

# European Prejudice and Pre-Colonial African Reality: Reconsidering State Formation and Indigenous Governance in Owo Kingdom

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## Abstract

A major aspect of historical reconstruction during and after independence in Africa was a conscious attempt by African scholars to study and write their history. This was designed to debunk the Euro-centric view that Africans had no history worth of study before their contact with Europe. In spite of the appropriateness of these efforts, most of them had concentrated on the popular mega-states and empires, with utter neglect of many of the other kingdoms. This is a major lacuna in African historiography. It is in that context that this article offers a modest attempt to fill the lacuna by discussing a crucial aspect of Owo kingdom's early history namely; the process of state formation and indigenous governance. Owo, which is adopted in this study as the unit of analysis for understanding the pre-colonial African reality of governance, social organization and self determination, is obviously one of the ancient kingdoms in Yorubaland, Southwestern Nigeria. As a largely descriptive and explanatory study, this work employed primary source archival materials and oral interviews, as well as secondary source materials from an existing body of knowledge such as books, long essays, conference papers and journal articles. The study rests on the premise that any attempt to study African history will, necessarily entail the study of its different empires and kingdoms that were later colonized by the European Powers. This is the main purpose this paper sets out to achieve.

**Keywords:** European prejudice, African reality, state formation, indigenous governance

## Introduction

The need to expand the frontiers of intellectual debate on the African past may be seen as no longer fascinating in view of the fact that a good number of African scholars had responded to the misleading views of European writers about Africa. This stance of 'non-necessity' may also be explained in the context of the evaporation of the excitement associated with the discovery of African history and the euphoria that greeted the emergence of new African nations from European colonization. More so, national governments across Africa no longer embark on generous endowment of research schemes as they did in the closing years of decolonization and the early decades of independence when they were still deeply interested in strengthening the African identity. However, this study departs from that track of thoughts and holds that there is the need to further the debate. This is hinged on a number of reasons. One, the focus of early generation of African history scholars was quite selective as they largely (if not entirely) emphasized on mega-states, leaving mini-kingdoms in the lurch of neglect. Two, there is the compelling need to attune the perception of younger generations of Africans to the historical realities of their continent by systematic discussion of the histories of the various kingdoms across Africa. This, it is hoped, will hone them to frontally confront what has been called "the perplexing problems of unstable polities and economies" (Alagao, 1984, p. 19). It is in this context that the present study explores Owo kingdom as an African example of a history of remarkable state formation and indigenous governance in the pre-colonial period. The study is not really a confrontation with European ethno-centric writers, but it is meant to provide a platform of reminder from which younger Africans can draw inspiration and learn some methods of governance adaptable to modern times. Alagao (1984, p. 19) puts it better that "Confrontation with foreign enemies is no longer as urgent as confrontation with the problems of unity, development, and a sense of historical roots deep enough to overcome present difficulties and to build a confident future".

In order to draw a perspective on the topic within a practical framework, the discourse of this study is time-bound as it is located within the scope of pre-colonial period. Towards this end therefore, the study is split into four sections as follows. Section one is an overview that x-rays the European prejudice against Africa. Section two examines the peopling process, early history and state formation of Owo kingdom, while the third section unpacks the post-migration developments with focus on evolution of indigenous administration. Section four is the conclusion.

## European Prejudice – An Overview

A common fad of foreign domination as manifested through slave trade, and colonial rule by some European countries in Africa was to develop theories and propaganda of inferiority or inhumanity against the dominated people. This strategy was effectively deployed to justify the forceful seizure of African land and domination of its people. Two major concepts grew from this strategy. One, it was argued that Africans had no significant

historical experience throughout the ages. Two, the few cases of development or achievement as demonstrated in material or other sources were taken to be product of external influence that worked on and in Africa. In other words, Africans were incapable of deploying initiatives to tackle social challenges. These prejudices were authoritatively promoted by Friedrich Hegel, Arnold Tonybee, and Hughes Trevor-Ropper.

