

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF YORUBALAND PRIOR TO COLONIALISM

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Abstract

One of the negative effects of colonialism on African societies was the disruption, and eventual replacement of indigenous social and economic structures, sub-structures and superstructures with structures of global capitalism, for the purpose of easy appropriation of local resources for the benefit of the metropolis. The supplanting of centuries-old and tested structures of the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria, not only weakened the fabrics that held the society together, but also rendered the people and their culture amenable and vulnerable to the exploitative tendencies of British colonial machineries. This paper explores the political economy of Yorubaland prior to colonialism. It demonstrates how pre-colonial society structures synergized to create orderliness, ensure prosperity and maintain inter-class harmony among the people, using taxation as its unit of analysis. The paper posits that pre-colonial financing system of the government which was modified to provide a fulcrum on which the colonial tax administration rested. In essence, the paper sheds light on the sources of revenue of the various government in pre-colonial Yorubaland, all of which the British encapsulated in taxation, rents and dues.

Key Words: Yorubaland, Taxation, Racialized, Pre-colonial

Introduction

The Yoruba dominate the south-western part of Nigeria. Historians also agree that a considerable number of Yoruba people also inhabit the southeastern part of the Republic of Benin (former Dahomey). These areas, namely,

southwestern part of Nigeria and southeastern part of the Republic of Benin, were reputed to form what was known as the Yoruba country¹ before the Western European powers sat in Berlin in 1884/85 to formulate rules for the diplomatic game of dividing the African continent. The 1991 census result of south-western Nigeria, which included Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Ondo and Lagos, was officially put at eighteen million, four hundred and thirty three thousand, four hundred and twenty nine (18,433,429).² The population of south-western Nigeria officially stands at twenty seven million, five hundred and eighty two thousand, and ninety two (27,582,092).³

Although there are various versions of the origin of the Yoruba, who have always accepted a fraternal relationship among themselves with Ile-Ife as a rallying point and the cradle of Yoruba civilization, while Oduduwa is accorded a central place as progenitor of all the Yoruba people. The basic political unit of government in Yorubaland was the town (*Ilu*), which was made up of lineages. A typical Yoruba kingdom was made up of many towns, villages, markets and farmsteads. One of these served as the capital town where the king (*Oba*) lived.⁴ The provinces or villages were headed by uncrowned kings (*Baale*). While the government of the capital served as the central government of the kingdom, those of the subordinate towns served as local government units.⁵ Major Yoruba towns include Ife and Oyo, whose kings, *Ooni* and *Alaafin*, respectively, were and are still the most highly respected Yoruba kings in Nigeria. Other major towns are Ilesha and Ekiti settlements to the northeast; Egbado, Ijebu and Awori in the southeast, Ondo, Ikale land, Owo and Itsekiri in the southwest, as well as the Shabe and Ketu, whose territories occupy the western boundaries that are

¹ J. A. Atanda, 1980. *An Introduction to Yoruba History*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, p. 1.

² *Nigerian Tribune*, 20th of January, 2007.

³ *Nigerian Tribune*, 20th of January, 2007.

⁴ G.B.N. Ayittey, 1991. *Indigenous African Institutions*. New York: Transnational Publishers Inc., p. 210.

⁵ J. A. Atanda, 1980. *An Introduction to Yoruba History*, p.19.

adjacent to Benin Republic.

The *Oba* is politically supreme as the executive head in all Yoruba towns. He exercises considerable powers; could arrest or even punish any of his subjects.⁶ In theory, he has absolute power. He is not accountable to them for any of his actions. That is why in greeting him, the Yoruba refer to the king, as '*Kabiesi*', meaning, there is no questioning his authority. In practice, however, the *Oba* is *not* an absolute ruler. He is assisted by a group of chiefs who counsel him on various political matters as well as economic, cultural, religious and other relevant issues.⁷ It is within these loose political structures that the people's economic livelihoods are situated.

