

CHAPTER 9 CENTRALISED STATES II

Objectives

At the end of this chapter, students should be able to:

- mention theories of the Yoruba origin and relation between Ife and the rest of the Yorubaland;
- describe the socio-political organization of the Yoruba;
- describe the rise and growth of the Old Oyo Empire;
- explain the impact of the Old Oyo Empire on its neighbours and other Nigerian Groups;
- describe each stage in the development of Benin kingdom;
- assess the contribution of Benin rulers to the development of the kingdom;
- describe the relationship between Benin and its neighbours e.g. Yoruba, Igbo and Itsekiri and the Europeans;
- identify the factors which led to the rise of Efik state;
- explain the socio-political organization of the Efik;
- discuss the impact of contact with Europe on the Efik state.

Introduction

This chapter will study Oyo, Benin and Ife, which were centralised states that emerged in the forest region. Notably, they developed a centralized system of government headed by a monarch before 1800.

9.1 Origin of the Yoruba and Relations between Ife and the Rest of Yorubaland

The Yoruba tradition of origin claimed that they came from the North-East area of Africa. This tradition was first mentioned by Clapperton and later adapted by Rev Samuel Johnson in his account the history of the Yorubas. The tradition further states that the Yorubas were led by Oduduwa to the Ile-Ife area, which happened to be their final destination, Akinjogbin and Ayandele in “Yorubaland up to 1800” state that: before the Oduduwa period, some form of monarchial system had developed in the area. It is believed that Oduduwa founded a dynasty and the origin of Yoruba is Ile-Ife. Oduduwa ruled around 8th century and his sons founded other kingdoms. Ile-Ife was seen as the founder of other Yoruba kingdoms and it remained as a ritual centre protected by the rest of the Yoruba kingdom. Apart from the spiritual role of Ile-Ife, it developed art and culture; various objects were made from clay, bronze and stone. They were known to have made the bronze head and other artworks found in museums.

Ife developed the Ooniship which is a government different from its role as territorial head of Yoruba kingdom. The Ooni was crowned and was the head of the government.

9.2 The Rise and Growth of the Old Oyo Empire

Oyo started as a small state in Northern Yorubaland. Its influence began to grow and by the 15th century, it had covered most parts of Yorubaland, with the exception of the coastal areas. By the 16th century, Oyo began to incorporate other Yoruba states under its control by expanding Southward. The founder of the Oyo Empire was Oranmiyan, who conquered areas North of Ile-Ife and made Old Oyo his capital in the 15th century. The conquest and incorporation of other states was done in order to have more states under its control who pay tribute to her. Nupe, Borgu and Dahomey paid tribute to her.

Oyo Empire was at the peak of its power in the 18th century. The Empire was bordered by the Niger to the North, Benin to the East and the Togo area to the West. There were factors that led to the rise of Oyo Empire. These include: emergence of the kingdom in a fertile region suitable for agriculture to feed and support a large population. This is coupled with the fact that the area was around Niger which was a centre of communication to other areas, especially the North. As a result of this communication Oyo benefitted from trade in kolanut which was produced in the area and was taken to the Sudan areas such as Hausaland.

Horses were also imported from the Sudan which helped in the formation of a strong military in Oyo. The military of Oyo was divided into horsemen and foot soldiers who protected the Empire against external attack and also engaged in the expansion of the kingdom.

9.3 Political Organization of Oyo

Oyo Empire was a centralized state headed by the Alaaḥin, who was the head of government. He was assisted by the council members who were seven in number called the Oyomeesi. The Oyomeesi were derived from the seven wards into which the kingdom was divided.

The responsibility of the Oyomeesi was based on electing a new Alaaḥin from the royal family. They were councilors who advised the Alaaḥin on matters of the state. If an Alaaḥin became tyrannical, oppressive and refused to listen to the advice of the council members, the Oyomeesi forced him to commit suicide by presenting him with a calabash: which showed that his people no longer wanted him in office. The Oyomeesi also performed executive, legislative and judicial functions of the state in the interest of the people. The Oyomeesi were headed by the Bashorun, who was the Prime Minister of the state and it was his duty to present the Alaaḥin with a calabash if the people no longer wanted him in office. A step lower in hierarchy to the Oyomeesi were the military officials who were appointed and were headed by the Kakanfo who acted as the Commander-in-chief of the Oyo Army.

