



## Children of War in Yoruba and Aja Culture and Society in Precolonial West Africa

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### Abstract

In the twentieth and early twenty-first century, the world became particularly strident in condemning the use of 'child soldiers' or the exposure of underage boys to war conditions. However, to historians of West Africa, the use of 'war-boys' was the bitter-sweet legacy of pre-colonial West African societies that recruited and deployed these boys as military cadets to enhance the strength of their respective states. With a focus on the military conditions of Ibadan and Dahomey, this paper examines the West African tradition of promoting the use of boy soldiers since pre-colonial times. It also deals with the implications of this practice for the state concerned and the remarkable effects on societal values and ethos. Aja and Yoruba traditions are rich in the colourful portrayal of these boys and their pivotal roles in significant historical events.

**Keywords:** Yoruba Kingdom, Aja Culture, Yoruba Tradition, Precolonial Africa,

### Introduction

A distinct corpus of literature on the Aja Kingdom of Dahomey and the Yoruba State of Ibadan gave voice to their militarist traditions. In pre-colonial times, these two indigenous peoples of West Africa were closely related by language, beliefs, economy, political systems, and social usages and by the similarities of their hostility and aggression. The two groups were regarded as belonging to a single cultural area.<sup>1</sup> Greenberg's linguistic study of the sub-region classified the Yoruba, Aja and Ewe languages as belonging to the same Kwa sub-family within what is regarded as the Niger-Congo family.<sup>2</sup> According to Akinjogbin, the Aja language was Lucumi, which is directly related to the Yoruba language.<sup>3</sup>

This work displays a distinct interest in the tradition and wartime practice of taking children along to war. The preoccupation with this aspect of their histories is to rekindle interest in a theme that had become an aspect of cultural memory. This is recognised as interstice or meeting a point of the culture of two militarist states. Yoruba culture and religion strongly influenced Aja culture and religion, so both groups had distinctive cultural similarities.<sup>4</sup> It was, therefore, not surprising that the rise of two states belonging to the two- Dahomey and Ibadan in pre-colonial West Africa manifested unique experiences in war and warfare that defined society and culture during the period.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac A. Akinjogbin, 'The expansion of Oyo and the rise of Dahomey, 1600-1800.' In J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, *History of West Africa*. Volume One, Second Edition, London, Longman Group Limited, 1976, p. 373.

<sup>2</sup> For details, see J. Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University, 1963, p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac A. Akinjogbin, 1976, p. 373.

<sup>4</sup> S. Adebajji Akintoye, *A History of the Yoruba People*, Dakar, Amalion Publishing, , 2014, p. 381.



The close affinity between the Aja and Yoruba became evident in their cultural practices, beliefs, and social organisations. The oral tradition found in Allada, Whydah and Abomey asserted that the Aja kingdoms derived their origins from Ketu, a realm of primary migration from Ile-Ife. One of the salient experiences of the two states founded by the Aja and Yoruba was the use of war boys as part of the constellation of processes that led to the advancement of society. There is, therefore, every justification to treat their experiences in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as one.

War transforms society.<sup>5</sup> However, the manifold experiences of organisations about war differ from place to place.<sup>6</sup> No matter what, it is possible to develop a template that filters out different historical experiences from diverse parts of the world.<sup>7</sup> In other words, some experiences have proved culturally significant in certain respects – even in defiance of certain norms and culturally acceptable standards. The deployment of children in armed conflicts and war zones was recognised as a deliberate military strategy. Several pre-colonial West African states adopted unique schemes of military training to produce intrepid soldiers. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, two crucial West African states- Dahomey and Ibadan- developed the ethos of deploying young boys to the war front as a strategy of creating a core of battle-hardened soldiers. Agaja, who ascended the throne of the Aja state of Dahomey in 1708, introduced a military training scheme for young boys under which each adult soldier was allowed at state expense to take with him to war a certain number of boys of about twelve years of age. Ibadan, a militarist state developed in the 1830s in Southwest Nigeria, also perfected the same scheme. Aja and Yoruba traditions are rich in the colourful portrayal of these boys and their pivotal roles in important events. This, therefore, explores a peculiar feature of the military rules of two of the most advanced military states in pre-colonial West Africa and the dialectical linkages between their combatants and under-aged non-combatants undergoing training as military cadets.

