

# YORUBA

## History and Historians

A Festschrift for  
Professor Gabriel Olorundare Oguntomisin

Edited by

O. B. Olaoba

S. Ademola Ajayi

V. O. Edo

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# Cultural Solidarity as an Expedient Tool of Economic Imperialism: A Historical Survey of Oyo Empire and its Neighbours

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### INTRODUCTION

The rise and fall of the Oyo Empire marked a watershed in the annals of history of not only the Yoruba, but the entity that later became Nigeria at the dawn of the 20th century, and Africa in general. Historically, Mali, Shongai and Ghana Empires were the harbingers of Oyo; one common feature of these Empires was their ability to bring to the fore, the glory of Western Sudan coupled with their contributions to the civilisation of the region. It is, however, important to note that one fundamental factor which sustained the expansion of these Empires was their inherent political stability. Political stability, therefore, served as an aiding tool, which sustained their economic adventurism. Throughout history, the rise of Empires within and outside Africa was driven by unquenchable taste for political glory abroad. This political glory though not an end in itself, was usually initiated under the policy rubric of political adventurism. By implication, political adventurism of Empires in history served as a means to an end, but the end itself for these Empires was

economic gain. For instance, the rise of British Empire in Asia and Africa from the 16th century was as a result of inherent political stability enforced by Britain since the end of her revolution in 1688.

The Hapsburg Empire that spread across Eastern and Western Europe, especially across the boundaries of Poland, principalities of Germany and Italy between 15th and 19th centuries had unwavering political stability. The French Empire under Napoleon Bonaparte witnessed relative peace for fifteen years due to internal consolidation that was sustained by political cohesion of all centrifugal forces within France.

From the above, it could be asserted that economic imperialism is usually cloak with political adventurism. The emergence of Oyo in the 16th century as an obscure entity to a colossal political and economic giant in West Africa for over three hundred years cannot be insulated from solid political arrangement and cultural solidarity of the Empire. This socio-political arrangement became a carrot, which accumulated economic stick from other vassal states of the Empire. It is against this back drop that, this paper intends to interrogate the pattern of relations established by Oyo as a highly respected and domineering Empire in West Africa over its neighbours at the peak of its economic imperialism.

#### ECONOMIC IMPERIALISM: CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Imperialism, according to Daniel Effiong, is associated with monopolistic privileges which sustain plunder of raw materials, seizure of territories and enslavement of the indigenous population. According to Effiong, imperialism is associated with economic, cultural and territorial expansion.<sup>1</sup>

Also, imperialism, according to Tunde Adeniran, refers to a situation where one nation-state dominates another purely for the purpose of domination and exploitation. Imperialism is associated with economic necessity, social factor, psychological factor and political motivation. Imperialism as argued by Adeniran is usually driven by economic factors and the quest for glory abroad.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Daniel A. Offiong, *Imperialism and Dependency*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980, p. 54.

2. Tunde Adeniran, *Introduction to International Relation Lagos*: Macmillan Nigeria publishers Limited, 1983, p. 195.

In their own opinion, Norman D. Palmer and Howard Perkins define imperialism as a relationship in which one area and its people are subordinate to another area and its government. Imperialism involves subordination; it is power relationship without moral implication of any kind.<sup>3</sup>

In examining the above, imperialism gives credence to quest for economic glory, though glories such as psychological and cultural domination come with the concept of imperialism, but the success of these glories is largely determined by unhindered political stability. Imperialism also connotes territorial expansion which transcends the frontiers of a state, transcending the frontiers amounts to the invasion of another political and economic entity. This institutional curiosity served as a pointer to the kind of relations which existed between the Oyo Empire and its neighbours.

#### OYO EMPIRE: GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Yorubaland is located around the inland to the Niger around latitude 90<sup>N</sup>. The land spread westwards cutting across the whole of Dahomey (now Benin Republic and reaching into the East of Togo. The weather is fairly stable, with two clearly defined seasons in the year, the rainy and dry season. The rainy season lasts from about April until September, with a short relatively dry spell during the first week of August. The dry season lasts from September to April with cold wind from the Sahara desert, called the harmatan. The climate is suitable for agriculture, making it possible to have two harvests in one year.<sup>4</sup> The Oyo kingdom which later metamorphosed into an Empire was surrounded by foreign elements.<sup>5</sup> The Nupe kingdom bothered Oyo Empire in the northeast, while the Ibariba occupied the northwest.

