sokoto Caliphate emerged to replace the independent Hausa states in present-day northern Nigeria. The Benin Empire was in decline. Economically, the transition from slave trade to 'legitimate' commerce had altered the pattern of relations between European powers and African states. In the last quarter of the century, Africa was partitioned, conquered and effectively occupied by European powers in such a manner which had no precedence in African history. The political exigencies of the century made it the most critical period in the history of Benin Empire. In response to the exigencies of the period, there were reforms in the military organisation of the state, the idea of surveillance on and collaboration with states

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Prince Enawekponmwen Eweka describes the influence as "Benin Chieftaincy in Diaspora." For details, see his book published in 1992 entitled *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*. Benin City: Uniben Press, pp.165-212.

¹⁴⁷ Eweka, 1992. *Evolution of*, p.165.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p166.

¹⁴⁹ NAI CSO 26/3, 26769. G. B. Williams and E. A. Miller, 1930-31. "Intelligence Report on the Benin-Aboh Clans of Warri Province," p.6.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp165-166.

within the empire assumed a different dimension. It also necessitated weapons build-up, new strategic plans and the establishment of a standing army. The evidence shows that this was the continued process of the development of the military system of Benin. However, on 17 February, 1897 Benin fell to the British, which marked the end of its precolonial history. The nineteenth century developments vis-à-vis the military system of Benin have been discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

BENIN MILITARY SYSTEM DURING THE CENTURY OF POLITICAL EXIGENCIES, 1800 - 1896

Introduction

In the historiography of the kingdom of Benin and its Empire, the nineteenth century has special significance as the most critical century in its history. Unlike the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when Benin carried on an active trade in cloth, pepper and ivory, in exchange for the products from European traders; in the nineteenth century, its prosperity began to decline. In terms of both the future of its sphere of influence, and its economic role, the main current of events was a vivid illustration of the nature of the transformation process of an empire in decline. It is difficult to point to any critical turning point during this period, but a central issue in the transition process was the impact of domestic power politics and foreign trade with Europeans on the advancement of the goals of the state, especially its economic policy. The evidence now available,¹ suggest that generally, ‘the central problem encapsulated in the concept of the nineteenth century transition can be broken into two analytical parts: one deals with changes in economic structure; the other with changes in economic performance.’² Anthony Hopkins argues that ‘these two types of change interact, and their conjuncture may prove on occasion to be a turning-point in the history of the economy and indeed of the country concerned.’³ The ending of the European slave trade and its replacement with ‘legitimate’ trade had very different effects in different societies, depending on the social structure and the question of who controlled the trade. Hopkins position, therefore, provides a framework of analysis in illustrating the connection between internal dynamics and international forces that decisively altered the fortunes of Benin Empire.

It is useful, therefore, to consider the following questions: First, what was the response of Benin to the commercial transition? Second, how did the warrior aristocrats respond to the crisis of the nineteenth century? Third, what were the war aims of Benin, and finally, what

¹ For details, see Robin Law (ed.), 1995. *From Slave Trade to ‘Legitimate’ Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth Century West Africa*. Cambridge University Press.

² A. G. Hopkins, 1995. “The New International Economic Order in the nineteenth century: Britain’s first Development Plan for Africa,” In: Robin Law (ed.) *From Slave Trade*, p. 24.

were the factors that motivated the changing perspective on warfare? In considering these questions, it is necessary to also determine the economic factors which led to renewed warfare in nineteenth century Benin, and the manner in which military power was used to protect economic interests or ‘priorities’ by the Oba and his chiefs. It was a period of political exigencies in which Benin had to respond, on the basis of the strength of its army, to the revolts that threatened to undermine the territorial integrity of the empire.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the continued process of development of the Benin military system during this century of political exigencies. The chapter examines critically, the interrelationship between the political economy and changing perspective on warfare, the reforms in military organisation, surveillance and collaboration, weapons build-up, new strategic plans, and the evolution of policy on a standing army, which were considered by the ruling aristocracy to be essential to the attainment of their objective, and the goals of the state. The rebuilding of military power was seen as the instrument of political policy in furtherance of economic interests. During this period, the interweaving of interests also serve to illustrate the conflicting goals of the Oba and the chiefs.

On the level of power politics, from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the fall of Benin in 1897, political competition which found expressions in conflicts and rivalry between the Oba and his chiefs, was a contributory factor to the political exigencies of the period. From about 1804 to 1815 when Obanosa was king, Benin witnessed events of bloodbath that inflicted seemingly irreparable damage to the society. His reign was ‘notorious for the wholesale massacres that occurred.’⁴ In fact, the Benin monarch ordered the murder of his own mother who had already been invested with the title of the *Iyoba* (Queen Mother) at *Uselu*.⁵ Jacob Egharevba explains that ‘the events of the time went by the term “*Okpughe*”, in which countless lives were lost.’⁶ *Okpughe*, meaning the ‘Great Spectacle’ led to an insurrection in about 1815, in which the Oba was eventually killed.⁷

With the assassination of Obanosa in 1815, the outbreak of civil war represented a complete breakdown of the political process. The evidence demonstrates that political competition exacerbated conflicts among different political groups. Egharevba’s suggestion that the cause of the war was the struggle between Prince *Erediauwa* and Prince *Ogbebo*, the

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs Library, Benin City (hereinafter referred to as MLG Library/BC), J. Macrae Simpson, 1936. “A Political Intelligence Report on the Benin Division of the Benin Province,” 26 April, p. 7.

⁵ J. U. Egharevba, 1969. *Some Prominent Bini People*. Benin City: Ribway Printers, p. 16.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936. “Intelligence Report”, p. 7.

two eldest sons of the assassinated king,⁸ is to oversimplify the events which led to the civil war. The massacre of ‘countless lives’ during the reign of Obanosia, and his assassination in 1815 were events which reflected political instability that drifted the state to civil war. Prince Ogbebo who was one of the claimants to the throne set fire to parts of the palace and destroyed valuable treasures after his defeat in the civil war.⁹

In 1816, Prince Erediauwa who was supported by most of the principal chiefs as the rightful heir, was crowned Oba of Benin with the title of Osemwede. There is evidence of external military support, especially from the Esan chiefdoms, for the claims of Oba Osemwede to the throne.¹⁰ Throughout the nineteenth century, the dynastic struggle exacerbated conflicts and rivalry. Oba Adolo who succeeded Osemwede in 1848, had to contend with his brother who instigated rebellion and uprisings among the Esan people,¹¹ the immediate neighbours of Benin in the north. In 1882, Adolo died and was succeeded by his son, Prince Idugbowa who took the title of Oba Ovonramwen, although he was not the eldest. Orukotu, the eldest son of Oba Adolo had disputed the succession, and he and his followers were brutally massacred.¹² Egharevba also points out that ‘shortly after Ovonramwen became Oba he had chiefs Obaraye, Obazelu, Osia and others put to death on the charge that they had opposed his accession.’¹³ In 1895, Egiebo, who was the Uwangue and Chief Adviser to Ovonramwen was murdered for his suspected role in the bloodbath. The Oba instituted an enquiry, and two of the principal chiefs of the House of Iwebo- Obaduagbon and Esasoyen - ‘and many others were charged with murder, and after a hasty trial were all found guilty and executed.’¹⁴

The domestic political crisis in nineteenth century Benin had two interrelated dimensions. The first was the inordinate ambition of members of the Benin royal family which produced conflicts of unbridled bitterness. It would appear that competition on the level of power politics produced ‘princes’ with conflicting goals, who had to seek for alternative means in pursuit of their interests. They could not foresee or at least consider all the dimensions of what was essential to the political stability of the state. The second aspect of the crisis was the structure of power in Benin society, in which political competition worked to exacerbate, rather than solve conflicts among the different political groups with

⁸ J. U. Egharevba, 1968. *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, p. 43.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ National Archives Ibadan (hereinafter referred to as NAI), CSO 26/3, 27987. E. G. Hawkesworth, 1932. “Intelligence Report on the Irrua Clan, Ishan Division, Benin Province”, p. 6.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936. “Intelligence Report”, p. 7.

¹³ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p. 48.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

their conflicting goals and interests. Such an arrangement in the distribution of power was pre-eminently to the interest of the Oba, who manipulated the political competition among his chiefs. As Bradbury points out, ‘the Oba of Benin was neither a mere ritual figurehead nor a constitutional monarch, but a political king, actively engaged in competition for power.’¹⁵ After 1897, Benin entered a New Age which brought about a fundamental transformation of that political culture.

What seems to have been the crucial underlying factor in the interpretations of political developments in nineteenth century Benin was the economic crisis of the period. The crisis was the impact of commercial transition,¹⁶ of which the ruling aristocracy attempted to balance economic interests and domestic political constraints through the reorganisation of power and the search for a military strategy capable of protecting vital interests. This also led to the changing perspective on warfare. It is therefore useful to discuss, first, the nineteenth century Benin political economy and the changing perspective on warfare as a background to the understanding of the renewal of campaigns during this period. Two interrelated questions can be considered: First, was the central issue in nineteenth century political economy the difficulty of Benin’s influence on the overseas exchange economy? Second, or was it the general problem of transition to ‘legitimate’ commerce?

The Political Economy of Benin and Changing Perspective on Warfare in the Nineteenth Century

The general concept of political economy suggests a relationship of political, economic and social factors of change in one continuous historical process. The dynamics of such change emerge from the continuing interplay of economic forces and related social groups; and those dynamics are reflected and furthered through institutional innovation and change.¹⁷ This position has its relevance in the analysis of developments in nineteenth century Benin, being the climax of the economic and political relations with Europeans. The involvement of the African kingdom in an exchange relations, coupled with her past military successes, would appear to have given a boost to economic activities. This boost was responsible for the limited military campaigns from c.1600 to 1800, as trade expansion in turn had its effects on the

¹⁵ R. E. Bradbury, 1973. *Benin Studies* (Peter Morton-Williams, ed.) London: Oxford University Press, p. 70.

¹⁶ See Robin Law, 1993. “The Historiography of the Commercial Transition in Nineteenth Century West Africa” In: Toyin Falola (ed.) *African Historiography: Essays in Honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi*. Harlow, pp. 91-115.

¹⁷ See C. W. Gutkind and Immanuel Wallerstein (eds.), 1976. *The Political Economy of Contemporary Africa*. Beverly Hills and London: SAGE Publications, pp. 7-8.

social structure of the Benin society. In fact, competition for position, power and prestige in the state itself provided a major incentive to engage in this trade.¹⁸

However, changes in the nineteenth century international trade presented difficulties to the Oba and his chiefs. The starting point of the crisis was the demand by the Europeans for free trade in Benin Empire, which conflicted with the interests of the Oba, and perhaps, the goals of the state. The two opposing interests had roots in the transition from slave trade to 'legitimate' commerce. The main problem was the role played by the Oba whose policy had always been highly protectionist: First, no other traders from the interior were permitted to operate in Benin Kingdom; second, stringent controls were exercised over the coastal trade with European merchants and Itsekiri middlemen; third, dues were demanded from visiting ships; fourth, the Oba's monopolies in certain exports such as palm-oil, were strictly enforced; and finally, general trading was allowed only when the Oba and his chiefs had completed their business.

The trade was originally in cloth and ivory, and in some other commodities such as slaves and pepper, but after the abolition of the European slave trade, the main export shifted to palm-oil and wild rubber, and other products which were from time to time regulated in order to preserve the isolation and independence of the kingdom of Benin.¹⁹ Up to the fall of Benin in 1897, the export trade of most products was banned, and the only article in which trade was permitted by the Oba was palm-oil.²⁰ In 1863, Sir R. Burton the then British Consul at Fernando Po visited Benin City,²¹ to persuade the Oba to allow free trade in the region but did not succeed. However, in 1885 the coastline of Benin was placed under British protection, and steps were taken to enter into negotiations with the Oba; it was not until 1890 that Consul G. F. N. B. Annesley saw the king with the hope of making a treaty but failed in his object.²² In March 1892 Captain H. L. Gallwey, British vice-consul succeeded in concluding a treaty with Oba Ovonramwen. 'The treaty however proved of no avail' as documented in the colonial Intelligence Report, 'and the king kept aloof as of old, from any outside interference.'²³

A line of explanation for the protectionist policy of the Oba suggests that with the difficulties arising from the commercial transition in the nineteenth century, there was a shift

¹⁸ R. E. Bradbury, 1967. "The Kingdom of Benin", In: Daryll Forde and P. M. Kaberry (eds.) *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 6.

¹⁹ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. H. N Nevins and H. G. Aveling, 1932. "Intelligence Report on the Benin Division of the Benin Province," p. 16.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 13.

²² *ibid.* p. 13-14.

²³ *ibid.* p. 14.

in the balance of wealth among the ranks of the nobility. The control of other products in the international trade provides a striking example of the new strategy by the Oba and the “merchant chiefs of Benin” to control economic resources and wealth. This was important because the power of the noble was not only reflected in his title, but ‘also in his visible wealth, in his large household, and numerous slaves and retainers, that attracted to him more and more clients, and brought him greater influence.’²⁴ For the Oba to permit free trade would mean throwing the lucrative economic activities to all groups of the community, instead of being confined to the ruling aristocracy. It was for this reason, that is the social structure and the question of who controlled the trade, that Benin did not become a major producer of palm-oil during this period. The reason why the Niger Delta and the Igbo communities in present-day eastern Nigeria experienced a boom of the palm-oil trade was the social structure of the societies which permitted access to the market. Although the trade generated crisis of adaptation after the middle of the century,²⁵ the fall in oil prices in the 1880s and the accompanying shift in the terms of trade may have generated the economic crisis which forced, for example, the Oba of Benin to adopt his own protective policies.

A second explanation, though related to the first, is that material wealth was a means of social advancement in Benin. The purchase of title or payment of investiture dues demonstrate the chances of social promotion, and only the rich could aspire for this social advancement. Stringent controls and the Oba’s monopolies were the policies aimed at regulating the source of wealth, which free trade would have facilitated with the opening of new opportunities. In essence, state control was aimed at maintaining the economic power of the ruling aristocracy.

Writers who may not agree with the two explanations, are likely to interpret the “protective policy” of the Oba of Benin as an instrument aimed at preserving the integrity of the kingdom. Writers in this category always point to the royal power of the Oba which the European traders and consuls attempted to undermine with their policy of free commerce. Those who subscribe to this view are quick in pointing out that state control was necessary to regulate the distribution of firearms and gunpowder, in a century of political exigencies when domestic political crises and insurrection within Benin Empire threatened the collapse of the state. Finally, they may argue that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Oba and his

²⁴ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936. “Intelligence Report”, p. 42.

²⁵ See for example, D. Northrup, 1976. “The Compatibility of the Slave and Palm Oil Trades in the Bight of Biafra,” *Journal of African History*, 17, pp.353-364, and Martin Lynn, 1995. “The West African Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century and the ‘Crisis of Adaptation’” In: Robin Law (ed.), *From Slave Trade*, pp.57-77. See also, A. Jones, 1983. *From Slaves to Palm Kernels: A History of the Galinhas Country, 1730-1850*. Wiesbaden; E. Reynolds, 1974. *Trade and Economic Change on the Gold Coast 1807-1874*. London.

chiefs were apprehensive of the imperial ambition of the British, as the coastline of Benin was already placed in British protection in 1885 as they were also firmly established in the rivers to the south.

Foreign commerce, no doubt, enhanced the economic power of Benin, although the economy was not transformed to stimulate further development.²⁶ On present evidence, the central problem as the views of Anthony Hopkins suggest,²⁷ was the economic structure and the nature of its performance. The Oba wielded a great deal of economic and political power, and exercised control over internal and external trade.²⁸ This regulation led to the emergence of a new group of wealthy chiefs whose positions and prestige in the society was determined by their economic power. Neither the Oba nor the chiefs invested their capital as evidence shows that they gained a great deal from foreign commerce.²⁹ Olufemi Ekundayo has advanced his own argument that throughout the nineteenth century there were a number of constraints upon economic growth. These, he identified as inter-tribal wars, the absence of any one nationally accepted currency, the undeveloped transport system, and the problem of finally suppressing the slave trade.³⁰

Undoubtedly, developments during the previous centuries of commercial activities with Europeans,³¹ laid the foundation of the nineteenth century political economy of Benin. The economic situation which arose in the nineteenth century, coupled with the waning power of Benin and the difficulty of enforcing tribute or suppressing revolts triggered an irresistible pressure on the ruling aristocracy to rethink their perspective on warfare.

²⁶ The state of debate on the impact of Atlantic slave trade on Africa is still at the level of two conflicting views. The first school of thought maintains that trade with Europeans, particularly the slave trade, retarded the economic development of Africa and created obstacles for achieving industrialisation in Africa. The second school of thought believes that the trade benefited the continent in several ways. A conference organised by the Centre of Commonwealth Studies at the University of Stirling, Scotland to both take stock of the state of the debate, and to present new detailed research bearing upon that debate, did not seem to have resolved the conflicting views. For readings of the papers presented at the conference, see Robin Law (ed.), 1995. *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth Century West Africa*. Cambridge University Press.

²⁷ See footnote no. 2 of this chapter.

²⁸ For details, see P. A. Igbafe, 1980. "The Precolonial Economic Foundations of the Benin Kingdom" In: I. A. Akinjogbin and S. Osoba (eds.) *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History*. Ile-Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd., pp.19-34.

²⁹ While the trade lasted, the people of Benin spun their own thread, weaved their own garments, provided their own foodstuffs, and had their own tools. European goods were luxury items, alcoholic drinks, firearms and gunpowder. The question that need to be posed here is: Was it the vested interests of the ruling class which prevented their investment in domestic production? Or put simply, was it the nature of the commercial transactions that discouraged the merchant chiefs of Benin from exploiting avenues of investment? A meaningful assessment of this question should take into consideration the main features of the economy of Benin and the constraints upon growth. The interpretations of Hopkins are quite useful in this case. See A. G. Hopkins, 1973. *An Economic History of West Africa*. London: Longman Group Ltd.

³⁰ R. Olufemi Ekundayo, 1973. *An Economic History of Nigeria 1860 - 1960*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., p. 59.

³¹ See Alan Ryder, 1969. *Benin and the Europeans 1485 - 1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd.

The political economy of Benin was therefore, a key factor of the changing perspective on warfare during this period. The degree of influence is embalmed in the economic considerations for the wars in the nineteenth century. Conflicts and disagreements within and without, revolts against the imperial control of Benin, the declaration of independence by vassal states of Benin, and of course, the difficulties and the increasing resort to malpractice among the traders. In fact, it was the political economy that generated a crisis which the British capitalised on to impose a treaty on Benin, and their interest in colonisation that finally culminated in the fall of Benin on 17 February, 1897. It is useful therefore, to consider the following questions: How did the warrior aristocrats respond to the crisis? And second, what was the extent of their involvement?

During the course of the nineteenth century, the history of military activities and political economy seem to indicate that the idea of war was not necessarily an integral means of achieving political objectives, nor was the decision to suppress revolts within the empire or to resist when challenged the war aim of Benin. Military actions which arose from such confrontations in the nineteenth century were decisions taken by the ruling aristocracy in Benin to stop their enemies from achieving their war aims. From the era of warrior kings up to the end of the eighteenth century, Benin went to war either to conquer neighbouring peoples and states, or to suppress rebellions. The aim was to get captives, booty, and enforce the payment of tribute or war indemnity. Payment by the defeated state was evidence of submission and loyalty to the Oba of Benin. This payment was in the form of slaves and other economic goods or means of exchange.

The argument of Richard Roberts based on a study of the Mossi states, is perhaps, also useful in understanding the war aims of Benin before the nineteenth century. According to him, 'warfare was an expression of state involvement in the larger social formation', and this he interpreted to mean that 'to make war successfully, and thus to fulfil the expectations of the warriors and the groups involved in support services, required conscious intervention in the economy in order to replenish the material conditions for making war.'³² Although Benin was not a military state, war was profitable for the warrior aristocrats because of the gains it yielded. This meant that to some extent, warfare was also an expression of state power.

The limits of this power became obvious following the events which pushed Benin from political instability in 1804 to civil war in 1816. The aftermath of the civil war were the

³² Richard L. Roberts, 1987. *Warriors, Merchants, and Slaves: The State and the Economy in the Middle Niger Valley, 1700 - 1914*. Stanford University Press, p. 20.

series of revolts within the empire during the first half of the century.³³ In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Nupe-Fulani jihadists invaded the northern limits of Benin Empire, ‘forcing most of the Northern Edo groups to pay regular tribute to the Emir of Bida.’³⁴ Although the crumbling imperial authority of Benin was triggered by the crisis and civil war of the early nineteenth century, Bradbury points out that ‘the penetration of European commerce through Lagos on the west, and up the Niger on the east was slowly whittling away the Benin trading hinterland and loosening the Oba’s hold over his subject populations.’³⁵ In the last two decades of the century,³⁶ Benin Empire was in the last stages of decline.

The events of the nineteenth century leads to a reconsideration of the issues connected with the future of Benin as a military power, as well as the changing perspective on warfare. The chain of events seems to demonstrate that the pressures of military necessity due to the threats posed by the rebellious vassals were infinitely greater than the motives of politics in understanding the new perspective on warfare. The task for the Oba and his principal chiefs was the search for a military strategy capable of maintaining the territorial integrity of Benin. The economic resources in form of tribute, taxes, and tolls were important elements in the conception of Benin Empire, but more than military power was required if the empire was to be held together. In spite of the fact that Benin was confronted with difficult domestic political constraints, the ruling aristocracy could not foresee all the dimensions of what was essential to the pursuit of the imperial power of Benin. What seems to have occupied them was perhaps, the military strength of the state and the preparedness of the army in readiness to suppress revolts.

A central issue in the changing character on warfare was that campaigns were no longer embarked upon for the expansion of the frontiers of the empire, but rather were attempts to consolidate the territorial gains of the previous centuries. This was dictated by the current political exigencies in which military power could no longer be relied upon as the instrument of expansion. These developments were to lead to reforms in the military

³³ See for example, NAI CSO 26/4, 30172. A. F. B. Bridges, 1934. “Intelligence Report on the Ondo District of the Ondo Division, Ondo Province”, pp. 7-8; NAI CSO 26, 29734, N. A. C. Weir, 1933. “Intelligence Report on Ado District of Ekiti Division, Ondo Province”, 20 November, pp. 17-23; NAI, CSO 26/3, 29956. J. H. Beeley (Assistant District Officer), 1932, “Intelligence Report on Owo and Ifon Districts, Owo Division, Ondo Province”, pp. 2 ff. See also, NAI, CSO 26, 31350. J. E. Jull, 1936. “Intelligence Report on the Ogwashi-Uku Clan, Asaba Division, Benin Province”, pp. 4 - 5 ; and NAI CSO 26, 30414. J. H. Blair, 1935. “Intelligence Report on the Uzairue clans, Kukuruku Division, Benin Province”, p. 8.

³⁴ Bradbury, 1967. “The Kingdom”, p. 7.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ Series of revolts within Benin Empire. In the 1880s, for example, the Benin army led by Ezomo, was occupied subduing rebellious villages and towns on the north-west borders of the kingdom, about sixty-five kilometres

establishment, and the main problem was the reorganisation of the command structure, and this in turn directly involved the question of basic military strategy capable of responding to the political exigencies. This changing perspective on warfare was the response of the warrior aristocrats to the crisis; to use war as a means of recovery, and attempt to maintain a military strength fully adequate for the range of problems or tasks expected to be performed. While the warrior aristocrats in nineteenth century Dahomey, for example were in crisis,³⁷ the Benin warrior aristocrats entered the post slave trade era, determined to reconsolidate the imperial power of Benin, strengthen the military system, and to deal with all the critical challenges³⁸ to the goal and power of Benin.