### **The Rise of Dahomey**

The Aja people are situated near the coast. Allada, regarded as their 'father' kingdom, was established around 1575. In the seventeenth century, the activities of Europeans were well felt in the Aja country. This led to the manifestation of rivalries among the different Aja groups. A development that subsequently resulted in the foundation of Dahomey around 1625.<sup>8</sup> The new kingdom established a strong monarchy where citizenship was based on the individual's willingness to belong to the state and serve the king. Alongside the establishment of the domain and the manner it came into existence, they established the doctrine of 'might is right.'<sup>9</sup> By 1680,

Dahomey had become the most powerful kingdom north of Allada and Whydah, and it was giving early warnings of its future actions. In 1670-71 and again in 1687-8, the Dahomeans barred the way to the Allada raiders going into the interior

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew R. Wilson and Mark Lloyd Perry, *War, Virtual War and Society: The Challenge to Communities.*, Rodopi, 2008, p. ix.

<sup>6</sup> See, James Marten (ed), *Children and War: A Historical Anthology*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2002; Tina Susman and Geoffrey Mohari, 'A Generation Lost to War,' *Newsday* (October 11, 1999), p. A. 54.

<sup>7</sup> It has been asserted that Napoleon's army in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century featured a few twelve-year-old combatants. See, A. Honwana, 'Negotiating post war Identities: Child soldiers in Mozambique and Angola.', *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1&2, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> <sup>8</sup> Isaac A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708-1818*, Cambridge, 1967, p. 32; 33-37.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac A. Akinjogbin, 'The expansion of Oyo...' p. 384.



to procure slaves. On both occasions, the Allada raiders had to return home without slaves until they negotiated with Dahomey.<sup>10</sup>

Agaja, the king of Dahomey (1708-27) was also known to have conquered Allada and Whydah between 1724 and 1727. On March 30, 1724, Agaja's army invaded the Allada Kingdom, burned its capital, sacked the European establishments, and carried away, among other prizes, about eight thousand prisoners and many great guns and cannons.<sup>11</sup> How did Dahomey become that powerful within a short space of time? The answer could be developing a solid standing army that equally adopted a strategy of creating battle-tested soldiers.

### The Rise of Ibadan

The complex interactions between and among constitutive elements of the militarist Ibadan state and society of the 19th century can be viewed in the broader contexts of the changes experienced in the political, demographic, economic, military, and social structures of society.<sup>12</sup> This is because, from the 1850s and 1890s, Ibadan witnessed unique transitions that redefined its outlook on the future. It was a period that gave rise to 'warrior entrepreneurs who learnt the art of war, built up a reputation and followership, and amassed enslaved people who were used for farming and producing palm oil for export to the coast in exchange for firearms.<sup>13</sup> Situated on one of a range of hills just at the edge of the grassland, Ibadan itself offered natural defences against hostile forces.<sup>14</sup> In the 19th century, the city-state, located in the Southwestern part of Nigeria (West Africa), had become one of the largest Yoruba towns with a population of about 70,000.<sup>15</sup> Since its inception in 1829 as a war camp, the town and its people had been seen as symbols of hostility, aggression and warfare.<sup>16</sup> Despite this, its successes as a military state had attracted to her an increasing flow of refugees and adventurers. The population increased with the addition of domestic enslaved people seized in raids eastwards into Ekiti and Akoko parts of Yorubaland.<sup>17</sup> It thus became a period that reflected the creative energy and ingenuity of both men and women in economics and political power relations.<sup>18</sup> Ibadan had by the third decade of the 19th century, become the centre of Yoruba political power after the collapse of the Oyo Empire.<sup>19</sup> It also became well known for its historical

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 384-5.

<sup>11</sup> J. D. Fage, *An Introduction to the History of West Africa*, Cambridge, 1956; Isaac A. Akinjogbin, "Agaja and the Conquest of the Coastal Aja States 1724-30", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, December 1963, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 545-566.

<sup>12</sup> For details, See Akinwunmi Ogundiran, *The Yoruba: A New History*, Indiana University Press, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> J. F. Ade Ajayi, '19th Century Wars and Yoruba Ethnicity.' in Adeagbo Akinjogbin (ed), *War and Peace in Yorubaland, 1793-1893*, Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Plc, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Femi Osofisan, 'Ibadan and the Two Hundred Snails.' *Ibadan Mesologo: A Celebration of a City, Its History and People*. Ibadan, Bookcraft, 2001, p.3.

