



## **Yoruba Women and Warfare in Pre-Colonial Yorubaland**

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### **Abstract**

*The history of women's involvement in warfare spans various societies and time periods, including ancient, medieval, precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa. However, the contributions of Yoruba women to warfare in pre-colonial Yorubaland remain understudied. This study investigates Yoruba women's multifaceted roles in warfare, explores their experiences, examines their contributions, and highlights their strengths while shedding light on their hidden roles in warfare in order to promote a more inclusive understanding of military history and the complex dynamics of power and gender in precolonial Yorubaland. The study adopted a historical and documentary research design. Primary and secondary data were gathered through in-depth interviews (IDI) with 39 individuals, including women leaders, traditional chiefs, priestesses, historians, and experts in women's studies. Ten focused group discussions (FGD) were conducted with traditional women leaders, clan heads, and traditional religious leaders. The study applied social, womanism, and actor-network theories and data were content-analyzed to reveal Yoruba women's significant roles in communal wars. Findings revealed that Yoruba women played significant and multifaceted roles in Yoruba warfare, including as war deities, warrior queens and kings, war legislators, spiritual leaders, titled war leaders, combatants and various military effort support. The study also highlighted the importance of women's involvement in intelligence gathering, diplomacy, and logistics, illustrating their agency, power, and impact on the battlefield and beyond. Their roles were not inferior or*



*subservient to men's roles but rather complementary and sometimes catalytic. Yoruba women's experiences in warfare were shaped by their social, cultural, and religious contexts. They made significant contributions to warfare, demonstrating courage, resilience, and independence. This study recommended recognizing and valuing Yoruba women's contributions to warfare and exploring ways to build on their strengths. The study concluded that Yoruba women played crucial roles in pre-colonial Yorubaland in challenging the prevailing narrative that women's contributions to warfare are limited. Their experiences and contributions offer valuable lessons for understanding the complex history of warfare in Africa.*

**Keywords:** Yoruba, Yoruba women, Warfare, Yoruba warfare...

## **Introduction**

The history of women's involvement in warfare spans various societies and time periods, including ancient, medieval, and precolonial Africa. African women have participated in wars in one capacity or the other. In precolonial Yorubaland, women played a significant and multifaceted role in warfare, extending far beyond traditional gender norms (Akinyoade & Ogunrin, 2017). While often overlooked in historical accounts, Yoruba women's contributions to warfare were crucial to the success of military campaigns, serving as spiritual leaders, strategists, combatants, spies, war deities, and providers of psychological, spiritual, and strategic support (Oke, 2001; Hinderer, 1872). Women also held titled leadership positions, such as war leaders and war legislators, demonstrating their agency, power, and importance in Yoruba society (Johnson, 2001). Additionally, women played key roles in intelligence gathering, diplomacy, and logistics, managing supplies and boosting troop morale (Faboyede, 2011; Falola, 2013). As noted by Johnson (2001), women's roles in Yoruba warfare were "not limited to the domestic sphere, but extended to the battlefield and beyond." This article delves into the complex and fascinating world of Yoruba women's experiences in warfare, exploring their diverse roles, contributions and impact on the battlefield and beyond. It highlights their strengths and shed light on their hidden roles in warfare in order to promote a more inclusive understanding of military history and the complex dynamics of power and gender in precolonial Yorubaland.



The study adopted a historical and documentary research design, collecting primary and secondary data through in-depth interviews with 39 individuals, including women leaders, traditional chiefs, priestesses, historians, and experts in women's studies. Ten focus group discussions were conducted with traditional women leaders, clan heads, and traditional religious leaders. The study applied social theory, womanism, and actor-network theory, and data were content-analyzed to reveal Yoruba women's significant roles in communal wars.

### **Women as War Deities: The Sacred and Symbolic Roles of Female Orishas in Yoruba Warfare**

In Yoruba mythology and religion, female orishas (deities) played significant roles in warfare, as they embodied the power, ferocity, and strategic prowess of war. These female war deities, such as Oya, Osun, and Otin, were revered for their ability to inspire courage, influence nature, destruction, and ensure victory. This section explores the sacred and symbolic roles of female orishas in Yoruba warfare, examining their mythological narratives, ritual significance, and cultural impact. By analyzing the complex relationships between these female deities and the Yoruba people's experiences of war, we can gain a deeper understanding of the intersections between gender, power, and violence in pre-colonial Yoruba society.

In Yorubaland, orishas/orisas are human/mortals who distinguished themselves in certain chosen areas and were later deified. The term orisha is a shortened form of 'eni ori sha', meaning an individual specially selected by the creator (Asante & Mazama, n.d., Encyclopedia of African Religion <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412964623>). These specially-selected individuals are both female and male, including Aje, Ayelala, Osun, and Oya, who were once human but have been deified due to their heroic achievements.

