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African Statecraft before European Influence: A Study of Political Authority in Benin and Oyo

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Abstract

This paper explores the political systems of the Benin Kingdom and the Oyo Empire before 1800, a time before strong European influence. Focusing on this period allows for a clearer understanding of how these societies governed themselves using their own traditions and institutions. The study provides insights into the social and political identities of these pre-colonial African states and helps deepen our understanding of indigenous African governance. This knowledge is important for present-day Nigerians, especially in light of the later introduction of foreign political systems. The paper examines how political power was organized, how leaders gained legitimacy, and how order was maintained in both societies. By focusing only on Benin and Oyo, the research offers a detailed look at their political structures without unnecessary comparisons to other cultures. The study is based on historical evidence from notable publications, offering a balanced perspective rooted in African experiences that rely on both descriptive and analytical methods.

Keywords: *History, Benin Kingdom, Oyo Empire, pre-colonial, West Africa, Nigeria, political structures*

Introduction

The Benin Kingdom and the Oyo Empire were both powerful precolonial states in West Africa, each with distinct political structures and cultural practices. Studying them separately allows for a deeper understanding of their unique contributions to the region's history. Comparing their systems of governance also highlights how different political models can influence the development of a society. This comparison helps historians appreciate the diversity and complexity of precolonial African cultures. It is believed that a prince from Ife founded the Benin Kingdom in the 13th century, located in the forest region east of the Niger River. While tradition suggests that a prince from Ife established it, Benin gradually developed its own unique political and social system (Morton-Williams, 2018). The kingdom reached its peak in the 16th and 17th centuries and remained influential until it was annexed by the British in the late 19th century. Similarly, Oyo is believed to have originated as a war camp founded by Oranyan, a prince from Ife, in the late 14th century. It later grew into a major empire by the late 16th century, with the establishment of the Alaafin (the Oyo king) and a centralised system of governance. However, Oyo declined in the late 18th century due to internal conflicts and civil unrest (Osadola & Adeleye, 2020).

Theoretical Discussion

This study necessitates a framework that focuses on the indigenous philosophies, political values, and structures that guided precolonial African governance systems. Indigenous African political thought offers a conceptual foundation rooted in the political traditions, cultural ideologies, and normative values developed by African societies over generations. This way of thinking offers a genuine perspective that differs from European-centered views and places African political power in its proper cultural and intellectual setting.

At the heart of Indigenous African political thought is the understanding that political authority was not merely a product of coercive power (Law, 1975) but that political thought was deeply intertwined with spiritual legitimacy, kinship structures, communal consensus, and moral leadership. Governance was seen not only as an administrative function but also as a sacred duty grounded in the collective well-being of the community, often represented through symbolic institutions and ritualised leadership roles.

The Oyo Empire exemplifies a highly sophisticated political system guided by indigenous notions of balance, collective responsibility, and delegated authority. The Alaafin of Oyo, regarded as the spiritual and political head of the empire, derived legitimacy not solely from conquest or heredity but from a sacral kingship system grounded in Yoruba cosmology and religious tradition (Osadola & Adeleye, 2020). The Oyomesi, a council of hereditary chiefs, acted as kingmakers and protectors of the community's interests, so the Alaafin's power was not absolute. The existence of the Ogboni society, a religious and judicial council, further illustrates the layered governance structure in which power was dispersed through a matrix of checks and balances (Raji, 2021).

Within the Indigenous African political thought framework, this system reflects a commitment to collective governance, consensus-building, and moral leadership, in contrast to Western notions of autocratic or absolutist rule. The Oyo model emphasises participatory decision-making, sustaining legitimacy through respect for tradition, societal balance, and the embedded spiritual authority in governance.

In the Benin Kingdom, political authority was centralised in the figure of the Oba, whose power was perceived as both sacred and secular (Osadola, 2025). The Oba was not only a political leader but also a ritual figurehead whose rule was believed to maintain cosmic harmony within the kingdom. The Uzama nobles, a council of high-ranking chiefs, played advisory roles but did not wield power equal to that of the Oba. This system highlights a type of leadership where power is justified by a connection to the divine and through religious practices, closely related to the ideas of Indigenous African political thought (Law, 1975).