<sup>15</sup> William R. Bascom, 'Urbanism as a Traditional African Pattern', *Sociological Review*, 7, 1959, pp. 29-43.

<sup>16</sup> See, B. Awe, "Ibadan's early Beginnings" in, P.C. Lloyd, A.L. Mabogunje and B. Awe (eds), *The City of Ibadan*, Cambridge University Press, 1967, p.11.

<sup>17</sup> P.C. Lloyd, 'Introduction.' In P.C. Lloyd, A.L. Mabogunje and B. Awe (eds), *The City of Ibadan*, p.3.

<sup>18</sup> Foluke Ogunleye, 'A Male-centric Modification of History: Efunsetan Aniwura Revisited.' *History in Africa*, 31, (2004), 303-318; Bolanle Awe (ed) *Nigerian women in Historical Perspective*, Lagos and Ibadan, Sankore Publishers and Bookcraft, 1992, 167pp.

<sup>19</sup> Bolanle Awe, 'The Rise of Ibadan as a Yoruba Power' Oxford University D. Phil. Thesis, 1964.



tradition of urbanism.<sup>20</sup> From then on, it was widely recognised as an emporium of note and an imperial power.

At this juncture, it is appropriate to point out that the significant development recorded by Ibadan did not "rest in the hands of the warriors alone."<sup>21</sup> With more of the Ibadan male population mobilised for war, women played a significant role in sustaining the economy and society. These women regarded markets and trading activities as integral parts of their roles and existence as community members. By the 1860s, Ibadan had become the most influential town in Yorubaland. The exchange of locally produced goods was widespread and dynamic as several women engaged in domestic and regional trade. The principles of reciprocity and redistribution played significant roles in the marketing process in this pre-industrial economy. This principle was later incorporated and adapted into the economic direction of selling and redistributing foreign-produced goods. Even though the magnitude of the influences of Western market and commercial regulations and the products on sale in nineteenth-century Yorubaland greatly influenced indigenous thought, consumption patterns, mode of distribution, and gender relations, the effects on sale, like the local goods, were also conditioned by the purposes that their distributors had in mind. The difference between the sale of local and foreign products was in consumer demand and the buyer's and seller's complementary needs and desires.

The volatile and exuberant nature of Ibadan has received attention in the literature. The establishment of the Ibadan state, its expansionist policy, and its location in space good for commerce created the enabling environment for economic growth and political development.<sup>22</sup> The history of its economic enterprise revolved around its status as the purveyor of extensive commercial networks. By the 1850s, a regional specialisation had emerged in Yorubaland due to ecological and geographical differences. Ibadan became not only a clearing centre for salt but also a leading producer of palm oil, yam, and maize, which were sold to the Ijebu, Egba and Lagos. The Ibadan is derived from the Ijebu and Egba markets of European liquor, guns, and gunpowder.<sup>23</sup> The presence of the Europeans on the coast of Lagos and Badagry, two critical towns in Yorubaland, proved immense advantages to Ibadan.

### Children and War

Historians and anthropologists have researched and written about the history of war and diplomacy in Yorubaland.<sup>24</sup> However, this study, by concentrating on developments engendered by war situations in two West African states that displayed blood and grit, analyses the military strategy of training under-aged boys directly at the war front and how this shaped the nature of society. This work of historical research places children and war within both a socio-cultural and historical context by describing and explaining the connection between war and children in two pre-colonial African societies. The images are part of the vast experiences of children in militarist states where

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<sup>20</sup> Ruth Watson, *Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan ('Ija Igboro Larun Ibadan): Chieftaincy & Civic Culture in a Yoruba City*. Oxford, James Currey & Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Plc, 2005, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Bolanle Awe, 'Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura (Owner of Gold)', in Bolanle Awe (ed), *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, Lagos, Sankore Publishers Ltd., and Bookcraft Ltd, 1992, p.57.

<sup>22</sup> See Kemi Morgan, *Akinyele's Outline History of Ibadan, Part One*, (Ibadan, n.d)

<sup>23</sup> Toyin Falola, *Ibadan: Foundation, Growth and Change, 1830-1960*, Ibadan, Bookcraft, 2012, p.103.