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3. Norman D. Palmer and Howard Pekins, *International Relations: Third Revised Edition*, Delhi: A.I.T.B.S. Publishers, 2004, p. 159.
  4. I. A. Akinjogbin and E.A. Ayandele, 'Yorubaland up to 1800' In Obaro Ikime (ed). *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, Nigeria Plc, 1980, p. 121.
  5. Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire 1600-1836: A West African imperialism in the era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 32.

## FROM GEOGRAPHICAL OBSCURITY TO AN HEGEMONIC ENTITY

Historical ascendancy of Oyo Empire in the 16th century was intrinsically linked with its struggles to establish itself as a powerful political entity before the quest for economic glory was conceived. Oranmiyan who happened to be the pioneer ruler of the Empire struggled on two fronts: internal consolidation and political expansion. Political expansion of Oyo under him attracted Oyo's friendship with Borgu that is, the Bariba, but such expansion was thwarted by the people of Nupe who were not ready to affiliate themselves with foreign element such as the Yoruba.<sup>6</sup> From the foregoing, the Yoruba from the moment of establishing their kingdom had mingled with other non-Yoruba elements around them. For instance, the mother of Sango, the second Oyo king was Tapa, but this affiliation, however, did not make Oyo to develop a subtle expansionist programme towards Yoruba and non-Yoruba elements around them. The expansion of Oyo, therefore, could be described as a journey from political dependency to economic autonomy. This appellation was necessary because Sango himself destroyed the political dominance of Owu, a Yoruba town, while other kings after him such as *Oluaso* and *Onigbogi* continued his policy. The quest for territorial expansion and glory diminished robust relations between states and kingdoms. Oyo's experience with Tapa reflected this. Despite the process of intermarriage between them, Tapa exploited the relative peace which Oyo enjoyed and external commitment in terms of political expansion to attack Oyo when the Oyo array had gone to fight a town called Ita-Ibidun, leaving the city undefended.<sup>7</sup>

However, it could be argued that the incessant attacks and political instabilities experienced by Oyo in its early history were not unconnected with the porosity of its borders, but these attacks provided Oyo the platform to develop the attitude of warfare, since the Oyo people were not geographically favoured in their early history. It could be posited

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6. I. A. Akinjogbin and E.A. Ayandele, 'Yorubaland up to 1800' In Obaro Ikime (ed) *Groundwork of Nigerian* . . . , p. 127.

7. I. A. Akinjogbin and E.A. Ayandele, 'Yorubaland up to 1800'. . . , p. 128.

that Oyo's economic hegemony at the peak of the Empire in the late 16th century to the early 17th century was a product of battle for its political survival. Contrary to Akinjogbin and Ayandele that Oyo survived the military onslaught of its neighbours due to the experience of its army could be excused, the survival and experience of Oyo army emanated from frequent defeats of Oyo by Tapa, and Bariba, the experience gathered was an offshoot of defeats experienced by Oyo. In spite of this hostility of Oyo neighbours, there was acculturation between Oyo and its neighbours. For instance, the *Egungun* cult was bestowed upon Oyo Tapa.<sup>8</sup> By the middle of the 16th century, territorial expansion had made Oyo to transmute from a small kingdom to a formidable Empire.

During the reign of Obalokun, the quest for economic imperialism began as he installed *Ajele* in adjacent Yoruba towns such as Egbado. The role of *Ajele* that was purely economic, that is, tax collection on behalf the *Alaafin* lubricated the imperial drive of Oyo Empire. Attempts were made by Oyo to invade Ijesha, but these were unsuccessful. Resources accrued for vassal states transformed the internal political organisation of Oyo. For instance, *Alafin* Ajabo created the position of *Are-ona/Kankanfo*, that is, the General of the Oyo army since successful warfare was bringing economic gains. Other positions such as *Agba Akin* and *Asipa* were equally created. With this solid political arrangement, Oyo's attention was turned to the people of Aja and Allada in Dahomey. This became necessary in order to have access to the coast as this enabled Oyo to participate in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.<sup>9</sup> Apart from this, the quest to open Oyo to the international market was more compelling for its rulers. To this end, Allada and Aja were invaded in 1698, this invasion was facilitated by cultural affiliation of these people with Oyo. Oyo's invasion of Allada and Aja created tension between it and Dahomey throughout the 1730s and the 1740s before Dahomey was subsequently conquered and made a vassal state of Oyo.<sup>10</sup>