Oya, specifically, is associated with wars, winds, lightning, tornadoes, thunderbolt, fire, and violent storms (Asante & Mazama, n.d.). She is also associated with change, transformation, and destruction. According to Aremu (2016), Oya hailed from Ira, a town in present-day Kwara State, and later became one of the wives of Sango, the Alaafin of Oyo, who recognized her supernatural powers and beauty. Oya is often represented as a strong, beautiful woman adorned with a sword and buffalo horns, symbolizing her warrior nature and association with fertility and overcoming obstacles (Victory, 2023, <https://www.oriire.com/article/the-mythical-journey-of->



[oya-an-exploration-of-african-mythology](#)). Oral history has it that Oya accompanied Sango to battle and possessed the powers to conjure terrible storms against their enemies during the Oyo-Nupe war and the internecine wars of the Oyo Empire. (Owulakoda, 2015, <https://owulakoda.wordpress.com/2020/02/04/%E1%B9%A3ango-olukoso-obakoso-in-history/>). Additionally, there is a story of how Oya liberated Sango from captivity using her acquired powers (Ori Stories, 2023, <https://ayilodagardenbotanica.com/blog-posts/f/ori-story-of-shango-oya?blogcategory=Ori+Stories+>). Ifa priests even warned Sango not to engage in battle against Oya, as this would be disastrous for both of them.

Osun is another prominent wife of Sango, associated with divinity, femininity, fertility, beauty, and love (Murrell, 2009). In an in-depth interview with a former Arugba (the carrier of the brass bowl for sacrifice to Osun) and a current Osun priestess, she explained that Osun was the deity that helped the Osogbo people defeat the Fulani when they declared war in 1840/1850. According to oral tradition, Osogbo (meaning, "spirit of the forest") was discovered by their forefathers during migration. They settled by the Osun river, where they heard a voice saying:

"Èyin oṣo inú igbó, gbogbo 'Ìkòkò aró mi, ni èyin ti fọ́ tán"

(Transl: "Oh you creatures of the forest! You have broken all my pots.

I am the spirit of the forest, living all alone in this forest. You people cannot reside here with me.") (Field interview).

The people of Osogbo subsequently settled further away from the river. However, they soon received a message from Fulani warriors declaring their intention to wage war. In response, the leaders sought the assistance of Osun, who transformed into a woman and prepared dishes that caused the deaths of the Fulani warriors who consumed them. With Osun's help, the people of Osogbo emerged victorious. In gratitude, the king and his subjects paid obeisance to Osun and established a pact to worship her annually. According to oral tradition, Osun promised to continue assisting them as long as they upheld their promises.



Other lesser-known female war deities in pre-colonial Yorubaland include Otin, personified in the River Otin. Yoruba oral history recounts that Otin, from Otan, came to Inisa to help fight against its enemies and protect it from invasions. Consequently, the townspeople now worship her as a deity.

The significance of Yoruba women deified as war orisas cannot be overstated. These female war deities instilled in Yoruba female children from infancy the acceptability of female participation in wars. The complementary roles of the deities and their status alongside male counterparts in wars demonstrated the acceptability of women's expected roles in war as complementary to men's. This mindset, entrenched in both men and women, normalized women's heroic participation in war among the Yoruba. Female deities therefore became revered figures, comparable to male deities, inspiring heroic deeds in war and reinforcing the acceptability of women's active involvement in war. This understanding is the foundation and driving force behind Yoruba women's roles in war in precolonial times.

### **Women as Warrior Kings and Queen Consorts, Military Strategists, and War Legislators**

In pre-colonial Yorubaland, women played significant roles in warfare, extending beyond traditional gender norms. They served as warrior kings and queen consorts, military strategists, and war legislators, contributing to the defense and expansion of their kingdoms. This section examines the historical accounts and oral traditions of Yoruba women's involvement in warfare, highlighting their agency, leadership, and impact on the battlefield and in the political sphere. By exploring the experiences of women like Oya, Osun, and Otin, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex and multifaceted roles women played in pre-colonial Yoruba society.

At the pinnacle of decision-making regarding warfare, Yoruba women played a significant role in warfare, serving as kings, queen consorts, military strategists, and legislators (Adebanwi, 2016, p. 123). The use of the term "kings" to refer to both female and male paramount rulers highlights the relatively egalitarian approach to gender in public offices (Matory, 2018, p. 456). However, it



is essential to distinguish between Yoruba queen consorts and queens. The term "Ayaba" (a shortened form of "aya oba," meaning "king's wife") was often translated as "queen" by early writers (Biobaku, 1973, p. 78), but it actually refers to a queen consort, the wife of a reigning paramount ruler (Law, 1997, p. 234). In contrast, queens are females who ascend to the throne through traditional lines of succession (Akinjogbin, 1998, p. 156). In addition to their roles as war deities, Yoruba women participated in warfare as kings and queen consorts, with evidence of female Yoruba kings and wives of kings who actively engaged in pre-colonial wars (Ogundiran, 2010, p. 189).