<sup>24</sup> See for instance, J. F. Ade Ajayi and Robert S. Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*, Ibadan & Cambridge, University Press, 1964.



the children not only became tools in the war efforts at the war front but also, like children in other civilisations, partook in war efforts by "planting gardens to offset food shortages and imbibing patriotism through their participation in the home front war effort."<sup>25</sup>

Developments in Aja and Ibadan in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed protracted internecine wars that ensured monumental changes in the region.<sup>26</sup> These led the states to evolve certain practices to cope with or solve problems associated with insecurity and war. One of these developments was the socialisation, preparation, and training of young boys to become brave soldiers. This seemed to give their soldiers the toughness and ferocity to conquer their enemies. The idea of child cadets featured prominently in the militaristic traditions of the two states regarded as highly warlike and aggressive states in pre-colonial West Africa.

For most of the nineteenth century, Yorubaland was in a perpetual state of war. The period experienced severe political restiveness, brigandage, military adventurism and internal friction. The region witnessed the Owu-Ife battle (1821-1828), the Batedo war between Ibadan and Ijaye in 1844, and the Ekitiparapo war of 1878-1893. Many of these wars ended in the ruination and termination of several states and kingdoms. For instance, the Owu-Ife war led to the destruction of the two kingdoms and resulted in the emergence of New Oyo, Ibadan, Abeokuta and Ijaye.<sup>27</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, Ibadan had developed into one of the largest towns in Yorubaland.<sup>28</sup> In colonising the surrounding territories in Ibadan, the domestic slaves of paramount war Chiefs in Ibadan played prominent roles.<sup>29</sup>

New cultural and political formations evolved out of these ruins...At the same time, the class complexion was changing, as military aristocracy and military federalism emerged in places, such as Ibadan, Kurunmi's Ijaye, and new Egba, comprising Ake, Gbagura, Oke-Ona by 1830, supplanting the hereditary nobility, which had held sway for centuries.<sup>30</sup>

From 1840 to 1893, Ibadan became and remained the dominant power in Yorubaland. The victory of Ibadan forces over the Ilorin Fulani Jihadists at Odo Otin in 1840 brought the power of Ibadan into bold relief.<sup>31</sup>

While Dahomey evolved into a solid militaristic state, so did Ibadan, which created a military republic that grew into the most significant and robust state in Yorubaland in the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> O. L. Davis, Jr., "School Gardens and National Purpose During World War I." *Journal of the Midwest History of Education Society* 22, 1995, pp. 115-126; P. 1

<sup>26</sup> Toyin Falola, "The political system of Ibadan in the 19<sup>th</sup> century." In J.F. Ade Ajayi and Bashir Ikara (eds), *Evolution of Political Culture in Nigeria*, Ibadan, University Press Limited and Kaduna State Council for Arts and Culture, 1985, p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> Ajayi, J.F.A. and R. S. Smith *Yoruba Warfare in the nineteenth century*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1964; Toyin Falola and G. O. Oguntomisin (eds) *Yoruba Warlords of the Nineteenth Century*, Smara, Africa World Press, 2001; A. L. Mabogunje and J.D. Omer CooperOwu in *Yoruba History*, , Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, , 1971; , Akinjogbin, I.A. and B. Adediran, "Pre-colonial Nigeria: West of the Niger." In Richard Olaniyan (ed), *Nigerian history and Culture*, Ikeja, Longman Nigeria, 1985, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> Atanda, J.A. *An Introduction to Yoruba History*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1980, P.33.

<sup>29</sup> Falola, T. *Ibadan: Foundation Growth and Change, 1830-1960*. Ibadan, Bookcraft, 2012, p80.

<sup>30</sup> Ashimuneze Heanacho, "Ile-Iwe Ofe: Socialist Epistemology in Awolowo's Reconstruction of Yoruba Identity and Nationalism" in Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (eds) *The Yoruba in Transition: History, Values, and Modernity*, Durham, North Carolina, Carolina Academic Press, 2006, p.24

<sup>31</sup> Isaac A. Akinjogbin, *Milestones and Concepts in Yoruba History and Culture*, Ibadan, Olu-Akin Publishers, 2002, p. 52.



century. The immensely substantial courageous leadership that arose in Ibadan and the group that settled there both withstood the challenges of the period. It was one of the most innovative structures deployed anywhere in Yorubaland. This leaves us with one central question. What factors lay behind the use of 'child soldiers' in these two pre-colonial West African societies? A precise analysis of these two West African groups' history, culture and tradition revealed spectacular warfare traditions. Understanding this process highlights the implications of this practice for the states concerned and the remarkable effects on societal values and ethos. The Aja kingdom of Dahomey and the Yoruba state of Ibadan- adopted strategies that created intrepid soldiers.<sup>32</sup> Why did these two states need to develop skilled and very proficient armies? The answer to this question provides a better understanding of why children became a significant component of their military.