The Political Economy of Yorubaland

Like most indigenous African economies, Yoruba societies were based on agriculture, pastoralism, market and trade, and the importance of these activities was appreciated by both the ruler and his people.⁸ Of paramount importance to the cultural uniformity among the Yoruba people were the economic relations between the various groups. The economic system may be characterized as 'capitalistic' in the sense that peasants, not their chiefs or states, determined what to produce, how much and for whom. However, the indigenous economic system was a different kind of capitalism in that profit was shared, even though it was not one of unfettered capitalism. The individual economic liberties were always circumscribed or bounded by social norms and obligations for the survival of the group. Profit could be made and wealth accumulated by the individual, but not at the expense of his kinsmen.⁹ Agriculture was of primary importance and was the occupation

⁶ R. Olaniyan, (ed). 1985. *Nigerian History and Culture*. London: Longman Group Ltd., 43.

⁷ I. A. Akinjogbin, & Ayandele, E. A. 1980. Yoruba land up to 1800, pp.130-131.

⁸ G.B.N. Ayittey, 1991. *Indigenous African Institutions*. New York: Transnational Publishers Inc., p. 373.

⁹ G.B.N. Ayittey, 1991. *Indigenous African Institutions*, New York: Transnational Publishers Inc. P. 373.

of the majority of the people.¹⁰

Until the war of the 19th century among the various communities in Yorubaland, peace and order was maintained to a degree that allowed the growth of a variety of economic activities and enterprises. Explorers and missionaries who traversed this area eloquently testified to the availability of variety of farm products everywhere: corn, yam, pumpkins, pepper, vegetables, palm oil, cotton and some tobacco. However, most of these products were for local consumption.¹¹ The Yoruba system of agriculture was so effective up to 1800 to the extent that there was enough for local consumption and external trade.¹² With agriculture as the principal occupation, land was very central, and it was not a marketable commodity.

Land was communally owned¹³ but the traditional land tenure system ensured that each family was entitled to land holding. It was originally occupied by the ancestors of the present possessor; by conquest, immigration, etc.¹⁴ The right to property in the land derived either from the right of conquest, first occupation of a hitherto uninhabited country or through long continued and uncontested use. Depending upon whether the conquest or original occupation was the work of a single chief or of a community acting without any one directing force, so will ownership of land be found to be vested either in the chief or in the community. It was definitely not seen as the personal property of an individual or government.

Each clan owned its own farmland, which was granted by the King (*Oba*)

¹⁰ A. I. Asiwaju, 1976. *Western Yoruba land under Europeans Rule; 1889 – 1945: A Comparative Analysis of French and British Colonialism*. London: Longman Group Ltd, p. 22.

¹¹ A. I. Asiwaju, 1976. *Western Yoruba land under Europeans Rule; 1889 – 1945: A Comparative Analysis of French and British Colonialism*. London: Longman Group Ltd, p. 22.

¹² J.A. Atanda, (1973). *The New Oyo Empire: Indirect Rule and Change in Western Nigeria, 1894-1934*. London, Longman Group Ltd. P.25.

¹³ W. Bascom, 1969. *The Yoruba of South-western Nigeria*. New York Holt, Rinehart and Winston, p. 24.

¹⁴ NAI. Oyo Prof. 1. File 676, Vol. 1. System of land Tenure in the Yoruba Province, Investigation into and Report on.

or *Baale* (minor *Oba* or village head) who just acted as the custodian of the land. Land was assigned to members on the basis of individual needs and it was subject to re-assignment. Although a man's land may continue to be worked by his heirs, only the crops they grew on it were theirs. However, in theory, it belonged to the clan as a whole. Outsiders were also permitted to lease clan land for farming provided they were willing to pay an annual fee (*Ishakole*) as an acknowledgment of the clan's ownership.¹⁵ Rights granted by a chief to a stranger were always at any time revocable, either by the grantor or any of his successors.¹⁶