The implication of these military campaigns enabled Oyo to open its economy to global market; Oyo became a cynosure of European

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8. *Ibid* . . . , p. 129.

9. I. A. Akinjogbin and E. A. Ayandele, 'Yorubaland up to 1800' . . . , p. 163.

10. *Ibid* . . . , p. 134.

traders, and African traders from Mali with the affluence and splendour of Oyo being sustained by tributes from the vassal states. With this, imperial glory transited into economic hegemony for Oyo. This economic hegemony was further sustained by the *Ajele* who were as powerful in the vassal states like the *Alaafin* himself at the centre.<sup>11</sup>

With the recapturing of Oyo Ile after the attacks by the Nupe and Ibariba had been repulsed in the early 17th century by *Alaafin Abipa*, Oyo expansionist programme started comprehensively. This imperial expansion of Oyo could be divided into two phases; First, Political expansion with the need to conquer the adjacent territories such as Sarki and Igbomina. The motive behind this expansion was purely political dominance; this objective simply increased the determination of Oyo Empire to see territorial ambition as economic gains. This explained why the Ijesa and other towns in eastern Yorubaland defeated the Oyo army under *Alaafin Obalokun*.<sup>12</sup>

The defeat of Oyo by its eastern Yoruba neighbours made the re-organisation of the Oyo army a necessity by the rulers. The reign of *Alaafin Ajagbo* in the latter part of the 17th century revived Oyo's imperial ambition. Ajagbo fought Egba and Ijebu. He also consolidated Oyo's expansion to the Egun State of Weme, all in the name of political dominance.<sup>13</sup> It could be argued that Oyo conquest of Egba and Ijebu after its defeat by Ijesha and other towns of eastern Yorubaland enhanced its ability to exploit to the fullest the under-utilised military materials, such as horses. Geographically speaking, the use of horses was supported by the climate. Biodun Adediran argues that the people of Oyo were already using horses since the mid-16th century when horses were certainly not unique in other Yoruba countries. The previous defeat of Oyo made the use of horse an important tool of Oyo expansion and dominance of its neighbours. Horse became significant because Oyo needed to sustain its unhindered expansionist programme, and since Oyo was proving incapable of subduing its neighbours, the rulers of Oyo looked inwards and thereafter identified the importance of horse to the

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11. I. A. Akinjogbin and E. A. Ayandele, 'Yorubaland up to 1800' In Obaro Ikime (ed). *Groundwork of Nigerian . . .*, p. 135.

12. Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire 1600-1836: A West African imperialism . . .*, p. 237.

13. Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire 1600-1836: A West African imperialism . . .*, p. 238.

military campaign of the Empire.<sup>14</sup>

From the above, domestic restructuring of Oyo's administrative machinery assisted its military domination throughout the 18th century. The shift from political dominance of Oyo imperial ambition to economic hegemony provided for the Empire, unquenchable taste for economic glory outside its frontiers. The conquest of the kingdom of Dahomey, which had been a dominant power in Aja speaking people of area by Oyo in wars that were fought between 1726 and 1730 marked a departure from the past regarding Oyo's imperial ambition. Previously, Dahomey had conquered Allada, but with the conquest of the former by Oyo under Alaafin *Ojigi* who can be said to stand second to *Ajagbo* as a creator of the Oyo Empire, Oyo's conquest of Aja speaking people area transformed this great Empire of West Africa. Oyo rulers turned their attention again to the Yoruba hinter land. What shaped this was the splendour of economic gains which emanated from the conquest of Dahomey and Aja area. This conquest had two significant implications. First, Oyo was able to access the coast since the Atlantic slave trade was still going on and by implication, the shipment of slaves from the Yoruba hinterland fell on the shoulder of Oyo with quantum economic gains accruing to the Empire. Second, the economy of Oyo was opened to international market as Mali, Shongai and Asante traders were trading in Oyo.<sup>15</sup>