### **War, Society and Power Relations in Pre-Colonial Dahomey and Ibadan**

A tradition linked these two states with a revolutionary phase that produced structural transformations in which prevailing realities conditioned the citizens' destiny, fate or fortunes. This gave vital orientations and directions to the states under discussion. Evidence of this effect surfaced in the narrative of warfare between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The Yoruba and Aja constitute one distinct cultural area by religion, language, and social and economic organisation. The convergent traditions and contiguous territories of these people placed them as kins. With Ile-Ife regarded as their ancestral home, the Yoruba constitute one of the most dynamic groups in West Africa.<sup>33</sup> They are also one of the better-known peoples of Africa.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, to a large extent, the Yoruba and Aja groups share certain cultural similarities and reach a high level of political sophistication. The Yoruba historian, Akinjogbin has detailed the Yoruba-Aja cultural unity more succinctly:

... the people here called Aja which include the Egun (Gun), the Fon, the Arada, and a number of other small groups in modern Southern Dahomey, are very closely related to the Yoruba by language, beliefs, economy, political systems and social usages. And, as we shall see, large slices of both the Yoruba and the Aja areas were, at various periods, under the same political authority. In a real sense therefore, the Yoruba and the Aja can be regarded as belonging to a single cultural area.<sup>35</sup>

It is also important to state that over time, both groups had developed social formations with an outstanding heritage of urbanisation, sophisticated economies, and large-scale political and military organisations. These, more than any other considerations, formed the basis of the similarities in their practices and values.

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<sup>32</sup> Toyin Falola, *The Political Economy of a Pre-Colonial African State: Ibadan, 1830-1900*. Ile-Ife. The University of Ife Press Limited, 1984.

<sup>33</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of the Yorubas from the earliest times to the beginning of the British Protectorate*, Lagos, C.M.S, 1921, pp.3-7.

<sup>34</sup> See, C.D. Forde, *The Yoruba –speaking peoples of South-Western Nigeria*, London, International African Institute, 1951; Ade Obayemi, "The Yoruba and Edo-speaking peoples and their neighbours before 1600" in J.F. Ade-Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa*, Vol. One, Second Edition, London, Longman, 1976, pp. 196-263.

<sup>35</sup> I.A. Akinjogbin, 'The expansion of Oyo and the rise of Dahomey, 1600-1800' in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, *History of West Africa*, Vol. One. Second edition, London, Longman, p.393.



In social organisation, the Yoruba and Aja also shared many common characteristics. Respect for age and authority was a primary consideration in social relationships among the groups. It was, therefore, not strange that young children are socialised into the social and political structures that define their societies. The 'father' or 'elder brother' was given instant obeisance irrespective of acquired wealth or military reputation.<sup>36</sup>

Yoruba and Aja's cosmological beliefs are similar. These may have been responsible for the region's shared values and practices endemic. For instance, death is seen not as absolute extinction or end of life but as a transition to a spiritual realm- the domain of ancestors, gods and spirits.<sup>37</sup> Several West African societies share the same perspectives about life, living and death.

The Aja kingdom of Dahomey was established around 1625. Its foundation and sustenance were quite revolutionary in Aja-Yoruba history. Its establishment produced significant changes in the region. Before this, the earlier Aja kingdoms, such as Allada and Whydah, continued to relate with each other based on family values. However, the establishment of a French trading station in Whydah in 1671 greatly affected Aja politics. With this, the economic rivalry between the states came into the open. The family relationship that had hitherto existed among the states started to be questioned. According to Akinjogbin, "the traditional sentiment of family relationship, which had existed among the Aja kingdoms, and which made for stability", started to be questioned. The economic rivalry took the place of formal consultations between kingdoms. Furthermore, within each kingdom, the chiefs, anxious to amass wealth, gradually weakened the traditional organisation which bound the state together."<sup>38</sup>

By 1680 Dahomey had become the most powerful kingdom north of Allada and Whydah. It also became the most prominent of the Aja kingdoms with a solid central monarchy. In this new state, citizenship was based on the individual's willingness to belong to the state and serve the king. The kingdom also developed the doctrine early that only such things as they could claim by force and guard were theirs. The state established a new precept of might being right.<sup>39</sup> It subsequently developed a notable economic structure.<sup>40</sup>

One Yoruba kingdom that significantly defined Dahomey's historical trajectory was Oyo. The experiences of Dahomey *vis a vis* Oyo placed it in a unique position in West African history. Its fear of and respect for Oyo necessitated the development of a strong military that gave it its martial character. Oyo possessed certain peculiarities that placed it in a class apart from other kingdoms. These included its strong cavalry and archers and a firm reliance on officials of slave origin in the military and civil spheres of government.<sup>41</sup> It also benefitted from the trans-Saharan trade as early as the fourteenth century.