There was also a well-developed sense of territorial ownership. Thus, certain lands were designated public land. These ones generally included the outskirts of villages, public roads, water courses, the sea, the beach, certain unproductive lands and sometimes, small areas of forest reserved for some special use (fetish, meeting places and markets). A most important fact, which may be deduced from the above is that, though there were much unused and vacant land, still there was not a foot of ground without an owner or owners; and 'he' or 'they' were always most clearly conscious of their rights and never surrendered them unless constrained by force, even if it was a portion of forest only frequented by hunters and rubber collectors that was in question. Actually, it was a common occurrence that interminable litigation and many wars had their origin in contentions as to the right of property over uninhabited lands, which formed frontier marches between two groups.¹⁷

An individual or family could acquire the rights of private or collective property in the produce of the land, but not in the land itself; property in the whole of the land that constituted the territory of a political or

¹⁵ NAI. Oyo Prof. 1. File 676 Vol. 1. System of land Tenure in the Yoruba Province, Investigation into and Report on.

¹⁶ S. Johnson, 1921. *The History of the Yoruba*. London: Lowe and Brydone Ltd., p. 95.

¹⁷ NAI. Oyo Prof. 1. File 676 Vol. 1. System of land Tenure in the Yoruba Province, Investigation into and Report on.

ethnic unit belonged to the chief of that unit; ownership of land was transmitted along with the political power, but did not form part of the personal succession".¹⁸ Land could also be granted to strangers. However, once granted, it was not to be taken back except on rare situations like treason to the kingdom, which rendered the grantee an outlaw, and such a person was driven altogether from the land and the land was confiscated.¹⁹

Even the colonial authorities accorded recognition to the native laws of property, and this is why E.D. Morel could say that "if there is one point on which all who had considered West African affairs agreed, it was the strength with which the West African Negro was attached to his right in land." Property in land in West Africa and Yorubaland in particular, has with reason been represented as a 'rite'. English, French and German observers had all noted the same fact. Wherever it had been studied at all, the Yoruba system of land tenure, "under its tribal, family, individual or commercial aspect, was found to be at once simple in its main lines, developed in its details and in many ways near the most advanced democratic conceptions of Western Europe."²⁰

Examined under the light of scientific enquiry, the hopelessly archaic "idea of the Negro being more or less a brute, incapable of any rational or durable progress, too backward to be capable of elaborating anything in the nature of an unwritten code of laws, every act of his life being merely the result of natural instinct"²¹ are jejune and can no longer be held. Europeans were

¹⁸ W. Bascom, 1969. *The Yoruba of South Western Nigeria*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, p. 18.

¹⁹ NAI. Oyo Prof. 1. File 676 Vol. 1. System of land Tenure in the Yoruba Province, Investigation into and Report on.

²⁰ NAI. Oyo Prof. 1. File 676 Vol. 1. System of land Tenure in the Yoruba Province, Investigation into and Report on.

²¹ NAI. Oyo Prof. 1. File 676 Vol. 1 System of land Tenure in the Yoruba Province, Investigation into and Report on.

convinced that the commercial and political success of their colonial governments in their West African possession depended on their recognition of the native laws of property.

From the study of the ideas of West African aboriginal on the subject of land tenure, the point that stands out most prominently as they relate to Yorubaland are: there was no "foot of land without a owner; an individual or family could acquire the rights of private or collective property in the produce of the land, but not in the land itself; property in the whole of the land that constituted the territory of a political or ethnic unit belonged to the chief of that unit; ownership in land was transmitted along with the political power, but does not form part of the personal succession".²² These, along with other considerations that cannot be fully exhausted in this work, were responsible for helping the colonial government to appreciate the inviolable quality of land tenure system in Yorubaland in particular and the entire West African forest region in general.