Hegel (1956) held the view that Africa “was no historical part of the world”, being incapable of development and culture. For him, Egypt and the northern fringe of Africa were parts of the Mediterranean and of the Asian continent. In a similar vein, Tonybee (1987) in his 12-volume *A Study of History*, which has been seen as his *Magnus Opus* (Wikipedia, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September, 2014) and which contains his scheme of world civilizations, only recognized nineteen major civilizations among which only the Egyptian civilization was from Africa (Ibid.).

The other civilizations he recognized included Andean, Sinic, Minoan, Sumerian, Mayan, Indic, Hittite, Hellenic, Western, Orthodox Christian (Russia), Far Eastern, Orthodox Christian (main body), Persian, Arabic, Hindu, Mexican, Yucatec, and Babylonian. There are also those he labeled four 'abortive civilizations' (Abortive Far Western Christian, Abortive Far Eastern Christian, Abortive Scandinavian, Abortive Syriac), and five 'arrested civilizations' (Polynesian, Eskimo, Nomadic, Ottoman, Spartan). In his view, the rest of Africa faced no challenge, developed no civilizations, and were able to enter the stage of world history only through the challenge of European colonial domination. Trevor-Ropper (1966, p. 871) offered a more unequivocal hint of these prejudices in 1963 when he labeled African history as constituting “only the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe”.

All these postulations would seem to be outgrowth of the Hamitic Hypothesis, which of course, has been roundly and severally condemned by many African and Africanist scholars. The hypothesis, as quoted by Seligman (1968), contends that “apart from relatively late Semitic influence...., the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history the records of these peoples and of their interactions with the two other stocks, the Negro and the Bushman”. What they all point to is that Africa was an unknown or, at best, insignificant part of the world before its contact with Europe. But, the African reality has shown otherwise, such that writings by some African scholars, political activists, nationalists and some Western scholars particularly after the independence of Africa from colonial rule have shown that Africa had significant historical experience and distinct identity before its interface with Europe. This is typified in the historical experience of Owo Kingdom particularly in its process of state formation and governmental architecture.

### **Owo Kingdom – Peopling, early history and state formation**

Owo kingdom (hereinafter referred to as Owo) is the most easterly of the Yoruba kingdoms, contiguous with the Edo-speaking peoples of Benin (Shaw, 1980, p. 50). A town that spreads over a land expanse of about twelve kilometers, Owo is situated in Ondo State, and is presently the headquarters of Owo Local Government Council. It is located in the forest region and lies between latitude 7°15' North of the Equator and longitude 5°37' East of the Greenwich Meridian. Owo can be said to be located in the humid tropical region of Nigeria. It enjoys abundant annual rainfall of over 1,500 millimeters. Between December and February, the cool continental wind blows across Owo, while in most parts of the year, the South westerly winds prevail. The rainy season usually lasts between March and October every year. (Macmillan School Atlas, p. 13). These climatic features of Owo account for the dominance of crops like cocoa, cocoyam, banana, yam and rubber in the kingdom's agricultural history. In essence, as has been observed, the economy of any group is closely related to, and very much limited in scope by, the conditions of its physical environment (Udo, 1980, p. 7).

Rivers Ogbese and Osse are the major rivers in Owo. The two rivers run from north to south through Owo and across Benin boundary, thus creating a natural boundary between Owo and Benin. It is situated roughly midway between Ife and Benin. According to Obayemi, this location of Owo in a transitional zone between the Yoruba states and Benin has placed it in a culturally unique position (Obayemi, 1982, p. 226). Rivers Ogbese and Osse therefore form the western and southern boundaries of Owo, thus placing Akure and Akoko as its western and northern neighbours respectively. It is also bounded in the northwest by Ekiti towns of Ise and Emure. Her eastern and southern neighbours are the peoples of Akoko Edo and Benin. The confluence of the two rivers forms the southern boundary of Owo. The northern boundaries of Owo are at the southern border of Kabba province, while its eastern boundaries are at the western border of the Benin kingdom, with an area of well over 2,000 square miles (Olateru-Olagbegi, 2013, p. 1).