Several clues have emerged as to the importance of economic factors in the relationship between the two states. The power of the states derived substantially from long-distance trade that conferred advantages and access to enslaved people, weapons, and luxury goods. While Oyo sent to the north goods like kola nut, shea butter, and oil palm products, it accepted horses, saddles and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 375

<sup>37</sup> Olufunke Adeboye, "The Graveyard: Understanding Missionary Mortuary Practice in Ibadan, 1853-1960." *Ibadan Journal of History*, Vol. 1, 2013, p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> I.A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours, 1708-1818*, Cambridge, 1967, pp. 33-7.

<sup>39</sup> Akinjogbin in Ajayi and Crowder, p. 384.

<sup>40</sup> See Karl Polanyi, *Dahomey and the Slave Trade*, University of Washington Press 1966.

<sup>41</sup> Ade Obayemi, "The Yoruba and Edo-speaking peoples and their neighbours before 1600" in J.F. Ade-Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds), *History of West Africa*. p.230.



other goods manufactured in North Africa and the Middle East. Like Dahomey, the leaders of Oyo understood the power and wielded it to significant effect in their search for influence and prosperity. In the aftermath of the fifteenth-century attack on Oyo by the Nupe to the north, Oyo was known to have established a sub-kingdom, Ikoyi, where training in warfare became the order of the day. Ikoyi became pre-eminent in producing the bravest of the Yoruba soldiers known as the *Eso*.<sup>42</sup> This gave impetus to the kingdom to flex its muscles far and wide. By the sixteenth century, Oyo was consolidating and expanding, and this increased strength enabled it to carry its power southwards towards the coast in the general direction of Dahomey. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Oyo engaged in a period of imperial expansion south-eastwards and southwestwards. One of the states that bore the brunt of the renewed power of Oyo was the Aja kingdom of Dahomey. This was when the coastal regions of the Yoruba-Aja country had become known to Europeans. The Aja, situated near the coast, had felt the influence of the arrival of the Europeans more than Oyo. According to Peter Morton-Williams, Oyo's expansion southwards must have been encouraged by the presence of the Europeans on the coast since the kingdom was also anxious to come into commercial contact with Europeans, mainly to trade in enslaved people.<sup>43</sup>

Oyo's success was primarily based on the subjection of several kingdoms to her sway.<sup>44</sup> Oyo's power and cultural influences struck fear in its neighbours for several centuries. The expansion of Oyo brought the empire into physical contact with the Aja of Allada and Dahomey. Oyo attacked both Dahomey and Allada between 1680 and 1682.<sup>45</sup> Another major invasion would not occur until 1730 when Dahomey accepted the suzerainty of Oyo and agreed to pay annual tribute.<sup>46</sup>

To make matters worse, the rivalry between the Aja kingdoms in the seventeenth century compounded their problems and significantly weakened their common bond. "By the 1680s civil wars had broken out among them, with each inviting mercenaries, including Europeans, to help put the other down."<sup>47</sup> Between 1708 and 1712, European traders constantly fanned wars and internal disorders between Allada and Whydah. The power vacuum created by these continuously raised the spectre of civil war. The result was a high level of insecurity that allowed the Dahomean state to recover and become a sizable kingdom, which necessitated the constant overhaul of the state's security apparatus.

Ibadan's innovative "traditional kingship system produced the awesome army which stopped the Fulani from overrunning the whole Yoruba nation in 1840."<sup>48</sup> In other instances, the mighty Ibadan army unleashed terror on many states and kingdoms. Taking the evidence as it is, it is not difficult to conclude that in the tradition of warfare that existed in several pre-colonial West African societies, small boys, even in their pre-teens, became part and parcels of the accoutrements of war. The processes of state formation, their political development and the structural arrangement of these kingdoms necessitated every member of society to engage in some complementary or

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<sup>42</sup> Akinjogbin, p. 381.