The wars of this period serves to illustrate how crucial the situation was for Benin, and of the necessity of strengthening the military system in order to cope with the political exigencies of the century. In 1818,³⁹ the Akure-Benin War broke out.⁴⁰ The war aim of Benin was to regain the territory and enforce the payment of tribute, for which Akure put up defensive fighting.⁴¹ The Benin army was led by three top war commanders namely, the Ezomo, the Ologbosere and the Imaran, and two other Front Commanders - Imadiyi and Oyodo.⁴² The Benin soldiers successfully suppressed the Akure revolt⁴³. After the victory over Akure, the Ezomo and the Ologbosere died of strange diseases or illness,⁴⁴ on their

from the capital. In the 1890s, Agbor and some of the western Ibo chiefdoms were in revolt. Some continued to pay tribute, but it was more difficult to enforce and the revolts were more difficult to put down.

³⁷ See for example, John Reid, 1986. "Warrior Aristocrats in Crisis: The Political Effects of the Transition from the Slave Trade to Palm Oil Commerce in the Nineteenth Century Kingdom of Dahomey", PhD thesis, University of Stirling, Scotland.

³⁸ These were challenges of the threats of disintegration, arising from insurrection to the authority of the Oba of Benin, which pre-eminently hinged on the question of Benin's future in the region. The numerous expressions of the response of the military aristocrats comprised the content of the military history of this period.

³⁹ Jacob Egharevba in his *Short History of Benin*, p.44, suggests 1818 as the date for the outbreak of the Akure War, and argues that Lieut. John King's account of 1823, who was in Benin City between 1815 and 1821 also confirms the approximate date. Colonial Intelligence Report on Ado District of Ekiti Division of Ondo Province suggests an earlier date of about 1815 for the war, but cautioned that it was a mere approximation. The "Intelligence Report on Akure District of Ekiti Division, Ondo Province", by N. A. C. Weir, 1934, seems to have disappeared at the National Archives Ibadan, Nigeria.

⁴⁰ The cause of the war was the revolt of the Deji of Akure against Oba Osemwede of Benin. The revolt was a threat to Benin's imperial control of eastern Yorubaland, and seem to have been calculated to undermine the influence of Benin in the region. Somehow, the war also turned out to be a punitive expedition to deal with the Deji of Akure who not only revolted against the Oba, but ordered the murder of chief Osague, the fourth ranking first class chief of the Iwebo Palace Society, who was the Oba's special envoy to announce the accession of Osemwede to the throne in 1816.

⁴¹ See Biodun Adeniran, 1991. "Pleasant Imperialism: Conjectures on Benin Hegemony in Eastern Yorubaland" *African Notes*, 15 pp.83-95.

⁴² Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, pp. 44 and 45.

⁴³ See also, S. A. Akintoye, 1969. "The North-Eastern Yoruba Districts and the Benin Kingdom," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 4 No. 4.

⁴⁴ Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, the Esogban of Benin, and second in the hierarchy of *Eghaevbo n'Ore* (Town Chiefs), interviewed in Benin City on 19 June, 1993 advanced the argument that the 'strange diseases' or illness may have been the effect of powerful juju of the Yorubas. Jacob Egharevba in his *Short History of Benin* identifies smallpox as the disease that killed Ezomo but provides no information on the cause of the death of

return journey to Benin. They were considered to have died in active service. Their success in the Akure War, however, was due to the support of additional contingents of soldiers and logistics from the Ikerres in eastern Yorubaland,⁴⁵ and from Irrua - an Esan chiefdom.⁴⁶

After the reconquest of Akure, the two Front Commanders of the Benin army, Imadiyi and Oyodo, established a military base at Otun for the continuation of military campaigns in Ekiti region and other parts of eastern Yorubaland. Several towns and chiefdoms were conquered and brought under the control of Benin.⁴⁷ The Ekitis remained loyal to the Oba of Benin for a few years and revolted. This necessitated another military action under the command of Omuemu - one of the Front Commanders of the Benin army. With the success of the campaign, the Ekitis renewed their 'allegiance to the Oba of Benin and the payment of tribute was maintained until the British occupation in 1897.'⁴⁸ There is evidence that the Deji of Akure played a crucial role for the Oba of Benin, in enforcing the payment of the tribute.⁴⁹

Throughout the reigns of Oba Osemwede 1816 to 1848, and Oba Adolo 1848 to 1888, rebellions of the chiefdoms, towns and villages weakened the foundations of the Benin Empire. To deal with the revolts in Owo and Ifon in eastern Yorubaland, the Benin army under the command of the Iyase 'was despatched via Ute to subdue Owo but met with strong resistance.'⁵⁰ The Benin army retreated, 'raided Ute and took many prisoners.'⁵¹ The Binis never returned and no more tribute was sent to the Oba of Benin.⁵² After Owo established their independence, Iremokun the sixth Irado of Ifon repulsed an expedition sent against him by Benin, and finally declared the independence of Ifon, dropping the title of "Irado" for a new title of "Oloja"- meaning "the owner of the town."⁵³ J. H. Beeley, a British colonial officer in his Intelligence Report suggests two reasons for the failure of the Benin army: First, possibly, the power of Benin was waning by this time; and second, perhaps Binis were too well occupied elsewhere to bother about subduing the Ifons.⁵⁴ There is evidence, indirect but suggestive, that trade and politics in Benin shifted attention from military activities by those

Ologbosere. The colonial Intelligence Report on Irrua points out (page 5) that some members of the contingent sent by the Onojie of Irrua to assist Benin in the Akure war effort, were infected with guinea worm.

⁴⁵ NAI CSO 26, 29734. Weir, 1933. "Intelligence Report on Ado", p. 18.

⁴⁶ NAI CSO 26/3. 27987. E. G. Hawkesworth, 1932. "Intelligence Report on the Irrua Clan, Ishan Division, Benin Province", p. 5.

⁴⁷ NAI CSO 26, 29734. Weir, 1933. "Intelligence Report on Ado", pp. 17-23.

⁴⁸ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰ NAI, CSO 26/3. 29956. J. H. Beeley, 1932. "Intelligence Report on Owo and Ifon Districts, Owo Division, Ondo Province", p. 11.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

chiefs who were more interested in the expansion of external trade than suppressing revolts for the purpose of collecting tribute.

In the northern borders of Benin Empire, the Uzairue clans 'gave up paying the tribute and appointed one of themselves to be their chiefs.'⁵⁵ By the second half of the nineteenth century, they were conquered by the Nupe-Fulani jihadists, forcing them to pay regular tribute to the Emir of Bida. The revolt in Ekpoma, an Esan chiefdom, was of considerable concern to the military chiefs in Benin City. The relationship of Ekpoma with the Oba of Benin had not always been peaceful,⁵⁶ and when they revolted, Ekpoma warriors seized a large number of Benin people and stopped all services to the Oba.⁵⁷ A regiment of the Benin army under the command of the Ologbosere, and Ebohon - a Front Commander was sent to quell the revolt. Possibly after this rebellion, the Oba began the practice of sending a chief from Benin as "District Head", to ensure the enforcement of peace treaty and the payment of tribute and other services.⁵⁸ From the mid-nineteenth century, the rebellion and uprisings in most Esan chiefdoms, were attributed to the instigation of Prince Ogbewekon, who lost out to Oba Adolo in the struggle for the throne of Benin, and had to move to Igueben, from where he 'did much to disturb the Oba's peace.'⁵⁹ Dynastic crisis had been a central political issue in the power relations among the various political groups and coalitions in the kingdom of Benin from the beginning of the ruling dynasty. It had generated conflicts among the chiefs and also drifted the state to civil wars and periods of political instability. Apart from the Esan chiefdoms, some of the Benin vassal states in western Igboland (west of the Niger) were also in revolts, and military expeditions were organised to deal with such rebellions.⁶⁰

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the most disturbing outcome of the revolts in Benin Empire was the invasion and conquest of her vassal states by other emerging powers and states. The Ogedengbe of Ilesha having conquered the town of Idoani and defeated the Oras in north-west of Benin Empire, contemplated an invasion of Benin City.⁶¹ A contingent of the Benin Army under the command of Ebohon, halted the advance of Ilesha soldiers at Irhuekpen, near Ehor, the border town between Benin Kingdom and Esan

⁵⁵ NAI CSO 26. 30414. J. H. Blair, 1935, "Intelligence Report on the Uzairue Clans, Kukuruku Division, Benin Province", p. 8.

⁵⁶ Ekpoma's disgust seems to have originated from the disappearance of their messengers to Benin, suspecting that they were either detained for some other reasons or worse, sold as slaves.

⁵⁷ NAI, CSO 26. 31225. H. L. M. Butcher, 1936. "Intelligence Report on the Ekpoma Village, Ishan Division, Benin Province", p. 12.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p. 46.

⁶⁰ For details, see D. C. Ohadike, 1994. *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People*. Athens: Ohio University Press. For a recollection of the myths concerning the wars, see Isidore Okpewho, 1998. *Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and identity*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

chiefdoms in the north. During this period, the Ekiti vassal states of Benin were also beset by Fulani raiders from Ilorin and by the growing military forces of Ibadan,⁶² for which reinforcements from Benin were despatched for assistance in the wars. This was also the period when the Yoruba states were engaged in wars,⁶³ which had its consequences for the expansion of Benin in the area.

In the nineteenth century, Benin Empire was actually in decline. The ruling aristocracy and military leaders demonstrated their capability in organising the military power of the state for the protection of their larger economic priorities. But in 1888 the bloodbath in Benin City, arising from dynastic struggle, weakened the various political groups. Most of the chiefs did not see any reason to support the army. In fact, at the battle of Ewohimi, Benin soldiers were defeated.⁶⁴ Ovonramwen's reign, 1888 to 1897, witnessed several revolts and difficulty in enforcing the payment of tribute. With the emergence of Aboh as a power in the south-east, most of the vassal states of Benin transferred their allegiance to Aboh,⁶⁵ and no military action was taken by the Oba.

As the power of Benin waned, Chief Nana of Itsekiri stopped the payment of his yearly tribute to the Oba, prohibited all trade between the Itsekiri and Benin in 1892, and banned the supply of cooking salt.⁶⁶ Towards the end of 1892, the embargo was lifted, trade resumed, and Chief Nana renewed his allegiance to the Oba. But in early 1896, Oba Ovonramwen placed an embargo on trade between Benin and the Itsekiri on the grounds of increasing malpractice by Itsekiri traders and middlemen.⁶⁷ The issues were fundamentally on matters of state revenue,⁶⁸ and military supplies especially firearms from the Europeans. In any case, the Itsekiri were fishermen, whose geographical position in the delta made them middlemen in the overseas trade between the Europeans and the ethnic groups of the interior, particularly, Benin, Urhobo and western Igbo.

⁶² Bradbury, 1967. "The Kingdom", p. 7.

⁶³ See for example, J. F. Ade Ajayi and R. Smith, 1971. *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition.

⁶⁴ NAI CSO 26. 30683. H. L. M. Butcher, 1935. "Intelligence Report on Ekpon Clan, Ishan Division, Benin Province", pp. 6-7.

⁶⁵ NAI CSO 26/3. 26769. G. B. Williams, and E. A. Miller, 1930-31, "Intelligence Report on the Benin-Aboh clans of Warri Province."

⁶⁶ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p. 48.

⁶⁷ From the reports of European traders and consuls, the main problem was the frequent clashes over jurisdiction and the areas of operation. This prompted the Itsekiri traders to deliberately interrupt supplies, leading to breakdown of law and order. European traders and consuls responded to this development by persuading their home governments to embark on an active policy in Africa, to guarantee free trade, to expand the interior of Africa for trading influence and markets. This may have been responsible for "Britain's first Development Plan for Africa" in the nineteenth century.

⁶⁸ See for example, Robin Law, 1978. "Slaves, Trade, and Taxes: The Material Basis of Political Power in Precolonial West Africa", *Research in Economic Anthropology*, Vol. I, pp. 37-52.

The commercial relationship between Benin and the Itsekiri people, particularly in the nineteenth century, was one of mutual distrust and suspicion. As middlemen in the trade between Benin and the Europeans, the Itsekiri had the advantage of making profits from both the Europeans and Benin. It was this problem and the accusations of increasing malpractice that prompted Oba Ovonramwen to place an embargo on trade between Benin and the Itsekiri. However, the Itsekiri owed allegiance to the Oba of Benin, and in the closing years of the century, loyalties to the Oba of Benin had become very loose and unenforced, but resentments at traditional subordination and inferiority remained.⁶⁹ After the British conquered Ebrohimi and sent Nana on exile, Dogho, another prominent Itsekiri chief emerged on the Benin River. His influence with the British on the Benin River was unchallenged. Dogho, therefore, also began to calculate to use his influence with the British to humble the Edo people and overthrow the Oba, to enable him remove an old domination from his people and at the same time strengthen his own power.⁷⁰ In pursuit of his interests, Dogho connived with traders to undermine the authority of the Oba of Benin, consistently misreported the Edo view point to the officials at Sapele, and complained loudly whenever Oba Ovonramwen restricted trade at the waterside markets.⁷¹ Robert Home points out that “as Ovorami (Ovonramwen) said later, ‘the whole palaver came from the Jekri (Itsekiri) people’.⁷² In essence, the external pressures coming from the Itsekiri and the British on the coast, had an impact on the hegemonic control of Benin over its south-western territories. The turn of events from early 1896, and the presence of Europeans in the direction of the Benin River, probably made it difficult for Benin to deal with the situation militarily.

Beyond the limits imposed by military necessities and the political economy, the warrior chiefs of Benin believed that the state still maintained an extensive and even superior military establishment, though it was obvious that the imperial system was crumbling. They were apprehensive of the intentions of new powers in the region, and in particular, seemed to have perceived the dangers and political implications of any invasion and conquest of Benin by another African power. These considerations were the issues in the main military problem of the period that led to the evolution of a military strategy, in response to the political exigencies, and was to accompany reforms of the military organisation.

The military re-organisation during this period was not a response of adaptation to the commercial transition nor was it dependent on changes in the social structure of the Benin

⁶⁹ Robert Home, 1982. *City of Blood Revisited: A New Look at the Benin Expedition of 1897*. London: Rex Collings, p.20.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² *ibid.*

society. It may have responded first, to the adaptive challenges flowing from the political instability of the early nineteenth century and second, to the need of maintaining the frontiers of the empire which also involved the integrity of the kingdom as one of the African powers in the region. Viewed from this perspective, there were noticeable interplay of several factors that led to the reform in military organisation.

Reforms in Military Organisation

Reforms in military organisation began with the restructuring of the command units of the Benin army. Several factors were involved which were basically political, strategic and personal. In the early nineteenth century,⁷³ after the period of instability and civil war, the state council may have considered reforms in the hierarchy of the army command. In Benin tradition, when the Oba wished to propose a new law, prosecute a war, or take important administrative decisions, he was bound to seek the advice and approval of the Uzama, the Eghaevbo n'Ore and Eghaevbo n'Ogbe - the central political institutions that constituted the state council. Perhaps, the reforms were post-war initiatives to lay the groundwork for a unified military structure which seemed to have been weakened by conflict and rivalry from 1804 to 1815. From the moment the civil war ended, and Prince Erediauwa was crowned Oba in 1816, with the title of Osemwede, meaning 'my time has come' the need for reconciliation and reconstruction in turn, defined the boundaries of future policy objectives.

The reforms defined a new command structure for the army, and probably specified new strategic plans for military operations, the conditions and order in which Benin warriors should retreat from battle, logistics and reinforcement measures, recruitment and co-ordination of village regiments.⁷⁴ The reforms directly involved the question of basic military strategy, and evidently demonstrate that in the early nineteenth century, the state was confronted with a multitude of complex military problems. 'In these circumstances', argues Bradbury, 'it is indeed remarkable that Benin Kingdom suffered no serious internal collapse.'⁷⁵

In dealing with the multitude of complex problems, the state council which also constituted the war council, began with the reform of the command structure of the army.

⁷³ Events which led to the considerations for reforms in military organisation confirm that this development took place during the reign of Oba Osemwede, 1816 to 1848.

⁷⁴ Evidence of Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, the Ezomo of Benin, interviewed on 5th and 6th June, 1993 in Benin City; Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed on 7 June 1993 in Benin City, and Prince Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka, local historian and Secretary to the Benin Traditional Council, interviewed on 18 June, 1993 are in support of the reforms which they also attributed to the domestic political constraints of the period.

⁷⁵ Bradbury, 1967. "The Kingdom", p. 8.

Bradbury explains that there were two alternative commands, one led by the Ezomo (*Uzama*) assisted by the Ologbosere; the other by the Iyase with the Edogun (*IbiweN'Ekhua*) as his second-in-command.⁷⁶ This meant that the military position of the Iyase as Commander-in-Chief of the army from about 1600 to 1800 was abolished in early nineteenth century. This was probably due to the tense relations which had existed between the Oba and the Iyase. More importantly, it may have been due to the pressures from the competing groups in the society, with competing goals that sought to either control or ensure the balance of power between the rival elements within the state. The Iyase was not denied any military position in the new arrangement. Both the Iyase and the Ezomo were placed in charge of two alternative commands as chief war commanders.

The interweaving of interests serves to illustrate how crucial the reorganisation was to those chiefs who were interested in the balance of power.⁷⁷ On the one hand, the Iyase had been head of the army even before the title of the Ezomo as a warrior chief became hereditary in the family of Ehennua after the civil war in c.1713 AD, when his place began to be taken by the Ezomo.⁷⁸ Having lost out in the political struggle of the early eighteenth century, the Iyase n'Ode remained in exile, and after his death, Akenbo, a successful trader was invested with the title of the Iyase. Akenbo was not a warrior, nor did he go to war, and until his death in 1816, the position of Commander-in-Chief began to be taken over by the Ezomo.⁷⁹ On the other hand, Ohenmwun⁸⁰ who was invested with the title of the Iyase in about 1816 by Oba Osemwede had good relationship with the king, and they used to address themselves as "*Ohamwen*" meaning "my man."⁸¹ In 1818 when Iyase Ohenmwun requested to undertake the Akure campaign, the Oba objected on the grounds that in the past, those junior to the Iyase in military command were the first to go to war.⁸² The Oba was correct but on a more critical appraisal of the situation, it is probable that it was on grounds of loyalty and friendship that the Oba objected; for if Iyase Ohenmwun was 'a thorn in his flesh', the Akure campaign was an opportunity for the Oba to get rid of him.

⁷⁶ Bradbury, 1973, *Benin Studies*, pp. 70-71.

⁷⁷ The end of the era of warrior kings marked the end of active participation of the Oba as Supreme War Commander. The Iyase took over the responsibility until the early nineteenth century, although in the eighteenth century, the Ezomo as an active war commander had become unofficially recognised as the head of the army. The difficulty of deciding who among the Iyase and the Ezomo, should head the army, was due to the conflicting interests of the different political groups that constituted the state council.

⁷⁸ R. S. Smith, 1976. *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa*. London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., p.75.

⁷⁹ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932. "Intelligence Report on Benin", p. 44.

⁸⁰ Ohenmwun was the great grandfather of Jacob Egharevba, the eminent local historian of Benin.

⁸¹ J. U. Egharevba, 1946. *Concise Lives of the Famous Iyases of Benin*. Lagos: Temi-Asunwon Press, p. 31.

⁸² *ibid.*

The Iyase of Benin, 1700-1897

The Office of Iyase held by:	In the reign of:
i. Ode	Ewuakpe/ Akenzua I
ii. Akenbo	Eresoyen/ Akengbuda/ Obanosu/ Osemwede
iii. Ohenmwun	Osemwede
iv. Okunbo	Osemwede
v. Ezomo	Osemwede/ Adolo
vi. Edo	Adolo
vii. Okizi	Ovonramwen

The Hereditary Ezomo of Benin, 1713-1897

Hereditary Ezomo:	In the reign of:
i. Ehennua	Akenzua I / Eresoyen
ii. Odia	Eresoyen/ Akengbuda
iii. Ekenneza	Akengbuda
iv. Erebo	Obanosu/ Osemwede
v. Osifo	Osemwede
vi. Uzama	Adolo
vii. Osarogiabon	Adolo / Ovonramwen

Politically, the Iyase was ‘the highest title of the state,’⁸³ and had not been made hereditary in any family. He was the only chief that had the right to argue with or censure the Oba in public. In tradition, he was portrayed as the focus of opposition to the power of the Oba. The importance of his office is demonstrated by the fact that all state chiefs were inducted by the Iyase on the instructions of the Oba. The Iyase had the privilege of marrying the Oba’s eldest daughter.⁸⁴ On the other hand, the Ezomo was third in the rank of the Uzama, and only in the nineteenth century did the military position of the Ezomo began to be equated with that of the Iyase.

In restructuring the command structure of the army, several factors were involved: Personal, political, and strategic factors combined to influence the change, and possibly, avoid the concentration of military offices in one order of chiefs. The choice of the second-in - command to each of the chief war commander was also based on considerations that were either political or personal rather than strategic. The aim was to maintain a balance between competing groups and individuals. Robert Smith points out that none of the commanders - the

⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 35.

Ologbosere and the Edogun - assisting the Iyase and the Ezomo “derived their titles from their military functions.”⁸⁵ This is not true. In the previous chapters of this work, attempts have been made to explain the military origins of the titles of the Edogun and the Ologbosere. The hereditary Edogun title was created by Oba Ewuare in the mid fifteenth century as a war chief in charge of the royal troops, while the Ologbosere title was created by Akenzua I in early eighteenth century as a hereditary war chief. Both were war commanders in the top hierarchy of the Benin army.

In the reorganisation of the command structure of the army, the Edogun was placed as the second-in -command to the Iyase. He was head of *Ibiwe N’Ekhua* (Junior Town Chiefs) and military commander of Ekaiwe. The Edogun had the privilege of marrying the Oba’s second daughter.⁸⁶ As the commander of the Royal Regiment, and being a hereditary war chief, he was ranked third in the hierarchy of military positions, after the Iyase and the Ezomo but of equal military status with the Ologbosere.⁸⁷ The Edogun was responsible for briefing the Oba on the outcome of campaigns, and announcing the declaration or cessation of hostilities.⁸⁸

The interweaving of interests, already discussed in this chapter, serve to illustrate why the Ologbosere, a hereditary war chief since the eighteenth century, became the second-in-command to the Ezomo. The first Ologbosere in Benin history was Ogbonmwan, who with Ehennua (later rewarded with the title of Ezomo), were the two war commanders of the loyalist troops of Akenzua I during the civil war in early eighteenth century. After the war, Oba Akenzua I appointed Ogbonmwan as Commander-in-Chief of the army in place of the Iyase n’Ode.⁸⁹ The incumbent Iyase revolted, leading almost immediately to another war, and the Oba was forced to drop the idea.⁹⁰ Both Ogbonmwan and Ehennua had important role to play in state administration after the civil war as well as being the two top military commanders at that time. In a sense, an *esprit de corps* came into existence, which led to firm and conscious, intimate confidence between the two war commanders. This relationship blossomed in the eighteenth century. In 1818, both the Ezomo and the Ologbosere led the

⁸⁴ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932. “Intelligence Report on Benin”, p. 46.

⁸⁵ Smith, 1976. *Warfare*, p.77.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ E. B. Eweka, 1992. *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*. Benin City: Uniben Press, p. 46.

⁸⁸ J. U. Egharevba, 1969. *Descriptive Catalogue of Benin Museum*. Benin City: Eribo Printers, p. 18.

⁸⁹ For details, see chapter four of this work.

⁹⁰ On the level of power politics, political competition exacerbated conflicts among the central political institutions of the state. Akenzua I was conscious of the implications of his action in a volatile political environment, and therefore, did not desire to drift the state from political instability to another civil war, the consequences of which could not be imagined.