Farmers usually worked the farm with their unmarried sons. Sometimes, when the labour needs exceeded the capacity of the extended family, recourse was made to 'co-operative work groups', friends, relative and members of his club to form a working bee (*Owe*). He simply ensured that food and drinks were provided for the group at the end of the day's job, but this was not considered payment.²³ At times, several men who had farms near one another used to agree to labour exchange (*Aro*), and before its prohibition in the 1930s, wealthy farmers used to have their farm worked by indentured labourers or 'pawns' (*Iwofa*).²⁴ Pawns, (debt slaves) served as collateral security for loans borrowed by their parents or themselves. They

²² W. Bascom, 1969. *The Yoruba of South Western Nigeria*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, p. 18.

²³ W. Bascom, 1969. *The Yoruba of south-western Nigeria*, p.23.

²⁴ W. Bascom, 1969. *The Yoruba of south-western Nigeria*, p. 23. For more on *Aro*, *Owe* and *Iwofa*, see Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas*.

worked for the creditor until the loan was paid. This institution of domestic slavery was largely used by the wealthy and powerful in the pre-colonial and the colonial periods.

The Yoruba were also involved in the tending of some domestic animals like sheep, goat, chicken, guinea fowl, pigeons, ducks and turkey, which were kept at home, just as pigs, dwarf cattle, horses, dogs, cats, rabbits and guinea pigs were also kept. All these, except cats, were edible by the Yoruba in the former pre-colonial times. Wild birds and game were hunted in the forests and in open grasslands, while fish and shrimps were caught in the larger rivers, the lagoon and along the ocean. Professional hunters and fishermen sold their fresh catch of fish through traders in the market or had them dried for sale in areas where fish and game were not so plentiful.²⁵

The Yoruba were also famous for local manufacturing in such diverse local arts as weaving, dyeing, iron working, brass casting, wood carving, calabash carving, bead working, leather working, and pottery. There was craft specialization in the production of certain goods. Craft specialization made each individual economically dependent on the society as a whole. For instance the carver depended upon the blacksmith for tools, and upon the farmer, the hunter, and the trader for food. The blacksmith depended upon others for food, and upon the weaver for clothing. The farmer also depended on the smith for his hoe, machete and axe, and on the weaver for his clothing.²⁶ Craft specialization also meant the development of internal trade and town market for the exchange of local produce.²⁷ The weaving industry in Iseyin even used imported yarn, while the various *Adire*

²⁵ W. Bascom, 1969. *The Yoruba of South Western Nigeria*, p. 23.

²⁶ I. A. Akinjogbin, & Ayandele, E. A. 1980. "Yoruba land up to 1800". In Obaro Ikime. (ed) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, p.126.

²⁷ W. Bascom, 1969. *The Yoruba of South Western Nigeria*, p. 24.

²⁸ NAI. Oyo Prof 1, File No. 1757, Vol. III. Weaving and Dyeing in Nigeria, p. 32.

dyeing in Abeokuta and Ibadan were adapted to special requirements.²⁸ Spinning was a job for the women and was done by most of them in their houses during intervals allowed by their domestic chores.²⁹ Production was predicated upon the existence of a market for the finished product. A European, W.H. Clarke, was so impressed by these economic activities when he observed that generally, each town excelled in some particular department of industry from which it supplied those who needed such articles. The trade in indigenous produce and arts ensured continual interactions between towns, leading to exchange of one article for that of others.³⁰

The market places were the central nervous system of the community. They served as veritable locations of economic importance where the 'exchange of a ... considerable commerce transcending indigenous, ethnic and political boundaries'³¹ took place. Apart from their economic significance, these markets also served the role of fostering inter-group relations among the different states in the pre-colonial era since different people came together there to transact business. Although commodity relations among the Yoruba predated colonialism, as the market economy developed, the peasants came to depend more on the market. The village market performed vital economic, social and political functions that were well understood by the chiefs and people.

Direct barter was the medium of exchange in early times when goods were exchanged directly. However, people in many communities later began to use certain commodities as money, first, cowries, manila, copper, rods and bracelets before the Portuguese explored the coast, and then later manila metals imported through trade from the Indian Ocean. One wonders why the Portuguese

²⁹ NAI. Oyo Prof I, File No. 1757, Vol. II. Textile Industry in Oyo Province, (Resident's Office, Oyo), p. 400.