The governance system in Benin prioritised cultural cohesion, spiritual continuity, and hierarchical order, but it was also grounded in communal responsibility. The kingdom's political culture emphasised duty to the collective and reverence for tradition, ensuring that leadership was exercised within culturally defined parameters rather than arbitrary personal rules (Raji, 2021).

Through the lens of Indigenous African political thought, the political authority in Benin and Oyo can be understood as complex, culturally embedded, and morally anchored systems of governance. These systems were distinctively African, rooted in communal values, spiritual symbolism, and institutional sophistication that challenged reductive colonial narratives of precolonial African political primitiveness. Rather than mirroring European hierarchical state structures, Benin and Oyo reflected indigenous models of authority that prioritised collective well-

being, spiritual legitimacy, and cultural continuity—hallmarks of African statecraft prior to European influence.

Benin Kingdom's Political Structure

The political structure of the Benin Kingdom was organised at three main levels: central, local, and regional governments (Abe & Omotoso, 2021). These levels had clearly defined roles, similar to those of modern systems of government. The Oba (king) led the central government with the assistance of a Council of State, which consisted of his appointed officials, often close allies or relatives. This council held significant authority—they made laws, settled disputes, and oversaw traditional practices. Each government department reported to this council, which in turn reported to the Oba. Their goal was to ensure peace, stability, and the general well-being of the kingdom (Lassou et al., 2021).

The local government was made up of town unions and age-grade associations, where every able-bodied adult male was expected to participate (Banko, 2020). These groups provided security during conflict and helped maintain order during peace. Elders supervised age-grade associations like the Uzama, Ighele, Otu, and Egha Imiekie during their set terms. These groups also held annual festivals, offering sacrifices for peace and prosperity (Adeniran, 2020). The regional government emerged later under British influence after 1897, was formalised through the Benin Divisional Chiefs' Conference in 1910, and remained in place until it was dissolved in 1963 with the creation of the Midwest Region (Dansou & Carrier, 2023).

The Oba was not only a political leader but also a religious figure, believed to rule by divine right. He was considered the embodiment of the state, and his actions were considered directly affecting the welfare of the kingdom. Public loyalty to the Oba was reaffirmed through annual ceremonies. Disloyalty was considered rebellion and could lead to serious consequences, including war (Joseph, 2024). Historically, the Oba's role was central. The first Oba, Eweka I, was said to have begun his reign around 1180, chosen by divine will during what was remembered as a golden age. The Oba acted as a spiritual intermediary between the gods and the people, particularly representing the god Osanobua (Sogbesan & Laotan-Brown, 2022). At the grassroots level, the village group was the smallest political unit, based on extended families. A village head and a council of elders governed each village. Their primary roles included

overseeing ancestral religious rites and maintaining order (Bondarenko, 2020).

The Council of State was tasked with protecting the kingdom, upholding law and order, and ensuring justice. They also managed royal lands, maintained foreign relations, and collected tribute and taxes. This council acted as a check on the Oba's power and included both noble and commoner chiefs. A special group of chiefs, known as the Ibiwe, helped interpret customary laws and royal edicts (Osadola & Adeleye, 2020). Among the highest-ranking chiefs were the Uzama, known as 'kingmakers'. Initially representing the original seven towns, their numbers later grew. The Uzama could enthrone or remove an Oba, ensuring he followed tradition. If an Oba ruled unjustly, they could even compel him to abdicate or die by suicide. To limit their power, some Uzama were assigned diplomatic or administrative duties by the Oba (Asikhia).

Military and economic activities are closely linked to Benin's administrative system. Ministries were set up to manage different sectors, such as food collections, finance, and defence. The Ministry of War provided soldiers, while the Ministry of Finance oversaw resources and trade (Adenipekun, 2022). War and revenue collection were key responsibilities of the Oba and his aristocrats, with district chiefs tasked with sending food and goods to the capital. The Oba, supported by his crown princes, stood at the centre of this system. Below him, the Uzama served as both advisors and a check on royal power. In the 17th century, tensions between the Oba and the nobility led to internal conflict. These disputes resulted in a power-sharing arrangement called the "power of process", establishing an early form of constitutional governance in Benin and laying the foundation for modern political systems in Nigeria (Odiije, 2024).