Benin Army in the Akure campaign; though victorious in the war, both died on different days on their return journey to Benin City.

While the interweaving of interests played a crucial role in the reform of the command structure of the army, the ruling aristocracy would appear to have also placed great emphasis upon the lessons which were drawn from the military history of Benin. The value of the Benin army depended on the value of the war commanders - senior and junior - who, under the strain of battle, extolled bravery and impressed upon the soldiers the need for discipline.⁹¹

The top four military officers in Benin Army were the Iyase, the Ezomo, the Edogun and the Ologbosere. Three were all hereditary positions except the Iyase whose role in the state was first political. This meant that apart from the Iyase, the others were not appointed by or entirely dependent on the Oba. Within their ranks, the Oba could not foster competition for his favours. Though the Oba had considerable room for manoeuvre in exercising his prerogatives for the appointment of the Iyase, the loyalty of the Iyase was not guaranteed. 'In tradition, the Iyase', argues Bradbury, 'was regularly portrayed as the focus of opposition to the Oba's power.'⁹² As a result, political factions tended to gather round the Oba and the Iyase.

All war commanders, except the Ezomo, were subordinate to the Iyase, who himself was practically independent of the Ezomo.⁹³ The Iyase was generally despatched on important campaigns. If the Iyase had to go to war, he left the walls of Benin City as the head of the military force. He could become 'possessed of full powers and could put to death any one he chose, even the Oba's personal servants.'⁹⁴ Whether successful or unsuccessful, he rarely returned to Benin, but stayed to rule the conquered territories, 'although he could be sent on further expeditions at the Oba's will.'⁹⁵ In Benin politics, the Iyase was a strong factor in deciding political coalitions, a factor which was also reflected in his military power.

The reform process of the command positions was also accompanied by efforts to unify the military structure at the level of regimental command. All the regiments of the Benin army were under the command and control of the Iyase and the Ezomo - the two chief war commanders, assisted by the Edogun and the Ologbosere. The General Headquarters of the army was in Benin City, which also constituted the metropolitan regiment. The Imaran, a non-hereditary war chief, and fifth in the military hierarchy, was placed in command of the

⁹¹ Evidence of Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 7 June, 1993.

⁹² Bradbury, 1973. *Benin Studies*, p. 69. See also, NAI Ben Dist. 6 BD 1 Vol. 1, Petition to the Acting Chief Commissioner, Western Provinces on tour of Benin City, by principal chiefs for and on behalf of members of the Benin National Council, 24 July, 1939.

⁹³ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932. "Intelligence Report on Benin", p. 47.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

metropolitan regiment. He was directly responsible to the Iyase and the Ezomo on military matters but politically, subjected to the authority of the Oba. He could also decide which of the two alternative commands to join for military campaigns if the Oba did not personally request his assistance for special military assignments.⁹⁶ During the Akure campaign of 1818, the Imaran co-ordinated the Benin forces with the Ezomo and the Ologbosere, and was the only war commander that returned to Benin City with the victorious warriors.⁹⁷

For administrative purposes, the metropolitan regiment consisted of several companies or troops, divided into three Units under the command of the Iyase, the Ezomo, and the Ologbosere respectively. The Edogun was in command of the Royal Regiment, directly responsible to the Oba. The royal regiment, in most cases, was referred to as the Fourth Unit.⁹⁸ The Queen Mother's own Regiment at Uselu was commanded by a warrior appointed directly by the Iyoba, and they joined forces in most cases, with the Edogun. This means that the Queen Mother's Regiment was part of the Fourth Unit. Robert Smith points out that though there was no standing army in Benin, "young men were expected to learn the art of warfare, and each war-chief had his own semi-professional private army of kinsmen, slaves and free-born followers."⁹⁹ He also made reference to the experienced soldiers at Ibiwe. What he identified in the course of his research were units of the metropolitan regiment of the Benin Army. In the modern world, such units are now referred to as battalions. A battalion in military usage means unit of infantry composed of several companies of soldiers. Within each Unit of the metropolitan regiment of the Benin Army, the Front Commander in battle or junior war commanders were the company or troop commanders. Robert Smith also noted in his study that "there is no information as to how they (the top war commanders) selected the subordinate officers who in war presumably bore much of the responsibility for leadership."¹⁰⁰ The military principle for such selection was based on choice of the leader of a regiment known as *Okakuo* and his second-in-command, and company commanders. The names of such subordinate officers are not easily remembered except the notable ones among them in the nineteenth century: Ebohon, Imadiyi, Oyodo, and Omuemu.

In the village regiments, battalions did not exist. Military administration was slightly different in various villages. Two Enigie: the Enogie of Ugo, and the Enogie of Ebue, were warrior positions in the two villages, and both had direct command relationship with the

⁹⁶ Evidence of Chief Stephen Igbinador Asuen, the Eson of Benin, interviewed in Benin City, on 19 June, 1993.

⁹⁷ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p. 44.

⁹⁸ Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, the Esogban of Benin and second in the hierarchy of Town Chiefs, interviewed in Benin City, on 19 June, 1993.

⁹⁹ Home, 1982. *City of*, p.68.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, 1976. *Warfare*, p.77.

military leaders in Benin City. This did not subject them to the chiefs but the Oba because of the royal connection.¹⁰¹ In some other villages, the Enigie were political heads without military responsibilities. Others such as Eholor N'Igieduma and Ogie Ehor seem to be of warrior origin.¹⁰² A common feature in all the village regiments was the military position of *Okakuo* (regimental or war commander), and his second-in-command (*azukpogieva*). An *Okakuo* was responsible for the administration and co-ordination of the regiment under him, and which was divided into companies or troops. The goal of every village regimental commander was the enhancement of the military reputation of the village. This was pursued by the training and drilling of the warriors in the strategy and tactics of warfare. Since there was little or no time for the training of the warriors when they were recruited for campaigns, and had to assemble in Benin City, it may be reasonable to suggest that village regiments also made significant contributions to warfare in the fields of strategy and tactics.

The organisation of the village in its principal aspects was the same throughout the kingdom.¹⁰³ There were, of course, local variations, but these were only in name, for the basic organisation was common to all. The military organisation of the state was all-pervading and permeated even the smallest village. Most of the large villages had settlements known as “*agor*”, away from the village proper, sometimes at a considerable distance; which was founded by people from the village, farmers looking for more fertile soil, or camps of hunters.¹⁰⁴ An “*agor*” had no political organisation of its own, and for military purposes and recruitment, it remained in close contact with its parent village. The *ighele* were the fighting force in all the villages. In all cases, the *Okao-ighele* and *Olotu* were responsible to the village council for the proper collection of the entire village tribute.

Although all villages dealt directly with the Oba, there were five cases of a strong form of political organisation, which arose out of the need for federation of the village groups. There were Isi in Oghada area; the Ugu area of Iyekorhionmwon; the Iwubu of Igbanke; the Ugbeka and Oheze of Ugboko. Of this five, only Isi had a central political union. The federation of fifteen Isi villages¹⁰⁵ was not on the basis of actual population and power of the federating units, but on a common ancestry, customs, mores and beliefs. Eguaholor being the parent group was numerically the strongest and politically the most important, and the head was Eholor N'Isi. For purpose of military service, all the Isi villages recognised the

¹⁰¹ See E. B. Eweka, 1992. *Evolution of*, p. 83.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰³ For details, see Simpson, 1936. “Intelligence Report on Benin”, pp. 12-26.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ See D. N. Oronsaye, 1995. *The History of Ancient Benin Kingdom and Empire*. Benin City: Jeromelaiho Printers, pp. 34-38.

leadership of Eguaholor. In fact, whenever general political co-operation was necessary, Eguaholor took the lead. The authority of the Ehollor N’Isi was never questioned and was freely admitted by every member of the village federation, that it was derived from the Oba, who placed Ehollor N’Isi in the position and invested him with the power of “*igban*”, the power of life and death over any member of the federation of Isi villages.¹⁰⁶ The federation of Isi villages considered itself politically one unit and was so treated by the state.¹⁰⁷ It paid tribute as one, and rendered services to the Oba as one.

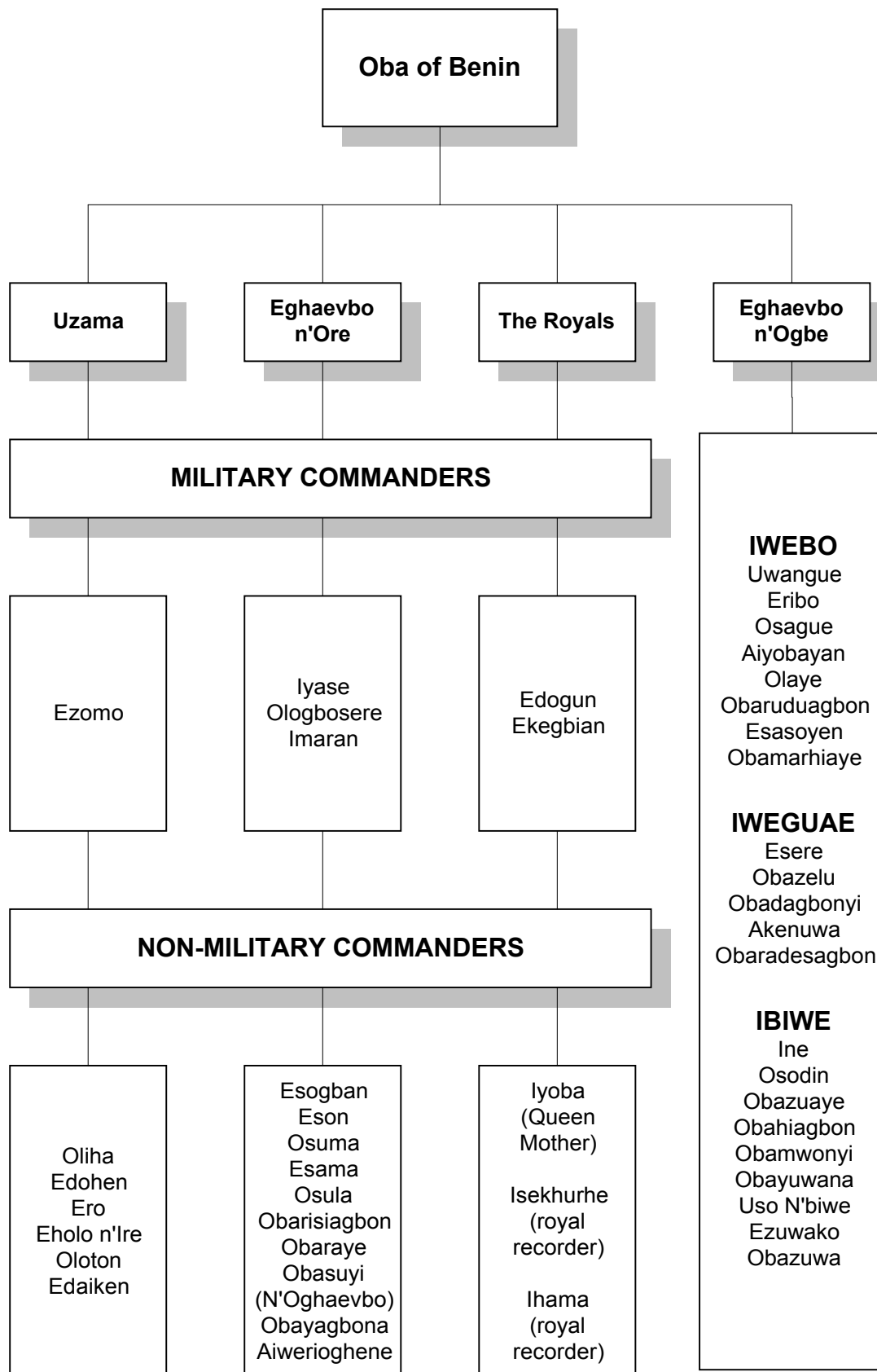
The strength of all the village regiments, nonetheless, was in its organisation and peacetime training. This was due to the fact that the methods of preparing the warriors in time of peace, and of employing them in time of war varied in the different regiments. The exceptional case of Isi federation of villages must be acknowledged, and its military organisation would appear to be a territorial battalion formation. No other village groups coalesced into a union to form territorial battalions of the Benin army. The warlike people of Iyekorhionmwon in south-east of Benin kingdom, had fundamental differences by virtue of their territorial contiguity, and could not coalesce their units into formidable battalions.

Closely related to the reforms in military organisation, were the issues of surveillance and collaboration which directly involved the question of political intelligence and basic military strategy. The driving force was the necessity of strengthening the military power of Benin, in dealing adequately with the range of problems that were expected during this period of political exigencies. The central problem for the military leaders was to work towards collaboration within the empire as the advancement of state goals could lead to critical challenges within. In this situation, the idea of surveillance and collaboration was considered to be crucial to the enhancement of the military power of Benin. Military intelligence was not new to Benin war chiefs in the nineteenth century, but the political exigencies of the period had led to developments for renewed awareness for adequate information that would ensure the success of any collaborative ventures within the empire. In the last two centuries, Benin had depended on her immediate Esan neighbours for assistance in wars of expansion or consolidating the frontiers of the empire. The exigencies of the nineteenth century, in particular, the menace of revolts, expanded the scope of the new initiative for surveillance and collaboration.

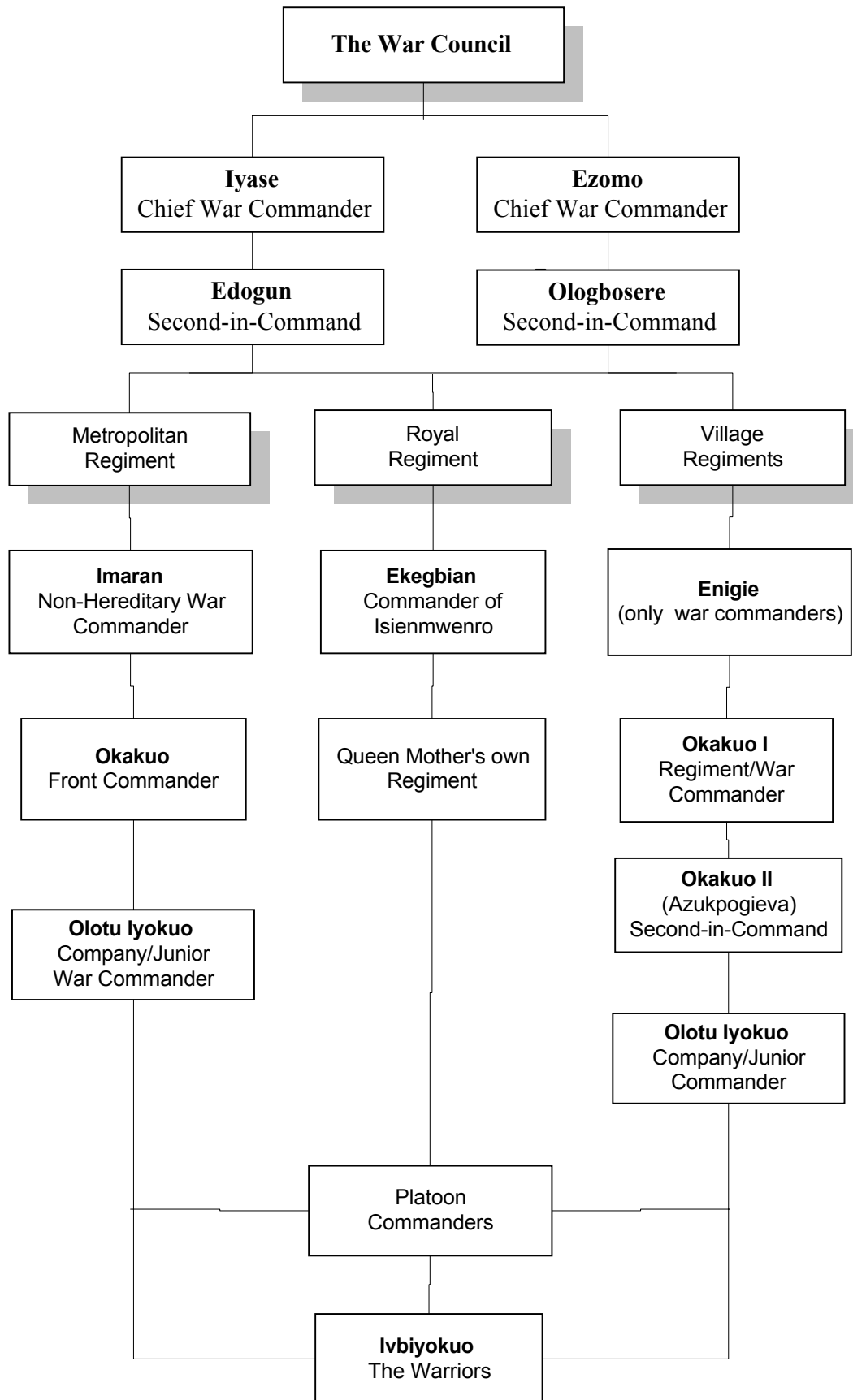
¹⁰⁶ MLG Library/BC. Simpson, 1936. “Intelligence Report on Benin”, p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

Benin War Council in the Nineteenth Century



Command Structure of Benin Army in the Nineteenth Century



Surveillance and Collaboration

The military intelligence system of Benin from the era of warrior kings up to the nineteenth century was the product of its history and development. Before 1600 AD, the warrior kings were interested in the collection and evaluation of information relevant to military decision-making. From 1600 to 1800 when domestic power politics tended to undermine the authority of the Oba of Benin, the Osuma, a member of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* order of chiefs was assigned the position of head of military intelligence, responsible for surveillance, as well as being head of Ogbe Quarter,¹⁰⁸ the south-west of Benin City where the Oba and most of his palace chiefs resided. In the nineteenth century, the need to protect the “interests” of Benin against adversary challenges led to the emergence of state-wide military intelligence network. Several groups within the various military units which came into prominence for the purpose of surveillance and other military matters were: the *Oyaighirrioba*, meaning ‘the Oba cannot be blasphemed’; the *Obo-Ironmwe*,¹⁰⁹ who were the informants, planners and strategists; the *Uzamete*, responsible for studying the strength and weaknesses of the enemy; the *Aikinnidodo* - the ‘bulldozers’; and *Aiwan-erhenkpen*, meaning ‘no one dares the leopard’s fire.’¹¹⁰

By the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century military intelligence units had emerged in virtually all the regiments of the Benin army. It is probable that the outbreak of revolts and the military urgency for their suppression, led to a unique collaboration between the metropolitan regiment and the other regiments in their surveillance methods. While revolts and loss of territory created a climate favourable for the regiments to collaborate on military intelligence, a more ideological role fell to the state. The state called on all the people of Benin to defend their fatherland and their possessions. For the warriors, the clarion call was: *Ogha re ghayon ma gha sinmwin Oto eramwen*, meaning, ‘no matter how

¹⁰⁸ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932. “Intelligence Report on Benin”, p.46.

¹⁰⁹ In some other village regiments, for example, Urhonigbe and Urhome, this group was known as *Ihonsi*.

¹¹⁰ My informants namely Pa Robert Agbontaen, Mr. Abyssina Eriemator at Udo, and Dr. Osaren S. B. Omoregie, Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, Prince Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka in Benin City, and Edede Omogboru Uwadiae (nee Igbino), Pa Sunday Ogbomo, Mr. Okunrobo Obarisiagbon at Urhonigbe agree on the names of the various military groups. But it is doubtful if they were all preoccupied with military intelligence. The evidence suggests that the names were very instructive as they describe the duties and identity of specific companies or troops in a regiment or battalion. This gives an insight into the composition of the groups for specific military tasks. At Urhonigbe, in south-east of Benin Kingdom, my informants claimed that such groups were already in existence before the nineteenth century; that the *Izeki* festival with its long initiation process gives evidence of such ‘military’ names of the different groups in which the initiates were placed in different groups. In Benin City, the annual *Isiokuo* ceremony (war festival) which also began before the nineteenth century, was the occasion for the parade of such groups who displayed their military prowess. Both Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, a Consultant Surgeon and local historian of Benin, and Dr. Osaren S. B. Omoregie, research assistant to Jacob Egharevba, educationist, and local historian of Benin agree that there were specific units for military surveillance in the nineteenth century, but the political exigencies of the period called for the involvement of all the military groups in intelligence work. In some Esan chiefdoms, such descriptions existed for various military units. See NAI, CSO 26. 31224. H. L. M. Butcher (Assistant District Officer), 1935, “Intelligence Report on the Uromi Village Group, Ishan Division, Benin Province”, p. 33.

difficult, we will defend our fatherland', which was, in fact, a popular mobilisation and war song.¹¹¹ The Oba on the other hand, called on military commanders to see the revolts as subversion and attempts in destroying the peace of the state and probably thrust it into a condition of anarchy and lawlessness. This ideological propaganda led to the promulgation of new wartime espionage and sedition laws.¹¹²

In this atmosphere, it seem reasonable to suggest that nineteenth century military intelligence was a direct response to threats to the stability and interests of the state. In effect, military groups such as *Uzamete* and *Ihonmwe* or *Ihonsi* assumed a fundamental importance in the gathering of information. The use of these specific groups of the army became a hallmark of the intelligence-gathering system during this period. Both *Uzamete* and *Ihonsi* were concerned with the gathering, analysis and evaluation of information vis-à-vis the strength and weaknesses of the enemy, but the propaganda work of instilling fear in the enemy was also the task of *Ihonsi*.¹¹³

At the stage of development of Benin polity in the nineteenth century, it is doubtful if the various intelligence units of the army were able to conduct their task in a comprehensive and effective manner even though the military chiefs believed that they maintained an extensive, and perhaps more superior intelligence network than their neighbours. Evidence from reports of European traders and consuls during the period confirm that the power of Benin was waning, and that revolts were becoming more difficult to suppress. The chain of military failures in most of the campaigns may be attributed to some other strategic miscalculations, but also reveals that the military leaders were probably not accurate or correct in assessing the efficiency of their intelligence network.

However, political surveillance activities at the level of internal security seem to have been well inspired by the state ideology which condemned subversive forces. The Oba's security council and the close relationship with the Osuma combined to generate interest and support to engage in intelligence activities for the purpose of internal security.¹¹⁴ The Osuma was a title of the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* order of chiefs, who had the responsibility among other functions, to oversee the security of Ogbe Quarter in Benin City. The title of Osuma which means *Nayasuma* (my confidant), was 'usually conferred on a friend of the Oba'¹¹⁵ and explains why the Oba entrusted him with internal security. Details of the politicisation of

¹¹¹ Evidence of Dr. Osaren S. B. Omoregie, research assistant to Jacob Egharevba, educationist, and local historian of Benin, interviewed in Benin City on 17 March, 1997.

¹¹² Evidence of Prince E. B. Eweka, local historian of Benin interviewed in Benin City on 18 June, 1993.

¹¹³ Dr. Osaren S. B. Omoregie, interviewed in Benin City on 17 March, 1997.

¹¹⁴ Prince E. B. Eweka, local historian of Benin, interviewed in Benin City on 18 June, 1993.

¹¹⁵ E. B. Eweka, 1992, *Evolution of*, p. 45.

internal security are lacking due to the paucity of evidence in palace history and Benin traditions. This lack of data notwithstanding, the historical evidence in the nineteenth century shows that the Kingdom of Benin did not suffer any serious internal collapse. At least, it was a demonstration of the operational capability of Oba's security council and his intelligence chiefs.