It should be noted that there developed a check and balance system in Oyo Empire which is similar to the development of democracy. The Alaafin and Oyomeesi were checked and prevented from exploiting their subjects by the Ogboni cult. The cult was made up of freemen who were part of a secret cult and were the actual political, social and religious leaders of the state. The members resolved crises between the Alaafin and the Oyomeesi. For administrative purposes, the empire was divided into three: Firstly, the Alaafin and the council of ministers who stayed in the capital governed the centre. Secondly, the administration of provinces which were dominantly Yoruba state, was carried out by their own Oba and council of elders but they were answerable to the Alaafin. These territories were supervised by agents called the Ajale who were independent due to a certain level of communication. Thirdly, conquered territories, such as Nupe, Borgu and Dahomey, were ruled by their own rulers but only paid tribute to the Alaafin.

9.4 The Economy of the Oyo Empire

Agriculture played an important role in the lives of the people. The fertility of the soil enabled the people to produce food that sustained large populations. Generally, yam and cassava were produced in the area.

Trade was an important aspect of the economy of Oyo, as the trade routes passed in all directions. Kolanut was taken to the Sudan while horses were imported. The conquest of Dahomey by Oyo enabled it to have access to European goods, which was at a disadvantage to the empire because it prevented it from selling its industrial goods, such as textiles in the international market. There was also the exporting of slaves from Oyo which did not bring lasting benefits to the kingdom.

Taxes paid by the people of the empire, as well as tribute paid by conquered states, was a source of revenue. Between 1729 and 1781 Dahomey paid an annual tribute of forty men, forty women and forty loads of cowry.

From the 18th century the direction of Oyo trade changed from the North to the South. From then on, Oyo exported slaves and imported firearms and European textiles. This shows a change of direction of the trade relations of Oyo.

9.5 Collapse of the Oyo Empire

The empire started to show signs of decline in the second half of the 18th century. Dahomey refused to pay tribute and the Egba became independent of Oyo control by defeating the army which was sent to fight them. These territories became independent because of internal struggles for power between the Alafins and Bashoruns, which weakened the central government. Between 1750 and 1774 there was struggle for power between Bashorun Gana and the Alaafin which led to conflicts and bloodshed. This further affected the economy and military prowess of the state, which made the army weak and unable to contain provinces that wanted to be independent. The independence of the provinces, such as Nupe, Borgu, Dahomey, led to the reduction of revenue of the state, as well as slaves that were

brought to Oyo. Thus, Oyo had to source for slaves from within the area which reduced agricultural labour force and consequently affected agriculture. Also, Oyo changed the direction of trade from the North to where it acquired horses for its army to the direction of the coast where it participated in the slave trade. The slave trade led to the collapse of the Oyo Empire.

There was the presence of weak rulers from the 18th century, who could not maintain the kingdom together, thus, the kingdom declined.

Also, due to change of trade from the North to the coast there was population shift towards ports of Badagry, which made Oyo loose its population.

9.6 Benin Empire

Origin of the Benin Empire

Tradition has it that Benin came from ancient Egypt and temporarily settled in Ile-Ife before they finally settled at their final place. For centuries after their arrival, they remained disunited until about 900AD when they decided to have a centralized system of government. Igodo was the first ruler of Benin and founder of the Ogiso dynasty. The Ogiso continued to rule until the time of Owodo, whose rule was characterized by misrule, exploitation and calamity, thus, he was deposed and the dynasty came to an end. This was followed by a period of Republican experiment, after which the people of Benin requested for a ruler from Oduduwa who gave them his youngest son called Oranmiyan. Oranmiyan faced opposition to his rule, but he got a son as a result of his relations with the daughter of a Benin Chief. The chief was Eweka who founded the Eweka dynasty that continued rule in Benin.

Archaeological sources have shown that the city of Benin is older than Ife and that kings from Ife could not have participated in Benin. The fact is that the Benin were negro groups who lived in the Sudanic belt and later migrated to their present place. What is clear is that by the 15th century, the Benin Empire had reached great heights. From 15th to the 17th centuries, Benin was at the peak of its power and it had great rulers.