<sup>43</sup> P. Morton-Williams, "The Oyo Yoruba and the Atlantic slave trade, 1670-1830", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, iii, I, 1964.

<sup>44</sup> R.C.C. Law, "The constitutional troubles of Oyo in the eighteenth century", *J.A.H.*, xix, I, 1974, pp. 25-44.

<sup>45</sup> J. Barbot, *a Description of Coasts of North and South Guinea*, London, 1732, pp.351-2.

<sup>46</sup> Akinjogbin in Ajayi et al, p. 397.

<sup>47</sup> I. A. Akinjogbin, *Dahomey and Its Neighbours*...p.33.

<sup>48</sup> Akinwumi Isola, "Foreword" in Theophilus Adeleke Akinyele, *Ibadan. The Traditional System: Reform and Regeneration*, Ibadan, Kajia Publishing, 2011, p.x.





supportive functions. The states also showed remarkable uniqueness in their operational peculiarities.

The militarisation of society, therefore, had profound political, social and even ethical consequences. This has been known to inscribe the power relations that, in several cases, came to determine and reinforce the relationship between combatants and members of the society. Although militarism was masculine-gendered, women's supportive role as wives, followers, and traders in times of war became remarkable. At the battlefield, Iba Oluyole was always accompanied by his wife, Oyainu, who was described as a lady of masculine temperament and very popular.<sup>49</sup> Bolanle Awe has documented the role of women in the 19th Century Yoruba warfare quite copiously.<sup>50</sup>

The use of 'war-boys' was a significant legacy of the two pre-colonial West African states under discussion. The states recruited and deployed boys as military cadets and war boys to enhance the strength of their respective states. Some indication of the prevalence of this practice emerged in the two prominent pre-colonial West African states under discussion.

On the other hand, the Yoruba state of Ibadan was founded as a military camp in 1829. It was ruled by a military oligarchy, a feature that distinguished it from other Yoruba states. The cream of the society was made up of professional warriors whose military feats advertised Ibadan as a formidable power in nineteenth-century Yoruba politics.<sup>51</sup> The warriors constituted the rulers of the state and the most important economic group.<sup>52</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Ibadan state had grown to become the most powerful in Yorubaland.<sup>53</sup> The state engaged in constant wars from the 1830s to 1893. "Ibadan, as an aggressor state, had little respite from wars with sometimes high casualties."<sup>54</sup> The state moved from being a defender of the weakened Oyo kingdom to building a sphere of influence for itself and becoming a power to reckon with in Yorubaland.<sup>55</sup> It fought several wars to establish itself and maintained the independence of the Yoruba from the Fulani jihadist that ravaged northern Yorubaland in the nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup> Sudarkasa affirmed that soldiering was more valued than farming in Ibadan in the nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ruth Watson, *Civil Disorder is the Disease of Ibadan: Chieftaincy and Civic Culture in a Yoruba City*. Athens. Ohio University Press, 2003, p. 48.

<sup>50</sup> Bolanle Awe, B. and O. Olutoye, 1998. Women and Warfare in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Yorubaland: An Introduction. *War and peace in Yorubaland*. Akinjogbin A. Ibadan. Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Plc. , 1998, p. 121.

<sup>51</sup> O.A. Adeboye, "The City of Ibadan", in G.O. Oguntomisin (ed), *Yoruba Towns and Cities, Vol. One*, Ibadan, Bookshelf Resources Ltd., 2003, p.9

<sup>52</sup> Toyin Falola, *The Political Economy of An African State: Ibadan, 1890-1900*, Ile-Ife, University of Ife Press, 1984, p.192. See also, Ruth Watson, "'Ibadan- a model of historical facts': militarism and civic culture in a Yoruba city", *Urban History*, 26, I, May 1999, pp.5-26.

<sup>53</sup> Adeboye, Olufunke, "The Graveyard: Understanding Missionary Mortuary Practice in Ibadan, 1853-1960." *Ibadan Journal of History*, Vol. 1, 2013, p. 44.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> Bolanle Awe, "Ibadan, Its Early Beginnings" in P.C. Lloyd, A.L. Mabogunje and B. Awe, *The City of Ibadan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1967, p.20.

<sup>56</sup> Olawale B. Salami, "Ibadan Slaves and Ibadan Wars in Pre-Colonial Southwestern Nigeria, 1835-1893", *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, Issue 3 (Jan-Feb 2013), pp. 32-38.