In the broad domain of political and economic interests, military intelligence led to the collection of data that facilitated logistics and conciliation initiatives for collaboration between Benin and some of her neighbours. The scheme for collaboration involved a kind of "protective agreements" or "peace treaties" that were indirectly suggestive of the limits of Benin's power. The relations between Benin and Esan chiefdoms in the northern borders throws more light on the collaborative scheme. Among the Esan chiefdoms, each *Onojie* (the traditional ruler) 'was lord supreme of his community, owing allegiance only to the Oba of Benin before the advent of the British.'¹¹⁶ This allegiance meant services and tribute to the Oba, who in turn had "protective agreement" and "peace treaty" with each *Onojie*. Before 1800, the Oba of Benin had regularly requested for their military services¹¹⁷ in the prosecution of wars of expansion or reconquest of rebellious states. Also, Benin traditional historical accounts and various documentary sources¹¹⁸ confirm that virtually all the Benin princes who were engaged in dynastic struggles or civil wars had to seek refuge in any of the Esan chiefdoms. Moreover, before the title of Ezomo became hereditary in early eighteenth century, most of the renowned warriors who were rewarded by the Oba of Benin with that title were of Esan origin.¹¹⁹

The military co-operation between Benin and the Esan chiefdoms continued in the nineteenth century. In the second decade of the century when civil war erupted in Benin, the eight *Onojie* of Irrua went with a contingent of Esan warriors to support the claims of Prince Erediauwa, the rightful heir to the throne, who was later crowned with the title of Osemwede.¹²⁰ During the Akure campaign of 1818, the *Onojie* of Irrua assisted the Oba with

¹¹⁶ C. G. Okojie, 1994, *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*. Benin City: Ilupeju Press Ltd., p.

¹¹⁷ The Esan people seems to have been warlike and bold, and a study of the military history of the Esan chiefdoms will reveal their military achievements and warlike past.

¹¹⁸ See for example, D. N. Oronsaye, 1995. *The History of Ancient Benin Kingdom and Empire*. Benin City: Jeromelaiho Printers; C. G. Okojie, 1994. *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*. Benin City: Ilupeju Press Ltd.; E. B. Eweka, 1992. *Evolution of Benin Chieftaincy Titles*. Benin City: Uniben Press; J. U. Egharevba, 1968. *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press (Fourth Edition); and R. E. Bradbury, 1957. *The Benin Kingdom and the Edo-speaking Peoples of South-western Nigeria*. London: International African Institute.

¹¹⁹ NAI, CSO 26/1. 31319. H. L. M. Butcher (Assistant District Officer), 1932, "Intelligence Report on the Ewohimi Clan, Ishan Division, Benin Province", p. 9-10. This has been confirmed by Dr. Christopher Okojie in his ethnographic studies of the Esan people.

¹²⁰ NAI, CSO 26/3. 27987. E. G. Hawkesworth, 1932, "Intelligence Report on Irrua", p. 6.

a military contingent, and there is evidence that Amilele, the ninth Onojie of Irrua also assisted the Oba in his Lagos expedition about the third decade of the century.¹²¹ Egharevba also explains that the Onojie of Uromi sent soldiers to help Benin in the Akure war, and as a reward, ‘the Oba granted him the special right of inheriting the property of any one in the town and district of Uromi who died childless.’¹²²

Ekpoma chiefdom, on the other hand, had military confrontation with Benin during the reign of Oba Adolo, 1848 to 1888. Benin successfully crushed the rebellion and Ekpoma had to swear the oath of peace or “peace juju.” After this rebellion, the Oba began the practice of sending a chief from Benin as “District Head” to ensure the payment of tribute and services, and the enforcement of the oath of peace. Before the British expedition of 1897, the Osuma was the envoy of the Oba in Ekpoma.

Until some of the Esan chiefdoms began to revolt against the Oba in the 1880s,¹²³ they had always maintained friendly relations with Benin. Possibly because all the rulers of the Esan communities were always sent for by the Oba of Benin and ‘made to swear eternal peace with Benin.’¹²⁴ The swearing of “peace juju” was not only with Benin. There was the oath of peace between Ora (north-west of Benin) and Ekpoma who were mutually forbidden “to see each other’s blood.”¹²⁵ The same treaty not ‘to see each other’s blood,’ was also endorsed by Ekpoma and Uromi. Among the people of Niger Delta, the Owe of Warri Province had binding oaths of peace with some of the neighbours after series of wars. The British colonial officer, E. R. Chadwick, noted in his Intelligence Report that ‘the more binding of the oaths of peace acted in the nature of alliances, otherwise no alliances were formed.’¹²⁶

In the parts of eastern Yorubaland which came under the imperial control of Benin, “protective agreements” or “oaths of peace” were endorsed, particularly among the Ekiti,¹²⁷ which facilitated military cooperation between Benin and such states. Information about the military history of the Yoruba before the nineteenth century is scanty.¹²⁸ The only Yoruba state that was a powerful rival to Benin was Oyo.¹²⁹ In fact, the general endemic warfare of

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² Egharevba, 1968, *Short History*, p.44.

¹²³ The revolts have been attributed to the dynastic crisis in Benin City. It was also a period when the power of Benin was waning.

¹²⁴ NAI CSO 26. 31224. H. L. M. Butcher, 1935. “Intelligence Report on the Uromi Village Group, Ishan Division, Benin Province”, p. 10.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 13.

¹²⁶ NAI CSO 26/3. 27989. E. R., 1931. “Intelligence Report on the Owe Clan of Warri Province”, pp. 17-19.

¹²⁷ For details, see Biodun Adediran, 1991. “Pleasant Imperialism: Conjectures on Benin Hegemony in Eastern Yorubaland.” *African Notes*, 15 pp.83-95.

¹²⁸ J. F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith, 1971. *Yoruba Warfare*, p. 10.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

the nineteenth century in Yorubaland was triggered in about 1813,¹³⁰ following the collapse and supersession of Oyo.

Five years after the outbreak of Owu war in 1813, Benin warriors were on a military campaign for the reconquest of Akure. The people of Ikerre aided Benin in the campaign on the basis of military cooperation.¹³¹ Early in the reign of Oba Osemwede, probably, in the third decade of the nineteenth century, the Ekitis renewed their allegiance and the payment of tribute to the Oba of Benin until February 1897. The collaboration between Benin and Akure after war was the appointment of the Deji of Akure by the Oba of Benin to watch over the interests of Benin in the Ekiti region.¹³² During the Ekiti wars from 1878 to 1893, which centred around a general coalition against Ibadan,¹³³ a contingent of Benin warriors joined in the Ekiti coalition. A local historian of Benin, Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien explains that what the Yoruba called the “Kiriji” war was from the sound of the firearms which Benin supplied Ekiti to assist in the war effort against Ibadan.¹³⁴ This was confirmed in a study by Jacob Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith that kiriji was ‘onomatopoeically named from the report of the muskets,’¹³⁵ that were used in the war.

The Oba of Benin acquired firearms from the Europeans with which he equipped his army and supported his allies. The efficient preparation for the many battles and campaigns of the period was not only in the composition of the army, but also in the weapons and strategic plans of operation. During this period, military victory and defeat were relative terms, as the weapons of war and strategic plans of operation seem to have had decisive effects. The acquisition of firearms and gunpowder, and of the innovations in strategic plans of military operations were calculated to improve on the military system of Benin.

Weapons Build-up and New Strategic Plans

For weapons, Benin warriors had a few breech-loading rifles, bows and arrows, but commonest were muzzle-loading smooth-bore guns (known as dane-guns, since originally

¹³⁰ The Owu war of 1813 was the first of the civil wars in Yorubaland. It was followed by the revolt at Ilorin against the Alafin by Afonja, his *Are-Ona Kakanfo*, which gave the Fulani their foothold in Yorubaland, the overthrow of Oyo by the Fulani, and then the south ward movement of the people into the forest region. For details, see R. Smith, 1969, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba*. London. See also, S. Johnson, 1937. *The History of the Yorubas from the earliest times to the beginning of the British Protectorate*. C. M. S.

¹³¹ NAI CSO 26. 29734. Weir, 1933. “Intelligence Report on Ado”, p. 18.

¹³² Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p. 45.

¹³³ Ibadan had emerged between 1837 and 1878 during the second phase of Yoruba wars, as the greatest power in Yorubaland. Ekiti formed a coalition to resist Ibadan, just as the Ekiti people never acknowledged the suzerainty of Oyo. For details, see S. A. Akintoye, 1971. *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland 1840-1893*. London: Longman Group Ltd.

¹³⁴ Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, consultant surgeon and local historian of Benin, interviewed on 20 June, 1993.

¹³⁵ J. F. Ade Ajayi and R. Smith, 1971. *Yoruba Warfare*, p. 12.

many were supposed to have been imported from Denmark), firing iron bolts or ‘pot-leg’ (broken metal) when proper bullets were not available.¹³⁶ The Benin arsenal of firearms was stocked to a limited number before 1890 when European powers banned the export of arms to West Africa. The arms were also obsolete, in comparison with the Maxims and rockets that were the latest weapons produced in Europe but were not sold to West Africans. Even before the ban on the export of firearms to West Africa, the ruling aristocracy in Benin had shown some concern on the dependence on European sources of firearms.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, Oba Akengbuda was already conscious of the implications of dependency on European sources of supply of firearms, which was the driving force that impelled him to encourage and support the local production of firearms. As the political exigencies of the period continued towards the end of the century, Oba Adolo (1848-1888) was compelled to restrict the sale and acquisition of firearms from European traders. This had two interrelated dimensions: the first was to enable the Oba acquire more firearms, and therefore build-up the arsenal in the palace; the second aspect was to limit the distribution of firearms and gunpowder as the pressures of military necessities dictated that the military effect of new weapons could decisively determine the strength of a fighting force and consequently the success or failure in campaign.

During this period of political exigencies, the nineteenth century Obas controlled the distribution of firearms and gunpowder. It is not known when the initiative was taken to produce firearms locally. The evidence of this attempt is suggestive from one of the colonial Intelligence Reports. The report states that Ekhuele village in the Esan chiefdom of Urohi was founded by Ekenuhan, one of the warriors of the Oba of Benin who ‘requested the Oba to give him a blacksmith to repair his gun and make bullets,’ and that ‘a man called Inele came who formed an Idumu...’¹³⁷ The ethnographic studies of the Esan people by Christopher Okojie supports the claim that Ekhuele was founded by some Benin warriors under the leadership of Ekenuhan.¹³⁸ He argues that ‘Urohi Village Group had no intercourse with even the nearest district of Ekpoma let alone the rest of Esan’, being a military outpost founded by Benin warriors in 1516, in the extreme western end of Esan.¹³⁹ Butcher’s report agrees with this view, and explains further how Urhohi was originally founded as a military settlement by warriors from Benin.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Home, 1982. *City of*, p.68.

¹³⁷ NAI CSO 26/3. 31228. H. L. M. Butcher, 1935. “An Intelligence Report on the Urohi Village Group of the Ishan Division, Benin Province”, pp. 7-8.

¹³⁸ C. G. Okojie, 1994, *Esan Native Laws*, p. 282.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ NAI CSO 26 31228. Butcher, 1935. “Intelligence Report on Urohi”, pp. 1-5.

The interest of the Oba in the military outpost was demonstrated by his response to the request for a blacksmith to support local initiative in the production of firearms. The Inele referred to in the Intelligence Report was probably Chief Ine (*Ine N'Igun-Eronmwon*) who was head of the guild of casters in Benin.¹⁴¹ If there was need to establish a guild of blacksmiths outside Benin City for weapons production, this can also be interpreted to mean that Benin blacksmiths were already making progress in the local production of firearms in the capital city. The raw materials they needed included iron ore, and this was available in the north of Benin Empire, as well as almost everywhere in West Africa. Philip Curtin points out that 'many European travellers described African smelting in the nineteenth century.'¹⁴² According to him, 'African iron production appears, in fact, to have held its own relatively well in the face of European competition.'¹⁴³

Like other tools, arms in Africa followed the exigencies of circumstance and environment; technological improvements, therefore, were adopted only when they demonstrated a clear advantage in utility.¹⁴⁴ Developments in iron technology made spear tips lighter and more effective, and arrowheads in iron improved the use of the weapon as a missile.

The value of the weapons depended in large part, also upon the strategic plans of military operations. The Benin Empire was in the densely forested area of West Africa, and the effective use of the weapons was a clear advantage in war. In such areas of West Africa, the foot soldier dominated, in which case, 'some form of battle order was usual, although surviving accounts differ considerably concerning the efficacy of tactics, a variation that may reflect local distinctions in military prowess.'¹⁴⁵ In the same manner, defensive positions also reflected the necessities of terrain. Forest citadels like Benin and the Yoruba towns supplemented the tangle of undergrowth with walls and earthworks, while encampment sites were chosen to take advantage of natural strong points.¹⁴⁶

However, the strategic imagination of Benin war commanders during this century of political exigencies was reflected in new strategic plans of military operations. In the last century, Benin warriors had adopted the encirclement strategy (*ifianyako*), which was improved upon during the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century, encirclement was a

¹⁴¹ Eweka, 1992. *Evolution of*, p.56.

¹⁴² Philip D. Curtin, 1975. *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, p. 209.

¹⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁴⁴ Robert W. July, 1975. *Precolonial Africa: An Economic and Social History*. New York: Charles Scribner's sons, p. 266.

¹⁴⁵ July, 1975. *Precolonial Africa*, pp.266-267.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

strategic offensive action by a contingent of the Benin army which had to split into three wings with two flanks in battle. The Akure war of 1818 was a demonstration of considerable improvement on the strategy of encirclement. Three top Benin war commanders, leading the contingents of Benin army, reinforced by contingents of warriors from other parts of the empire, were engaged in the reconquest of Akure. As Egharevba writes, the Ezomo went by way of Okearo, the Ologbosere by Okelisa and the Imaran by Isikan and Isinkin.¹⁴⁷ According to him, Akure was taken by assault. The colonial Intelligence Report on Ado also explains how Benin army advanced from the south to attack Akure, Ilawe and Igara-Odo, driving them northwards together with many of the towns of Ewi.¹⁴⁸

The success of the military operation was due, among other factors, to the strategy of encirclement; as Akure after its revolt, also consolidated plans to resist any military threat from Benin. The conduct of the campaign did not suggest crucial changes in weapons and methods of fighting. But the use of gunpowder seem to have been crucial, as Egharevba narrates how Imaran, one of the Benin war commanders escaped being killed but for the use of his pistol.¹⁴⁹ If the Akure war was a challenge to the adequacy of Benin's military system, the success of Benin army and their commanders was also due to their ability to maximise the chances for superiority at the decisive point on the battlefield.

The improvement on the strategy of encirclement was apparently due to what may be described as institutional contribution of the Benin war council. The council discussed all proposals relating to war, the preparations for any war, and how it should be waged.¹⁵⁰ This means that members of the war council was not devoid of strategic imagination. Its membership included the Oba, all the war chiefs, the Uzama, the *Eghaevbo n'Ore* and *Eghaevbo n'Ogbe*. Due to paucity of evidence, the nature of strategic analysis of any military operation by the council is not well known. Suffice it to say that the political exigencies of the period influenced critical appraisals of strategy and tactics, as logistics and reinforcements from Benin City and other parts of the empire, were of primary interests to the council.

The war strategy of siege, which was to besiege and sack enemy towns, and the engagement in prolonged wars of attrition,¹⁵¹ were no longer relevant in the nineteenth century Benin strategic thought on warfare. In the past centuries when enemy territories were besieged or the soldiers were engaged in war of attrition, the purpose was to enslave rather than kill. The political exigencies of the nineteenth century demanded immediate and decisive

¹⁴⁷ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p. 44.

¹⁴⁸ NAI CSO 26 29734. Weir, 1933. "Intelligence Report on Ado", p. 17.

¹⁴⁹ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p. 44.

¹⁵⁰ Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 7 June, 1993.

¹⁵¹ Home, 1982. *City of*, p.68.

victory. This can be interpreted to mean that military strategy had evolved in response to prevailing conditions of each period. One aspect of preparations for war which did not seem to have changed was the use of traditional medicine for protection.

The use of magical protection, albeit pre-scientific in Benin world view, was considered part of the preparations for war. Its psychological potency for the warriors explains why they had to seek the services of 'traditional doctors' before any campaign. The priest of Okhuahie was responsible for the state army. The *Ewaise*, a guild of 'traditional doctors' who controlled the shrine of *Osun-okuo* (war medicine) also played a prominent role. 'Medicines' for war were prepared in *egba* (armlet) or in *ukokogho* (small calabashes) for individual warriors by different traditional doctors, and the presence of each warrior was required in the preparation process to ensure its effectiveness.¹⁵² The armlets for instance, had the potency of diverting weapons and protecting the warrior from premature death in war. The top commanders in Benin City had personal traditional doctors but usually had consultations with the *Ewaise* or any other traditional doctor who was well known in any part of the empire.

Bradbury's interpretation of the Ezomo's *Ikegobo*, which is a historical war document from eighteenth century Benin, explains the significance and value of magical protection.¹⁵³ In the *Ikegobo*, for instance, a symbol on the front of Ehennua's cap is *onwe vb'uki*, 'the sun and the moon.' It was a protective charm for the Ezomo. The explanation for it is that just as the sun and the moon always reach their destinations in the evening and return the next day, so will the warrior return safely from his campaign. The warriors believed in such magical protection and would not go to war without it.

Nevertheless, throughout the course of the nineteenth century, many ideas became recognised for improving the military system of Benin. There were reforms in the command structure of the army, and the perspective on war also began to change. The assessment of the enemy's combat capabilities, existing and potential, influenced the need for military intelligence and collaboration. Weapons were being accumulated and new strategic plans of military operations were given systematic trials. Towards the end of the last decade of the century, it became imperative for Benin to establish a standing army.

The Idea of A Standing Army

The last decade of the nineteenth century was critical in the history of Benin. External pressures from the European and Itsekiri traders threatened to undermine the south-west

¹⁵² Evidence of Pa Omoruyi Azehi, a first class Benin traditional medicine practitioner, interviewed in Benin City on 9 June, 1993.

¹⁵³ Bradbury, 1973. *Benin Studies*, pp.255-261.

territorial boundaries of the empire. Domestic political crisis led to the assassination of the Uwangue (Egiebo), the Chief Adviser to Oba Ovonramwen, which in turn triggered off a bloodbath by the middle of the decade. The empire was on the verge of collapse due to unending revolts and insurrection. The British were becoming impatient with the attitude of the Oba towards trade in the region and began to contemplate a new strategy for the colonisation of the territory. On 26 March, 1892 the British signed a treaty with Oba Ovonramwen,¹⁵⁴ which in fact, marked the beginning of British attempt to undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Benin. In 1895, the ruling aristocracy probably reassessed the waning military power of the state, and considered new plans to deal with the situation.

Hence, in 1896, Oba Ovonramwen built a war camp at Obadan, a Benin village, ‘and ordered every town and village in his domain to send him to send him soldiers.’¹⁵⁵ Jacob Egharevba suggests that about ten thousand men were recruited and stationed at Obadan to be trained, so that they might be used in Agbor and other campaigns which he proposed to undertake.¹⁵⁶ Ten thousand was probably the estimated number of soldiers to be recruited and trained at Obadan. It is possible that the first group of warriors were about one thousand considering the necessities of food, water and physical structures for accommodation in the camps. In any case, it was a significant development in the military history of Benin. For the first time, a military policy evolved which provided for both a standing army and training school. Until 1896, there was no standing army in Benin. In most pre-colonial African states and societies, there was no standing army; men were recruited from their peacetime occupations on the proclamation of war.

The emergence of a standing army with a training programme in 1896, marked a transformation process of the Benin army. Though it evolved as a state policy in manpower development of the army, it was influenced by the pressures of military necessity when Benin was in the last stages of decline. Details are not known of how the standing army was financed. The warriors were usually not paid by the state; for military service was a matter of honour, status and patriotism for the soldier.¹⁵⁷ The organisational policy of the military school, and the programme of training were at infancy when in February 1897, Benin fell to the British. In terms of its purpose, the scope of the military policy can only be explained within the limits of war plans which were dictated by the political exigencies of the time. The background to the fall of Benin can be explained from the chain of events in the last quarter of

¹⁵⁴ For details of the treaty, see Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, pp. 86-88.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.* p. 46.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*

the nineteenth century, which finally resulted in the Anglo-Benin military confrontation. Before the military encounter, Benin military system was already enveloped in a web of innovation, but by the end of 1896, the leadership of the army would appear got somehow, out of control due to internal political distress. The sequence of events towards the end of 1896 and the disagreement between the Oba and his chiefs on how they should respond to the perceived threat of the British complicated the crisis.

The next chapter examines critically, the main developments which led to the British invasion of Benin in February 1897. The invasion was an opportunity for the Benin army to demonstrate, at least, the superior military strength it enjoyed in the forest region, in the past four centuries though with some limitations. The question that should be posed immediately is: Why were many of the war chiefs weakened in morale and enthusiasm? Or did they consider it a justifiable invasion? What were the issues that led to the conflict? The next chapter presents a new perspective of the conflict between Benin and the British, and the extent to which differences among the various political groups weakened the Benin war effort. Perhaps, it was power play, expressed in conflict of objectives among the chiefs vis-à-vis the goals of the state. The chapter points out that the conquest of Benin by the British imperialists was part of the manoeuvres to expand their sphere of influence and economic role in Africa in the age of new imperialism. What seemed to have been crucial for Benin was probably the expectations of the dawn of a new era after the British conquest.

¹⁵⁷ Home, 1982. *City of*, p.68.

CHAPTER SIX

THE RESPONSE OF BENIN MILITARY SYSTEM TO BRITISH INVASION IN 1897

Introduction

The Anglo-Benin military confrontation of February 1897 was one of the dramatic series of events in nineteenth century Benin. The military confrontation was a Great War between Benin -an African power, and Britain -one of the greatest powers of Europe. The war was a drama without parallel in the annals of the military history of Benin. The event occurred during the period of European territorial expansion and international partition of Africa from 1870 to 1914. The Benin way in warfare, strategic thought and practice met its first and greatest test as the war challenged the adequacy of its military system. This chapter examines critically, the remote and immediate causes of the war, the resistance to British aggression, theatres of the war, and a comparative analysis of Benin and British ways in the war. It also examines the guerrilla warfare which continued after the fall of Benin in February 1897.

The aim of this chapter is not to rewrite the history of the expansion of British influence in the Benin Empire nor is it an assessment of the fall of Benin. While the various illogicalities of the Eurocentric history of the event had necessitated and will continue to necessitate the rethinking of historical attitude to Africa in general, the many points of reaction in African historiography are also quite understandable. As Michael Crowder points out, “the history of the scramble for Africa has largely been written with reference to its implications for European history.”¹ For the majority of the European historians of the quarter-century of African history from 1880 to 1905, during which the European conquest was largely completed, the most important events have been European ones.² Therefore, the history of the major lines of interpretation of the Benin resistance to British aggression in the last quarter of the nineteenth century provide a basis for a reconsideration of the subject. While the issues involved have led to the presentation of conflicting views among writers, it is necessary to understand the evidence and their arguments. The purpose is to have another look at the British invasion of Benin in February 1897.

¹ Michael Crowder (ed.), 1971. *West African Resistance: The Military Response to Colonial Occupation*. London: Hutchinson and Co. (Publishers) Ltd., p.1.

² *ibid.*

In doing this, this chapter also discusses the response of Benin military system to the British invasion. It is the military aspect of Benin resistance to British imperialism. The military system of the Kingdom of Benin up to the time of confrontation with Britain had provided a basis for pride in past achievements in state-formation and empire-building capacity through expansion in the forest region of West Africa for over five hundred years. In February, 1897 the system attempted to stop the British from achieving their war aims based on the strength of its calculated resistance but failed to stop the British. It is useful, therefore, to consider the following questions: First, was the defeat of Benin due to miscalculation largely from erroneous appraisal of British strategic operations?; second, or was it the advantage of British superior military technology?; and third, did the problem of internal political distress in Benin City affect their threat perception of the British? In considering these questions, it is important to note that the military system of Benin and doctrine of warfare had been weakened by the chain of revolts in Benin Empire in the nineteenth century that the threat posed by the presence of the British was considered manageable and transient. In this regard, two questions should be posed immediately: first, why did the war with Britain occur at all? Second, why did it happen at the time it did? In order to answer these questions, it will be useful to examine critically the remote and immediate causes of the war.

