

# SYNOPSIS OF PHD THESIS

## The Military System of Benin Kingdom c.1440 AD - 1897

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### Chapter One: Introduction: The Research Perspective

This thesis examines the process of the establishment and development of the military system during the period of the expansion and consolidation in the history of the West African kingdom of Benin from AD 1440 to 1897. For the period under consideration, a fairly detailed documentation about change in the military system is available, such as oral historical narratives, European travellers' accounts, and objects of art accessible to historical interpretation. This study critically examines these sources, and gives due respect to both continuity and change in Benin history. However, basic to this research, is the contribution to the academic debate on the place of the military in terms of the origins and essence of the state in Benin, which was the first to be established in that part of Africa with the emergence of the *Ogiso* dynasty of kings in the first millennium.

This study introduces the concept 'military system' as a set of units or elements such as the command units of the army, weaponry, logistics, intelligence, training, defence initiatives, strategy and tactics of warfare, all of which are actively interrelated and operating in a regular pattern as a complex whole. There is considerable diversity in the ways in which military systems have evolved in different societies over long periods of time in history. In this study, the research problem revolves around the assessment of the purpose and function of military power in the kingdom of Benin. Based on the research questions that were asked, the working hypotheses were formulated: First, that every military system has a logic of its own which advances the aims of the state. Second, that the military power of the kingdom of Benin was a factor which transformed the small state in the early fifteenth century to an empire that lasted until British colonisation; the success over long period of time was due to civil supremacy over the military, which defined the proper relationship of military power to civil authority. It was the mechanism adopted for securing predominance over the

army that led to the development of a military system within the political structure of the state. Third, that the interweaving of interests among the different political groups exacerbated conflicts that drifted the state from instability to civil wars, which in turn created the opportunity for the reorganisation of the army during the different phases of the history of Benin.

Moreover, in this first chapter, the study discusses the problems of sources and methodology. Although the primary sources for the reconstruction of early Benin history are scarce due to the deficiencies of written data, the range of materials from the archives and libraries which were supplemented with historical texts and travellers' accounts, and data from Benin oral traditions opened up the boundaries of historical space in a way that made it easier for to advance the range and quality of historical knowledge of the Benin past. Other sources, basically data from archaeology, ethnography and anthropology promoted an interdisciplinary approach in the collection and evaluation of material for the military system of Benin. In all, the structure of this work was based on the periodisation of Benin history as marked by political movements and development, which provided a framework for general assessment of the process of the establishment and development of the military.

## **Chapter Two: Aspects of Benin Military History Before 1440 AD**

This chapter addresses aspects of Benin's political and military history before 1440. The discussion of the historical process before 1440 attempts to examine the historical legacy of the first millennium which formed a variety of influences that shaped the political culture and patterns of authority of the historical developments in the second millennium. The fundamental weaknesses of previous interpretations of the origins of Benin, and the Benin-Ife relationship, and the effort of historians to reconcile the contradictory appeals in various ways have been reconsidered in this chapter. Other issues concerning the development of politico-military ideas, warfare and state building, and the war potential of Benin before 1440 have also been examined with the aim of throwing more light on the significant events that changed the course of Benin history. The discussion of these issues gives a background of the conditions which led to the transformation of the state by the warrior kings of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

### **Chapter Three: The Era of Warrior Kings, c.1440-1600 AD**

This chapter focuses on the development of the military during the era of warrior kings from c.1440 to 1600, a period that witnessed the expansion of the state through warfare mounted virtually in all directions. It begins with the reforms introduced by Oba Ewuare the Great of Benin (c.1440-1473), the first of the warrior kings which marked the beginning of the transformation of the character of the kingdom of Benin, as the reforms were calculated to eliminate rivalries between the Oba and his chiefs, and establish political monopoly over the exertion of military power. On the basis of this reforms, this study examines the nature of the military system which evolved during this period, with focus on the socio-economic background of the system, the political foundations of the military system, organisation of the army, defensive fortification and establishment of military camps, weapons of war, strategy and tactics of warfare, as well as intelligence and logistics. The process of the establishment and development of the military during this period reflects the distribution of power within the Benin society.