This glamorous economic position was more compelling for Oyo to subdue the Yoruba and non-Yoruba elements around it. For instance, Oyo colonisation of the Ewon area of northern Egbado, Ilaro, Egbaland and Asante in the 1760s saw Oyo forces operating far away to the West, close to the River Volta under the unpalatable reign of *Bashorun Gaa* who was the *de facto* and dominant figure over different *Alaafins*. It can be posited that the conquest of Dahomey and Aja shifted the expansionist objective of Oyo. Oyo levied tribute from the southernmost portion of Nupe and Borgu. Ilesa that previously defeated Oyo was subsequently conquered. Even Ijebu acknowledged the dynastic seniority of Oyo.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Biodun Adediran, *The Frontiers States of Western Yorubaland 1600-1889*. Ibadan: IFRA, University of Ibadan, 1994, p. 32.

15. Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire . . .*, p. 238.

16. Robin Law, *The Oyo Empire . . .*, p. 239.

The economic transformation of Oyo Empire through war of conquest provided the springboard for political structure, which sustained Oyo's wars of conquest. The imperial glory made the ruling class to be conscious of the importance of power dispersal as the *sine-qua-non* to political stability, while political stability from the perception of the ruling elite was to determine the Empire's imperialism; it also nurtured the domestic economy of the Empire. The uncommon administrative skill of the ruling élite of Oyo explained why Africa's political leaders recognised the inseparable nature of political economy in governance. Power dispersal shaped the decision to enthrone the principles of checks and balances in the Empire, this was further sustained by the institutionalisation of the *Ogboni* cult that was made up of free men noted for their age, wisdom and importance in religious affairs. The introduction of *Oyomesi* as the council of Ministers put serious constraints on the *Alaafin* who was at the apex of administration, while the military machinery was placed under *Are Ona Kakanfo*, the generalissimo but was accountable to the *Alaafin* for his appointment, promotion and discipline. The *Alaafin* was given that political power by the arrangement to appoint the *Ajele* who was responsible for the collection of tributes in the vassal states.<sup>17</sup>

This power dispersal sustained economic expansion on the one hand, but created internal struggles that emanated from obstinate ambition within the ruling class. For instance, the share of power between the *Oyomesi* and the *Alaafin* was not restricted to the political sphere, but also to the economic sphere. War booties were collectively shared between the *Alaafin* and the *Oyomesi*. This special privilege given to the *Oyomesi* explained the level of economic power of the members of the council. This became necessary since the *Alaafin* could not maintain the Oyo standing army, especially the calvary alone. This argument, according to Robin Law, could be faulted because tributes collected were substantial enough to maintain the Oyo army. Fundamentally, economic conquest which sustained Oyo's pre-eminence became a torn in its flesh. Quest for economic dominance created the situation for political struggles among

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17. Toyin Falola, Abdullahi Mahadi, Martin Uhomoibi, and Uka Chukwu Anyanwu. *History of Nigeria, Volume 1* Lagos: Longman Nigeria Plc, 1989, p. 63.

the ruling élite of the Empire.

The above argument corroborates Adediran's view, that dynastic struggles were carried by economic factor and the need to have a fair share of war booties, not only among the ruling political élite of Oyo, but various ruling houses that were laying claim to the throne of the *Alaafin*. It was under this atmosphere of political turmoil that a particular ruling house named *Ijeun* departed from Oyo, because it was denied of its dynastic and material rights, and this uncertainty was to mark the embryonic crisis of Oyo Empire in later years.<sup>18</sup>