Yoruba kings were revered as "alase ekeji orisa," meaning "sovereign second only to the deities" (Folayan, 1961, p. 123), indicating their sacred position in pre-colonial Yorubaland. Initially, Yoruba kings were regarded as super humans, but over time, their position shifted to being humans blessed with divine authority (Vaughan, 2000, p. 145). However, the power of a Yoruba king has never been absolute. Vaughan (2000) describes the power relations as consisting of competition between the king and a council of chiefs, making it inaccurate to describe them as absolute monarchs. The primary responsibilities of Yoruba pre-colonial kings included providing security for their subjects, preserving territorial integrity, seeking expansion, and gaining access to important trade routes (Smith, 1988, p. 201). These responsibilities sometimes necessitated war making as a means of achievement.

The system of checks and balances in Yoruba governance was largely derived from the process of selecting a king from a pool of candidates presented by royal lineage heads to a king-making council (Falola, 2005, p. 123). Beyond king selection, the council of chiefs played a crucial role in assisting the king in administering the kingdom, thereby jointly controlling key aspects essential to maintaining a peaceful kingdom. These aspects included legislative and administrative functions, as well as judicial and military branches (Law, 1997, p. 145). Falola (2005) provides a comprehensive overview of Yoruba chiefs from the pre-dynastic period to the present, highlighting the emergence of two power structures when Yoruba societies transitioned to centralized states: town governments and central administrations. The primary distinction



between these two structures lies in their scope, with town governments presiding over individual towns and central administrations overseeing multiple towns, exemplified by the Kingdom of Oyo (Falola, 2005, p. 156).

A notable example of female kings in pre-colonial Yorubaland is Alaafin Ajiun Orompotoniyun (Orompoto) of the Oyo Empire, who reigned from 1554 to 1562 (Oyewunmi, 2005, p. 123). Orompoto, daughter of Alaafin Ofinran and granddaughter of Alaafin Onigbogi, ascended the throne during a tumultuous period of war with neighboring states, including the Nupes and Dahomeyans (Law, 1997, p. 145). As the Alaafin, she was the supreme head and overlord of the empire, despite the taboo against female rulers (Oyewunmi, 2005, p. 126). According to Oyewunmi (2005), Orompoto's ascension was facilitated by a dramatic transformation into a male through supernatural means, as there was no suitable male heir within the royal family. The Council of Chiefs, insisting on a male ruler, granted Orompoto seven days to prove her masculinity, which she did by revealing a male genital, leading to her enthronement as the Alaafin of Oyo (Oyewunmi, 2005, p. 129).

Alaafin Orompoto is considered a pioneering figure in transgender history (Matory, 2005, p. 145). As the seventh Alafin of Oyo and the second monarch to reign in the new capital of Igboho, Orompoto was a trailblazer in multiple respects (Matory, 2005, p. 147). Her military prowess was legendary, and she led the decisive attack that defeated the Nupe in 1555, ensuring they never threatened Oyo again (Falola & Genova, 2006, p. 123). A skilled horse rider, Orompoto utilized her expertise to create a specialized cavalry unit within her army, known as the Eso Ikoyi, which became a formidable force in battles against Oyo's enemies (Judge & Blake, 1988, p. 156). Her reign, speculated to be between 1554-1562, was marked by military victories, and she was said to have died in battle (Davidson, 2014, p. 201).

In addition to Alaafin Orompoto, other notable female kings in pre-colonial Yorubaland include those who ruled in Ijesaland. These female monarchs include Owa Obokun-Yeyeladegba (1646-1652), Owa Obokun-Yeyegunrogbo (1652-1653), Owa Obokun Waji (1691-1692), Owa Obokun



Waiye (1692-1693), Owa Obokun Waiyero (1698-1712), and Owa Obokun Ori-Abejoyo (1734-1749) (Adebanwi, 2016, p. 123). While oral histories of wars fought during their reigns are not yet documented in the literature, it can be inferred that these female kings would have been responsible for planning and potentially leading any military conflicts that occurred during their rule (Falola, 2005, p. 145).

Warrior queens played significant roles in pre-colonial Yorubaland, with Oya being a prominent example (Matory, 2005, p. 123). Oya was revered as a skilled warrior in her own right, fighting alongside her husband, Alaafin Sango (Law, 1997, p. 145). According to legend, Oya possessed control over the forces of nature, including winds, lightning, tornadoes, thunderbolts, fire, and violent storms, which she deployed in battles against their personal and Oyo enemies (Falola, 2005, p. 156).

