

**SUBJECT:** History  
**TOPIC:** The Oyo Empire (1)  
**WEEK:** Five (5)  
**CLASS:** JS1

**OBJECTIVE:**

- a. Trace the origin of Oyo
- b. Highlight the factors responsible for the growth of Oyo
- c. Discuss the political organization of Oyo
- d. State the reasons why Oyo Empire lasted

**ORIGIN OF OYO**

The Oyo Empire was the most distinguished political achievement of the Yoruba speaking people. The Yoruba has two main tradition of origin. They have a tradition which claim that the “world was created in the heart of the region occupied by them at Ile – Ife”. They also have another tradition which traces their origin to a wave of migrations from an unspecified place in the Far East. In both traditions, the position of the hero is often assigned to a mythical figure known as Oduduwa whose seven children are believed to have been the founders of different Yoruba culture groups.

**FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GROWTH OF OYO EMPIRE**

- a. The foundation of Oyo Empire was strategically located from the economic and strategic stand – point. On the economic front, the soil of this zone was fertile and it encouraged farming on a large scale.
- b. Trade: the people were well placed to play an important part in the trade between the forest lands to the south and the savannah to the north. This trade was very lucrative and made Oyo wealthy.
- c. The use of Calvary also aided the rise of Oyo Empire.
- d. Paying of tributes by vassal states

**POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF OYO EMPIRE**

At the head of the government was the priest monarch known as Alaafin a monarch. The Alaafin was the supreme political head of all kings and kinglets in the north and western Yoruba land but in ritual and religious matters he was subordinate to the Ooni of Ife. The Alaafin lived in his palace. His crown was made of owo (cowries) or beads (Ileke). At coronation the Alaafin was presented with an Eewo (a compulsory guiding rule). The Alaafin belonged to the Yoruba Ebi system which is an oath and law binding the descendants of Oduduwa of Ife together not to do harm to one another and particularly to Ife. The practice of keeping the oath was called Ogun Jije or Ogun pinpins. In theory, the Alaafin was an absolute monarch whose will was law, but in practice, he was a limited monarch whose political actions were regulated by a body of customs and conventions which were regarded as secret, unchanging and covering all conditions. The Alaafin ruled jointly with an energetic and tragic figure in Yoruba political history known as the Aremo or the crown prince. The Aremo’s coronation was almost as elaborate like that of the king. He exercised almost equal powers with the Alaafin.

Next was the Oyomesi (King makers or nobility) they were the seven highest principal counselors of the Empire. The Oyomesi was the watchdog of the nation against the assumption of dictatorial power by either the Alaafin or the Aremo. It was headed by the Bashorun who was the traditional prime minister. He consulted the Oracle for the appointment of a new Alaafin. He acted as the president of the council and he had the chief choice in the selection of a new Alaafin. He acted as a regent in the period between the

death of an Alaafin and the accession of another. He tells the council when the Alaafin had broken the law and the constitution and therefore deserved to die. An Alaafin could be removed by asking him to open an empty calabash or by presenting him with a calabash with a parrot's egg in it.

There was the Ogboni cult. It was a secret society made up of prominent religious leaders and Juju priests. They were led by Oluwa (Ifa priest). It acted as check and balances on the powers of the Alaafin and Oyomesi. They could either accept or reject the Bashorun's declaration over Alaafin suicide.

Next was the Imperial Army called Eso. The army was headed by the Are-ona – kakanfo. He was usually an obstinate, stubborn and troublesome person who feared neither man nor gods. Because of his troublesome nature, he was usually appointed a resident in provinces away from the imperial capital which lay on that side of the frontier from which the greatest trouble was suspected. The Are-ona –Kakanfo could commit suicide if defeated at war. The army had horses and foot soldiers. The army was saddled with the task of expanding the frontiers of the empire and in maintaining peace in the Empire.

Finally were the provinces. The Empire was divided into provinces made up of the vassal or conquered states. The vassal states had representatives (Ilari) from the Alaafin. They ensured regular payment of tributes by the vassal states.

#### **WHY OYO EMPIRE LASTED**

- a) The efficiency of the army
- b) Good economy
- c) Visionary Alaafin's
- d) Organised Government

#### **EVALUATION**

1. Examine the various traditions of origin of the Yoruba people.
2. State two factors responsible for the growth of Oyo Empire.
3. Examine the socio-political organization of the Oyo Empire.
4. Highlight the factors responsible for the long survival of Oyo Empire.s

#### **ASSIGNMENT**

Discuss the administration of Oyo Empire.