Owo is no doubt one of the ancient kingdoms of Yorubaland. A number of accounts exist on the origin of the early people of Owo. The most popular of these accounts is that of Ile-Ife as the point of migration of the earliest Owo settlers. It is claimed that the ancestors of the Owo people migrated from Ile-Ife in the 11<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of Ojugbelu (Beeley, 1934, p. 6), who Aruna described as “the youngest and most faithful of the sixteen sons of Oduduwa the paramount ruler of Ile-Ife” (Personal communication, December 16, 2003). According to this account, Oduduwa had decided in his old age to share all his personal effects to all his princes. But in the course of sharing, Ojugbelu who was away on hunting expedition was left out inadvertently. When he

returned, he found that all his brothers had left and that he was left with nothing significant – a situation deeply regretted by Oduduwa.

Thereafter, Oduduwa gave the few remaining items to Ojugbelu. These included a state sword, a royal trumpet and a crown. In addition, Oduduwa blessed Ojugbelu in the following words of prayer:

You will be known as a respectable son (Omo Owo)  
You will be a popular ruler wherever you go  
And honour will be yours  
You will be respected not only by your subjects, but  
also by your brother rulers (Asara, 1951, p. 6).

However, another version of this account attributes the misfortune of Ojugbelu to his annoyance against a maid-servant who was yaws-infested. It is claimed that Ojugbelu treated the girl with disdain and gave her only the remnants of his meal. But on the other hand, another prince who later became the Oba of Benin, treated the maid servant with love, generosity and honour. This made the girl to become pleased with the Oba of Benin, and whenever she made blessing, it fell on the Oba of Benin instead of Ojugbelu. This made Oduduwa to be sorrowful and because Ojugbelu was “handsome, playful and polite”, Oduduwa gave him the name Omo Owo – respectful young prince (Asara, 1951, p. 6).

There are some flaws in this account. In the accounts of Yoruba history, no other source known to the present writer has made mention of this yaw-infested girl. There is also no mention of her in Benin mythology. It is also not known whether she had spiritual power to decide Ojugbelu’s fate as claimed. What can be deduced from the account however is that, Ojugbelu was not in the house when Oduduwa’s properties were shared; and the name ‘Omo Owo’ was given to him by Oduduwa. It may also be suggested from this account that the Owo – Benin relations began from Ile-Ife even before the time of dispersal.

According to Aruna (Personal communication, December 16, 2003), Ojugbelu left Ile-Ife with a large entourage which included armed men and women but particularly twelve senior chiefs who were also warlords in their own right. These twelve chiefs who are known as ‘Ighare Iloro’ (elders of Iloro) formed the prime traditional council of Owo (Olateru-Olagbegi, 2013, pp. 2-4, 6-8). They included Olisagho, Adafen, Arogho, Iroren, Alajagho, Irangun, Alagha, Alamuren, Odogun, Odede, Adanigbo and Orogun. These chiefs are known as ‘Onufe’ or ‘oni Ufe’, meaning people from Ife. Asara adds that Ojugbelu’s aim was to found a settlement in a suitable place. After several days journey from Ife, Ojugbelu and his followers ran out of supply of victuals. And in their desperation for survival, they met some of the princes that had left Ile-Ife earlier in a place called Ujin. These princes, who had lost their ways, were forced to part with some of their goods and followers by Ojugbelu’s group. The twelve senior chiefs later saluted the courage of Ojugbelu in the following day in these words:

Le Ujin, eruse ana ujin  
In wo agbo, tu wo ato, ase (Asara, 1951, pp. 9-10)

Meaning:

Greetings Ujin regarding your exploits yesterday,  
Well done, may you live long. Amen.

Closely related to this claim is the evidence that Ojugbelu forcibly collected his own share of Oduduwa’s property from the Oba of Benin. He was then given the cognomen “Afijagboye”(Alajagho, 1990, p. 6) – one who gained authority through strife. As Ojugbelu’s team proceeded on their journey, they saw a monkey, which they chased until they got to a forest that was thickly wooded with fruit trees. They also found a stream of clean and pure water. Having found the fruits and drinkable water, they gave up their chase of the monkey. They later blessed the animal and declared it sacred, for it led them to where they obtained food and water. This explains why it is a taboo for the descendants of the king of Owo to eat the flesh of a monkey even today as reflected in their cognomen as *Omo’lowo ai j’ eran edun*, meaning;

Olowo’s child who is forbidden to eat the meat of a monkey.