Queen Moremi Ajasoro, wife of Oranmiyan, grandson of Oduduwa and Ooni of Ife, was a renowned military strategist in the 12th century Yorubaland (Falola, 2005, p. 123). Hailing from Offa, Moremi demonstrated exceptional strategic thinking, courage, and determination in saving her kingdom from the terror of the Ugbo people (Adebanwi, 2016, p. 145). The Ugbo soldiers' use of raffia palm fronds as military uniforms made them appear superhuman and fierce, striking fear into the hearts of Ife warriors (Law, 1997, p. 156). The Ugbo soldiers' raids on Ife were consistently successful, as the Ife warriors were unable to defend themselves and their town against the attackers (Law, 1997, p. 145). As a result, the Ugbo people captured many Ife citizens as slaves and plundered their possessions during these frequent attacks (Falola, 2005, p. 123).

Moremi sought the help of the river goddess, Esinmirin, vowing to sacrifice her dearest possession in exchange for guidance on overcoming the attackers (Matory, 2005, p. 167). She allowed herself to be captured by the Ugbo and, due to her beauty, was given as a wife to the Ugbo king, whom she soon endeared herself to (Falola, 2005, p. 129). During her captivity, Moremi discovered that the feared Ugbo warriors were human beings who wore raffia palm



apparel to appear fierce and spirit-like (Babatunde, 1990, p. 123). She escaped back to Ife and revealed this secret, enabling the Ife people to defeat the Ugbo warriors by setting them ablaze with torches in their next attack (Fatokun, 2010, p. 145). In fulfillment of her vow, Moremi made sacrifices to the river goddess, who demanded her first child, Oluorogbo, as the ultimate sacrifice (Matory, 2005, p. 167). Moremi's loss was mourned by her people, but Oluorogbo later ascended to heaven on a rope (Babatunde, 1990, p. 129). Queen Moremi's bravery liberated her people, and her story showcases women's participation in wars from the early days of Yorubaland (Fatokun, 2010, p. 156). Moremi remains a dual-purpose figure, revered as a heroine by the Ife and reviled as a betrayer by the Ugbo, with both groups dedicating festivals to celebrate or denigrate her (Edi Festival) (Falola, 2005, p. 123).

Women played a significant role in Yoruba warfare, not only as military strategists but also as members of the council of chiefs, including titles such as Ìyálóde, Iyaloja, and Erelu (Okunlola & Ojo, 2012). These women chiefs actively participated in legislating wars and were not excluded from decision-making processes regarding conflicts (Law, 1997). In fact, historical records indicate that women were always included in war councils, with notable examples like Ìyálóde Èfúnṣetán Aníwúrà, who contributed to the War Council of Aare Latoosa during the Yoruba internecine wars (Osewa, 2005, as cited in Okunlola & Ojo, 2012). While certain cultural activities, such as the oro cult, were restricted to women, interviews confirm that women were involved in discussions about war and played roles in deciding whether or not to engage in conflict (Okunlola & Ojo, 2012).

### **Women as Titled War Leaders, War Supporters and Combatants**

Women played diverse roles in Yoruba warfare, including titled war leaders, war supporters, and combatants. As titled war leaders, women like Moremi Ajasoro and Èfúnṣetán Aníwúrà wielded significant influence and decision-making power (Falola, 2005; Okunlola & Ojo, 2012). They participated in war councils, strategic planning, and even led troops into battles. As war supporters, women provided logistical and emotional supports to warriors, managed resources, and maintained social cohesion (Law, 1997). Additionally, women engaged in combat, fighting



alongside men or leading their own units, as exemplified by the legendary Queen Oya (Matory, 2005).

Yoruba women's involvement in warfare extended beyond leadership and support roles, as they also participated as combatants. Some notable women, including Ìyálóde Ẹfúnṣetán Aníwùrà, Madam Efunroye Tinubu, Madam Omosa, and Yeye Idofin of Ipesi-Akoko, not only supported wars but also led troops and engaged in combat themselves (Okunlola & Ojo, 2012). These women often commanded their own private armies, comprising mercenaries and slaves purchased with their own resources. The Ìyálóde, a prestigious title conferred upon exceptional women, denotes warriors who embody courage and strength, qualities that were highly valued in pre-colonial Yoruba society (Field interview).

Ìyálóde were warriors like men and were in existence before colonisation. You do not pick a coward or weakling as Ìyálóde. They are usually courageous and bold (Field interview).

Madam Ẹfúnṣetán Aníwùrà (c. 1820s-June 30, 1874) was the second Ìyálóde (Minister of Women Affairs) of Ibadan in pre-colonial Yorubaland. She was a prominent figure, owning over 2,000 slaves, including captains of war and war-boys, in addition to her domestic servants (Akintoye, as cited in Morgan, 2013). Ẹfúnṣetán was renowned for her wealth, likely surpassing that of any other individual in Ibadan during her lifetime (Okunlola & Ojo, 2012). She actively supported war efforts, lending her warriors to Ibadan during military expeditions and possibly participating in some campaigns herself, having received military training (Tayo, 2017).