The Anglo-Benin War of 1897

The events which culminated in the Anglo-Benin war of 1897 began with the evolution of British West African policy in 1875, the year which marked the beginning of their need for territorial expansion and even regarded as a late development in British imperial policy.³ The argument advanced by the British for territorial expansion in Africa was that primarily, the establishment of interior protectorates was a reaction to French and German expansion, plus a traditional interest in preserving and pre-empting existing and potential markets.⁴ “The timing of advances and the compromises reached in European diplomatic negotiations,” argues Newbury, “derived from complex local factors in Africa and international considerations beyond Africa.”⁵ The British explanation of their imperial policy and the issue of European imperialism in Africa in general, has generated a lot of arguments and conflicting interpretations among scholars, such that the basis of European colonisation of Africa has

³ For details, see C. W. Newbury, 1971, *British Policy Towards West Africa: Select Documents 1875-1914*. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.157.

⁵ *ibid.*

become one of the most controversial and emotive issues of our time.⁶ In spite of the conflicting interpretations, the basis of European colonisation of Africa was basically economic. This is evident also from a study of British interest in Benin. From a study of British policy, it would appear that they were more interested in access to Benin territories than in control. There were probably conditions on which force might be applied, and in the last years of the nineteenth century, there were considerations on the use of that force. It seemed that the scramble for “effective occupation” of territories which led to inter-European rivalry changed the British attitude towards Benin in the last decade of the nineteenth century.

British interest in Benin started with the official visit of Sir Richard Burton in 1862, who at that time was British consul at Fernando Po.⁷ After this visit, unsuccessful attempts were made by different consuls to reach Benin until Captain H. L. Gallwey succeeded in 1892.⁸ Meanwhile, in 1885, following the European Conference in Berlin on the partition of Africa, the coastline of Benin was placed under British protection, and steps were being taken to establish contacts with the Oba; but when consul G. F. N. B. Annesley saw the king in 1890, he did not succeed in signing a treaty.⁹ The motivation of the British for the action of 1885 was a fear that French protectionist policies might be applied in vast areas of the West African interior in the 1880s. Both the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office remained anxious about French activities in Southern Dahomey and on the Lower Niger. The anxiety was due partly to the unratified Anglo-French Convention of 1882 which left open many questions about Sierra Leone and Guinea boundaries.

In fact, the 1880s was the decade that marked the effective European scramble for territorial acquisitions in West Africa. It was the need to check European rivalries that led to excessive reliance on paper treaties among colonial administrations.¹⁰ During this decade, the British did not succeed in signing any treaty with the Oba of Benin. In 1891, the British appointed Captain H. L. Gallwey as the first permanent vice-consul to the Benin River district. On 26 March 1892, Captain Gallwey succeeded in concluding a treaty with Oba

⁶ See G. N. Uzoigwe, 1985, “European Partition and Conquest of Africa: An Overview” In: A. Adu Boahen (ed.) *UNESCO General History of Africa Vol. VII, Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935*. Heinemann, California and UNESCO, pp.19-44.

⁷ National Archives Ibadan (hereinafter referred to as NAI), Ben Prof. 4/3/4. H. N. Nevins and H. G. Aveling, 1932, “Intelligence Report on the Benin Division of the Benin Province”, p.13. For detailed report of the visit, see Richard Burton, 1863, *My Wanderings in West Africa*, part II, ‘The Renowned City of Benin’.

⁸ NAI, Ben Prof. 7/6, I. Moor to Foreign Office, 12 September 1895.

⁹ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932. “Intelligence Report”, pp.13-14.

¹⁰ Newbury, 1971, *British Policy...Select Documents*, p.157.

Ovonramwen.¹¹ For the purpose of this study, it will be necessary to reproduce here the contents of the treaty:

**TREATY WITH THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT
26 MARCH 1892¹²**

ARTICLE I

Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland, Empress of India, in compliance with the request of the king of Benin, hereby undertakes to extend to him, and to the territory under his authority and jurisdiction, her gracious favour and protection.

ARTICLE II

The king of Benin agrees and promises to refrain from entering into any correspondence, Agreement, or Treaty with any foreign nation or Power, except with the knowledge and sanction of Her Britannic Majesty's Government.

ARTICLE III

It is agreed that full and exclusive jurisdiction, civil and criminal, over British subjects and their property in the territory of Benin, is reserved to Her Britannic Majesty, to be exercised by such consular or other officers as Her Majesty shall appoint for that purpose.

The same jurisdiction is likewise reserved to Her Majesty in the said territory of Benin over foreign subjects enjoying British protection, who shall be deemed to be included in the expression 'British subject' throughout this Treaty.

ARTICLE IV

All disputes between the king of Benin and other kings and chiefs or between him and British or foreign traders, or between the aforesaid king and neighbouring tribes, which cannot be settled amicably between the two parties, shall be submitted to the British consular or other officers appointed by Her Britannic Majesty to exercise jurisdiction in the Benin territories for arbitration and decision, or for arrangement.

ARTICLE V

The king of Benin hereby engages to assist the British consular or other officers in the execution of such duties as may be assigned to them; and, further, to act upon their advice in matters relating to the administration of justice, the development of the resources of the country, the interest of commerce, or in any other matter in relation to peace, order, and good government, and the general progress of civilization.

¹¹ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932, "Intelligence Report", p.14. For details of the treaty, see J. U. Egharevba, 1968, *A Short History of Benin*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, pp.86-88.

¹² Reproduced from Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, pp.86-88. The author acknowledges that the contents of the treaty were first published by Ling Roth, 1903, *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors*. Halifax: F. King and Son. Reissued by Routledge and Paul Kegan Ltd., London, 1968.

ARTICLE VI

The subjects and citizens of all countries may freely carry on trade in every part of the territories of the king, party hereto, and may have houses and factories therein.

ARTICLE VII

All ministers of the Christian religion shall be permitted to reside and exercise their calling within the territories of the aforesaid king, who hereby guarantees to them full protection.

All forms of religious worship and religious ordinances may be exercised within the territories of the aforesaid king, and no hindrance shall be offered thereto.

ARTICLE VIII

If any vessels should be wrecked within the Benin territories, the king will give them all the assistance in his power, will secure them from plunder, and also recover and deliver to the owners or agents all the property which can be saved.

If there are no such owners or agents on the spot, then the said property shall be delivered to the British consular or other officer.

The king further engages to further engages to do all in his power to protect the persons and property of the officers, crew, and others on board such wrecked vessel.

All claims for salvage dues in such cases shall, if disputed, be referred to the British consular or other officer for arbitration and decision.

ARTICLE IX

This Treaty shall come into operation, so far as may be applicable, from the date of its signature.

Done in triplicate at Benin City, this 26th day of March, 1892.

his
(Signed) OVURAMI, X King
mark

H. L. GALLWEY, Deputy Commissioner and Vice-
Consul, Benin District, Oil Rivers Protectorate.

Witnesses: H. HALY HUTTON
(Signed) ALLAN H. HANLY
JOHN H. SWAINSON

I hereby certify that I have interpreted the full purport of this Treaty to the king, and that he clearly understands the nature of the contents and the meaning thereof.

(Signed) AJAE, his
X INTERPRETER,
mark

The contents of this treaty suggests the degree of British interests on the Benin territory, and which the Oba of Benin was forced to recognise. The opening of free trade to the Europeans and the protection of all those involved in the trade was one of those interests. It is doubtful if the contents were properly interpreted to the Oba nor did he request for such a treaty. There were similar treaties with African rulers of the period, which were used by the European powers in Africa as evidence of their spheres of influence. Such treaties were legally acceptable in European diplomatic negotiations.

In the case of Benin, the British themselves admitted that the “treaty, however, proved of no avail and the king kept aloof from any outside interference.”¹³ This means that the Oba of Benin did not accord any recognition to the treaty. In fact, there is evidence that the Oba and his chiefs did not sign the treaty but had ‘X’ marks in place of their signatures. That Gallwey himself explains that Oba Ovonramwen refused to touch the pen,¹⁴ means that the said treaty of 26 March, 1892 with the British Government was fraudulent, at least, from the African perspective. The idea of treaty presupposes an agreement formally concluded and ratified between states. Such an agreement had to be negotiated. In the case of Benin, the treaty was not negotiated but seems to have been imposed, hence the Oba of Benin refused to touch the pen.

The use of ‘fraudulent treaties of protection’ was British strategy to outwit two main rivals - the French and the Germans - in the scramble for and partition of Africa. As Newbury, a British writer, explains, “the entry of Germany into West African partition added a new and unexpected dimension to international agreements about boundaries and spheres of influence, 1870-90.”¹⁵ Such fraudulent treaties were used to extend British jurisdiction, often in advance of administrative occupation. Newbury argues that “the French challenge led Chamberlain to authorize the use of force in September 1897 in the manoeuvres for posts in the Nigerian and Gold Coast interiors.”¹⁶ Before this directive of Chamberlain, the British had expressed interest in Benin and its interior. It should also be pointed out that the other European powers also used treaties with African rulers as the basis of their claims to the territories in different parts of Africa.

In 1892, Commissioner Claude Macdonald in a memorandum to the Foreign Office explained the interest this way: ‘There is no doubt that the Benin Territory is a very rich and

¹³ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932. “Intelligence Report,” p.14.

¹⁴ F. O. 84/2194, Gallwey’s Report on visit to Ubini (Benin City), the capital of Benin Country, 30 March 1892. Cited in: Philip A. Igbafe, 1970. “The Fall of Benin: A Reassessment”, *Journal of African History*. Vol. XI, no. 3, p.387.

¹⁵ Newbury, 1971. *British Policy...Select Documents*, p.157.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.158.

most important one' but that 'trade, commerce and civilisation however were paralysed.'¹⁷ This statement was made after the so-called treaty has been made with the Oba of Benin. The emphasis on the fact that trade, commerce and civilisation were paralysed were pretensions for the use of military action in the occupation of Benin. This is because the report recommended 'probable use of force' as a last extremity. In 1895, the Acting Consul, General Ralph Moor recommended that 'at the first opportunity steps should be taken for opening up the country if necessary by force.'¹⁸ The coming of James R. Phillips as Deputy Commissioner and Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, who took over duties from Captain Gallwey on 15 October 1896 raised the hopes of the representatives of the principal trading firms who have been pressurising and imploring the vice-consul since April 1896, to take firm action against Oba Ovonramwen whose policy was seen as disruptive of trade and exploitation of the interior. On 16 November 1896, that is one month after he resumed duty, Consul Phillips declared war against the Oba of Benin, which is evident from his dispatch to the Marquis of Salisbury:

"To sum up, the situation is this:- the king of Benin whose country is within a British Protectorate and whose City lies within fifty miles of a Protectorate Customs Station and who has signed a treaty with Her Majesty's representative, has deliberately stopped all trade and effectually blocked the way to all progress in that part of the Protectorate. The Jakri (Itsekiri) traders, a most important and most loyal tribe whose prosperity depends to a very great extent upon the produce they can get from the Benin Country, have appealed to this Government to give them such assistance as will enable them to pursue their lawful trade. The whole of the English merchants represented on the River have petitioned the Government for aid to enable them to keep their factories open, and last but not perhaps least the Revenues of this protectorate are suffering."

"I am certain that there is only one remedy, that is to depose the king of Benin from his stool. I am convinced from information, which leaves no room for doubt, as well as from experience of native character, that pacific measures are now quite useless, and that the time has now come to remove the obstruction."

"I therefore ask his Lordship's permission to visit Benin City in February next, to depose and remove the king of Benin, and to establish a Native Council in his place and to take such further steps for the opening up of the Country as the occasion may require."¹⁹

The Foreign Office agreed to the recommendation of Consul Phillips and arranged the expedition with the War Office.²⁰ The memorandum of 24 December, 1896 from the War Office, asserted strongly the declaration of war against the Oba of Benin, which was planned for February 1897.

¹⁷ F. O. 84/2194. Encl. Treaty of Protection, 26 March 1892; and report by vice-consul Major H. L. Gallwey, 30 March 1892. In: Newbury, 1971, *British Policy...Select Documents*, p.129.

¹⁸ F. O. 2/85, Moor to Foreign Office no 39 of 12 September 1895.

¹⁹ In: Newbury, 1971. *British Policy...Select Documents*, pp.147-148.

²⁰ *Passim*. W. O. to C. O., 24 December 1896.

From the foregoing, Phillip's dispatch partly explains the reason why the Anglo-Benin War occurred at all, and probably why it happened at the time it did. Igbafe's study shows that the military confrontation was prompted by economic rather than humanitarian considerations.²¹ According to him, Captain Gallwey needed to impress on the Oba of Benin the need to recognise British interests on the Benin River, and his official visit in March 1892 was 'the real harbinger of the events which finally brought Oba Ovonramwen of Benin to his downfall.'²² Gallwey's visit to Benin was for commercial and partly political reasons, and his fraudulent treaty 'did not mention, at least specifically, anything about human sacrifices, bloody customs or the slave trade.'²³ Alan Ryder further explains: As it happened it was not the question of human sacrifice that immediately engaged official attention on Benin, but the charge that Oba Ovonramwen was failing to observe his obligations under article VI.²⁴ That article of the treaty states that "the subjects and citizens of all countries may freely carry on trade in every part of the territories of the king, party hereto, and may have houses and factories therein."²⁵ 'Pressure from commercial interests' argues Ryder, 'played some part in forcing that problem upon the vice-consul's attention, but probably more important was Treasury insistence that the consular establishment in the protectorate must recoup its expenses from the import duties introduced in 1891.'²⁶

The economic dimension of European imperialism in Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was the remote cause of Anglo-Benin War of 1897. It was not just the conflict of British commercial interests with the interests of the Oba of Benin. It was the era of European aggressive imperialism in Africa and of African resistance to the bloody, murderous affair. During this age of new imperialism, Britain was determined to effectively occupy Benin Territory between 1892 and 1897, to use it in the bargain for negotiations for a demarcation of spheres of influence with France and Germany. The decade of the 1890s was the second phase of West African partition in which attempts were made to settle the details of the Anglo-French Declaration of 1890 and the provisions of the Anglo-German Heligoland Agreement, which threw into relief the weakness of reliance on treaties to counter French or German advances. It was this development which motivated the British conquest of what is present-day Nigeria.²⁷

²¹ Philip A. Igbafe, 1970, "The Fall of Benin", pp.385-400.

²² *ibid.*, p.386.

²³ *ibid.*, p.387.

²⁴ Alan Ryder, 1969, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd., p.272.

²⁵ Egharevba, 1968. *Short History*, p.87.

²⁶ Ryder, 1969, *Benin and*, pp.272-3.

²⁷ See Obaro Ikime, 1977. *The Fall of Nigeria: The British Conquest*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.

The Benin Empire, from reports of consuls and traders, was more important to the British than other neighbouring states. However, a clash between two neighbours of Benin - the Urhobo traders and Itsekiri middlemen - provided Ralph Moor the opportunity of British aggression against Nana, which ended with the capture of Ebrohimi by an imposing naval force on 25 September 1894. The fall of Nana and his exile, led to British occupation of the Itsekiri kingdom. Claude Macdonald in his despatch to Foreign Office explained why he passed a sentence of deportation for life on Nana in accordance with Section 5 Paragraph 102 of the 'African Order in Council 1893.'²⁸ Until the fall of Nana, strong though he was, always paid the king of Benin a yearly tribute. Captain Alan Boisragon, commandant of the Niger Coast Protectorate Force noted that 'neither he nor his Jakris (Itsekiris) would have dared to attack the king of Benin, for whom, and for whose men, the Jakris, like the Ejaws (Ijaws), and other trading tribes in that part of the world, have always had a most wholesome dread.'²⁹

The conquest and occupation of Ebrohimi was calculated by the British to gain a strategic position because of its navigable waterways, in the event of any planned military attack on Benin. The Ughoton route was considered important but not strategic for a decisive military victory. When this "hidden agenda" was not made known to the Foreign Office in London, they raised points of disagreement over the humiliation of Chief Nana of Ebrohimi.³⁰ The main interest of the British was Benin, and the reason was basically for economic exploitation - the control of the important sources of raw materials, and the search for markets for manufactured products. As John Hargreaves explains, "to the early sources of palm oil the 1840s had added a going trade in groundnuts; palm kernels were in increasing demand from the 1870s, and that decade saw the first interest in Africa resources of wild rubber."³¹ The oil palm was also of considerable importance to the Africans: Its leaf-ribs were used in building, the leaves in thatching, the fibre in rope making, palm-wine obtained by tapping, and the palm-oil was a valuable source of vitamins in the indigenous diets.³² In Britain and some other European countries, palm-oil was needed for industrial use. Oil palm and the main bulk

²⁸ F. O. 2/64. Minutes in the Foreign Office raised points of disagreement with this interpretation of the Order of 1893, but agreed 'to let things slide and to take no official notice of the despatch': Minutes 18 and 19 June by Kimberley. In: Newbury, 1971, *British Policy...Select Documents*, p.141. For the background to Nana's deportation, see J. C. Anene, 1968, *Southern Nigeria in Transition 1885-1906*. Cambridge, pp.160-161.

²⁹ A. Boisragon, 1897. *The Benin Massacre*. London, p.55.

³⁰ See footnote 25 of this chapter.

³¹ John D. Hargreaves, 1974. *West Africa Partitioned* Volume I. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., pp.1-2.

³² Besides, the palm tree was important to the Africa for its local uses. First, the palm-wine for social gatherings; second, the palm-oil for food; third, the dead palm used as pillars and beams, and local fuel for cooking. For details, see E. J. Usoro, 1974. *The Nigerian Oil Palm Industry*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

of kernels which were in demand in Europe, was found throughout Benin, and the wild rubber “were classed as first class trees,” so were the various species of timber.³³

The British had no intention of investment because after February 1897, the people of Benin were under the burden of forced taxation to support colonial administration. It is necessary to lay strong emphasis on the fact British interest in Benin was not for any investment but the control of sources of raw materials and new markets. This was the outcome of the dynamics and crisis of industrial revolution in nineteenth century Europe. The failure to reform the economies of the industrialised countries of Europe, rather than the problems encountered in the transition from slave trade to ‘legitimate’ commerce in nineteenth century Africa was the root cause of the scramble, and the partition was meant to establish spheres of formal political influence by rival European powers especially France, Britain and Germany. The intensity of the rivalry degenerated the partition to a bloody and murderous affair - cruel and degrading - in the history of humanity.

The official position of Britain on European rivalry in the Lower Niger throws more light on the economic argument. T. V. Lister, in a despatch on 22 May 1883 to Sir Robert Herbert on the subject of France and the Lower Niger, raised a number of issues. According to him,

“The question then arises whether effective steps could be taken, without annexation, to keep other nations from interfering with this territory, and it is clear that, if any such steps are practicable, they should be taken at once; for if the chiefs, or any of them, should be induced to place themselves under the Protectorate of any Power, whatever that Power might be, any other Power would be debarred from dealing with them. Should the French, for instance, induce Native Chiefs to accept Treaties of the character of that recently concluded with the king of Loango, they would become virtually masters of their territories...”³⁴

Lord Granville agreed that French occupation of the Oil Rivers would damage British West African commerce, and that negotiations for a demarcation of spheres of interest will probably fail.³⁵

The details of military campaigns which accompanied British expansion demonstrate that the remote cause of the Anglo-Benin War of February 1897 was essentially economic in its basic impetus. After the fall of Benin, Lord Chamberlain in apparent response to the French challenge, authorised in September 1897, the use of force in the manoeuvres for posts in the Nigerian and Gold Coast interiors. It was not until June 1898 that the West African difficulties with France were smoothed out in an extensive agreement which offered access to

³³ NAI Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932. “Intelligence Report,” pp.121-122.

³⁴ C. O. 879/20, 265. In: Newbury, 1971. *British Policy...Select Documents*, pp.177-178.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p.177.

the navigable Niger, in return for a conventional tariff zone from Ivory Coast to Lake Chad.³⁶ The following year the principles governing the partition of the neutral zone were laid down by agreement with Germany, and the rest was left to boundary commissions on the ground.³⁷

On the one hand, while economic reasons motivated British encroachment on Benin, the *casus belli* for the war of February 1897 was the attack by Benin warriors on a British ‘espionage team’ of Acting Consul-General Phillips, which comprised nine other Europeans, and 280 carriers, most of whom were of the Niger Coast Protectorate Force.³⁸ The mission was a disaster for the British team. With the exception of Captain Alan Boisragon and Mr. Locke, all the members of the party fell before the fusillade of the Benin soldiers.³⁹ The event was not ‘Benin Massacre’ as British writers have been referring to it, but appropriately the Disaster at Ugbine. It was a disaster for the British in so many ways. In November 1896, Consul Phillips had advocated the use of force to depose Oba Ovonramwen, which was a deliberately calculated action to undermine the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Benin. He got the approval of the Foreign Office, and by 24 December 1896, the War Office in London had given its support for the military operation which was fixed for February 1897. Consul Phillips, having convinced himself of the need to collect and evaluate information relevant to the proposed war against Benin, set out on what may be described as an espionage mission for the purpose of military intelligence. Espionage actually means the practice of spying or using spies, especially to obtain secret information. As noted above, Phillips had planned his military action against Benin and the deposition of Oba Ovonramwen for February, 1897. The Foreign Office and the War Office approved his plan. In January, he needed the collection and evaluation of basic information relevant to his operation in February. Otherwise, why did he ignore the advice and request of the Benin chiefs that his visit be postponed for two or three months before the Oba could see him? Did his stubbornness show any sign of a friendly visit? But British war propaganda claimed that ‘Acting-Consul Phillips set out for Benin on a peaceful unarmed mission.’⁴⁰ After a more critical analysis of the events, Philip Igbafe came to the conclusion that ‘a logical explanation

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.158.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ The first published account of the event was by Captain Alan Boisragon, entitled *The Benin Massacre*, London, 1897. Boisragon was the Commandant of the Niger Coast Protectorate Force, and one of the two European survivors. The other account was by R. H. S. Bacon, entitled *Benin: The City of Blood*, London, 1897. For a more detailed and critical analysis of the episode, see Philip A. Igbafe, 1970. “The fall of Benin: a reassessment”, *Journal of African History*, XI, 3, pp.385-400; Alan Ryder, 1969. *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd., pp.283-294.

³⁹ Igbafe, 1970. “The fall of Benin”, p.396.

⁴⁰ Ministry of Local Government and Chieftaincy Affairs, Benin City (hereinafter referred to as MLG/BC), J. Macrae Simpson, 1936. “A Political Intelligence Report on the Benin Division of the Benin Province”, 26 April, p.8.

seems to be that Phillips was going on a reconnaissance survey.⁴¹ Reconnaissance means preliminary survey, and when applied in military terms, it implies military examination of a region by detachment to locate enemy or ascertain strategic features. In the view of Alan Ryder, a British historian, 'Acting Consul-General Phillips was 'a young man of limited experience.'⁴²

Also, Henry Gallwey who completed the 1892 treaty with Oba Ovonramwen seemed to have disapproved of the motives behind Phillips' expedition. When writing in an article fifty years later, he expressed his feelings: "I have never ceased to regret, from that day to this, that I should have been called away on another errand at the very moment I should otherwise have been with the gallant Phillips. I feel sure that had I been with my friend he would have postponed his visit to the City."⁴³ Though an officer in the British armed forces, Phillips, who was serving the imperial interests of his country in West Africa, was not well informed of the military strength and potential of Benin. He seemed to have underrated the Benin army. In his letter of 16 November 1896 to the Foreign Office, he wrote:

There is nothing in the shape of a standing army...and the inhabitants appear to be if not a peace loving at any rate a most unwarlike people whose only exploits during many generations had been an occasional quarrel with their neighbours about trade or slave raiding and it appears at least improbable that they have any arms to speak of except the usual number of trade guns...When Captain Gallwey visited the City the only canon he saw were half a dozen old Portuguese guns. They were lying on the grass unmounted.⁴⁴

Phillips' naive belief was proved wrong in his espionage mission. He did not survive the disaster at Ugbine to tell the story. Boisragon, one of the survivors, recalls one of the incidents this way: 'we must have walked past nearly a mile of Benin City warriors in ambush. A very well-arranged ambush, from their point of view, it must have been too, for, though they were scarcely twenty yards from the road on our right-hand side as we advanced behind a bank, we never saw or suspected anything of their presence.'⁴⁵ This was a demonstration of one of the aspects of Benin strategic imagination in warfare - that is, the doctrine of the strategic primacy of ambush. It was guided by the strategic conception of surprise attack on the enemy.