This underscores the Yoruba subscription to totemism. In this place, Ojugbelu and his men established a settlement and named it Upafa, which has now become a relic between Rivers Ala and Ofosu in the Akure-Idanre axis in a distance of about fifty kilometers south-west of Owo. It is called *Apafa* in Idanre (Akintan, 2014, p. 106). This new settlement was constantly harassed by settlers in the neighbouring villages under the leadership of Oluma and Adansen. Ojugbelu and his men were said to be victorious in many of these battles (Asara, 1951, p. 3).

In this process of migration, Ojugbelu died and was succeeded by his son, Imade who led the team to an hilly place called Oke-Made (Imade hill). Later the team finally moved to Okiti-Asegbo where they properly established the nucleus of Owo kingdom as is known today (Smith, 1969, p. 12). The name ‘Owo’ was according to Smith earned by Ojugbelu because of pleasant manners. (1969, p. 12).

The Ife origin of Owo has also been buttressed by a prominent scholar writing from a rather spiritual perspective connected with the Ifa divination. Wande Abimbola (1957, p. 42) writes;

One of the most famous myths about the later life of Orunmila on earth can be found in Iwori meji (the third Odu). This myth tells how Orunmila first lacked children but later had eight male children. All the eight children bear names similar to the titles of some kings of Ekiti and Owo areas e.g Alara, Ajero, Oloyemoyin.

It should be noted however that none of those names tallies with any of the names in the Owo king-list provided by Asara (1951, p. 150).

Writing in a slightly different vein, Akinjogbin and Ayandele (1980, p. 124) claim that Ojugbelu and Oba of Benin left Ile Ife at the same time during the dispersal. They claim that those who went eastwards and finally settled at Ado, Owo and Benin are remembered in the various traditions along the routes as having journeyed together.

While he traced the origin of Owo to Ile-Ife and its foundation to Ojugbelu, Obayemi (1982, p. 226) seems not to agree with oral traditions of Owo that Ojugbelu was left with almost nothing and that he was absent during the moment of property sharing. He states that the formal history of Owo starts with the departure from Ile-Ife of Asunlola or Ojugbelu, alias Omolaghaiye, 'one of the princes of Oduduwa, who was given a crown and other symbols of royalty until he arrived at Upafa'. He adds that after many reigns, the dynasty moved to the present site of the palace. Contrary to Aruna's oral evidence on the composition of Ojugbelu's retinue as comprising the twelve elders of Iloro, Obayemi (1982, p. 226) sees Idashen, Iyere, Uso, Isuada and Upenmen as the earliest mini-states that constituted the advance guard dispatched by Ojugbelu from Ile-Ife. Thus, these mini-states were the core settlements of Owo kingdom. He buttresses his position with the claim that while Idashen was the collective name of seven separate settlements including, Ilale Oko, Ilale Ile, Isijogun, Ijgunmo, Amurin, Ilemo and Ijelu, the Alale of Idashen is the custodian of the principal 'Ogho' deity after whom the town and state 'Ogho' (Owo) is named (Ibid). But this position may be substantiated further by the intonation of Owo dialect in the pronunciation of the town's name; Owo, which sounds closer to 'Ogho' than 'Owo'.

As we have noted earlier, the early stage of state formation was one of battles with other pre-existing neighbours in Upafa area. As Obayemi attests, Ojugbelu and Imade were engaged in bloody battles with Oluma Upafa and Elefene (Olu of Efene). The Olowo-Elefene rivalry spanned several reigns until the reign of Olowo Opa who was the seventh Olowo around c.1320 when Elefene and his people were driven to the forest (Obayemi, 1982, p. 227). Asara (1951, pp. 15-16) claims also that:

... the Elefene asked his servants to enter Owo twice everyday and carry away people to be sacrificed to Ogun, the god of Iron. He stirred up his people against the Olowo and negotiated with the Oluma and the Olutelu for armed support. ... the troops on either side suffered heavy losses (sic) and the rebellion was not completely crushed.

Eventually these early teething problems were surmounted particularly from the time of Olowo Asunlola c. 1331 A.D. It should be said from the foregoing accounts that, Owo had a chequered history of origin, centred around Ojugbelu and his migration from Ile-Ife.