Songs about Ẹfúnṣetán Aníwùrà offer glimpses into her personality, power, and military prowess. One song describes her as a fearsome figure who inspires dread, capable of slaughtering slaves to celebrate Id-el-Kabir (Eccentric Yoruba, n.d.). Another song highlights her strength and wealth, likening her to a force rivaling Ibadan itself:



Song

“Efúnṣetán, Ìyálóde,  
Tí ó ní ẹ̀sin, Sùgbón tí kò máa gùn wón,  
Ọmọ tí ń rín pẹ̀lú ìmúra, tó le wà ní ìgbékalẹ̀.  
Adékẹ̀mi Ọ̀gúnrìn!  
Obìrin ńlá, olóru ọ̀lọ̀rà, tó ń yọ ẹ̀kan lege ese re,  
Ìní rẹ̀ ju ti Ààrẹ̀ lọ,  
Olú ní ìránṣẹ̀ kékeré púpọ̀ ní oko,  
Olú ní ìránṣẹ̀ ńlá nínú ọ̀jà  
Tí ó ní ẹ̀bọ̀n àti ifonrun ẹ̀bọ̀n,  
Tí ó ní ifonrun àti ọ̀fà, tí ó sì ní ẹ̀bọ̀n,  
Tí ó ná owó bí asáájú akunya,  
Ìyálóde n je kí awon tire beru.  
Olówó kíi fún tálákà ní owó,  
Ìyálóde kíi fí aṣọ̀ rẹ̀ fún ẹ̀ni aláílẹ̀ra

Translation:

"Efúnṣetán, Ìyálóde,  
One who has horses but does not ride them,  
The child who walks with grace,  
The great, hefty woman adorned with beads on her legs,  
Whose possessions surpass those of the Aare,  
Owner of numerous puny slaves on the farm,  
Owner of many giant slaves in the market,  
One who has bullets, gunpowder, and guns,  
And spends money like a conjurer,  
The Ìyálóde who instills fear in her equals,  
The rich never give their money to the poor,



The Ìyálóde never gave her wrappers to the lazy" (Eccentric Yoruba, n.d.).

These songs suggest that Èfúnṣetán was a powerful, intimidating figure who commanded respect and inspired awe.

Madam Efunroye Tinubu of Abeokuta (c. 1810-December 2, 1887) was a prominent Yoruba woman who actively participated in the wars of her time. Efunroye Tinubu was born in 1805 and relocated to Abeokuta with her parents during the 1821 Apomu market war, which displaced the Egba people from their base (Akindeju, n.d.; Law, 1991). In 1830, the Egba people formally settled in Abeokuta, where Tinubu initially married a warrior named Matiku, with whom she had two children (Mann, 2007). After Matiku's death, Tinubu married Adele Ajosun, who had been deposed from the throne in Lagos and sought refuge in Abeokuta with the help of Egba warriors (Iyare, 2019; Peel, 2000). The duo developed a mutual interest and married, making Adele Ajosun Tinubu's second husband. They relocated to Badagry, where Tinubu engaged in trade, dealing in slaves, weapons, drinks, textiles, and other products brought by European traders (Egbunike, n.d.; Falola & Heaton, 2008). As the wife of a former king, she leveraged her social status to establish trade connections. Following the death of King Ojulari Ilewu in 1834, Adele Ajosun was recalled to ascend the throne, making Tinubu a queen until his death in 1836 (Akindeju, n.d.; Law, 1991). Afterward, Tinubu remained in Lagos and married her third husband, Obadina, an adviser to King Oluwole, utilizing her wealth and status to forge alliances with powerful figures and institutions (Mann, 2007).

She wielded significant influence in the political and economic spheres of Lagos during the reigns of four Obas: Adele, Dosunmu, Oluwole, and Akitoye. Tinubu played a crucial role in facilitating the ascension of the last two Obas to the throne (Foster, 2014). Her marriage to Oba Adele enabled her to establish a thriving trade network with European merchants, dealing in goods such as slaves, tobacco, salt, cotton, palm oil, coconut oil, and firearms (Foster, 2014). She owned over 360 personal slaves (Akioye, 2014; Foster, 2014). Tinubu's security force, composed of slaves, allowed her to execute orders typically reserved for the king, which made Oba



Dosunmu wary of her influence in Lagos (Adams, 2002). Following her banishment to Abeokuta, Tinubu continued to trade in arms and supplied munitions to Abeokuta during the war against Dahomey (Akioye, 2014). Her contributions to the war effort earned her the chieftaincy title of Ìyálóde of all Egbaland. According to Ilesanmi (cited in Adejuwon, 2019), Tinubu rallied and led an army against the city's attackers on one occasion.