However, external interaction of the Oyo Empire was not restricted to the quest for political dominance and economic exploitation of the adjacent territories, the climatic condition which shaped the pattern of Oyo domestic economy, that is, agriculture informed the need for external conflict. No doubt, the domestic economy which catered for the teeming population necessitated the need for export of agricultural products to the international market. The point is that, economic dominance which created unequal partnership between Oyo and its neighbours emanated from political conquest; this does not make Oyo Empire an entity with an unquenchable taste for warfare alone. Imperialism alone did not constitute source of income for Oyo. The uniqueness of the Empire in terms of economic policy revealed the hallmark of policy makers of the Empire. Trade with the Sudan which served as another source of wealth emanated from the export of Kola nuts and Woven cloth. Oyo also ensured favourable balance of trade in its dealings with other kingdoms. Salt, dresses and horses were equally imported from Sudan and other Kingdom of West Africa. Though taxes from the provinces and tribute from vassal states provided the greater bulk of royal revenue, the revenue profile between 1729 and 1781 could be expressed in monetary terms of ₦32,000 or ₦62,000 annually in the contemporary currency arrangement.<sup>19</sup>

From the above, Oyo was not only driven by the need to dominate its neighbours through war of conquest and economic dominance, but the quest to open the Empire to the international market remained the

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18. Biodun Adediran, *The Frontier States of the Western Yorubaland* . . . , p. 32.

19. K.B.C. Onwuniko, *History of West Africa A.D. 1000-1800*. Lagos: African Publishers Limited, 1982, p. 139.

paramount objectives of the rulers. Imperialism, war of conquest and trade constituted the financial profile of Oyo Empire. These tools perfected the imposition of imperial political system of Oyo over a wide area and over a large number of peoples by force of arms.<sup>20</sup> The introduction of horse into the Empire, for instance, was a product of trade, not conquest. This trade benefit such as horse later became a tool of subjugation. Mabogunje argues that the European traders who witnessed Oyo invasion of Allada were marvelled at the level of sophistication which the use of horse brought to Oyo military. The use of cavalry in large numbers depicted the broad range of Oyo economic imperialism when Allada was invaded in the mid 18th century by the Oyo army.<sup>21</sup>

It should be noted that the impact of Oyo's imperial glory did not only increase the revenue portfolio of the Empire. Though the revenue realised shaped the imperial ambition of Oyo, internal transformation of domestic economy as well as social structure was achieved. Internally, farms were well cultivated largely with slave labour, Oyo houses were superior to that of their neighbours. They were wealthy and corpulent due to unhindered flow of income from imperial conquest and trade abroad.<sup>22</sup>

#### CULTURAL SOLIDARITY AS A WEAPON OF IMPERIAL GLORY

The political configuration of Oyo from its early days as a kingdom to the height of its glory as an Empire in the late 15th century depicted internal and external collaboration of political forces. The collaboration was unavoidable given the linguistic and cultural affiliations of other Yoruba towns, which served as provinces and vassal states of the Empire. The subservient roles of these provinces, one of whom was Ikoyi never

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20. Obaro, Ikime, *Through Changing Scenes: Nigerian History Yesterday Today and Tomorrow* Being an Inaugural Lecture Delivered in the University of Ibadan. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1979, p. 23.

21. Akin Mabogunje, *Yoruba Towns* Based on a lecture entitled, 'Problems of Pre-industrial urbanization in West Africa' delivered before philosophical society on 12 April, 1961. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, p. 6.

22. E.A Ayande, *Nigerian Historical studies*. London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1979, p. 22.

translated into comprehensive circumscription of these provinces, though the *Alaafin* was the supreme monarch whose power and status overshadowed monarchs of other Yoruba towns such as Egba, Egbado, Ekiti and Ijebu. However, the wielding and limitations of power of these smaller monarchs were largely determined by the personality of the reigning *Alaafin* vis-à-vis their own accessibility to the capital.<sup>23</sup> From all indications, political stability of Oyo Empire which was the pre-condition to the splendor of economic glory was externally driven. This became necessary because the influence of these vassal kings was not perpetually controlled by the *Alaafin* as these kings wielded their own influence, which equally determined the strength of stability in Oyo capital. The flow and ebb of political alignment and re-alignment between the metropolitan Oyo and the vassal states of Yoruba elements were sustained through linguistic and cultural resemblance that was historically established. Linguistic and cultural affiliation sustained political alliance; political alliance became a strategic tool of economic expansion of Oyo.