Yet another set of accounts upholds a claim of Benin origin for Owo. A prominent Benin historian, Egharevba, writes that Ozolua, a Benin monarch, who ruled around 1481 A.D., had many sons, most of whom he appointed chiefs over towns and villages earlier conquered by Benin. Some of these sons were Alani of Idoani, Awujale of Ijebu-Ode, Eze of Agbor, Uguan of Oro, Olokpe of Okpe and Owa of Owo (Egharevba, 1960, p. 24). This implies that the first Owa of Owo was a son of Ozolua. Thus, if there was no pre-Owa dynasty in Owo, this claim may be taken as far from being incredible. However, there is no claim in Owo tradition to support the claim. Another writer expresses the view that the Owo group from Ife went straight to Benin to sojourn with Oranmiyan before migrating later to the present settlement in Owo where the early Owo monarchs carved territories for themselves through the subjugation of the autochtones (Kasumu, 1987, p. 1).

From the foregoing, two distinct but not fundamentally different accounts of the origin of Owo can be deciphered. The first one generally sees the origin as traceable to Ile-Ife which is the dispersal centre of most Yoruba kingdoms. This account weaves the story of Owo origin around the personality of Ojugbelu and surmises that the process of state formation was volatile and violent. This is illuminated by traditions relating to Oluma, Elefene and Olutelu. Asara observes that the withdrawal from Ota Upafa was preceded by a fierce war in which "the royalists (Omolowos) almost perished (Asara, 1951, p. 24). But the victories of the Owo army in these wars might not be unconnected with the weapons of war like iron gown, spears, coats of mail and other armaments of war introduced by their kings. The military superiority of Owo is suggestive of an early contact of the kingdom with trans-Saharan trade. Some of these items are still kept in Olowo's palace up till this day as relics of history. The second account tends towards establishing a Benin origin for Owo, particularly in the aspect of the institution of Olowo dynasty. But, it is reflected too here that the Owo kingdom was founded after a series of skirmishes with, and eventual subjugation of, the autochthonous settlers.

We can therefore surmise at this juncture that the modern culture of Owo is basically Yoruba, but it shows an evident overlay of Benin features. There is reason to suggest that the early Owo kingdom must have demonstrated diversity in the system of dynastic succession and of state and title organization, thus giving an insight into the process of transforming the component parts of the kingdom into a cohesive political unit. It has been observed that,

But although the people of this kingdom (Owo) are Yoruba, there has been some marked Benin influence, an influence revealed in the cultural activities, designation of titles, the royal regalia, art and culture of Owo... It is sufficient to note that the people of Owo in general are a conglomeration of diverse ethnic groups; Benin, Igala, Yagba, Yoruba – who have come to settle together and been made by the circumstances of frequent wars, succession disputes, trade, and sheer adventure to share a common destiny (Awe, 1977, p. 3, Oloye, 1991).

However, it can be stated with certain level of appropriateness that the Yoruba character of Owo is earlier, more original and preponderant.

### **Post-migration development and state formation**

It can be said that the process of state formation that began with the migration from Ile-Ife around the 11<sup>th</sup> century and led by Ojugbelu, was completed by his son and successor - Imade. Soon afterwards, the process of consolidation of state power started. Imade's effort at consolidating his position was enhanced by his very powerful queen named Ikese who helped him to rule the people (Owo History, Mimeograph, n.d., p. 102). The task of subduing the autochthones became herculean, but Imade waged wars against them (the Elefene and Oluma) and drove them away. He later dispatched one of his army commanders to Okiti – Asegbo the headquarters of the Elefene, to prepare the place for effective occupation. Shortly afterwards, Imade led his people to the place and renamed it Ogbo (Owo) in commemoration of the blessing Ojugbelu received from Oduduwa before leaving Ile-Ife (Asara, 1951, p. 12). Apparently due to the effective leadership of Imade, the new settlement expanded rapidly. This expansion was, according to Asara, due to the voluntary enlistment of nearby villages in Owo- an enlistment that was borne out of fear of being attacked by the Imade-led warriors (1951, p. 12).