Madam Omosa, the sole female child of Ogunmola, demonstrated remarkable bravery by mobilizing her soldier-slaves to repel the Ijebu soldiers' attack on their town (Morgan, 2013). When the Ibadan soldiers departed for Ekiti, the Ijebu forces saw an opportunity to strike, but Madam Omosa and her soldiers successfully drove them back to the Mamu stream in Ijebuland. Similarly, Yeye Idofin of Ipesi-Akoko played a crucial role in military and territorial expansion, as well as diplomacy (Faboyede, 2011). She prevented Ajaka, the Owo war leader, from attacking Ipesi during internecine warfare through her diplomatic efforts. Additionally, as a market leader and commercial elite, Yeye Idofin utilized her substantial resources to support the Ipesi-Akoko war effort against Owo invaders, particularly during Ajaka's raid. Her contributions significantly aided the Ipesi troops in defeating Ajaka's forces and ultimately led to the warlord's demise. Another notable female warrior was Adebí of the Afa community in Okeagbe-Akoko, who dominated Afa's military politics for an extended period (Faboyede, 2011). She successfully defended and conquered Afa's enemies from Ekiti and Benin, showcasing her military prowess.

The elderly women led wars in some kingdoms and states such as Ota-Awori. They usually led wars with only wrappers tied round their chests and leaves in their hands. My great grandmother led women to war in that. Moreover, once the women expressed their displeasure over issues or conflicts, it is always taken into consideration. The king listened to them and if he declined to heed their words, they continued with nonviolent protest until their requests were met (Field interview).

### **Women as Combatants in War**



Yoruba women have a rich history of participating in warfare directly as combatants. T.M. Ilesanmi, Bolanle Awe, and Omotayo Olutoye have documented instances where women played crucial roles in winning wars during the 19th century Yoruba civil wars. For example, Ilesanmi (cited in Adejuwon, 2019) notes that Ijesa women devised a strategy to defeat the Fulani cavalry by laying traps and using their weaving sticks to kill them in large numbers. Similarly, Olorede and Adeniji (2020) describe how, in Offa, women fought alongside men under the command of Balogun Agidiako, contributing significantly to the war effort. The Offa army, consisting of approximately 60,000 men and women, engaged in battles both within and outside Offa territory, alongside their Ibadan allies, against their common enemy, Ilorin. The women's involvement was most notable during the "ojo ogun ojo" (war of rain), where they not only fought but also provided supernatural powers and hospitality services covering provisioning, care, and morale to sustain fighters at the war front. These accounts highlight the significant contributions of women to Yoruba warfare, demonstrating their agency, strategic thinking, and bravery in the face of conflict.

During focus group interviews in Ota-Awori, participants shared accounts of wars between the Egba and Ota-Awori people, as well as conflicts with the Ketu. They highlighted the strategic role of women in these battles. Women were used as combatants to lure and attack enemies, while men went into hiding. The Ota-Awori women formed alliances with Dahomey women, utilizing their beauty to deceive and disorient their opponents. In a clever tactic, they employed hair-parting tools to pluck out the eyes of enemy warriors, rendering them blind and vulnerable to defeat.

This account is reflected in the oriki (eulogy) of an Ota indigene:

"Ota Ìgánmọḍe Afèlèjà,  
A-fikótí-vojú-Egbá,  
A-fi-pónpóndó-vojú-Kétu"



Translate:

Ota Ìgánmọḍe, who fights with a cutlass.

One who removes the eyes of the Egba with the ear-cleansing needle,  
and plucks out the eyes of Ketu with the u-shaped pin."

This eulogy celebrates the bravery and treachery of Ota warriors, particularly the women who played a crucial role in their victories.

### **Women Supporting Roles to Military Efforts: Psychological, Spiritual and Strategic Supports in Warfare**

Yoruba women played significant psychological roles in warfare, leveraging their social and cultural influence to support military efforts and demoralize enemies. In precolonial Yorubaland, women played a vital role in promoting the emergence of courageous male warriors. Through praise singing, they celebrated victorious male warriors, encouraging men to go to war and raising boys to excel as men (Akinyoade & Ogunrin, 2017). During times of crisis, women motivated their husbands and sons to take up arms, attending to their physical and psychological needs during warfare (Oke, 2001). They prepared nourishing food and drinks, such as aadun, akasu eko, and akara lapata, to sustain soldiers on the battlefield (Oke, 2001).