Oba Ewuare

He ruled Benin from 1440 – 1473. He was a courageous and great ruler. He was referred to as: Ewuare the great. He expanded the empire eastward towards the Niger, Akure, Ekiti, Owo in the West and Kurukuru in the North.

He established a strong government in Benin and ended power struggles. This made the empire peaceful. He introduced constitutional reforms which increased the powers of the Oba against the Uzama, who were the council of state. This helped to reduce power struggles.

He built good roads and streets in Benin which gave it a good outlook. He also built ditches for defensive purposes. Also, he claimed to be a semi-divine king which made people to honour his rule. He laid a solid foundation for the emergence of his successors.

Oba Ozolua (1481 – 1504)

He succeeded Ewuare the Great. He conquered the Yoruba states of Ekiti and Ijebu. In 1485, he received the Portuguese, headed by Afonso d'Aveiro. The visit helped in the establishment of commercial and diplomatic relations between Benin and Portugal. He sent an ambassador to Portugal who brought back missionaries, trading agents and presents for the Oba.

A trading station was set up at the port of Benin, which led to the increase of trade between Benin and Portugal.

Oba Esigie (1504 – 1550)

Under his rule, Christianity and Portuguese acquired a great place in Benin. During his reign, there was war between Benin and Idah and with the help of the Portuguese, who provided firearms to the Benin, he emerged successful.

Trade between Benin and Portugal became important. The Portuguese brought firearms and guns, and took away ivory, pepper, Bini cloths and women slaves.

Political system of Benin

At the peak of power of Benin. It stretched from Lagos and Idah to the North-West, areas of Western Igbo in the Eastern side, Ekiti and Owo on the Northern side.

At the centre of administration was the Oba who claimed divinity. He was, by tradition, not allowed to leave the palace unless during some state ceremonies. He was believed not to eat or dine and had the most powerful charms. He had executive, legislative and judicial powers. He reserved the right to pass capital punishment on crimes, such as murder. He generated revenue through taxes on the people as well as on the officials. He had the right to declare war and peace in Benin. He also controlled trade, both internal and external, with the Europeans.

Next to the Oba in hierarchy was council of state, who were officials that participate and assisted the Oba in the administration of the area. They were a hereditary class and were the king makers, called the Uzama.

The empire was divided into provinces. Villages and towns were grouped together to form provinces headed by governors. Benin was inhabited by Edo-speaking people. The governors appointed to the provinces were usually Benin princes who were responsible for collection of taxes and tributes on behalf of the Oba as well as maintenance of law and order.

While conquered territories, such as the Ishan to the North, Urhobo and Isoko in the Niger Delta, Akure, Ekiti, Owo and Eko (Lagos), were allowed to be governed by their local rulers.

In the judicial aspect, there was the presence of courts, but the court of the Oba was supreme. It is from there he passed sentences.

Portuguese Contact with Benin

Benin came in contact with Portugal in 1485 during the reign of Oba Ozulua. The Portuguese were led by Afonso d'Aveiro.

Trade developed as ivory, pepper, Benin clothes, leopard skin and women slaves were exported while firearms, clothes, umbrellas, beans and cheap metals were given in exchange. The port of Benin developed as an important centre of trade. The people of Benin grew rich as a result of participation as middlemen in the trade.

The contact between these two states made Benin to acquire firearms with which it used to strengthen its army and engaged in conquests of other areas.

The Portuguese introduced Christianity and a converted people including the ruler Oba Orhogbua. The Portuguese introduced corn, tomatoes, pineapple, groundnut and cocoyam, yam, bananas and coconut were introduced by the Portuguese from East Asia. This helped in introduction of new food crops.

As a result of contact with Portuguese, there is a rich history of Benin written by the Portuguese which is a first hand information.

9.7 The Efik State

The Efik settled in the Cross River Basin of Nigeria. When they settled, they met the Ibibio people there. The Efik settled in creek town and developed their features there.