Normalcy set in as people began to engage in one occupation or the other. Farming and trading were the main activities of the people. However, some of them were also engaged in mat-making, cloth weaving, pottery and carving. Trade-internal and external- began in earnest. It has been asserted that it was during the reign of Imade that the people (of Owo) began to trade with Benin. From this early trade, Benin-Owo relations began to grow, and consequently there was cultural diffusion between Benin and Owo, as Benin customs quickly spread to Owo (Ibid.).

Basically, the Owo kingdom is made up to five quarters – Iloro, Igboroko, Ehinogbe, Isaipen and Ijebu. Iloro is the oldest of these quarters. It was made of twelve dukedoms each of which was headed by one or the other of the senior chiefs that accompanied Ojugbelu from Ile-Ife. This arrangement is still intact today (Haruna, 2003). It would seem that these twelve chiefs constituted the body of the senior chiefs until much later when subsequent Owo monarchs began to create new chieftaincy titles some of which were borrowed from Benin. For instance, Olowo Elewokun who became king in c. 1781 created the Ojomo chieftaincy title (known to be Ezomo in Benin) to placate his younger brother who had contested the throne with him (Awe, 1977, pp. 19-20; Asara, 1951, pp. 40-42). In the course of time, this development led to a considerable reduction in the power and influence of the Iloro chiefs. Igboroko is the second quarter of Owo. It is the Owa or Olowo's quarter, and headed by Ojumu who rules the quarter in a deputizing capacity on behalf of the Olowo. It is said that the first Ojumu originated from Ufe' ke (now Idanre) (Akintan, 2014, p. 107). This may be during the time of Owo's temporary settlement at Upafa, and it is a further testimony that the Owo dynasty had its roots in the Idanre area.

Next to Igboroko is the Ehinogbe quarters headed by Osere. Isaipen was also headed by Ajana. It is historically interesting to note that the first Ajana of Isaipen was said to be a migrant hunter and prince from Afa area of Okeagbe in Akoko. It is claimed that Ajana left Okeagbe due to succession struggle and came to Owo during the reign of Olowo Alamuren (c. 1481 AD). He was welcomed and employed as the guard of Owo borders. Shortly afterwards, the Ajana chieftaincy title was created by the Olowo and the guard was installed the first Ajana of Isaipen as a way of rewarding his gallantry (Asara, 1951, pp. 23-4). Ever Since, his lineage has been producing candidates for the stool whenever it is vacant.

The Ijebu quarters is headed by Ojomo – a very prominent title holder in Owo. It would seem that right from the time of Olowo Elewokun when the title was created, the Ojomo has been next in rank and influence to the Olowo. This is because the Ojomo is a crowned chief and has prerogative to collect tributes within his domain. While he still sees the Olowo as his overlord, he is *primus inter peres*. (first among equals) in the

hierarchy of chiefs.

The first Ojomo, Oludipe, built up a large quarter and encouraged migrants both from far and near to Ijebu quarters. This explains why many of the dwellers in Ijebu-Owo are of Ute, Akungba, Ifira and Ikare extraction (Beeley, 1934, pp. 14). Aruna (Personal communication, December 16, 2003) specifically mentioned that about half of early settlers of Ijebu came from Akoko areas particularly from Akungba. Apart from these major quarters, Owo kingdom had some satellite settlements like Idashen, Iyere, Upenmen, Isuada, Ute, Emure-Ile and Ipele of these, the people of Idashen formed the advanced guard of Ojugbelu when he was moving out of Ile-Ife. These together with the above mentioned quarters formed the core of the kingdom's metropolis, and the central authority under the Olowo exercised direct control over them.

It could be said also that Owo had a measure of influence (but not direct control) on its neighbouring villages like Idoani, Okeluse, Idogun, Sobe, Ifon, Ijagba, Imoru, Ukaro, Arimogija, Ugbuta and Ogbese. Such influence, which might have grown out of frequent inter-group contact through trade, war and inter-marriage, was inevitable in such contiguous areas (Awe, 1977, p. 2). What followed the migration and settlement in Owo was the evolution of an identifiable system of indigenous administration.