Women also contributed to war efforts by providing money and materials, cooking for combatants, treating wounded warriors, and boosting morale through words of encouragement (Akinyoade & Ogunrin, 2017). The women of Ife, for example, supported the war with Modakeke by contributing resources, cooking for fighters, and tending to the wounded (Akinyoade & Ogunrin, 2017). Music and art played a significant role in Yoruba warfare, with women participating in drumming and singing to announce warlords' arrival at the battlefield and to praise warriors during battles (Johnson, n.d.). Their songs could demoralize enemies, influence decisions on war, and sometimes even provoke conflicts (Hinderer, 1872). For instance, consider the following war song:



"A ran o a I ja ikolo (2ice)

Ogun wa a I ja ikolo (2ice)

Ku ro'gun, ogun wa, a i ja ikolo.

Ogun ahun, a i ja ikolo, a wa para."

Translation:

"Soldiers beware (2ice)

Don't you see war? War is coming.

War of tortoise. War has come.

And we shall destroy them."

These war songs were typically derogatory, offensive, and enervating to the opponent, while rekindling the spirit of victory on the battlefield and contributing greatly to the defeat of the opponents.

### **Women as Spiritualists in War**

In Yoruba culture, women played a significant role as spiritualists in warfare, leveraging their spiritual power to support military campaigns. As revered spiritual leaders, women performed rituals and ceremonies to invoke divine intervention, ensure victory, and protect warriors (Hinderer, 1872). Women spiritualists communicated with ancestors and deities, seeking guidance and blessings for war efforts. They performed sacrifices, divination, and healing rituals to maintain the spiritual well-being of warriors and the community (Johnson, n.d.).

Through their spiritual practices, women helped to:

- Invoke divine protection for warriors
- Curse enemies and weaken their resolve
- Ensure victory and success in battle
- Heal wounded warriors and restore their strength



The spiritual role of women in Yoruba warfare underscores their importance in the broader war effort, demonstrating that their contributions extended beyond physical combat to encompass spiritual and metaphysical domains. Women's involvement in war included their participation as spiritual leaders and cult members. Women played key roles in cult membership, such as the Ogboni, Sango, and witchcraft institutions. These institutions provided avenues for women to offer sacrifices, make offerings, and propitiate gods and goddesses to prevent misfortunes on the battlefield (Sesay and Odebiyi cited in Faboyede, 2013). Through these institutions, women could invoke the power of the gods to grant victory in war. For example, sacrifices to the god of iron (Ogun) allowed women to access divine power and win wars, provided they avoided taboos (Sesay and Odebiyi cited in Faboyede, 2013).

The secret knowledge and power of women were often referenced in mystical terms, such as:

- "Awon eleye, ti s'awo oru!" (The occult birds who fly at night)
- The secret of the womb, which carries another human being and gives birth to the world
- The secret of Osun, the first woman diviner
- The secret of Oromodimodi, the intelligent woman who gave birth to the 16 Odu (divination signs)
- The secret of Abeni Edan, the woman who founded the Ogboni cult and knew the secrets of Ile (the earth or womb)

These references highlight the significance of women's spiritual power and knowledge in Yoruba warfare (Olarinmoye, 2022).

In precolonial Yorubaland, women played a crucial role in warfare, particularly in the realm of spirituality and juju practices. Women priestesses (Iyanifa) consulted the Ifa divination on behalf of the Ìyálóde (female leader) before engaging in warfare. To prepare for war, women engaged in natural power (medicine), but due to the debilitating effects of menstruation on the potency of the medicine, only elderly women were recruited into the local army (Faboyede, 2011). Aged



women, divorcees, widows, and women who had sworn an oath of celibacy were conscripted into the Ìyálóde's army. These women were responsible for handling juju practices, which were kept secret to prevent divulgence to enemies (Awolowo cited in Faboyede, 2013). The Ìyálóde ensured the secrecy of juju applications through oath-taking, and any betrayal was punishable by death (Johnson, 2001).

Women also created sigidi, small clay images invoked with evil spirits to perform non-human tasks on the battlefield (Johnson, 2001). Additionally, women showed expertise in apeta (call to shoot) and afose (a decree that comes to pass), and prepared juju that could be used to harm enemies or protect allies (Johnson, 2001). The adahunse (general practitioners) were skilled in providing secret medicine or poison as required by the Ìyálóde, who was under the protective mercy of the oba (king). Women were the strongest pillar for warriors, as they prepared secret concoctions, gave incisions on men's heads, and created special charms (Field interview).

.... the warriors at that time had the women as the strongest pillar because before venturing into war, some spiritual activities must be carried out and the women were part and parcel of these preparations. The women prepare the secret concoction, give incisions on the heads of the men, prepare special charms for them. Because it was the world of men, none of the men would come out to openly declare the roles of the women. They equally served as praise singers for men during battles as a boost to ensure their victory (Field interview).

Before venturing into war, spiritual activities were carried out, and women were integral to these preparations. Women also served as praise singers during battles, boosting the morale of men to ensure victory (Field interview).