The disaster at Ugbine was apparently due to the haste with which Phillips thought he could respond to the economic and political difficulties in the closing years of the nineteenth century. The increasing number of European firms in the coastal region had led to increased

⁴¹ Igbafe, 1970. "The Fall of Benin", p.396.

⁴² Ryder, 1969. *Benin and*, p.283.

⁴³ Cited in Robert Home, 1982. *City of Blood Revisited: A New Look at the Benin Expedition of 1897*. London: Rex Collings, p.40.

⁴⁴ F. O. 2/102, Phillips to F. O. no. 105 of 16 November 1896. Cited in: Igbafe, 1970, "The fall of Benin", pp.396-7.

⁴⁵ Boisragon, 1897. *Benin Massacre*, p.98.

competition between European traders on the one hand, and between European firms and African middlemen on the other hand. The policy of the Oba of Benin had made it difficult for the British to penetrate into the interior. Considering the fact that European and African traders were manoeuvring for commercial advantage, and the relations between the Itsekiri and Benin had degenerated to rivalry, Phillips convinced himself of the need for direct occupation of Benin, which the European traders had been advocating in the interest of their commerce.

The question of why Phillips reconnaissance team met with disaster at Ugbine is closely related to the issue of crisis and conflict in Benin politics of the nineteenth century. Political intrigues in Benin significantly affected the turn of events. It is possible that among the Benin chiefs, there were those interested in the expansion of commerce to enhance their wealth, power and influence in the society. These group of chiefs may have disapproved of the Oba's economic policy. The argument that the Ologbosere disobeyed the orders of Oba Ovonramwen merely reveal differences between the military leaders, the Oba and his chiefs.⁴⁶ In wartime, such differences were not uncommon, neither has Benin's history been entirely free of civil-military conflict. In January 1897, the disagreement in the state council was due to the difficulty in explaining the motive of Captain Phillips' visit.⁴⁷ The state council which comprised the members of the central political institutions of the state, would have experienced such a difficulty considering the interweaving of interests among the chiefs which merely serves to illustrate that vital interests - economic, political and social - were tied up. The Oba and some of his chiefs knew that the British meant no good as dispute over trade in the past had soured the relationship with European traders who had been pressurising the Benin monarch to permit free trade. The reported large number of Phillips' team also frightened the Benin leaders, and the military chiefs led by the Ologbosere did not see any reason why they should take chances with Phillips and his party.

On the other hand, the ill-fated expedition of Phillips was at the time of *Ague* festival in Benin kingdom. The Oba therefore, requested that the visit be delayed for two months because of the sanctity of the *Ague* festival, which was performed annually for the well-being of the Oba, his entire subjects and the land. Phillips replied that he was in a hurry and could

⁴⁶ This disagreement was made public during the proceedings of the trials of Oba Ovonramwen and his chiefs after the fall of Benin. See Public Records Office, F. O. 2/123, Moor to Foreign Office, 18 October 1897.

⁴⁷ Evidence of Chief Otasowie Oliha, leader of the *Uzama n'Ihinron*, interviewed in Benin City on 7 June, 1993. The views of Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, a consultant surgeon and local historian of Benin; Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, the Ezomo of Benin, and Prince Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka, Secretary to the Benin Traditional Council and local historian, all of whom were interviewed in Benin City in the summer of 1993, corroborate the evidence.

not wait because he had so much work to do elsewhere in the Protectorate.⁴⁸ Richard Gott explains that the Oba treated what seemed like an imminent British invasion as a national emergency.⁴⁹ As noted by Robert Home, “the expedition was given ample warning of the dangers ahead.”⁵⁰ Chief Dogho, when he head of the expedition, hurriedly left his town of Batere, conferred with Phillips and advised bluntly: ‘It will be death to go on.’⁵¹ Phillips ignored the advice and pushed ahead, and his last letter, written to Captain Child of the *Ivy*, reveals his optimism:

As things are turning out I think we shall be back within the fortnight from the start. We have been threatened and solemnly warned at every at every step that the soldiers of the king of Benin are waiting to fire upon us if we dare to land at Gwato. So much so that in a moment of panic I sent back the Band for which I am sorry now. However, here we are. We have had a palaver with the representatives of the Benin standing army which ended in great hilarity and general good will and they propose to accompany us at daybreak to the City of Benin. Chief Dore did his level best to frighten us out of going and all the interpreters etc. are in league together to keep us back but so far we have had no opposition but we talk and I don’t think we shall have any at all.⁵²

Robert Home points out that ‘representatives of the Benin standing army’ which Phillips mentioned were three chiefs who traditionally received foreign visitors at Gwato,⁵³ but Boisragon described them with contempt: ‘though very like monkeys in personal appearance, they looked quite a superior class of animal to the Gwato people. They were all three rather elderly, grave and most respectable-looking men.’⁵⁴ This was the kind of international blackmail and propaganda in British press, with screaming headlines, against the people of Benin whom they were anxious to colonise. Hence the first two books published in London about the events were entitled: *The Benin Massacre*, and *Benin: The City of Blood*. In both books, attempts were made to justify British colonisation because the capital of Benin had become to them, “the city of death.”⁵⁵ Home who had lived in Benin City admits that “the Edo had a respect for accurate reporting, and they contradict Boisragon’s account in several important respects.”⁵⁶ Boisragon’s book and colonial historiography in general, will always continue to necessitate the rethinking of historical attitude to Africa.

⁴⁸ Ekpo Eyo, “Benin: The sack that was”, On the Website: <http://www.dawodu.net/eyo.htm> (last updated on 03/07/2000), p.4.

⁴⁹ Richard Gott, “The Looting of Benin”, *The Independent* (UK), Saturday February 22, 1997. On the Website: <http://www.arm.arc.co.uk/> p.2. Last visited on September 30, 2000.

⁵⁰ Home, 1982. *City of*, p.41.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² Quoted in Home 1982, *loc. cit.*

⁵³ Home, 1982, *City of*, p.42.

⁵⁴ Cited in Home 1982, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, Preface, p.ix.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.46.

In London, Ralph Moor⁵⁷ incited feelings against the Oba of Benin. He was able to get a few replacements for his colonial officials who died during the disaster at Ugbine. ‘The general sentiment among them, however, was that they would like to engage in active warfare.’⁵⁸ The disapproval of Moor’s belligerent policies by the Colonial Office was such that the command of the expeditionary force against Benin was commanded by Rear-Admiral Harry Rawson. The British were determined not to experience another disaster, and therefore, began strategic plans for the expedition against Benin. The British war plan raises some doubts as to whether considerations were already on the way for such an operation since 1896 or whether it was just a matter of five weeks for the preparations.

Benin Strategic Thought and Plan of Operations in Response to the British War Plan

The disaster at Ugbine which the British experienced in early January 1897, perhaps, provided the War Office in London the opportunity for an approximation of the military strength of Benin which they were going to contend with in the punitive expedition planned for February 1897. After what seemed like a critical strategic consideration of the means at the Protectorate for the invasion of Benin, the British finally decided to increase their military resources so as to obtain a preponderance. It is possible that the British were also aware that Benin was going to do the same.⁵⁹

British invasion of Benin Empire was organised under the command of Admiral Sir Harry Rawson, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Naval Squadron at Cape Town. The invading army was made up of an elite force of 1,200 British soldiers brought to the Benin River from 4,000 miles away from London, Cape Town and Malta, and teamed up with several hundred African troops, locally recruited.⁶⁰ There is evidence that the elite force was some 1,500 soldiers, which also included the Mediterranean Squadron and the support of a detachment of the West Indian Regiment.⁶¹ The African troops recruited were from the Niger Coast Protectorate Force. In addition, thousands of African porters were brought from the British military base in Sierra Leone.⁶²

⁵⁷ Sir Ralph Moor who was the Commander of the Niger Coast Protectorate Force, later became the British High Commissioner for Southern Nigeria. He committed suicide at the age of forty-nine, at his London home during the night of 13-14 September 1909. On his bedside table was an empty glass containing dregs of potassium cyanide.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p.52.

⁵⁹ The proper assessment or approximation of the military strength and potential of Benin was the basis of what Richard Gott refers to as ‘a brutal British response..’, *passim*.

⁶⁰ Gott, 1977. “The Looting”, p.3.

⁶¹ Ryder, 1969. *Benin and*, p.290.

⁶² Gott, 1997, “The Looting”, p.3.

The nature and character of the British multi-national force used for the invasion of Benin meant that the war was a special business as it involved conflicts of interests. After the disaster at Ugbine in early January 1897, no military task was of greater importance to the British than the development of strategic plans for the punitive expedition against Benin in February 1897. The necessity of the multi-national force was considered as the most important means of avoiding a second disaster in Benin as military failure might lead to international humiliation of the British. In fact, the war aim of Britain was the exercise of force for the attainment of political objectives in the age of new imperialism.

In December 1896, Ralph Moor confirmed in his despatch to the Foreign Office that an Intelligence Officer had been employed for eighteenth months 'preparing all necessary information for the carrying out of offensive operations, and the approaches to Benin City and the country around are now fairly well known, and also the opposition likely to be encountered.'⁶³ The British war preparations were all aimed toward the defeat of Benin. When Ralph Moor arrived at Warigi, the base of operations on 9 February 1897, there was no doubt as to the effectiveness of the British military plan. Nine ships of Her Majesty's naval squadron, namely H. M. S. *St. George*, *Theseus*, *Phoebe*, *Forte*, *Philomel*, *Barossa*, *Widgeon*, *Magpie* and *Alecto*, were used for the attack on Benin. The attack was a three - point invasion through the Ologbo creek, the Jamieson River line to Sakponba, and through the Gwatto (Ughoton) creek. The invasion began on 10 February 1897.

The strategic thought and plan of operations of Benin, in defence of the empire against British invasion was not as elaborate as that of the British. This was due to several factors. First, Benin military leaders had to contend with differences among members of the state council. The action of the Ologbosere, a war commander and second -in-command to the Ezomo, which led to the disaster at Ugbine created misunderstandings and quarrels among the chiefs.⁶⁴ For many of the chiefs, there was lack of enthusiasm in military build-up of the army as the instrument of war in the Benin resistance. Those chiefs who supported the attack on Consul Phillips and his party at Ugbine accepted the task of proper preparation for the military operation. The Ezomo, a chief war commander, who supported Ovonramwen's point

⁶³ Moor to Under-Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 26 December 1896. Cited in Ryder, 1969, *Benin and*, p.284.

⁶⁴ The dimension of the misunderstandings was given in evidence during the proceedings of the trials of Oba Ovonramwen and the chiefs suspected to have been responsible for the disaster at Ugbine. For excerpts of the trials, see Ryder, 1969. *Benin and*, pp.283-294. My informants in Benin City, namely Prince Enawekponmwen Basimi Eweka, Chief Otasowie Oliha, Chief Robert Ize-Iyamu, Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien, Dr. Osaren Omoregie and Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo all agree that the misunderstandings caused by the intrigues in Benin politics, was a strong factor in disagreeing on the next line of action after the disaster at Ugbine.

of view not to attack the Phillips' party,⁶⁵ did not seem to have made any contribution in terms of strategy and tactics, nor the logistics for the war. In fact, among the chiefs, opinions were divided on what should be done.⁶⁶ The strongest advocate of war was the Iyase, the chief war commander of the Benin army, who did not make meaningful contribution to the Benin war effort. Perhaps, he "hoped to see the power of the Oba and his court curbed by a confrontation with the British."⁶⁷ On the other hand, the Ezomo, another chief war commander of the Benin army, 'decided that the war would be a bad one and withdrew to his compound for the duration.'⁶⁸ A similar problem erupted in assessing the motives of Phillips' visit, 'with the war faction dominant and the Oba politically too weak to stop it, the council of chiefs decided to attack Phillips's party.'⁶⁹ The same disagreement continued to weaken the military effort of Benin's resistance to British attack.

Second, in terms of the military strength and potential of Benin, her power was waning during this period. As noted in the last chapter, the nineteenth century was a period of political exigencies in Benin Empire. Many of the vassal states had revolted and gained their independence. In some other cases, in the northern frontiers of the empire where the Fulani jihadists were gaining a foothold, revolts were becoming difficult to suppress. It was not a situation of fluctuations in the military power of Benin, domestic political crisis was weakening the state. This posed a difficulty of the proper assessment of its military resources that were mobilised for the war. Third, between the short period of the disaster at Ugbine and the commencement of British invasion on 10 February, the problem of Front Command assumed a complexity to the extent that a non-war commander in the Benin army volunteered to lead the resistance troops at Ughoton. Although, Benin war leaders expected the main attack to come from the Ughoton route,⁷⁰ none of the war chiefs took charge as Front Commander. Ebeikhinmwin, a Benin warrior of 'gigantic strength' who had no command position in the army, posted himself and his troops at Ughoton to check the British assault.⁷¹ The Ologbosere, with a command position in the army, took charge of the defence of Benin City. Jacob Egharevba remarked that 'if there had been about seven generals like Ologbosere and Ebeikhinmwin during the punitive expedition the British would have been kept at bay for a few months before entering the City.'⁷² This can be interpreted to mean that the complexity

⁶⁵ See Ryder, 1969, *Benin and*, p.288.

⁶⁶ See Home 1982, *City of*, pp.35-37

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p.36.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p.69.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ See Ikime1977. *The Fall of Nigeria*, p.158.

⁷¹ J. U. Egharevba, 1969. *Some Prominent Bini People*. Benin City: Ribway Printers, pp.31-32.

⁷² *ibid.*, p.32.

of the command problem was such that the Iyase and the Ezomo, the two Chief War Commanders may not have played any crucial role in the conduct of operations for the resistance against British invasion.

Fourth, Benin military leaders did not seem to have embarked on a systematic and extensive gathering of information to counter British attack. This created difficulty of choosing the correct line of operations. The main routes to Benin City from the Atlantic coast were Ologbo and Ughoton creeks. The Benin war plan did not take into consideration other decisive points in the expected theatre of war. This was probably due to erroneous appraisal of the British strategic war plan.

Alternatively, developments during this period shows that with the Anglo-Benin War of 1897, came new pulls and pressures on the military system of Benin. This was due to the fact that the military system had been adapted to the African local conditions. In over four hundred years of relationship with different European powers, Benin did not encounter difficulties that would have necessitated military action. Hence, for the warriors who were defending Benin City, it is difficult to ascertain if the military chiefs gave appropriate information and advice to the commanding officers. As Boisragon noted, Benin warriors 'took every advantage of their cover from the bush, and some of them actually climbed trees to enable them to get a better chance of firing at the column.'⁷³ This put Benin warriors in a defensive action, making it difficult to co-ordinate their war methods by which certain results would have been obtained.

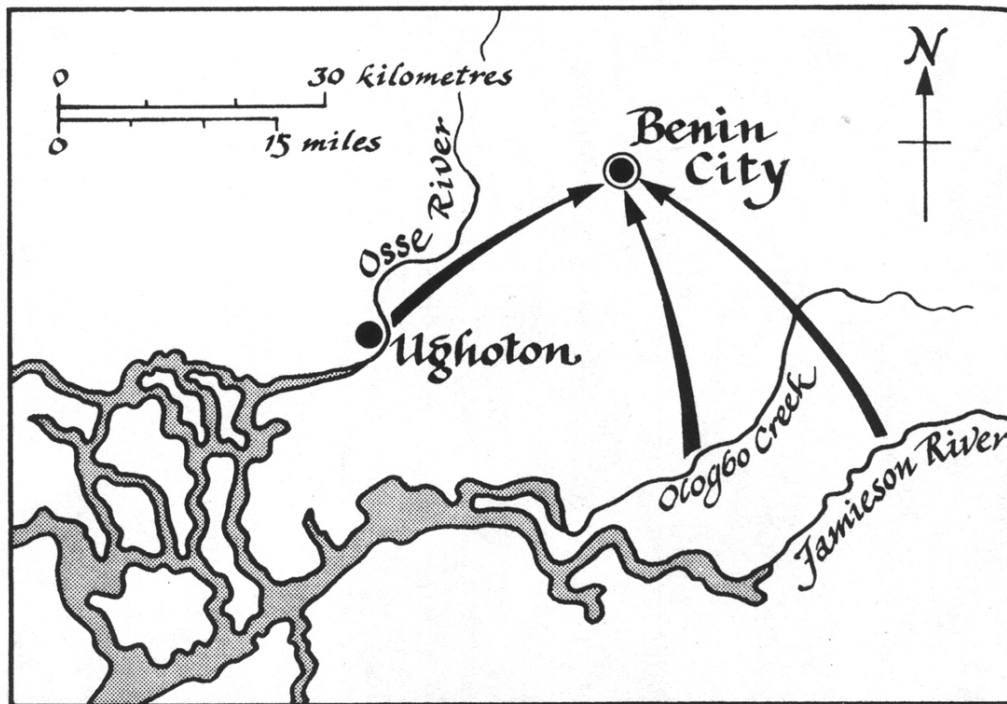
However, organisation of the resistance involved soldiers and their local commanders recruited from all the regiments of the Benin army for the heroic defence against British imperialism. The exact number of Benin soldiers involved in the war of resistance is not well known, but the men who were recruited by Oba Ovonramwen in 1896 for his standing army project, may have been mobilised for the war. It is important to point out that neither numbers nor weapons influenced the determination of Benin warriors. It was their bold offensive spirit, and the courage to fight the invading British army that sustained the resistance.

The British Invasion and Benin Resistance

The British invasion began on 10 February 1897 in a three pronged attack on Benin City, from Ughoton, Ologbo and Sakponba. The main column under Colonel Hamilton was stationed at Ologbo while the other two were supporting columns. Each of the advancing

⁷³ Boisragon, 1897. *The Benin*, pp.181-2.

columns met ‘a determined resistance all the way.’⁷⁴ The battle of Ughoton was a fierce military confrontation, in which many of the British were killed.⁷⁵



Map 3: British invasion of Benin in February 1897, showing the three pronged attack on Benin City from Ughoton, Ologbo and Sakponba. Source: Obaro Ikime, 1977. *The Fall of Nigeria: The British Conquest*. London, Nairobi and Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books Limited, p.146.

The column was also attacked at its base and the commanding officer was killed.⁷⁶ The defeated British army at Ughoton retreated because Ebeikhinmwini who was the Front Commander of Benin warriors at Ughoton put a heroic defence. ‘In fact so successful the Bini resistance on this route,’ argues Obaro Ikime, ‘that the British force was unable to contribute anything much to the fall of Benin City.’⁷⁷ Alan Ryder’s view also supports Ikime’s argument. According to him, ‘a diversionary attack against Ughoton met with still fiercer opposition - possibly because the Benin military leaders had anticipated that the British attack would come from that direction - and no headway was made there.’⁷⁸

⁷⁴ MLG/BC, Simpson, 1936. “Intelligence Report”, p.8.

⁷⁵ Egharevba, 1969. *Some Prominent*, p.32.

⁷⁶ Gott, 1997. “The Looting”, p.3.

⁷⁷ Ikime, 1977. *The Fall of Nigeria*, p.158.

⁷⁸ Ryder, 1969. *Benin and*, p.290.

The main column of the British force under Colonel Hamilton struck from the region of Sapele and ‘met spirited resistance the whole way.’⁷⁹ The invading army succeeded in capturing Ologbo on 12 February, from where they advanced on 14 February. As the tide of battle turned against the Benin warriors at Ologbo, the Front Commanders adopted new ideas of co-ordinating another offensive-defensive action along a new strategic plan. While some Benin warriors invaded the British base at Ologbo, others retreated to a few kilometres to check possible advance from other directions. The Benin attack was reported by Felix Roth, a British naval surgeon, who claimed that “as the launch and surf-boats grounded, we jumped into the water...at once placed our Maxims and guns in positions, firing so as to clear the bush where the natives might be hiding.”⁸⁰ The Benin attack on the British base was so devastating that the British force had to search the bush with volleys and some rounds from quick-firing guns, and reinforcement came with Captain O’ Callaghan, who landed with a force of about eighty men.⁸¹ While the British soldiers were engaged in burning the town (Ologbo) they were attacked by a force of Benin warriors, ‘who fought most pluckily from the bush.’⁸²

On 18 February 1897, the British troops entered Benin City through the Ologbo and Sakponba routes. Benin warriors made a determined stand.⁸³ Alan Boisragon explains that ‘as the square advanced, it was met with a tremendously hot fire from both side’, and it was during this time that Captain Byrne was hit badly, and died later of his wounds; Dr. R. N. Fyfe was killed, and ‘also several marines.’⁸⁴ The invading British force continued their advance and at this time, Asoro, an courageous Benin warrior, was killed. After a chance bullet landed in the palace, Oba Ovonramwen was persuaded to leave the City until the cessation of hostilities. Fighting continued and Benin City was finally captured on the same day after a stiff resistance.

The outcome of the war was dependent upon the Maxim guns and new weapons acquired by the British rather than the fighting spirit of their soldiers. The devastating effects of the Maxim guns destroyed the defensive lines of Benin warriors who were defending the City under the command of Ologbosere. That Benin fell on the same day of British advance, was due mainly to their miscalculation of British strategic operations.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Boisragon, 1897. *The Benin*, p.173.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*, p.181.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

The fall of Benin was used as an opportunity by the invading army to pillage and loot.⁸⁵ Robert Home explains it this way: “the naval expedition which captured and destroyed Benin City brought back as booty several thousand art objects and antiquities, which comprised the main cultural achievement of the Edo people.”⁸⁶ By virtue of the application of principles of war in western Europe, booty was no longer an aspect of European warfare. The booty from Benin was a violation of those principles by the British. The booty were sold by the British, and even in June 1980, twenty-four objects realised over 800,000 British pounds, the highest price paid being 200,000 British pounds for an early bronze head.⁸⁷ If the British violated the European principles of war, it will be legally binding on them to pay reparations for the loot.

British marines set the palace and several houses ablaze after looting the treasures. Commander R. H. Bacon described the heartlessness with which they burned the City. According to him, on 20 February, “in the afternoon a strong party accompanied by the Admiral, went to burn Ojomo’s (Ezomo’s) compound”⁸⁸; and “early next morning I was sent with a strong party...to burn Ochudi’s (Osodin’s) compound the village belonging to the General, who guarded the Ologbo and Sakponba...This compound consisted of about a Hundred houses, whose roofs made a good blaze.”⁸⁹ “The same afternoon”, writes Bacon, “a large party under captain Campbell proceeded to the Iye Oba’s (Queen Mother) House and destroyed it, so burning one more of the head centers of vice in the City.”⁹⁰ On Sunday 21 February, the British marines finally set the palace on fire at 4.00 p.m. which also destroyed a large part of the City. It was the last day of the marines in Benin, and the burning was calculated as the last psychological war against the Binis. The effect was such that for some time, the people of Benin were reluctant to return to the devastated capital.