³⁰ W. H. Clarke, 1972. *Travels and Explorations in Yoruba land, 1854 – 1858*, J. A. Atanda (ed.) Ibadan. I.U.P., p. 263.

³¹ C.D. Forde & R. Scott, 1964. *The Native Economy of Nigeria*. Vol. I, London, p. 32.

intuitively decided that they were worth importing,³² despite the fact that cowry shells had been in use for centuries as the main medium of exchange. So much was the importance of cowry shells that by 1522, they were being imported into Nigeria from Malabar Coast, and during the seventeenth century, from East Indies. This importation probably, ultimately, led to its steady depreciation.³³

Credit facility was made available to the people through the institution of indentured slaves or 'pawning'. Credit was also available through the 'Esusu' institution, which had elements similar to installment buying or saving club.³⁴ In this kind of contribution, there was neither profit nor loss, but the advantage to members was that he had access to the contributions of the others at a particular interval, and was therefore able to take care of his financial obligations *vis-à-vis* purchase of goods, for services or repayment of debt. There was no interest charged on this money, and it was normally given to each member at a time he most needed it.

Sources of Government Finances in Pre-Colonial Yorubaland

The concept of taxation was not a novelty introduced to Nigeria by the British during the period of colonialism. It had been clearly formed and applied by the indigenous Nigerian rulers as a means of generating revenue for the running of their administration. African historiography has proved beyond any reasonable doubt that there were well-organized state systems in Africa during the pre-colonial era, and the notion of revenue generation for administrative purposes was also involved. A treasury system accordingly evolved in each village or division. The local treasuries were financially independent of the centre. They expected no grants or revenue from the central government. Rather, it was the central government that expected tributes and other revenue from the provinces as a mark of civic

³² H. K. Schneider, 1986. "Traditional African Economies", in Martin & O'Meara, p.189.

³³ W. Bascom, 1969. *The Yoruba of South- Western Nigeria*, p.27.

³⁴ Nnamdi Azikiwe, 1970. *My Odyssey*, an Autobiography, London: C. Hurst & Co. P. 54.

responsibility. Government expenditures in traditional Africa were very small.³⁵ In fact, government authority was acknowledged through the fulfillment of established civil obligations, which were conceived in communal terms. Payments and contributions for general welfare of the community were rendered in unit of lineages and villages, while assessment of individual citizens was unknown.³⁶

Revenues were derived from various sources, including gifts, fines, tributes and market tolls, which were paid voluntarily. Other revenue generating economic institutions were markets that were strategically located in various parts of Yorubaland. For example, there were markets situated at Apomu in Ife, Kosofe and Orile-Imo.³⁷ There was generally no direct taxation as represented by poll or hut taxes. Instead, tributes were paid to the chiefs through their representatives.³⁸ Also, tributes had no fixed value. The size of the tribute the chief received was determined by how well he governed. If he ruled well, they praised him and sent large tributes. Otherwise, they withheld or reduced their tributes to send a clear message to an incompetent government.

The kings understood how to look after themselves.³⁹ In addition to tax and tributes revenues, they received customary gifts from important visitors to their towns as well as from those who sought their favour in special cases.⁴⁰ Another means of royal revenue was the *Ishakole*, rent on land. *Ishakole* was fixed in law depending on the size of the land and its location.⁴¹ The landlord

³⁵ B. K. Abrefa, 1951. *The Position of the Chiefs in the Modern Political System of Ashanti*. P. 78.

³⁶ A. I. Asiwaju, 1976. *Western Yorubaland under Europeans Rule; 1889 – 1945: A Comparative Analysis of French and British Colonialism*, p.22.

³⁷ B. Sofela. 2000. *Egba/Ijebu Relations: A Study in Conflict Resolution in Nineteen-Century Yorubaland*. P.10.