Oyo Empire's Political Structure

The Oyo Empire was divided into provinces and communities, each playing an important role in the political structure. These regions often traced their origins to the Oyo people, who were instrumental in forming the empire. A general from the Oyomesi (a council of nobles) led the provincial army, which maintained a presence in all parts of the empire. Despite this centralised military structure, local communities were allowed to manage their own affairs through traditional administrative systems. This helped preserve local customs and minimise frequent uprisings against central rule (Osadola & Adeleye, 2020).

The government of Oyo followed a typical African model, with authority shared between upper councils made up of senior chiefs and important officials. The Oyomesi, a council of seven senior officials who acted as kingmakers, closely supervised the Alaaḡin (king), ensuring he did not possess absolute power. The Oyomesi also served as a political and judicial authority, with the power to remove the Alaaḡin if he was deemed unfit to rule, often through the ritual act of suicide. The council also had a say in state policies and could say no to the king's decisions (Osadola et al., 2021).

The 15th century saw the founding of the Oyo Empire, a Yoruba state in West Africa. At its peak, it extended across a large area from present-day western Nigeria to the Republic of Benin. The empire actively participated in the transatlantic slave trade, forcibly bringing people from various ethnic groups into its territory. Despite its size, Oyo maintained a well-organised and efficient government system (Osadola et al., 2021).

During periods of weak leadership, the Council of State began taking greater control over resources and their distribution, reducing the Alaaḡin's influence. Over time, the Council played a growing role in selecting the Alaaḡin, though the exact moment this shift occurred remains debated among historians (Morton-Williams, 2018). Awonsokun, who became king in 1750, demonstrated the limits of the Alaaḡin's power. He attempted to distribute offices without the council's consent, which led to his resignation in 1754. The Council chose his successors, who had short or troubled reigns. This shows how the Council could use royal power to its own advantage (Osadolor, 2022).

Although there were formal rules for appointing an Alaaḡin, in practice, the process often depended on specific circumstances. The Alaaḡin held executive authority in theory, but he could be removed from power if necessary—even through assassination (Falola, 2022). The actual power of an Alaaḡin depended heavily on his personal traits, such as leadership skills and wisdom. Traditionally, the Alaaḡin delegated military and judicial responsibilities to trusted individuals to maintain the dignity of his position. His authority allowed him to declare war, summon provincial leaders to the capital, or cancel military campaigns (Adegbile, 2023).

The Council of State acted as a daily check on the king's power. It consisted of seven members—one from the city council and six from the provinces. Because each council member represented a different region, this system provided a form of balanced governance. The Oyomesi (council members) served as judges and only met when required to resolve

disputes. When the council was not in session, the Alaafin could temporarily take over its duties. In Oyo, it was the job of the rulers to uphold the empire's laws, promote justice, and protect moral standards, even if that meant going against the Alaafin's decisions (Adeyeye, 2023).

In 1776, Afonja, the commander of the provincial army and ruler of Ilorin (a northern city in Oyo), rebelled against the central authority. He aimed to create an independent state with Ilorin as its capital. While several political factors contributed to the uprising, the main causes included the weakened state of the Alaafin's rule and internal divisions within the empire. Afonja also had personal motives—he was about to be removed from office due to misconduct and therefore allied with rebels and opposition groups. His coup was successful, and his forces captured the Oyo capital. The Alaafin at the time, an elderly king named Abiodun, ruled for 13 years and reportedly committed suicide to avoid capture after the invasion. Afonja installed a new Alaafin of his choosing, but internal conflict continued, and the rebellion proved difficult to control (Anderson, 2022).

Comparison of Political Structures

Examining the degree of centralised and decentralised power in both systems allows for a simple comparison. In Benin, the relationship between the Oba and his officials, who held significant executive, judicial, and religious roles, consolidated power more centrally. In Oyo, the Alaafin ruled alongside the Oyomesi, a council of chief ministers, due to the empire's large territory and extensive military operations. The Alaafin depended heavily on this council for governance, as he could not oversee every region directly. Although the Oyo system appeared more centralised than Benin's, provincial leaders in Oyo often exercised a high degree of autonomy, especially during times of political instability, such as the late 18th-century Dahomey invasion (Morton-Williams, 2018).