The officers and soldiers of the British elite force survived the war due to ‘providential protection’⁹¹ rather than the war being a test of their military skills upon the field of battle. As Felix Roth explains, ‘our black troops, with the scouts in front and a few Maxims’ did all the fighting.’⁹² This evidence of Roth can be interpreted to mean that after all, the British elite

⁸⁵ The atrocities have been documented in: R. H. Bacon, 1897, *Benin the City of Blood*. London; H. Read and O. M. Dalton, 1899, *Antiquities from the City of Benin and from other parts of West Africa*. London; and G. Rawson, 1914, *Life of Admiral Sir Harry Rawson*. London.

⁸⁶ Home 1982. *City of*, preface, p.ix.

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Bacon, 1897. *Benin: The City*, p.102.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, pp.103-4.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p.105.

⁹¹ Providential protection in this context means having the foresight, and timely care, of avoiding direct contact with Benin warriors on the battlefield, and their own evidence suggests their shrinking from direct attack.

⁹² Cited in Gott, 1997, “The Looting”, p.3.

force that invaded Benin was not a highly drilled machine,⁹³ neither did they extolled bravery in their method of warfare. They had only one advantage - the latest models in weapons system. The major problem for all African armies was the difficulty of obtaining supplies of European arms. Before 1890, when the European powers formally forbade the export of arms to West Africa, obsolete European arms had been a staple of the export-import trade.⁹⁴

Benin warriors had known and utilised firearms from the sixteenth century as a result of the contacts with Europeans, beginning with the Portuguese. In the nineteenth century, Benin technology was limited to the imitation and attempts to reproduce early European guns and ammunition. During this period, attempts were also made by the kings of to acquire more firearms from European traders. "Against European forces, firearms were not likely to be effective," argues Robert July, "for the invaders were normally equipped with the latest models - rapid-fire, breach-loading rifles, for example, combined with rockets or powerful cannon."⁹⁵ Against these arms, smooth-bore, muzzle-loaded flintlocks made but an indifferent showing.⁹⁶ This means that the British weapons were more effective than the weapons used by Benin warriors. As a matter of fact, Benin military effort directed against the columns invading from Ologbo and Sakponba, were dictated by the advanced military technology of the British.

The devastating effect of the Maxims and rockets was the destruction of the defence plans of Benin. Consequent upon this, was the loss of strategic positions in the war effort which further militated against steps necessary for reinforcement and direct confrontation. The manner in which Benin approached the conflict was such that the Binis entered the war poorly prepared and equipped, perhaps, with primitive logistics, and failure to critically assess the British war plans. The implication of this was defeat. Therefore, the outcome of the war became dependent from the very beginning on the miscalculation by Benin,⁹⁷ which was largely derived from their erroneous appraisal of British strategic operations.

The Anglo-Benin War, afterall, was a matter of combat and battle - simply a demonstration of the art and science of war between an African kingdom, waning in power in the nineteenth century, and a European power, consolidating on the gains of the Industrial

⁹³ The column at Ughoton was defeated by Benin warriors, the commanding officer was killed and the marines had to retreat.

⁹⁴ Crowder, 1971. *West African*, p.11.

⁹⁵ Robert W. July, 1975. *Precolonial Africa: An Economic and Social History*. New York: Charles Scribner's sons, p.270.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ Preparation for the war was hastily based on the traditional methods of military organisation and the question of leadership and of the Front Commanders also became a central problem. The result was an ill-prepared operation that may not have been in accordance with their military needs nor did it also attempt to assess the operational plans of the invading army.

Revolution in the nineteenth century. The methods which the British used in organising the war,⁹⁸ namely, surprise, mobility, offensive action, co-operation and the economy of force, enabled them to attain the desired results. The invasion of Benin was also calculated on the military principle of concentration as reflected in the multi-national character of the British force. The war aim of the invaders was obtained by the defeat of Benin army, and “the concentration of superior strength, physical and moral, upon the field of battle,”⁹⁹ was one of the ways to bring about that overthrow. The methods and principles used by the British in the war were applied both by means of strategy, usually defined as the leading of the troops up to the time of contact with the enemy, and by means of tactics, which are the methods of employing troops in contact with the enemy.¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, the war plan of Benin in its military resistance effort, did not seem to have been based on a well considered security of the state, nor were all possible eventualities carefully weighed. Benin was, of course, a non-literate and pre-industrial society in which the science of war was yet to be fully developed. This factor influenced to a greater or lesser degree the collapse of resistance on the same day that the invaders took Benin by assault. In other words, the power of resistance, in terms of the strength and potential of Benin, was not proportionate to the power to be contended with. Perhaps, lack of information on the part of Benin concerning the invading enemy, was also a factor which led to failure in ideas and actions.

Generally, the organisation, tactics and equipment of the Benin army, probably the same with other with other African armies that resisted European invasion, had evolved to deal with local military situations. Hence Michael Crowder argues that “to deal with the European invading forces would have necessitated a complete reorganisation of the army in terms of strategy and equipment.”¹⁰¹ However, the fall of Benin did not bring about an immediate end to the resistance. Those who continued with the resistance resorted to insurgent warfare, not necessarily because of the pursuit of state power, but for the social disruption which accompanied the fall of Benin. It was in this circumstances that a guerrilla movement emerged.

⁹⁸ For details of British approach to war, see F. Maurice (Major General and Professor of Military Studies in the University of London), 1939, *British Strategy: A study of the Application of the Principles of War* (with an introduction by Sir G. Milne, G. C. B., Chief of the Imperial General Staff). London: Constable and Co. Ltd.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p.39.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p.51.

¹⁰¹ Crowder, 1971. *West African*, p.10.

Guerrilla Warfare after the Fall of Benin

With the capture of Benin City on 18 February 1897, the two prominent Front Commanders of the Benin army, namely the Ologbosere who took charge of the defence of Benin City, and Ebeikhinmwin who commanded the forces at Ughoton, began a insurgent warfare, that originated in classic guerrilla movement. The flight of Oba Ovonramwen and his palace retinue from Benin City until his submission on 5 August 1897,¹⁰² has been adduced in Benin oral history as one of the main reasons for the emergence of the guerrilla movement. The oral tradition recorded by Jacob Egharevba explains that the insurgency of Ebeikhinmwin began ‘when he heard that the City had been captured and the Oba had fled.’¹⁰³ On the other hand, the Ologbosere, a Benin war chief, relocated ‘to his war camp at Eko Ologbosere where he continued worrying with the British troops over two years in order to avenge the capture and deportation of his father-in-law the Oba.’¹⁰⁴ From his camp, he moved to Okemue in the Esan territory,¹⁰⁵ where he continued the resistance against the establishment of British rule.

This explanation has attempted to answer the central question concerning the outbreak of the two related insurgencies that manifested in guerrilla warfare. The question which still arises is: were the insurgent movements for the personal ambition of the two leaders who had to resort to guerrilla warfare in pursuit of state power? In an attempt to answer this question, it will be necessary to situate their activities within the context of historical development of the period. However, the historical process shows lack of political aspirations by the two leaders, and the guerrilla movement mainly emphasize immediate revolt against the establishment of British colonial rule.

The establishment of British administration in Benin¹⁰⁶ began in 1897 when a Native Council of Chiefs was set up by the conquerors. It was composed of the Iyase, the Oshodi, the Obaseki, the Ine, the Uwangue, the Ihaza, the Ima, the Obahiagbon, the Osague, the Ezomo, the Ehondor, the Ero, and the Aiyobahan.¹⁰⁷ The British Resident was President of the council. The Benin Native Council as it was called, administered and exercised control over

¹⁰² NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932, “Intelligence Report”, p.19.

¹⁰³ Egharevba, 1969, *Some Prominent*, p.32. Benin oral tradition supports the view that Ebeikhinmwin was disappointed when he heard that Benin City had been captured and the Oba fled. My informants, Edede Omogboru Uwadiae (nee) Igbino, trader and farmer, interviewed at Urhonigbe, south-east of Benin kingdom on 16 June 1993, and Chief Aiweriagbon Ezomo, the Ezomo of Benin, interviewed on the 5th and 6th of June 1993 claim that Ebeikhinmwin was a warrior who never believed in military failure. A statue in his honour been erected at the City Centre in Benin.

¹⁰⁴ Egharevba, 1969. *Some Prominent*, p.32a.

¹⁰⁵ MLG/BC. Simpson, 1936. “Intelligence Report”, p.8.

¹⁰⁶ For details, see Philip A. Igbafe, 1979. *Benin Under the British Administration: The Impact of Colonial Rule on an African Kingdom 1897-1938*. London: Longman Group Limited.

¹⁰⁷ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932. “Intelligence Report”, pp.20-21; and MLG/BC. Simpson, 1936. “Intelligence Report”, p.8.

Benin territories. The council made rules for governing the territories; exercised control over Benin chiefs; settled disputes between the chiefs, and in all, maintained law and order in the territories of Benin. This new political arrangement under British rule was complicated with the removal of the Oba who had been the politico-economic and spiritual head of Benin. This meant loss of sovereignty, albeit, independence as the British Resident took the position of the Oba and classified the Native Council chiefs as major and minor with utter disregard to the hierarchy of authority in Benin chieftaincy system. Philip Igbafe explains that the chiefs were ‘appointed as they showed a willingness to serve the victorious and ruling British officers.’¹⁰⁸

The guerrilla warfare was directed against this completely new political situation. Therefore, it may be reasonable to conclude that the war aim of the guerrilla leaders was the restoration of the ‘sovereignty and territorial integrity’ of Benin. In this case, it was not the pursuit of an insurgent route to power. Like other political movements, it was the continuation of military opposition, albeit, resistance to British rule. On this basis, it is doubtful if the idea was to prolong the Anglo-Benin conflict as the guerrilla leaders were also conscious that a new era of colonial domination had been ushered with the British conquest. Although the ideology of sovereignty was shared by the two leaders in organising the resistance, leadership of the movement was central to the survival of the guerrilla fighters.

In analysing African insurgencies, Christopher Clapham argues that ‘leadership, in turn, is closely related with ideology and organisation’, adding that ‘where members of the movement share a commitment to common principles and goals, and where the movement has an effective structure through which it seeks to achieve those goals, issues of personal leadership will be less critical.’¹⁰⁹ This argument may be true of present day African guerrillas, and in the case of Benin from 1897 to 1899, leadership was very crucial to the guerrilla movement; because the capture, trial and execution of the two guerrilla leaders led to the collapse of the military resistance movement.

The guerrilla warfare organised by the Ologbosere and Ebeikhinmwini may also be interpreted as ‘warlord insurgencies.’¹¹⁰ The condition which gave rise to the insurgency was foreign domination by a European power. Their efforts were, therefore, directed in contesting the power of the British colonial state. Since the two warlords acted differently in their activities, this can be explained as the consequence of social disruption that accompanied

¹⁰⁸ P. A. Igbafe, 1972. *Obaseki of Benin*. London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., preface.

¹⁰⁹ Christopher Clapham, 1998. “Introduction: Analysing African Insurgencies” In: Christopher Clapham (ed.), *African Guerrillas*. Oxford: James Currey; Kampala: Fountain Publishers; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.10.

¹¹⁰ I am indebted to Christopher Clapham, who first used the term in describing different types of African insurgencies. It has been used here not in the sense in which he applied it in his interpretations. See C. Clapham, 1998. “Introduction: Analysing African Insurgencies”, pp.6-8.

British conquest and the establishment of colonial rule. On the one hand, Ebeikhinmwin's goal was to hinder effective British control in the Benin territories. In the pursuit of this goal, he also targeted Benin chiefs or their interests described as "collaborators" who accepted to serve with the British in the colonial administration. His movement lasted from 19 February 1897 to May 1897 - a short period in which he wrecked considerable havoc with his military activities. A colonial Intelligence Report explains that when Captain Roupell attempted to visit the Esan territory in April 1897, but 'considerable opposition' was offered by Ebeikhinmwin.¹¹¹ The report points out that 'owing to the hostile attitude of Abekinni (Ebeikhinmwin), it was decided to make an exemplary expedition against him, which was accordingly done on April 27, but with little success.'¹¹² In a sense, Ebeikhinmwin distinguished himself again as a great warrior; as Front Commander, he had defeated the British column on Ughoton route, demonstrating his military prowess in action with British forces.

The circumstances under which Ebeikhinmwin was defeated has been explained by Egharevba:

He seized three women of the Osodin of Uselu and was preparing to extend his depredations to Okeluhun when a report of him was brought to the Acting Resident Captain E. P. S. Roupell, who at once set out with a few soldiers to attack him. He was unexpectedly surrounded when he was working in his farm, without guns and ammunition with him and not all aware of the danger. After being shot and wounded in the leg, he was captured and brought to Benin City in May 1897. After a trial he was executed in June of the same year. All Ebeikhinmwin's soldiers and followers were able and brave warriors as he was himself.¹¹³

Robert Home's account supports this view. According to him, "In April Lieutenant Roupell with eighty Niger Coast Protectorate Force troops and a Maxim destroyed Ebekin's camp and killed several of his men, and shortly after Ebekin, wounded in the leg, was captured and executed at Benin."¹¹⁴ Roupell himself may have shot him, because in his report, he wrote: "...I fired on with my revolver hitting him in the leg, whether this was Ebekin or not I do not know but he is reported to have been hit in the leg."¹¹⁵ Of course, he was Ebeikhinmwin the guerrilla fighter whom the British were determined to eliminate because of the military resistance activities of his movement.

From the account of how he was captured, it is probable that Ebeikhinmwin was betrayed by some Benin chiefs who were "collaborating" with the British, and who were probably victims of his guerrilla war. The Osodin of Uselu whom his group attacked and

¹¹¹ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932, "Intelligence Report", p.21.

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ Egharevba, 1969. *Some Prominent*, p.32.

¹¹⁴ Home, 1982. *City of*, p.108.

seized three women, was a member of the Benin Native Council.¹¹⁶ Before this attack, some of the chiefs in the council or at least, those related to them were already victims. Oba Ovonramwen, in his hide-out at Erua, sent messages to him to stop the attacks, but he ignored the Oba. He is reported to have said: “I shall never yield to the instructions of the Oba who fled when the British troops were approaching the City on February 19th, 1897 and shamed the land.”¹¹⁷ This was a manifestation of the social disruption that accompanied British conquest of Benin. The Oba could no longer be obeyed.

The Ologbosere’s guerrilla movement on the other hand, lasted from February 1897 to until 1899. He was better organised in his activities. Of the war chiefs in pre-colonial Benin army, the Ologbosere was the only military commander who continued the struggle against the British invaders. The Iyase and the Ezomo who were senior war commanders, and the Imaran, a war chief, had accepted to serve the British conquerors in the Native Council. The interweaving of interests may not be totally ruled out in this case, but in the absence of the Oba, the prominent chiefs had no alternative than to consider the situation critically within the power dynamics of a new era. This is understandable because of the differences between the chiefs on the Anglo-Benin conflict. There were those who wanted expansion of trade in order to increase their wealth and enhance their influence in the state and society. This group of chiefs were probably those interested in the removal of the Oba who regularly closed markets to disrupt the trade with European traders. The regular closure of markets was due to conflicts between the Oba and the Europeans and Itsekiri middlemen. The British insisted on free trade while the Oba’s policy was aimed at control of the trade.

Ologbosere’s challenge to British authority had profound impact on the administration of Benin territories. Shortly after the fall of Benin, a force of the Royal Niger Company Constabulary under Lieutenants Carroll and Fitzgerald attempted to crush the Ologbosere resistance movement at Okemue; nine of the constabulary were killed and seventy wounded (more than all the battle casualties suffered by Rawson’s expedition), while about fifty Edo were killed, either during the fighting or in subsequent reprisals.¹¹⁸ The early successes of the Ologbosere prompted the agents of the Royal Niger Company to negotiate with him, but Ralph Moor complained bitterly to the Foreign Office of the activities of the RNC, and in November 1897, Lieutenant Roupell at Benin also wrote to complain about the duplicity of the RNC.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ *loc. cit.*

¹¹⁶ NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932, “Intelligence Report”, p.21.

¹¹⁷ Egharevba, 1969, *Some Prominent*, p.32.

¹¹⁸ Home, 1982. *City of*, p.109.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

The guerrilla war completely disrupted control of the Benin hinterland. In September 1897, during the Benin trials, he was tried in absence, found guilty and condemned. This further intensified the guerrilla warfare as the base of his operation at Okemue and Eko Ologbosere became a camp for all those disaffected with British colonial rule. As Robert Home explains, “men from the defeated Benin army and those unreconciled to the new order gathered at Okemue.”¹²⁰ Rifle-pits, trenches and ambush-paths were made all around the town, and it was from there that the Ologbosere drove off the RNC expedition of June 1897, killing Lieutenant Fitzgerald.¹²¹ In 1898, military action directed against the Ologbosere was without success.¹²² In May of the same year, an expedition headed by Acting Resident Granville went to the Ehor district in an attempt to capture or subdue Ebohon and the Ologbosere, but merely succeeded in burning a few villages.¹²³ The Intelligence Report admits that “the rebel chiefs were in a strong position in the bush, and it was realised that considerable time and organisation would be necessary to dislodge him.”¹²⁴

On 20 April, 1899 an expedition left Benin City for military confrontation with the guerrilla warriors. The expedition was planned by Sir Ralph Moor who came to Benin with reinforcement for the garrison and a large number of carriers. The force comprised 250 Niger Coast Protectorate Force troops, Maxims, a rocket-tube, including scouts and carriers. On 27 May of the same year, the Ologbosere and Abohun were captured after a considerable and enduring military confrontation. On 27 June, 1899 the trial was held, and the following day, he was executed, and Ebohon was exiled to Old Calabar. The colonialists admitted that the capture, and execution of the Ologbosere “broke up all resistance on any organised scale to the British Government.”¹²⁵ The Benin territories expedition marked the last stage in the British military conquest of Benin, and was one of the hardest bush campaigns ever fought in British West Africa.¹²⁶ The Ologbosere died as the hero of Benin resistance against the bloody and murderous aggressive imperialism of the British. He is remembered in Benin history for defending his fatherland and dying in the hands of the British imperialists.

Perhaps, guerrilla warfare could only have staved off the inevitable. West Africa was an agricultural society with limited resources to finance a long-term war, whereas the Europeans came from an industrial society which had, by comparison, infinite resources, in

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² NAI, Ben Prof. 4/3/4. Nevins and Aveling, 1932, “Intelligence Report”, pp.19-20.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p.22.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p.23.

¹²⁶ Home, 1982. *City of*, p.117.

particular the resources of fire-power.¹²⁷ In Benin, the circumstances in which the guerrilla movement emerged has been worthy of consideration in discussing the military resistance to British imperialism in the closing years of the nineteenth century. After the suppression of the guerrilla movement, protests and revolts in different parts of the Benin kingdom continued against British colonial rule. Such protests were either against specific acts of the British colonial government which aroused the resentment of individuals or the villages in Benin territory.

Perhaps, at the time of British invasion, many of the chiefs did not seem to perceive the monumental and decisive long-term political implications of the loss of independence. For some, it opened a new pathway to power and advancement. With this development, a new era and a new game of power politics began among the chiefs who were without the Oba. The king had been sent to exile in Calabar and up to the present day, no trace of his life in exile. All in all, it is indeed remarkable that Great Benin was one of the principal historic states of the West African forest region which was not conquered by any African power in the pre-colonial period. Its conquest by the British imperialists was part of the manoeuvres to expand their sphere of influence and economic role in Africa in the age of new imperialism. Benin, however, lost all the territories in the empire, as the British reduced it to the small state of the early fifteenth century before the expansion began.

The next chapter is the conclusion of this study which discusses the relevance of the findings of this study for current debates in Benin historiography. As pointed out in this concluding chapter, the results of this study explicitly reveals the relationship between military power and political control in the kingdom of Benin, and the reasons why the kingdom of Benin was so successful, militarily and politically. One of the findings was the strategy adopted by the state for securing civil predominance over the military which led to the development of a military system within the political structure of the state. In addition, the concluding chapter elucidates the empire-building initiative of Benin, and the question of the expansion of the frontiers of Benin through warfare which has continued to generate debate in Benin historiography.

¹²⁷ Crowder, 1971, *West African*, p.16.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

In the history of pre-colonial African states and societies, the power and influence of the kingdom of Benin in the forest region of West Africa can hardly be denied. In Benin, there emerged one of the great civilisations in Africa. This study of the military system of Benin from about 1440 AD to 1897 has been concerned with the role and place of the military in the emergence of that civilisation. The result explicitly reveals the relationship between military power and political control in Benin, and the reasons why the kingdom was so successful, militarily and politically. As the result shows, the military power of Benin was an adequate force which the state had at its command; the sum total of its capabilities that transformed the kingdom from a small state in early fifteenth century to an empire was finally conquered by the British in February 1897 in the age of European imperialism in Africa.

In the different phases of the history of Benin from 1440 to 1897, there were fairly detailed records of change in the military system of Benin; first, arising from the dynamics of power politics of the period; and second, from the institutional changes within the framework of state-society relations. In both cases, the civil supremacy over the military defined the proper relationship of military power to civil authority. During the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great (ca.1440-1473), the political, among other reforms which he introduced, transformed the character of the kingdom of Benin. The four central political institutions of the state were firmly established. These were the institutions of the Oba, the Uzama, the Eghaevbo n'Ore and Eghaevbo n'Ogbe that constituted the state council. The Eghaevbo n'Ore, that is, the Town Chiefs constituted the civil authority while the Eghaevbo n'Ogbe, the Palace Chiefs constituted the palace bureaucracy. The Uzama were the elders of the state (the Senate in contemporary parliament?) while the Oba was the king.

The strategy adopted for securing civil predominance over the army led to the development of a military system within the political structure of the state. The central political structure of the kingdom of Benin had an important bearing on the distribution of power which hierarchically subordinated military leaders and all state functionaries to the Oba who was the head of the central government. Such an arrangement was pre-eminently to the interests of the state and social groups because of its safeguards against military despotism or

the abuse of military power. This was the foundation of the military preparedness of the kingdom of Benin for the expansion of its frontiers.

The problem of internal political conflict and rivalry between the Oba and his chiefs on the one hand, and between the chiefs on the other hand, created instability and civil wars. In spite of these problems posed by the power dynamics in the politics of Benin kingdom, which were potential sources for the destruction of the state, the small state in early fifteenth century expanded to become an empire, a remarkable achievement which was followed by Benin's cultural influence throughout the empire. The political problems which confronted Benin from the fifteenth century were problems which brought about the collapse and fall of several African states such as the internal political crisis in Oyo in the early nineteenth century.¹ Inherent in the political structure of Benin was the mechanism for political stability and development. The three main attributes of social ranking - position, power and prestige - with their inter-dependence reinforcing and promoting values in political behaviour, were aspects of the mechanism for political stability.

The Oba of Benin was the pivot of the economic, social and political organisation of the state, who balanced the competition for position, power and prestige. In fact, the institution of monarchy in the kingdom of Benin was a factor for political stability; neither was the Oba an absolute monarch or tyrant, but a constitutional king who, in the words of Robert Bradbury, was "actively engaged in competition for power" among his chiefs.² The royal family was not the only aristocratic family in Benin, all members of the Uzama were aristocrats and held their titles by hereditary rights and not by the privilege of the Oba. Most of the other titles, once created by the Oba and made hereditary, were no longer within the power of the Oba to introduce new men of wealth and influence into those positions. The Oba could try "to maintain a balance between competing groups and individuals" by creating new titles.³ Within this political space, there were conflicts and rivalries in the polity but the state thrived in an atmosphere of tolerance and mutual respect; apparently, because state-formation exhibited the development of a powerful hierarchy within the parameter of centralised authority and administrative machinery. This was the political foundation of the military ideas that aided the rise and expansion of Benin, beginning first, with the warrior kings who began the process of the establishment and development of the military and embarked on far-

¹ See for example, Robin Law, 1977. *The Oyo Empire c.1600 - c.1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; S. A. Akintoye, 1971. *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland 1840-1893*. London: Longman Group Limited; J. F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith, 1971. *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*. Ibadan University Press.