Strategically, political arrangement which guaranteed power dispersal within the Empire bestowed upon some indigenes that were not necessarily from Oyo capital the status of *Are-Onakakanfo* who was the leader of the Oyo army. Lack of restriction to this highly respected position by both vassal and metropolitan indigenes lubricated cultural and linguistic solidarity which in turn helped political stability of the Empire. The incorporation of non-ruling lineages into the chieftaincy and religious institutions presented a comprehensive representation of the indigenes of the Empire.<sup>24</sup> This flexible political arrangement, no doubt, laid the foundation of economic dominance; the quest for constant military exploit remained sacrosanct as this explained the possibility of economic expansion.<sup>25</sup>

However, the magnanimous power dispersal of the Oyo Empire could not erase the consciousness about the dominance of the metropolitan Oyo among the vassal Yoruba states, some of whom were implacably hostile to Oyo's hegemony. For instance, the resistance of Ijesa became

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23. Michael Crowther, *The History of Nigeria* London: Faber and Faber Publishers, 1962, p. 49.

24. Michael Crowther, *The History of Nigeria . . .*, p. 51.

25. *Ibid.*, 52.

worrisome for *Alaafin* Kori in the 16th century. The exigency of cultural and linguistic affiliation with vassal Yoruba towns were fully exploited when *Alaafin* Kori mandated Timi, a great hunter in Ede to subdue the Ijesha insubordination, but Timi's ambitious stance of carving out a niche for himself within the Empire compelled Alaafin Kori to deploy Gbonka to checkmate Timi's inordinate ambition. Gbonka himself became ambitious after the conquest of Timi through the dethronement of Kori.<sup>26</sup> The embryonic cracking of cultural solidarity which Oyo had established for the purpose of political stability with the vassal Yoruba towns orchestrated the hostilities of its non-Yoruba neighbours.

By the middle of the 16th century, Nupe under Tsoede incessantly attacked Oyo under Onigbogi. From the reign of Onogbogi to the era of Egugoujo, the porosity of Oyo's territory sustained its vulnerability to external attacks. With the emergence of Ajiboyede, such territorial vulnerability was checkmated with Oyo nursing the ambition of becoming an imperial entity in the forest region. Ajiboyede's unparallel military success against the Nupe transformed him from that humble silent achiever to the status of megalomaniac. His despotic disposition became manifested and unbearable when he ordered the execution of some chiefs for not mourning the death of his son during a particular Bere festival. His despotic tendencies incurred public outcry, but the criticisms which trailed his action and his possible dethronement was saved by a Moslem cleric from Nupe. The impact of the remonstrance of the Moslem priest was apparently so effective that the king apologised to the public for his despotic behaviour.<sup>27</sup>

Paradoxically, political stability which Oyo subsequently used as the rostrum of economic imperialism over its neighbours was maintained by acculturation of religious beliefs of Oyo people and their non-Yoruba neighbours during Ajiboyede's episode. Internally, cultural solidarity which Oyo as the metropolitan capital established with other Yoruba towns did not comprehensively sustain political stability. Strategically, the cultural connection of Oyo with other towns was like the imprimatur for political stability. The quelling of internal disorder through the alignment and re-alignment of the centrifugal forces within the Empire

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26. *Ibid.*, 52.

27. Michael Crowder, *The History of Nigeria* . . . , p. 53.

was more than an opportunity of consolidating economic expansionism in non-Yoruba territories whose economic potentials were strategic to Oyo's economic expansion. The unquenchable taste for economic subjugation distorted the cultural buffer which the Yoruba speaking states of the Empire enjoyed. Eugene Mendonsa argues that the sacrifice of cultural sanctity on the altar of economic glory pushed *Alaafin* Awole to engage in desecrating attack on Ife in 1793.<sup>28</sup> The significance of economic ambition of Oyo took precedence over cultural affinities, which Oyo established to maintain political stability. The splendor of economic prosperity from the perspective of the political class of the Empire became the basis through which Oyo maintained its glory. The loss of this cultural consciousness encouraged voracious taste for economic dominance.