The indigenous administrative structure of Owo kingdom was effectively under the control of the Olowo (otherwise known as Owa, but often pronounced 'Ogwa'), who had an exclusive power to create chieftaincy titles to which he could appoint candidates. With his council of chiefs called *Ugha Olowo*, his authority extended over all affairs including general administration, fixture and arrangement of major festivals, declaration of wars, collection of tributes, initiation and severance of diplomatic relations, and judicial administration particularly in major criminal cases, among others. He owned all the vast land of the kingdom, while requests to appropriate virgin portions of the land were made to him (Awe, 1977, p. 32). The Olowo, like any typical Yoruba traditional ruler, enjoyed tremendous influence and exertion of power in the pre-colonial era. The common expression that *Oba ba lori ohun gbogbo* (the king hovers over all things) found practical expression in the extant political culture of Owo as it was the practice, for instance, that parts of the personal effects of any chief or important person belonged to the Olowo. Also, the entire property of any condemned to death for any capital offence went to the king. In essence, the Olowo in the pre-colonial times was extremely powerful, affluent and influential. His persona was considered sacred, while he was seen as the soul of the kingdom that must be honoured and protected. Consequently, public appearance for him was a rarity. He was seen in the public only during very important occasions like the *Ero* and *Igogo* festivals (Awe, 1977, p. 32). But, this practice was played down later when war-like kings ruled as some of them personally led their soldiers to the battle fronts, and traveled to neighbouring communities to seal bi-lateral relations deals with other kings.

As already noted, Owo was divided into quarters. Each quarter was in turn divided into streets, while each street had a number of family compounds within it. In this setting, the exercise of recognizable political authority started from the compound level (Agbo Ile). The system of political control within each family compound was gerontocratic with the compound head known as *Agba Ile* (who was usually the oldest man) exerting authority over all members. He was seen as the head and spokesman for all members of the compound including those who were not living within the common household. The fairly huge influence of the compound head was borne out of the importance which the society in Owo kingdom attached to old age, life experience, wisdom and integrity. However, it should be noted that even within each compound, there were families (in most cases extended) with heads known as *Baale*, who complemented the effort of the compound head to effectively govern the compound. In this regard, periodic meetings were held between the compound heads and family heads to discuss issues of common interest.

Beyond the compound/family level, the street was another unit of administration where the senior titled chief of the street held sway. Any issues found too knotty or intractable by the compound head were referred to the senior chief of the street. Most of these street chieftaincy titles were created much later after the process of state formation had been concluded. And, the titles were more often conferred on *Omolowo* (children of previous kings), some of whom had been unsuccessful contestants for the royal stool. The emergence of this new category of chiefs detracted from the fame and influence of the original high chiefs of Iloro. Other factors that led to the sharp reduction in the influence of the high chiefs included the migration of powerful warrior-chiefs and hunters (like Ajana from Okeagbe) to Owo, the complacency of the Iloro chiefs to the then new order probably in their bid to attract more strangers to Owo, and the misunderstanding between the Olowo (Elewokun) and the Iloro chiefs (Awe, 1977, pp.19-21).

It suffices to note that some of the high and senior chiefs had been somewhat integrated into the inner council whose prerogative, among other duties, has been to ratify the appointment of a candidate nominated for the Olowo stool whenever it is vacant. The council also performed legislative and judicial duties, as it contributed significantly to the law-making process by the Olowo, and sat with the monarch as the final indigenous court of appeal with the jurisdiction of presiding over first serious offences. Daily meetings of the inner council were held at a designated courtyard called *Akomoaduse* within the palace. In such meetings, crucial state matters were discussed and appropriate decisions taken on them. Another meeting, which was held more

for social than political reason, held every nine days in another courtyard called *Dunmo*. In such meeting, members provided sumptuous meals in rotational basis from a descending order of rank. Yet another meeting of all Owo chiefs held every seventeen days at the *Ehinode* (behind the walls) courtyard of the palace. Otherwise called *itadogun* to imply the the interval, or *igbimo* to reflect the all-embracing nature, this general assembly discussed issues on the Owo metropolis and the satellite communities. The chiefs would be briefed on decisions of the inner council, and duties they were to perform or information to be conveyed to their people. Thus, head chiefs of the satellite communities were abreast of first-hand information on issues that bordered on their interests.