³⁸ NAI. Oyo Prof. 2/3, File No. C42, Ibadan-Oyo: Relationship between.

³⁹ G.B.N. Ayittey, 1991. *Indigenous African Institution* New York: Transnational Publishers, Inc. p. 367.

⁴⁰ T. Falola & D. Oguntomisin, 1984. *The Military in Nineteenth Century Yoruba Politics*. Ife: University of Ife Press Ltd. p. 20.

⁴¹ O. Oluyemi, 1980. *Oba Adesoji Aderemi: 50 years in the History of Ile Ife*. Ile-Ife, Ogunbiyi Printing Works. p.37.

usually lived in the city states but traveled to the farm to collect his *Ishakole* annually. The *Ishakole* was arbitrarily fixed and it existed until 1976, when the government of Nigeria, through the promulgation of the Land Use Decree, reverted the ownership of land to government.

The idea of taxation per capital was practically unknown⁴² in the pre-colonial period. For instance, in Ikaleland and Oyo areas of Yorubaland, taxes were paid in kind, mainly in foodstuffs that were provided for the rulers and their officials.⁴³ This revenue system remained in operation until around 1914 when commodity currency, was partially introduced to replace the foodstuff system.

Colonial apologists have described the pre-colonial financial derivation system in many stereotyped ways like 'backward', 'despotic', 'extortionist', and so forth. However, it has now been proven beyond all doubts that efficient and effective revenue generation system antedated all the time of European contact with Western Nigeria. The pre-colonial income system hardly degenerated into the kind of crisis situations that were experienced during the colonial and early post-colonial eras in Western Nigeria. Reference to the pre-colonial income system as barbaric and too diverse is, therefore, to be regarded as one of the whims and caprices of the imperial colonial system;⁴⁴ a system whereby all the existing institutions of the colonized people were portrayed as inferior to those of the colonial masters. It was the British and the immediate post-colonial taxation systems that often turned out to be too burdensome for the indigenous people.

⁴² J. A. Atanda, 1973. *The New Oyo Empire*, London: Longman, p. 27.

⁴³ Interview held with Oba Adetuwo, L. A. (80 years) Ikoya, Ondo State, 20th December, 1979. This is recorded in F. A. Lamikan, "The Impact of the Colonial Taxation on the Nigeria Society: A case study of Ikaleland". (B. A. Project, Department of History, University of Ibadan, 1980) p. 3.

⁴⁴ I. Wilks, 1960. "African Historiographical Tradition Old and New", in Fage, *Africa Discover Her Past*. London: O.U.P, 1970, pp. 7-17. See also "The Development of Kingdoms in Negro Africa" in JHSN Vol.2 No.1. pp. 27-38.

Conclusion

This study explored the pre-colonial economy and the political economy of the polities in Yorubaland. It x-rayed the territorial scope of the Yoruba comprising land ownership which was very central to the practice of agriculture, the chief occupation of the people. The place of land tenure received considerable attention as land was a communal property and not for an individual, a clan or the monarch. The study underscored the relevance of pastoralism, crafts and trade in the pre-colonial economic structure of the Yoruba. It also highlighted the fiscal policies of the era which included trade by barter, the introduction and use of cowries, manilas, bracelets, etc and later the British currency, the pound sterling.

The study illuminated the financial sources of the traditional rulers, the *Oba* and *Baale* which were majorly tributes, gifts, and charges or rent on land as well as fines charged on legal cases. However, it is instructive to point out that these could not be regarded as taxation as they were in most cases paid voluntarily, especially the communal tributes from the provincial governors or *baale*. The central authorities reciprocated by ensuring that the provinces were protected and safeguarded against external aggression. On the other hand, taxation entails the use of force and sanction in case an individual or a company or firm fails to remit it to the appropriate authorities.

On the final note, the Yoruba economy prior to the incursion of the rapacious foreign invaders and the imposition of their diabolic and destructive economic policies was very viable, sustainable and practical in nature. The economy was well organized and there was no unemployment in the Yoruba country.