Proper theoretical explanation of the loss of cultural consciousness by the metropolitan élite of Oyo Empire rests largely on mini-states-mega-states dialectics, which historians like Ade Obayemi project. This explanation tends to correct erroneous intellectual merging of cultural respectability with political centralisation. By implication, the two concepts are not comprehensively intertwined because mini-states are the products of the influence of mega-states without centralised political institutions on the one hand, while mega-states equally evolve from socio-political arrangement of the mini-states.<sup>29</sup> Cultural circumstance could, therefore, be seen as the ideological bond that shaped Oyo's dominance of other Yoruba kingdoms. Beyond paying homage and annual tribute, they recognised the right of the *Alaafin* to interfere in their day to day administration.<sup>30</sup>

### CONFLICT OF CULTURAL POLITICS AND OYO TERRITORIAL AMBITION

Within historical times, the Ibariba as a mini-state encroached on Yoruba

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28. Eugene, L. Mendonsa, *West Africa An Introduction to Its History, Civilisation and Contemporary Situation*. Carolina: Academic Press, 2002, p. 223.

29. 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 Third Edition* Newyork: Longman Incorporation, p. 262.

30. J.F. Ade Ajayi, 'The aftermath of the Fall of Old Oyo' in J.F Ade-Ajayi and Michael Crowder (eds.), *History of West Africa Vol. Two Second Edition* New York: Longman Group, 1987, p. 178.

speaking communities of Okuta and Ilesa west of Oyo as provincial communities of Oyo Empire.<sup>31</sup> Similar institutional outlook pertaining to kinship institutions in Nupeland appeared to be identical with those of Yoruba speaking people of Oyo, and since Kano Chronicle revealed the existence of Nupe king who exchanged gift with rulers in Hausaland in the fourteenth century,<sup>32</sup> the possibility of Nupe as an earlier entity before Oyo is demonstrable. Since mini-states have the capacity to demonstrate cultural antecedents which the mega-states equally evolved, Nupe and Oyo interactions could be situated within the context of ethnographic explanation than dynastic superiority in the early history of both groups.

However, this explanation cannot be replicated in the historical explanation of other non-Yoruba kingdoms which emerged after the erection of Oyo Empire. Kingdoms such as Olori, Ifonyin, Popo, Igede were established after Oyo, but Popo and Igede were subsequently subsumed through the expansion of the Adja speaking states in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>33</sup> Other kingdoms such as Anago, Ketu, Olori-Ketu, Egun and Idogo were sustained through the imperial hands of Oyo. Oyo's imperial dominance helped in the re-shaping of political configuration of these entities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>34</sup> These ethnographic and political interactions between Oyo and these mini-states created frontier zones in which cultural diarchy and dynastic marriages were cemented, the populations were exposed to intellectual and political heritage of different groups. The frontier zones provided the platform for experimentation in adaptability through which the citizens enjoyed multi-cultural traits with a potential nursery for revolutionaries, hybrids and rebels.<sup>35</sup>

From the foregoing, cultural constancy of kingdoms like Nupe and Ibariba which predated Oyo Empire did not bequeath on them unhindered process of political centralisation with hegemonic outlook, while kingdoms such as Popo, Anago, Ifonyin, Ketu and Olori that became

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31. Ade-Obayemi, 'The Yoruba and the Edo Speaking Peoples' . . . , p. 293.

32. *Ibid.*, p.294.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 298.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 299.

35. Ade-Obayemi, 'The Yoruba and the Edo Speaking Peoples', pp. 294-295.

political off springs of Oyo failed to possess cultural respectability and political centralisation. It therefore, means that the Kingdoms that were in existence before and after Oyo's emergence as an undisputable entity in the forest region were ruled by Oyo, but demonstrated resistance in unequal measures did so due to difference in historical circumstances. It could be argued that Obayemi's assertion that mini-states incorporate, adjust and accept innovation without losing their basic characters hit the target on the one hand, but their capacity for structural elasticity according to him which came into existence after Oyo's emergence did not obliterate the consciousness of their cultural, economic and political resistance against Oyo Empire.