### **Chapter Four: The Period of Benin's Military Power, 1600-1800**

Chapter four discusses changes in the military during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries within the context of domestic political constraints, leading to fluctuations in the military power of Benin. The changes were the results of the conflicts between the Oba and the chiefs, producing new political configurations in the structure of the state, which in turn significantly influenced the process of the development of the military. The first shift in power relationship was the displacement of the Oba as the supreme military commander of the army, leading to a decline in the personal influence and authority of the Oba, and the chiefs who gained power came to overshadow the king. The complexity of the processes involved in the historical development of this period was partly due to the rise of commerce. This was a period of active trade between Benin and the Europeans, affecting the balance of power between rival elements. The effects of this development on warfare and warriors, economic foundations of military power, reorganisation of the army, the new weapons system, logistics, strategy and tactics of warfare have been discussed in this chapter.

## **Chapter Five: The Century of Political Exigencies, 1800 - 1896**

Events closely associated with the development of the military in the nineteenth century - the most critical century in the history of Benin - are dealt with in chapter five. It is difficult to point to any critical turning point during this period, but a central issue in the transition process was the impact of domestic power politics and foreign trade on the military power of the state. The central problem encapsulated in the concept of nineteenth century transition has been analysed in the context of the connection between internal dynamics and international forces that decisively altered the fortunes of Benin Empire. Moreover, the continued process of development of the Benin military system during this century of political exigencies has been examined vis-à-vis the interrelationship between the political economy and changing perspective on warfare, the reforms in military organisation, surveillance and collaboration, weapons build-up, new strategic plans, and the idea of a standing army. During this period, the interweaving of interests serves to illustrate the conflicting goals of the Oba and the chiefs.

## **Chapter Six: The Response of Benin Military System to British Invasion in 1897**

Chapter six re-examines the Anglo-Benin military confrontation of February 1897, which was a drama without parallel in the annals of the military history of Benin, and offers a new perspective on the events which led to the conflict and its aftermath. While the Benin way in warfare, strategic thought and practice met its first and greatest test, this chapter critically analyses the resistance to British aggression, theatres of the war, comparative analysis of Benin and British ways in the war, and the guerrilla warfare which continued after the fall of Benin. In this chapter, attempt was made to answer the following questions: First, was the defeat of Benin due miscalculation largely from erroneous appraisal of British strategic operations? Second, was it the advantage of British superior military technology? And third, did the problem of internal political distress in Benin affect their threat perception of the British? However, this study points out that the conquest of Benin by the British imperialists was part of the manoeuvres to expand their sphere of influence and economic role in Africa in the age of new imperialism.

## **Chapter Seven: Conclusion**

The concluding chapter discusses the relevance of the findings of this study for current debates in Benin historiography. The results explicitly reveals the relationship between military power and political control in the kingdom of Benin, and the reasons why the kingdom was so successful, militarily and politically. One of the findings was the strategy adopted by the state for securing civil predominance over the army which led to the development of a military system within the political structure of the state. In addition, this concluding chapter elucidates the empire-building initiative of Benin, and the question of the expansion of the frontiers of Benin through warfare which has continued to generate debate in Benin historiography.

## **Bibliography**

The bibliography contains the archival notes and references, the oral sources and list of informants, and the bibliographic notes and references of unpublished theses and papers, journal articles, and books or chapters in books which were either consulted or selected in the preparation of this thesis. Although not all the books or articles listed in the bibliography have been used in the preparation of this work, they remain important sources for those who wish to pursue further inquiries, as a guide to a type of comprehensive reading list frequently consulted by scholars working on aspects of Benin history and culture. In this way, the bibliography connects this work with the corpus of past scholarship on Benin.

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