In Benin, the Oba maintained central control by appointing council members and key officials. However, this control rarely extended beyond the capital, limiting administrative centralisation (Osadola et al., 2021). A centralised political system concentrates power on one central authority, often suppressing opposition and controlling the use of force. In contrast, a decentralised system spreads power across various political institutions, allowing more local autonomy. However, decentralisation can lead to internal power struggles and a reduced capacity to respond to security threats. The major difference between Oyo and Benin political structures lies in their level of centralization. Each system reflected the specific needs

and challenges of its geopolitical environment. Both had strengths and weaknesses depending on the historical context (Morton-Williams, 2018).

The Oba of Benin was considered divinely chosen and ruled with religious legitimacy. As a result, his role was more spiritual than political. Although detached from daily governance, he could assert political authority when necessary through his veto power or during a political crisis, known as an interregnum. Such an arrangement allowed him to temporarily take on a stronger leadership role. The army was used to enforce authority and suppress dissent (Ojo & Ekhaton, 2020). When making major political decisions, the Oba often relied on past royal experiences and consulted oracles—similar to how modern leaders might seek public support through referendums.

Continuous power struggles among elite groups complicated political decision-making in the Oyo Empire. The Oyomesi often clashed with the Alaafin and other aristocrats over control. Military leaders, known as Baloguns, were often given orders by both the Oyomesi and the Alaafin, which led to confusion and overlapping authority. In some cases, the Oyomesi even blocked the Alaafin's policies if there was no agreement, which weakened central authority and slowed governance (Morton-Williams, 2018).

Over time, the Oyomesi became a political force that sometimes acted behind the scenes, influenced by powerful aristocrats. When an Alaafin opposed their interests, the Oyomesi could exploit his unpopularity, remove or exile him, and appoint a more compliant ruler (Agiri, 1975). Although the Alaafin gave overall leadership, he rarely took direct control of administration. The Oyomesi, acting as a council of state, was designed to keep the king's power in check. Theoretically, this council consisted of seven members, predominantly chosen from the Balogun (war chief) class, to avert the hegemony of influential aristocratic families and to equilibrate political power (Osadola & Adeleye, 2020).

When considering religion and governance, Osadolor (2022) posits that faith was integral to the political system of the Benin Kingdom. According to him, the Oba was not only a political and military leader but also a spiritual figure who maintained harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. The kingdom's religious practices were deeply entwined with governance, and the Oba's role was considered divinely ordained. In his thesis, Osadolor (2001) has earlier posited that the kingdom's major religious institutions, such as the priesthoods, were directly tied to the state apparatus, and religious rituals were used to reinforce the authority of the Oba. He believed that the kingdom also had a sophisticated system of

religious festivals and sacrifices to honour the gods and ancestors, which contributed to its political cohesion while comparing it to the Oyo empire.

Osadola et al. (2021) opine that while religion was important in the Oyo Empire, it did not hold the same central role in governance as it did in Benin. The position was borne out of the fact that while the Alaafin was considered semi-divine, his authority was more secular and political in nature compared to the Oba of Benin. No doubt, religion played a significant part in Oyo society, but the empire's political structure was more influenced by the power of the Oyomesi and the various other chiefs. However, certain religious leaders, especially the Ogboonis (priests), had significant influence, and religious rituals and divination played an important role in statecraft, particularly in military and political decision-making.

Barnes & Ben-Amos (1983) noted that the Oba's council in the Benin kingdom strictly regulated succession and leadership. According to them, "The selection of a new Oba was typically based on lineage, and a large council of elders, consisting of nobles and high-ranking chiefs, would select the most qualified prince to assume the throne." To support this position, Osadolor (2022) argued that the succession process in the Benin Kingdom was highly political, and rivalries among the royal family often influenced the selection of the next Oba. However, the Oba's power remained absolute, and there were few checks on his authority once he ascended the throne.

In Johnson (1921), succession in the Oyo Empire was similarly influenced by royal lineage, but it was a more complex process. The Oyomesi and other leading chiefs played an important role in the selection of the Alaafin. The Oyomesi would propose candidates from the royal family, and the chosen candidate would undergo a ritual process before being confirmed as the Alaafin. The Oyo political system ensured that no single individual or faction could completely dominate the succession process, maintaining a balance of power within the leadership (Akintoye, 1969).