<sup>57</sup> Sudarkasa, Niara *Where Women Work: A Study of Yoruba Women in the Market Place and at Home*, Museum of Anthropology Anthropological Papers, no. 53. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1973, p.34



### The Phenomenon of Boy-Soldiers

Dahomey and Ibadan appear to represent archetypes of certain warlike states in a region that had become economically and commercially vibrant. In Dahomey, Agaja's accession to the throne in 1708 was a blessing for the kingdom's growth. As soon as he became king, he created two new institutions that increased the effectiveness of the domain. Between 1708 and 1727, these two institutions were used to the state's utmost advantage.<sup>58</sup> One was the institution known as the *agbadjigbeto*, a body of spies who kept the king informed of all happenings in the coastal Aja kingdoms of Allada and Whydah. The other was the military training scheme for young boys, under which each adult soldier was allowed at state expense to take with him to war a certain number of boys of about twelve years of age.<sup>59</sup> According to Akinjogbin, "This system, though new in Dahomey, was probably not new in the Yoruba-Aja area for the Oyo may already have been using similar methods."<sup>60</sup> The scheme for military training succeeded in producing seasoned soldiers. The army he built through this means was used to conquer and destroy Allada in 1724. Whydah was to suffer the same fate in 1727. Through Dahomey's strong-arm tactics, both Allada and Whydah were incorporated into the enlarged kingdom of Dahomey, ending the chaos in the old Aja country.

As the pre-eminent military state in the Yoruba region, unfree labour in Ibadan- derived from slavery and pawnship, deployed in farming and warfare- became an essential calculus of power.<sup>61</sup> In the nineteenth century, "when the system was documented among the Ibadan, the military cadets were called *baba ni kin joko* (*lit.* father says I should sit down, that is, on the battlefield). They were to sit and watch their appointed master fighting and not leave the field until told to do so. In this way, these boys grew up to become brave soldiers."<sup>62</sup> The scheme of military training in both states produced seasoned soldiers.

Ibadan had gained military ascendancy, "and military adventurism had become an avenue for males to gain wealth. As a result of this development, farming during this period was regarded as a struggle."<sup>63</sup> There was compelling evidence to show that the use of minors in warfare was not an anathema. In other words, the recruitment, deployment, and use of boys did not pose any moral dilemma to the ruling elites of the period. It is relevant to this analysis because it was not considered morally wrong or improper for youngsters to be pushed into battle. Since the Yoruba believed that one of two things befits an *Eso* (soldier): either to be victorious or to die fighting, everyone deployed to the war front was expected to fight courageously, irrespective of age, status, or gender.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Akinjogbin, I.A. 'The expansion of Oyo and the rise of Dahomey, 1600-1800' in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, *History of West Africa*, Vol. One. Second edition, London, Longman, p.393.

<sup>59</sup> See Snelgrave W., *A New Account of Some Parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade*, London, 1743, p.78 cited in Akinjogbin, Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Akinjogbin, I.A. 'The expansion of Oyo and the rise of Dahomey, 1600-1800' in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, *History of West Africa*, Vol. One., p. 393

<sup>61</sup> Olufemi Vaughan, *Nigerian Chiefs: Traditional Power in Modern Politics, 1890s-1990s*, New York, University of Rochester Press, 2000, p.17.

<sup>62</sup> Akinjogbin, I.A. 'The expansion of Oyo and the rise of Dahomey, 1600-1800' in J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, *History of West Africa*, Vol. One, p.393.

<sup>63</sup> Oyeroke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourse*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.75

<sup>64</sup> Tunde Olowookere and Gbenga Fagborun "Systems of Communication in Yoruba Wars" in A.I. Akinjogbin (ed) *War and Peace in Yorubaland, 1793-1893*, Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Plc, 1998, pp.238-240.



### **Conclusion**

In the late twentieth and earlier twenty-first centuries, the world became increasingly concerned about the involvement and role of child soldiers in West Africa's internecine wars. However, while this occurrence appeared to have horrified people of all shades of opinion, historians were hardly rattled by what had always been a feature of society and warfare in two important West African states primed for war. It is, therefore, easy to infer that the modern practice of using boy soldiers was an established procedure since pre-colonial times and only reared its head in the modern period with adjustments and innovations but without losing its basic characteristics.