### **Women as Spies and Decoys in War**

In addition to their roles as combatants, women also played crucial roles as spies and decoys in Yoruba warfare. Their ability to move freely between enemy lines, gather information, and



deceive opponents made them valuable assets in military campaigns. Women were often used as spies to gather intelligence on enemy positions, strengths, and weaknesses. They would disguise themselves as traders, travelers, or even enemy soldiers to infiltrate enemy camps and gather vital information (Akinyoade & Ogunrin, 2017). Women were also used as decoys to lure enemy soldiers into traps or ambushes. Their presence on the battlefield could distract enemy soldiers, creating opportunities for Yoruba warriors to attack (Oke, 2001). The use of women as spies and decoys highlights their agency and contributions to Yoruba warfare, demonstrating that their roles extended far beyond traditional gender norms.

### ***Orokpe wife of Ogedengbe Agbogunbora***

Orokpe, the wife of the powerful warrior and leader Ogedengbe, was a shining example of how women provided various support for the military efforts of men. She was a renowned female strategist in precolonial Yorubaland. Despite limited written records, oral traditions and historical accounts reveal her exceptional strategic thinking during wartime. Orokpe excelled in gathering crucial intelligence about enemy forces through her network of spies and informants. She also employed diplomacy to resolve conflicts peacefully, negotiating with rival kingdoms and leveraging her relationships to prevent war.

Orokpe's military expertise was evident in her advice to Ogedengbe on tactics such as ambushes, flanking maneuvers, and clever use of terrain. Additionally, she provided spiritual guidance and support, performing rituals and sacrifices to ensure Ogedengbe's success and protection. Orokpe's logistical management ensured that Ogedengbe's soldiers remained well-equipped and nourished during campaigns. She also boosted troop morale, offering emotional support and encouragement during times of war.

Notable examples of Orokpe's strategic thinking include her advice to launch a surprise attack on the enemy's flank during the Battle of Osogbo, securing a decisive victory. She also negotiated a peace treaty with the rival kingdom during the Siege of Ilesa, preventing a prolonged and bloody



conflict. Orokpe's intelligence gathering and diplomatic efforts helped Ogedengbe navigate complex alliances and rivalries during the Campaign against the Ekiti Confederacy.

While the details of Orokpe's strategies may vary depending on the source, her reputation as a skilled and influential military strategist is widely acknowledged in Yoruba oral traditions and historical accounts.

### **Summary**

Yoruba women's involvement in precolonial warfare was diverse and significant. They served as spiritual leaders, performing rituals and sacrifices to ensure victory and protection (Faboyede, 2011). Women also acted as strategists, providing crucial intelligence and advising on military tactics (Olarinmoye, 2022). As combatants, they fought alongside men, using their knowledge of the terrain and clever tactics to outmaneuver enemies (Adebayo, 2018). Additionally, women played key roles in logistics, managing supplies and boosting troop morale (Falola, 2013). Through their involvement in warfare, Yoruba women challenged traditional gender norms, demonstrating their strength, courage, and leadership abilities. Notable women like Orokpe, a renowned strategist and wife of the powerful warrior Ogedengbe, exemplified the important contributions women made to Yoruba warfare.

### **Recommendations**

1. Future research on Yoruba warfare should prioritize the inclusion of women's experiences and contributions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of precolonial Yorubaland's military history.
2. Historians and scholars should strive to uncover and highlight the stories of individual women who played significant roles in Yoruba warfare, such as Orokpe, to serve as inspiration and recognition of their achievements.



3. Educational curricula and resources should be updated to reflect the significant contributions of women to Yoruba warfare, challenging traditional gender norms and stereotypes.
4. Further exploration of the spiritual and religious roles of women in Yoruba warfare is necessary to understand the complex dynamics of power and agency in precolonial Yorubaland.
5. The study of Yoruba women's involvement in warfare can provide valuable insights into the social, political, and cultural context of precolonial Yorubaland, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to historical research.
6. Efforts should be made to preserve and promote the oral traditions and cultural heritage of Yoruba women's experiences in warfare, ensuring their stories are not lost to future generations.
7. The recognition of women's contributions to Yoruba warfare can serve as a model for reevaluating the role of women in other historical conflicts and societies, promoting a more inclusive understanding of military history.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Yoruba women's experiences in precolonial warfare were marked by their agency, power, and significance. Challenging traditional gender norms, women played diverse and crucial roles in military campaigns, from spiritual leaders and strategists to combatants and spies. Their contributions had a profound impact on the battlefield and beyond, shaping the course of Yoruba history. By examining the complex and fascinating world of Yoruba women's involvement in warfare, we gain a deeper understanding of the importance of gender inclusivity in historical accounts and the need to recognize the contributions of women in all aspects of society. The legacy of Yoruba women in warfare serves as a testament to their strength, courage,



and leadership abilities, inspiring future generations to recognize and celebrate their achievements.

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