Dynamics in the comparison

It is important to explore the different aspects of power, politics, and leadership, particularly through the broader concept of succession, which helps us understand who held authority and how power was defined and exercised. In the early period of the Oyo Empire, rulers often demonstrated power through taxation and warfare, primarily aiming to expand territorial control and increase imperial revenue (Akinjogbin,

1966). However, interpretations that present the Alaafin and his ministers as the only key power holders oversimplify the situation. Historical accounts show that several Alaafin were removed by their ministers, indicating that real central authority did not fully emerge until the 17th and 18th centuries. Even then, Oyo's political leadership lacked full unity and coherence (Hiribarren, 2022).

When we examine the sociopolitical structures of Oyo and Benin before 1800, both societies may initially appear dominated by intense and, at times, destructive political struggles (Osadola, 2026). However, reducing them to mere power contests would ignore the complexity and vibrancy of these societies (Raji, 2021). While power and influence were clearly central concerns, a deeper analysis shows how succession politics shaped not only leadership but also affected wider society. This method allows for a more holistic understanding of the political, social, and religious elements that influenced both internal governance and inter-kingdom relations (Morton-Williams, 2018).

Both Yoruba and Edo societies had long histories of power struggles, particularly over succession. In Yoruba society, these often involved generational tensions between groups such as the Ogboni and the Alaafin. In Edo society, conflicts between the Oba and the Uzama chiefs were also common (Osadola et al., 2021). Succession disputes sometimes arose when a king's reign ended poorly or was considered bringing misfortune. In such cases, people often attributed problems not only to the ruler but also to the capital's environment (Anderson, 2022). In Edo tradition, relocating the capital was sometimes a response to such challenges, which may explain the limited archaeological remains of early Oyo cities. The final capital of Oyo, for instance, has yielded little material evidence, possibly because land was often rewarded more than construction efforts (Barnes & Ben-Amos, 1983). In contrast, the Edo Kingdom left behind extensive ruins, such as moats and city walls, along with written accounts by Portuguese observers that help reconstruct Benin's political past.

To address the challenges of succession, both Oyo and Benin established systems to limit the power of the king. In Oyo, the Oyomesi council acted as a check on the Alaafin's authority. In Benin, although succession was hereditary, efforts were made to ensure the king's power could be managed, either through the Uzama or by choosing successors who could be easily checked (Odijie, 2024).

Religion also played an important role in shaping political and social institutions in both kingdoms. The Oyo Empire functioned as a religious center that promoted the Yoruba faith. Religion was used to strengthen

political control over towns, although some religious autonomy was maintained locally. Oyo's belief system, which emphasised spirits and ancestral forces, led to efforts to spread its religious practices alongside territorial expansion (Hiribarren, 2022). However, the desire to preserve the "pure" form of the religion led Oyo to absorb local traditions without suppressing them completely. As the empire expanded, displaced religious practitioners often formed opposition groups, which later contributed to the empire's decline. In Benin, religion was equally central to political legitimacy. Rituals, such as human sacrifice, were used to maintain divine favour and purify the land. Religion was also integrated into foreign policy and helped explain natural or supernatural events (Anderson, 2022).

Due to their different political developments, the Benin and Oyo empires rarely came into direct conflict. By the late 16th century, Benin had stopped expanding northward and eastward after taking regions like Ekiti (Odijie, 2024). Later military activity in the 17th century focused mainly on reopening trade routes to Kano and Bornu, rather than territorial conquest. Around the same time, Oyo was consolidating its position in the Niger region. The two powers often met in central or western Yorubaland as diplomatic equals, and their interactions were generally peaceful and respectful (Law, 1975). Historical records even describe instances of mutual hospitality between the courts of Oyo and Benin, although there was also underlying tension. Despite some encounters during the Nupe wars of the 17th and 18th centuries, direct conflict between Oyo and Benin remained limited. Instead, logistical challenges, such as conflicts with the Sav people, prevented broader military cooperation between the two states (Hiribarren, 2022).