There was another class of chiefs known as *Isogbe Olowo* (supporters of Olowo). Headed by the Ajana of Isaipen, this group formed, more or less, a team of personal aides and special advisers to the king particularly on day to day routine of administration and other matters pertaining to propitiation of the gods. Apart from Chief Ajana, Chief Osowe was another prominent member of this class of chiefs. While it was claimed that Chief Osowe actually did the main duty of the group, the only female member was known as Olori-Olorisa (head of the worshippers of the gods), who coordinated activities of the worshippers (Awe, 1977, pp. 22-30). Apart from this woman, it would seem that the womenfolk occupied no prominent position in the pre-colonial administrative setting of Owo kingdom. Yet, the head of the king's wives known as *Olori-Oluwa*, had some (ceremonial) duties allocated to her. She had a crownlet (ajeghere) and a state sword (ada). Other wives that worked with her included Yeye-sorun, Ameri, Aralla, Aribi, and Yeyesa. These designations, according to Awe, were "no more than attempts to gratify, to express sentiments, and to resolve the perennial issue of claim of seniority in the king's harem as well as other women living within the palace" (Awe, 1977, pp. 22-30).

The age grade system was another major feature of the pre-colonial socio-political structure of Owo kingdom. There were basically two age grades; *Ugbama* and *Ihare*. The process of graduation into these two age grades was (and still is) closely connected with the *Ero* festival, which is celebrated every seven years, and during which every age group would move up one rung in the ladder. Consequently, the space vacated by the most junior age grade would be occupied by young boys of appropriate age. The first grade; *ugbama*, was basically made up of the young people within the age bracket of thirty years to late forty years. Initiation to this grade did not require any elaborate ceremony, but membership conferred on the young people a number of responsibilities like security duties, environmental sanitation and cleaning in bush paths, groves, palace and houses of senior chiefs. On the other hand, initiation into the *Ighare* grade entailed an elaborate ceremony and lavish feasting during the *Ero* festival. Essentially, all candidates who were qualified for the *Ighare* grade (usually from age fifty) must perform the ceremony. After this, the candidates would become potential leaders of thought and bearers of the society's compass of leadership such that the younger folks would look up to them for guidance and direction.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined some critical aspects of the history of Owo; an ancient Yoruba kingdom in Southwestern Nigeria. Such aspects include the peopling process, early history and patterns of migration, post-migration circumstances and the strategies evolved to cope with the challenges associated with state formation, as well as the nature and character of indigenous administration. It has been established that the process of state formation in the ancient Owo kingdom was without any European or other external input. Thus, the early settlers of Owo kingdom were not bereft of initiative, common sense, logic and intelligence to organize themselves in a social formation.

Activities and efforts of many of the past kings of Owo as herein highlighted have shown that in Owo, there were leaders who were well-equipped and satisfactorily knowledgeable to offer effective leadership to their people as appropriate in the context of contemporary demands. More importantly, the nature and character of indigenous administration in Owo were evident of a governmental architecture that was brilliantly designed and well packaged. For the most part, it was deeply rooted in the people's culture, and had satisfactory features of home-grown democracy whereby every section of the kingdom from the family, household, compound, quarters, streets and adjoining satellite villages were well represented in the process of governance. Robust and engaging discussions of state matters, negotiations and consensus building where necessary were evident ingredients in the pre-colonial administration of Owo kingdom. Also, it is pertinent to note that, in spite of the eroding impact of Europe's contact with Africa from the era of slave trade, through the time of trade in sylvan goods to the age of colonial rule and neo-imperialism, many features of the Owo ancient administrative system still subsist up to the present time.

Therefore, adopting the Owo instance as a working example and unit of analysis for Africa, the study concludes that it is utterly misleading to assume that Africans had no history or ways of life worthy of study before their contact with Europe as some ethno-centric European writers would have us believe. This study has also shown that the initiative and drive for effective social organization and good governance as critical elements of the pre-colonial African reality were pervasive beyond (and not restricted to) the mega-states of Africa, as

even the other kingdoms as well as mini states possessed such features and used them to the utmost advantage.

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