Political Organization of the Ekik

The Efik lived in communities that were organized and lived independent of one another. These societies derived their power from societies, associations and age grades such as Ekpe, Obong, Ekpiri, Akata, Ukwa, Enana Eka and Ekang. Moral authority rested with the council of priest or head of each village and the associations were important in the implementation of decisions. Ekpe was an organ of political control in Efik as it later became instrument of group relations.

A form of writing, called Nsibidi, developed in the area which spread in Igbo land. In Efik it was a secret language used by societies and in taking court proceedings.

The Efik developed carved stone figures used to represent the dead people. They also carved stones which had human figures like a nose, mouth. The carvings were called the Akwanshi which continued to be important in Efikland up to the 20th Century.

The Economy of the Efik

The Efik people produced fish, crayfish, salt and artworks, such as carvings. These goods were traded with Igbos, Idoma and Jukun while food stuff and iron products from these areas were taken to the Efik. The Efik people were predominantly fishermen due to the location of the area around the river.

From the 15th century, the Efik served as middlemen in trade between the Europeans who were restricted to the coast and the people of the hinterland such as Igbo and Benin people. The main

article of trade was slaves. The trade made the Efik people to generate wealth. The Efik people also exchange carved materials and kolanut with the European textiles, gin, arms and gun powder.

The trade became highly competitive which led to the development of 'House System' which consisted of members of the extended family.

However, in the 19th century with the introduction of legitimate trade, the Efik people active in palm oil trade. The people also participated as traders into the trade. During this period other articles of trade were ivory, wild rubber and carved materials. The Efik monopolized palm oil trade until when the Europeans decided to have direct contact with the people of the interior.

Summary

- The origin of Yoruba is the Ile-Ife.
- Oyo Empire emerged in the 15th century and covered a large part of Yoruba land.
- The founder of Oyo Empire is Oranmiyan.
- Oyo developed a centralized system of government headed by the Alafin, and assisted by council of ministers called Oyemeesi who controlled the powers of the Alafin.
- The economy of Oyo was based on agriculture, trade and levying of taxes and tributes.
- Oyo empire collapsed in the 18th century.
- Benin empire emerged in the forest region around the 15th century.
- Some of the rulers of Benin were Oba Ewuare the Great, Oba Ozolua and Oba Esigie.
- The Oba was the head of government in Benin and was assisted by the council of state.
- The Efik states were organized as independent villages headed by priest heads, and were located around the Cross Rivers basin.
- Societies and associations such as Ekpe, Obong, Akata played politically and moral roles in Efik.
- The Efik actively participated as middlemen in trade between Europeans and the hinterland.

Revision Questions

Objectives

1. The Yorubas trace their origin to _____.
 - A. Igbo land
 - B. Delta
 - C. Asia
 - D. Ile-Ife
2. The Oyo empire emerged in the 15th century and covered a large part of _____.
 - A. Hausaland
 - B. Igbo land

- C. Niger-Delta
 - D. Yoruba land
3. Oyo developed a centralized system of government headed by the _____.
- A. Oba
 - B. Alafin
 - C. Oni
 - D. Oyemesi
4. The economy of Oyo was based on the following except _____.
- A. agriculture
 - B. trade
 - C. levying of taxes
 - D. groundnut production
5. The Benin Empire emerged in the _____ region.
- A. savannah
 - B. forest region
 - C. dessert
 - D. lake
6. Ewuare the Great was one of the rulers of _____.
- A. Igboland
 - B. Hausa land
 - C. Benin Empire
 - D. Oyo Empire
7. _____ was the title of the Benin ruler.
- A. Obi
 - B. Oba
 - C. Emir
 - D. Etsu
8. The Efik state was founded around _____.
- A. River Niger
 - B. River Benue
 - C. Cross River Basin
 - D. Lake chad
9. _____ were organized as independent villages headed by priest heads.
- A. Igbos
 - B. Hausas

- C. Efiks
 - D. Kanem Bornus
10. The people of Efik participated as _____ the trade between Europeans and the hinterland.
- A. middlemen
 - B. buyers
 - C. sellers
 - D. producers

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the political organization of the Oyo empire.
2. Assess the contribution of Benin rulers to the development of the kingdom.
3. Examine the collapse of Oyo empire.
4. Discuss the political system of the Efik.
5. Examine the significance of relationship of the Benin with the Europeans.