² R. E. Bradbury, 1973. *Benin Studies* (edited with an Introduction by Peter Morton-Williams). London, New York and Ibadan: Oxford University Press, p.70.

³ *ibid.*

reaching campaigns which extended virtually into all directions that resulted in the emergence of Benin Empire.

However, the question of the expansion of the frontiers of Benin through warfare has continued to generate debate in Benin historiography. Obaro Ikime opened the debate on Benin warfare. He believes that Benin warriors were engaged in wanton destruction of other states and societies by pointing out that “it was customary to entertain them lavishly or face condign punishment like the burning down of an entire village.”⁴ Isidore Okpewho agrees with Ikime and argues that the Benin “military machine soon degenerated into a reckless display of adventurism, to such an extent that the Oba would send soldiers to a community simply as a matter of routine.”⁵ According to him, “the wanton arrogance was epitomised by the careers of the Ezomos, who became so much the centerpiece of the war organisation that they rivaled the Oba in riches if not in power.”⁶ Then he posed his question: Is it any wonder, then, that the communities in this region, living constantly in fear of attack from Benin, developed such a psychology about war that in their narrative imagination they have repeatedly sought to exorcise the bogey of Benin?⁷

First of all, it is difficult to point out from their arguments what particular period in history they are referring. Before 1600, the warrior kings were engaged in extensive warfare which expanded the influence of Benin. Representatives of the Oba, accompanied by contingents of the army were sent to ensure the final submission of such states which were conquered. As Ikime points out, “they did not interfere with the local government.”⁸ The payment of tribute or war indemnity, usually in the form of slaves or farm products, was prove of submission by those communities. Non-payment of tribute was evidence of revolt against the authority of the Oba of Benin. This was followed by military action from Benin to subdue the recalcitrant states and communities. Unfortunately, those communities were probably too weak and disunited to offer any resistance to the Benin army. If the wars that Ikime and Okpewho are talking about occurred before 1600, they were the wars of Benin’s imperial conquests. Those activities only slowed down by the end of the sixteenth century.⁹

Secondly, what Okpewho refers to as “wanton arrogance” epitomized by the careers of the Ezomos, leads to a reconsideration of the wars after 1600 when the era of warrior kings

⁴ Obaro Ikime, 1969. *Niger Delta Rivalry*. London: Longman Group Ltd., p.14.

⁵ Isidore Okpewho, 1998. *Once Upon A Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony, and Identity*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p.13.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Ikime, 1969. *Niger Delta*, p.14.

⁹ Peter M. Roese, 1992. “Kriegführung und Waffen im alten Benin (Südnigeria),” *Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift*, Jahrg 33, Heft 2 p.364.

ended in Benin history. With the exception of the wars which continued during the seventeenth century in eastern Yorubaland, to subdue rebellious states and expand the frontiers of the empire to the north of Ekiti, there were no official wars authorised by the Obas against the neighbours of Benin. The revolts at Ubulu-Uku and Agbor (the eastern neighbours) were crushed by the Benin army in the eighteenth century. The invasion of Lagos area by the Benin army in the eighteenth century was a reconquest in order to consolidate the frontiers of the empire in that area which was first conquered in the sixteenth century. There may have been occasional skirmishes with Benin neighbours, but were not recognised as wars of any political significance in the history of Benin.

Third, Okpewho seems to have been influenced by the work of a Benin amateur historian, Jacob Egharevba whom he quotes to support his view: “They (the Ezomo) delighted in warfare, as a hungry man delights in food and if their history could be written it would make a big volume.”¹⁰ Okpewho, in the fury of his pen, is enraged that the “arrogance of an Ezomo” started the war between Benin and Ubulu-Uku,¹¹ his kinsmen. He fails to mention that the murder of the daughter of the Ezomo in Ubulu-Uku by the Obi, created the conditions for the war. He also fails to mention that the Ezomo was not one of the commanding officers in that war. Perhaps, because Oba Akengbuda (ca.1750-1804) of Benin sent two of the war commanders from Benin “to teach Ubulu-Uku a lesson,” Okpewho draws his conclusion that ‘the military machine soon degenerated into a reckless display of adventurism, to such an extent that the Oba would send soldiers to a community simply as a matter of routine.’ Peter Ekeh notes that Okpewho “unloads his frustration”¹² in the preface of his book with

I think it is about time we broke the monotony of our glorification of great ‘emperors’ and ‘warrior kings of the romantic past and looked at the other side of the equation. What about the peoples they destroyed in pursuit of their greatness: have they no stories of their own to tell? If they do, isn’t time running out on those stories? If we continue to sing the praises of successful warmongers and usurpers of other peoples’ lands and wealth, what right do we have to chastise European colonizers who did exactly the same?¹³

Attention has been drawn to these views in order to understand the motives behind the ongoing debate in Benin historiography on the question of the expansion of the frontiers of Benin through warfare. The debate seems to have degenerated to the level of ethnocentric bias rather than a systematic exposition of the problem. The political and ideological background

¹⁰ Quoted in Okpewho, 1998. *Once Upon*, p.13.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.195.

¹² Peter P. Ekeh, 2000. Review Essay: “Contesting the History of Benin Kingdom.” *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 31, No. 3 Fall, p.163.

¹³ Okpewho, 1998. *Once Upon*, preface, p.xi.

to the debate appears to be quite understandable. It does not, however, make any meaningful contribution to the debate. Rather, the presentation of conflicting views of particular periods and problems, within the context of general interpretations, advances the range and quality of historical knowledge. This requires that we reflect critically on the ways in which sources have been interpreted and presented. The pre-colonial Benin wars presents such difficulties in assessing the aftermath from the perspective of either the conquerors or the conquered. In most cases, it has even been difficult for the conquered to distinguish between slave-raids and the wars which were calculated to expand or consolidate the frontiers of the empire.

The slave-raids in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and in early nineteenth century were wars generated by the European Slave Trade, and not the expansion of the influence of Benin through warfare. The external pressure led to the relationship of gun-slave-cycle which increased incidence of violence on several communities. Benin actually stayed out of the large-scale slave trade until the ban was lifted by the Oba in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ As pointed out in this study, the volume was low. However, throughout the slave trade era, the expansion of Benin's influence continued either through migrations and resettlement of the Binis in other lands or the reception of Benin culture by communities integrated into the empire. In the nineteenth century when Benin resumed active warfare, the political exigencies of the period dictated the nature and character of the wars.

However, in this on-going debate, Okpewho argues that Benin did not build anything like an empire.¹⁵ His contention is that 'the argument about empire becomes particularly difficult to sustain because, unlike most imperial powers in history, Benin appears to have operated more on the basis of sporadic strikes-to extort a tribute, to round up slaves for sale to Europeans, or to avenge an affront-than on a policy of extended occupation.'¹⁶ As this study has shown, the dynamics of the Benin empire cannot be denied in African history. The early expansion through warfare was followed by cultural influences that permeated the conquered territories.

In his study of the western Igbo, Benin neighbours in the east, which was part of the Benin Empire, Adiele Afigbo points out that Benin's manifest successes in social and political engineering permeated those communities. According to him, "this impact is seen most in the rise of village chieftaincies and monarchies all over the western Igbo area. It is seen in the regalia of these chiefs, in their court ceremonials, in some features of their title system as in

¹⁴ For details, see A. F. C. Ryder, 1969. *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897*. London: Longman Group Ltd., pp.196-238.

¹⁵ Okpewho, 1998. *Once Upon*, pp.173-191.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.177.

their claims that many of these institutions came from Benin.”¹⁷ The question that should be posed is: How would this have been possible with “sporadic strikes” which Okpewho would want us believe? The Benin policy of extended occupation either by conquest or assimilation was reflected in the appointment of a representative of the Oba in those areas. In the Abavo clan, for instance, if the village came under the Benin sway by conquest it was usually placed under the rule of the leader of the victorious army; if by assimilation the villagers placed themselves under the tutelage of one of the more important chiefs in Benin City, through whose good offices the Oba conferred the title of Obi on one of their clansmen, usually the most senior or a war leader.¹⁸ Also in Ogwashi-Uku, their Obis and their titled men, have for generations been subject to the influence of Benin political ideas, and every Obi within a year of his installation as Obi had to go to Benin City to receive his “Ada”- the sceptre of authority from the Oba of Benin.¹⁹ This is evidence of the imposition of imperial authority of Benin and its policy of extended occupation.

The relationship between Benin and the Esan neighbours in the north of the empire further supports the empire-building initiative of Benin. The original settlers in the Esan plateau were conquered by Benin in the second half of the fifteenth century, and waves of migrants from Benin City later joined the original settlers.²⁰ In fact, most of the Esan communities trace their origins from Benin before the fifteenth century migrations. Their language is Esan which is a dialect of the Benin language. The degree of cultural influence from Benin was reflected in their social, political and economic organisation. The Onojie (paramount ruler) of each Esan chiefdom personally or through his representatives went yearly to pay homage to the Oba of Benin who was their overlord.²¹ Besides the payment of tribute, they also sent contingents of warriors in support of the war effort of the Oba Benin.

In eastern Yorubaland, Benin did not engage in “sporadic strikes” as Okpewho thinks. The influence of Benin expanded into the area through military and commercial relations. The result of this study shows that usually when any state or community was conquered by Benin, it was constituted into a ‘tribute unit’ and the representatives from Benin known locally as *Bale-kale*, meaning representatives of foreign power, were put there to watch the interests of

¹⁷ Adiele A. Afigbo, 1981. *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*. Ibadan: University Press Ltd., p.19. See also, D. C. Ohadike, 1994. *Anioma: A Social History of the Western Igbo People* Athens: Ohio University Press.

¹⁸ National Archives Ibadan (hereinafter referred to as NAI), CSO 26. 30957. J. M. Simpson, 1936. “Intelligence Report on the Abavo Clan of the Agbor District, Asaba Division, Benin Province,” pp.8-9.

¹⁹ NAI CSO 26. 31350. J. E. Jull, 1936. “Intelligence Report on the Ogwashi-Uku Clan, Asaba Division, Benin Province,” p.5.

²⁰ For details, see C. G. Okojie, 1994. *Esan Native Laws and Customs with Ethnographic Studies of the Esan People*. Benin City: Ilupeju Press Ltd., New Edition (First Published 1960).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

Benin. Over the centuries, Benin's cultural influence expanded into that part of the empire as a result of "the Benin origins, or at least the close connections of the rulers of these kingdoms with Benin."²² This was noticeable in the use of Benin ceremonial sword, and other influences in court rituals, ceremonies and regalia. From Kabba to Abeokuta and Lagos, the same chieftaincy titles are recurring, and six of these - Olisa, Odofin, Ojomo, Aro, Osolo, Oloton - are found, in recognisable form, in the highest grade of Benin titles.²³ The fact that the structure of government among the Yoruba kingdoms and communities differed considerably, the prevalence of such Benin titles may be the cultural influences from Benin. This certainly could not have been possible through 'sporadic attacks'.

Moreover, the emergence of a powerful kingdom at Aboh, in the north of the Niger Delta, has been traced to the influence of Benin.²⁴ The evidence of the customs and relationships of all the western and southern clans suggest that they were established as a result of successive migrations from Benin, adopting the language and some of the customs of their eastern neighbours. Migrants from Benin also moved in to the western Niger Delta, to develop the vast area, and many retained cultural ties with Benin City. With this development, Peter Ekeh then argues that "Benin benefitted from this expansion, exploring its cultural ties to an incredible degree. It meant that its expansion was achieved in many instances without war."²⁵ By conquest and integration, therefore, Benin was able to build an empire and expand her influence. To strengthen the ties, any renowned and successful warrior from any part of the empire was invested with the title of the Ezomo of Benin (a war chief) and member of the Uzama, until the title became hereditary from early eighteenth century.

From the results of this study, the history of the military in Benin from about 1440 AD to 1897 would appear not to have been separated from the general history of the period and of the society. Periods of reforms or political instability and crisis, and even civil wars affected the development of the military. The fairly detailed records of change in the different phases of the development of the military were due to the transformation of the Benin kingdom. In the transformation process, the state was such a formidable force which carried out its functions in a manner that was determined by the relative powers of the configuration of different groups and political coalitions. The state's drive to assure its revenue base was also very fundamental, and this in turn, affected the organisation of the military. The inter-

²² Akintoye, 1971. *Revolution*, p.9.

²³ P. C. Lloyd, 1987. "Political and Social Structure" In: S. O. Biobaku (ed.) *Sources of Yoruba History*. Ibadan: University Press Ltd., p.206.

²⁴ See NAI CSO 26/3. 26769. G. B. Williams and E. A. Miller, 1930-31. "Intelligence Report on the Aboh-Benin Clans of Warri Province," pp.5-46.

²⁵ Ekeh, 2000. "Contesting," p.158

relationship between the institutions of government and social groups played a key role in this regard. The top military leaders were the high-ranking chiefs, and the warriors were subjects who offered their services for honour, status and patriotism. Within the limits of the opportunity offered by the state, freemen and slaves were appointed as military and administrative chiefs.

The suppositions of this study were based on three working hypotheses, as the starting-point for investigations. The first hypothesis which assumed that every military system has a logic of its own which advances the aims of the state was demonstrated in the study of the military system of the kingdom of Benin from about 1440 AD to 1897. Without the military power of Benin, the state would probably not have emerged as one of the ancient civilisations in Africa. One consequence of the logic of the military system was the establishment of Great Benin Empire, and the foundation of Benin's reputation as a formidable military power in the West African forest region. The military system was partly the product of the dynamics of power relations in the state-society relations, which, in spite of internal political crises and civil wars that cut across dynastic struggle, producing conflicts of unbridled bitterness, the prestige of Benin as a leading military power remained undiminished. Notwithstanding the fluctuations in the military power of Benin, especially during the seventeenth century, the state remained to the end a heterogeneous empire only held together at the centre by the prestige of the Oba of Benin, and of the military power which Benin could muster against any rebellious town or province.

The reasoning in the second hypothesis was that the military power of the kingdom of Benin was a factor which transformed the small state in the early fifteenth century to an empire that lasted until British colonisation; the success over a long period of time was due to civil supremacy over the military, which defined the proper relationship of military power to civil authority. It was the mechanism adopted for securing predominance over the army that led to the development of a military system within the structure of the state. The political reforms introduced by Oba Ewuare the Great (ca.1440-1473), transformed the character of the kingdom of Benin, and eventually laid the foundations for the process of the establishment and development of military system that launched Benin on the path of its military conquests. The early reforms were calculated to eliminate the severe power rivalries between the Oba and his chiefs. As a result, from the mid-fifteenth century, the monarchy was determined to maintain an overwhelming superior military establishment adequate for its war aims. Within the political structure which emerged, the balance of military power between the rival elements in the state was crucial to the survival of the state. In these circumstances, the Oba

was not a mere figurehead but a political king who was also engaged in competition for power among his chiefs. However, he maintained the balance between competing groups and individuals by redistributing administrative competences. The history of the evolution of Benin chieftaincy titles during the period under study, shows how the Oba made appointments to vacant titles, created new ones, transferred individuals from one order of chiefs to another, and introduced new men of wealth and influence into positions of power. The political aim of the distribution of authority was to prevent any one group of chiefs or different political coalitions from obtaining too much power in a particular administrative sphere. The inevitable distribution of power with the system that hierarchically subordinated all the chiefs to the direct control of the Oba secured civil predominance over the military.

The third hypothesis that the interweaving of interests among the different political groups exacerbated conflicts that drifted the state from instability to civil wars, which in turn, created the opportunity for the reorganisation of the army in the different phases of the history of Benin has been justified by this study. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, as this study has shown, the conflict and rivalry between the Oba and his chiefs - military or administrative - led to the displacement of the Oba as the supreme military commander of the army, weakening the power of the monarch as the reforms and subsequent of the army in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to the dependence of the Oba on his military chiefs.

Finally, this study has shown that Benin was not a military state. The character of any specific military state is the emergence of a junta as the group of ruling elite after a revolution or *coup d'etat*. In the kingdom of Benin, none of the central or local political institutions had their origins in military organisation. The institutions which emerged were not structures meant for the co-ordination of military activities. The process of the establishment and development of the military during this period was a reflection of the distribution of power in the state. Therefore, military organisation was within the context of power relations rather than a conscious evolution of a basic framework for organised violence.

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The bulk of the primary sources used for this work is from the National Archives, Ibadan/Nigeria. The most valuable of the records are the Chief Secretary's Office (CSO) Papers, the Benin Divisional Papers, and the Benin Prof. Papers. The "Intelligence Reports" belong to the CSO papers which are among the series of records most sought after by searchers.

The Intelligence Reports were compiled by British administrative officers in respect of clans, villages, towns, districts, divisions and provinces in Nigeria during the colonial period. A typical Intelligence Report comprises five or six chapters. An introductory chapter describes the territory covered by the report. This is followed by a chapter on the geography of the district in which the area population, boundaries, physical features, water supply and mineral wealth of the district are described in some detail. A third chapter deals with the history of the district before colonial rule and the period since the establishment of colonial administration. Since the places described in the reports have no literal tradition, the history of the district before the establishment of British rule is often a collection of local traditions about the founding of the various clans in the district.

The theme of a fourth chapter is generally the administrative organisation of the clan or district before and after colonial rule, and the chapter generally concludes with suggestions about reforms in the local system of administration. A fifth chapter describes the traditional judicial system in the district and the types of punishment awarded for various grades of offences. The prevailing practices in the Native courts are appraised in the light of the facts revealed by the investigations and their adequacies or otherwise evaluated. Like the preceding chapter, it ends with proposals for the future. The final chapter is generally on the subject of finance. In the context of these reports, this means the taxable capacity of the districts.

Most of the reports are adequately supported with copious appendixes comprising sketch maps, genealogical tables, statistical data and such minor details as the villages visited and dates and the African staff that accompanied administrative officers during the tours when the materials for the reports were assembled. Although the general setting of all the reports is

similar, the erudition of each writer determined the merits of his report and some reports are more comprehensively written than others. In fact, the adequacy of any particular report can be assessed from the critical comments made on it at various levels.

These Intelligence Reports are valuable records of Nigerian peoples who were without literary tradition, and were compiled at a time when the forces of modern economic and social change had not made their full impact on the country. In the circumstances, the writers were, to a very great extent, able to record the information about different states and societies in Nigeria. The reports have become indispensable source materials for studies in Nigerian culture and history.

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Oral Sources

Researching the African past is in itself challenging. The search through oral sources involves a more challenging experience because of the sometimes intricate process of shifting through data of varying accuracy. For the study of Benin military history, oral sources provided valuable information which enriched the interpretations of the intricacies of the Benin past. The use of oral sources did not necessarily imply ready access to essential evidence of the history and heritage of Benin. Much depended on the credibility of the informants, and the accuracy of the historical knowledge which has passed from one generation to the other. While gathering information from oral sources, I was consciously aware of this transmission process, and the quality of historical knowledge which will be passed on to the present and future generations.

The field work was in two phases: the first from June 1992 to July 1994, and the second from October 1996 to March 1997. In 1992, the aim of the field trip was to identify reliable resource persons, and discuss the theme of my research with people I consider would be able to link me with the elders that can make useful contributions. Due to my teaching and research commitment at the University of Ibadan/ Nigeria, I had to suspend the recording of evidence until 1993. I interacted with several people, many of whom I have not listed as my informants because they were not convinced of their evidence. The informants I have listed are those with whom I really spend time to assess the value of their information. The second field trip was purposely to update my data bank and reconfirm the evidence of historical knowledge from the oral sources.

The criteria for selection of informants were three: first, the local historians who have been engaged in research on the history and culture of Benin, and have published aspects of their work; second, principal chiefs in Benin considered to be the 'library' of Benin oral tradition; third, prominent people in the community who have had the privilege of being 'narrators' of past events. I desperately sought for Chief Isekhurhe and Chief Ihama, the royal recorders in Benin. We met on several occasions in Benin City but none had the time for detailed discussions, and I quite appreciate their sincerity to me.

The oral traditions from the field were critically assessed in the light of competing interpretations of the precolonial past of Benin. Secondly, because of the debates on Benin history generated by the works of Jacob Egharevba, the pioneer local historian of Benin, attempts were made confirm details of information from many informants. Within the context of general interpretations, the oral traditions were very useful as sources of historical knowledge for this work.

List of Informants

Serial No.	Name	Occupation	Place and Date of Interview
1.	Agbontaen, Pa. Robert	Farmer/Tr. Doctor	Udo, 21. 03. 1997
2.	Aisien, Dr. Ekhaguosa	Consultant Surgeon/ Local Historian	Benin City, 20. 06.93
3.	Asuen, Chief S. I.	The Eson of Benin	Benin City, 19.06.93
4.	Azehi, Pa. Omoruyi	Traditional Doctor	Benin City, 09.06.93
5.	Eriemator, Mr. Abyssina	Farmer	Udo, 21. 03. 1997
6.	Eweka, Prince Ena Basimi	Secretary, Benin Traditional Council/ Local Historian	Benin City, 18.06.93
7.	Ezomo, Chief Aiweriagbon	The Ezomo of Benin	Benin City, 5/6.06.93
8.	Idehen, Mr. David	Driver/ Farmer	Benin City, 10.02.97
9.	Idehen, Mr. Edward E.	Retired Clerk	Benin City, 08.06.93
10.	Igbinoba, Pa.	Farmer/ Tr. Doctor	Udo, 21.03.1997
11.	Ize-Iyamu, Chief Robert	The Esogban of Benin	Benin City, 19.06.93
12.	Obarisiagbon, Pa. Okunrobo	Farmer	Urhonigbe, 18.03.97
13.	Ohonba, Mr. John	Chief Security Officer, Oba Palace / Local Historian	Benin City, 20.06.93
14.	Ogbomo, Pa. Aiyunurhiorhue	Farmer	Urhonigbe, 18.03.97
15.	Ogbomo, Pa. Sunday	Farmer	Urhonigbe, 18.03.97
16.	Oliha, Chief Otasowie	Head of the Uzama	Benin City, 07.06.93
17.	Ologbosere, Mr. Edenabuohien	Businessman	Benin City, 24.02.97
18.	Ologbosere, Madam Elizabeth	Businesswoman	Benin City, 24.02.97
19.	Omoriegie, Dr. O. S. B.	Educationist/ Local Historian	Benin City, 15/17. 03.97
20.	Omoruyi, Pa. Aghama	Artist/ Museum Curator	Benin City 12/ 15.02. 1997
21.	Uwabor, Pa. Isaac	Farmer/Tr. Doctor	Udo, 21. 03. 1997
22.	Uwadiae, Mr. Jeremiah	Teacher	Urhonigbe, 18.03.97
23.	Uwadiae (nee) Igbinoba, Edede Omogboru	Trader/Farmer	Urhonigbe, 16.06.93

Bibliographic Notes

The bibliography contains the list of secondary sources selected in the preparation of this work. The secondary sources are of three categories, namely, unpublished theses and papers, journal articles, and books or chapters in books. They are all arranged alphabetically by author's names and not by the subject or title. However, not all the books or articles listed in the bibliography have been used in the preparation of this work. They remain important sources for those who wish to pursue further inquiries, as a guide to a type of comprehensive reading list frequently consulted by scholars working on aspects of Benin history and culture. In this way, the bibliography connects this work with the corpus of past scholarship on Benin.

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