**WEEK 3: THE ORIGIN AND EARLY HISTORY OF OYO EMPIRE**

There is a Yoruba legend which says that Oduduwa, the ancestor of the Yoruba, founded IIe-Ife. His grand children founded seven states and became the first obas of Yoruba land. Oranmiyan, the seventh grandchild founded old Oyo and became its Alafin (1388-1438).

The ruler of Ife, the Oni, became the spiritual head of the Yoruba while the Alafin of Oyo became the political head.

The Oyo empire was the earliest and largest of the four great first kingdoms of west Africa. (Benin, Oyo, Dahomey and the Akanu states of Ghana).

According to Yoruba legends and traditions, Oduduwa, the chief ancestor and first king of the Yoruba, settled at Ille-Ife. His eldest son and successor, okanbi, died at Ille-Ife leaving seven children; the first was a daughter, the mother of Olowu, the ancestor of the owu; the second, also a daughter, was the mother of alaketu, the founder of Ketu, the third became the king of Benin, the Fourth, orangun, became the chief of the sabe; the sixth, olupopo, became the chief of the popo; and the seventh oranmiyan, became the founder and first Alafia of Oyo.

These were the founders of the first obas of Yoruba land.

**GOVERNMENT OR POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF OLD OYO EMPIRE**

a. Alafin of Oyo, b. Oyo mesi, c. Kakanfo d. Ogboni Cult

The Alafins ruled with a council of seven, called the Oyo mesi. The head of the Oyo mesi was the Bashrun, or prime minister. The Oyo mesi elected or deposed the Alafin. The Ogboni Cult checked the power of the Alafin and his council of seven.

If an Alafin became tyrannical over his people, the oye mesi would force him to commit suicide by presenting him with an empty calabash, or parrot’s eggs, which signified that his people had rejected him.

In addition to being king makers, the Oyo mesi also performed legislative, executive and judicial functions. It was the duty of the leader of the Oyo mesi – Bashrun, to inform the Alafin of the people’s decision that he should commit suicide.

Kakanfo was the commander – in chief of the Oyo army (no standing Army). Every able bodied man served in the military campaign which took place usually in the dry season. If the Kakanfo was defeated in battle, he was bound to commit suicide rather than return to Oyo in shame.

The Ogboni Cult was a secret society of freemen, remarkable for their age and experience and who were the social, political and religious leaders of the state. The cult was devoted to the worship of the earth goddess. The members sometimes mediated between the Alafin and the Oyo mesi.

**ASSIGNMENT**

What were the causes and effects of the 19th century Yoruba wars?