The ruling elites controlled the resources that drove the expansion and transformation of the Oyo and Benin empires. In the case of the Oyo Empire, economic growth was primarily supported by its control over the trans-Saharan trade, which had shifted to northern Nigeria (Lloyd, 1968). The Oyo Empire used the revenue from this trade to strengthen its military, expand its territory, and increase investment in the capital city (Green, 2011). In contrast, the Benin Kingdom experienced economic transformation marked by changes in economic activities and resource distribution. Its favourable climate and access to forests supported a productive agricultural system (Edo, 2010). This allowed the Oba to rely heavily on the labour of the people. By the late 19th century, Benin had become a regional economic power, with increasing allocation of resources toward the capital (Akintoye, 1969).

Both empires closely linked their economic structures to their political systems. In these pre-colonial states, wealth depended on central control

and the power of the elite. In both cases, there was a move toward greater economic centralisation, with more resources directed to capital. The ruling class in Oyo and the Oba in Benin lived in luxury supported by economic surpluses obtained from surrounding areas.

To better understand their economic systems, it is helpful to consider four key themes: economic development, resource distribution, trade and commerce, and social hierarchy (Lloyd, 1968). Trade was a more prominent part of everyday life in Oyo compared to Benin. Markets, known as Oja-oba, were held every four days, aligning with the Yoruba four-day week. Citizens could easily access markets, and traders from outside regions, such as Nupe, also came to trade. These traders paid a form of tax symbolised by peeling bark from a tree outside Alaafin's palace (Law, 1975). In Benin, trade was less extensive. While there was some trade with external groups, it mostly involved direct exchanges rather than widespread commercial sales. Portuguese sources describe trade with Benin as cautious and limited in scope. The Oba had minimal interaction with European traders, especially when compared to other groups such as the Akan or Yoruba (Green, 2011).

Benin also generated income through taxation. Taxes were imposed on producers of goods, such as hunters, and on neighbouring regions under Benin's control (Edo, 2010). Taxation of goods moving through Benin caused tensions and led to conflicts, including the Edo Wars. In the 17th century, the Oba introduced a head tax on all males over 18. This system, which later became common during colonial rule, was believed to have replaced a harsher earlier system that demanded a fifth of all produce (Akintoye, 1969). The centralised governments in both empires created a clear division between social classes. The kings and their families held the highest status, followed by noblemen and officials who governed smaller cities. Below them were the commoners, whose occupations varied but who bore the weight of the political and economic systems. While Yoruba society prioritised descent and lineage, Benin organised its people by occupation (Lloyd, 1968). Both empires used taxation to generate revenue for state functions and elite lifestyles. In Benin, skilled craftsmen mainly produced goods for the royal court. In contrast, Oyo's history includes more intensive taxation on commoners to finance military campaigns and royal expenditures, similar to European mercantilist practices in pre-colonial Nigeria (Green, 2011).

Conclusion

The decision-making structure of the Benin Kingdom reflects the centralised nature of its governance. The Oba, who possessed ultimate decision-making power, primarily held political authority. However, the Oba was supported by an advisory council known as the Uzama, composed of senior nobles and dignitaries, often appointed by or closely aligned with the monarch. Various internal and external influences shaped the Oba's decisions, even though he retained supreme authority. Internal pressures often emerged from royal kin and palace elites seeking decisions that would advance their familial interests, while external pressures arose from broader societal expectations aimed at ensuring communal prosperity and political stability. The decision-making process in Benin thus reveals a dynamic interaction between autocratic authority and collective counsel, with the overarching goal of securing both the ruler's legitimacy and the welfare of the state.

The political systems of Oyo and Benin exemplify the distinctive character of African statecraft prior to European influence. Cultural values, traditions, and indigenous institutions played a central role in shaping governance structures, which were fundamentally different from the stratified and coercive models of European political systems. Unlike European governments, which relied heavily on centralised authority and monopolised force to protect property and enforce social order, the political systems of Oyo and Benin prioritised communal harmony, sustainable leadership, and collective well-being. Their institutions were not only meant to centralise power, but also to encourage social cohesion and long-term stability. While these systems may appear less rigid or hierarchical when compared to European models, they were well-suited to the political and social contexts of their time, offering functional and context-specific approaches to governance in pre-colonial Africa.

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