This reveals the status of Oyo as a metropolitan mega institution with other Yoruba and non-Yoruba speaking neighbours as mini states. Technically, the danger of substituting cultural significance for economic glory by the Oyo élite served as an appendage of vulnerability of Oyo to internal crises. Oyo's political leadership unrealistically believed that since the non-Yoruba mini-states did not undergo political transformation to the point of colossal giants, and remained essentially unchanged for centuries; their cultural constancy would be too weak to confront Oyo's political transformation. This perception was inherently improbable. Though Oyo's political transformation which became its tool of economic expansion conditioned to an extent the modes of production, distribution and exchange of the Yoruba and non-Yoruba speaking states, this restriction no doubt sustained socio-cultural formation of these states which the Oyo élite thought was too weak as an instrument of resistance.<sup>36</sup> One can therefore, align with Obayemi's argument that mini-states are structurally elastic because they incorporate, adjust and embrace innovations without losing their basic characteristics.<sup>37</sup>

It is therefore, reasonable to argue that administrative supervision of sub-Yoruba kingdoms which was made possible through cultural solidarity was a potent instrument of military dominance of metropolitan Oyo over other Yoruba kingdoms, despite their distinguishable sub-cultural traits. The argument here is that, absence of cultural solidarity between Oyo and its non-Yoruba neighbours such as Nupe, Borgu and Aja-speaking

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36. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

37. Ade-Obayemi, 'The Yoruba and the Edo Speaking Peoples' . . . , p. 264.

people whose languages were not mutually intelligible with Yoruba created the condition for hostilities of these kingdoms towards Oyo. The need for military subjugation of these non-Yoruba kingdoms by Oyo was more compelling than economic autonomy granted by it to these kingdoms to expand eastwards and westwards. It seems that this economic autonomy granted to these kingdoms in the face of unhindered tributes which Oyo enjoyed threatened their own territorial ambition.

When the rebellious disposition of these non-Yoruba neighbours arose, cultural solidarity which Oyo established with other Yoruba kingdoms was exploited to the fullest. This explained the reason why *Alaafin* Abiodun, an energetic ruler and former long distance trader who understood the Oyo country perfectly well, used his experience to tour the Empire and prevailed on other Yoruba kingdoms to rally round the Empire on the basis of cultural harmony against external threats.<sup>38</sup> Though his effort relatively stabilised the Empire before the Oyo army was defeated by Egba and Borgu in 1783,<sup>39</sup> this was followed by the defeat of Oyo in 1791 by Nupe.<sup>40</sup> It, therefore, meant that the breakdown of cultural solidarity which the Empire used as strings of holding itself placed it on worse terms with other Yoruba neighbours who displaced hostilities towards Oyo at the twilight of its imperial glory in the late 18th century.

### CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, the emergence of the Oyo Empire as an obscure entity was more of political necessity than economic and imperial ambition. However, the obscure status of Oyo as a weak political entity made her vulnerable to external attacks. This vulnerability was assisted by Oyo's hostile neighbours that were determined to subsume it territorially. This territorial threat pushed the political élite of the Empire to deploy the cultural affinities inherent in cosmological existence of Oyo with other Yoruba-speaking neighbours against the threat.

The fundamental business of nation building and internal consolidation distracted the attention of leadership from putting in place

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38. J. F. Ade-Ajayi 'The Aftermath of the Fall of Oyo. . .', p. 186.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

a formidable army. When the threat of being wiped out continued unabated, the leadership annexed all tangible and intangible elements of Oyo's potentials in order to ensure survival. This survival, no doubt, served as an eye opener for the leadership to explore other opportunities outside the frontiers of Oyo. Annexing these opportunities shaped expansionist policy. Expansionist policy dictated aggressive economic expansion. The splendor and glory which emanated from expansionism made Oyo to transmute from a mere kingdom to a colossal hegemonic power, sustaining this pre-eminence dictated the aggression which Oyo Empire demonstrated towards her neighbours. Imperial glory of Oyo abroad sustained unhindered political consolidation. The annexation of tangible and intangible potentials of Oyo's domestic structure subsequently diminished. This decline marked the embryonic destruction of an empire which existed in West Africa for over 300 years.

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