An Appraisal of the Roles of the Warriors’ Guild in Addressing Pre-colonial Security Challenges in Okaland South-West Nigeria

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Abstract

Security within the context of this paper can loosely be viewed as safety from any form of attack or harm. It is a term that has different dimensions and meanings in public safety, defense and military matters. It is the state or feeling of being safe and protected. Security can equally be seen as having a sense of protection against loss, attack or harm, or protection against attack from without or subversion from within. Security is one of the indispensable issues that had always taken priority position in any human society since ages. Leaders and the led alike are always concerned with how to ensure their safety in all ramifications and this has constantly spurred them to fathom measures of ensuring their continued safety. In pre-colonial Nigeria, ingenious means were employed to address security challenges by the people and their leaders. In specific terms, this article is tailored towards an appraisal of the roles of the warriors’ guild in addressing pre-colonial security challenges in Okaland. The article argues that the security challenges faced by the people of Okaland in the pre-colonial times were promptly tackled through collective efforts and of course through the good leadership provided by the traditional rulers coupled with the patriotic zeal and bravery showed by the native security group. While the article acknowledges the fact that no society can exist without having to face some sort of security challenges, the author is of the view that these security challenges are surmountable.

Keywords: appraisal, roles, warriors' guild, pre-colonial, security and challenges
Introduction

Societies from all ages have always designed ingenious ways of addressing their security problems and other challenges. The pre-colonial people of Okaland in South-west of Ondo State were very inventive in dealing with their domestic security problems and other related challenges. In fact, they actually handled their security problems as a commonwealth with a high sense of collective responsibility. While the Balogun warriors’ guild’ (which membership was comprised of the hunters and the farmer guilds and the age grades) took it upon themselves to help in the pre-colonial policing of Okaland, their overall performance was not without the assured collective supports received from the people and the traditional rulers.

Anchored on the above, this paper is designed to discuss the Balogun warriors’ guild as an effective indigenous informal security group whose members were largely responsible for the protection and stability of Okaland in the pre-colonial times. The warriors’ guild is an association of men whose hunting prowess has been ratified by both their rulers and the people. Unlike the hunters’ guild that is a recognised professional body without age limit, the warriors’ guild has age limit as children, aged men and women cannot join. The age limit is to allow for efficiency and performance especially during troublous times.

This paper begins with a brief description of Okaland which is the territory of the town located in the north-eastern corner of Yorubaland (the single largest) in Akokoland South-west of Ondo State, which existed before the colonial period in Nigeria. Etymologically, Oka is said to have derived its name from three sources: the wickedness (ika) of its earliest inhabitants, the maize (oka) which its people tauntingly threw at the enemies who besieged the town in the nineteenth century, and Onka (one who counts), a name which was used to refer to a Bini prince and his supporters. This area is now divided into fifteen identifiable quarters with two sub-groups referred to as Siru and Sifa.

For any society with a sense of history to survive, there is always a need to bring the past to bear on the present and then provide a template for future development. It is based on this that this paper seek to present a discussion on how the pre-colonial people of Oka were able to tackle their security challenges despite the non-availability of science based security check technology and institutions.

The Warriors Guild and Pre-colonial Security Challenges in Okaland

The development of guild system is not peculiar to any civilisation; it is a universal phenomenon of great antiquity. In the traditional Yoruba society, the guild system symbolized law enforcement agency. Occupational guilds, clubs, secret or initiatory societies, and religious units, commonly known as egbe in Yorubaland, included the parakoyi (or league of traders) and egbe ode (hunter’s guild), and maintained an important role in commerce, social control, and vocational education in Yoruba politics. The hunter’s guild was exclusively for men. They comprised men of proven valour and bravery. They were responsible for the provision of meat
for the village chiefs. They also participated in military services like guarding villages at night and warding off invaders.

Within the period covered by this paper, the prominent guilds in Okaland were the hunter’s (egbe ode) and the association of warriors or warriors’ (egbe ologun) guilds. These two guilds were headed by the Balogun. The Balogun title holder is the head of warriors’ and hunters’ guilds in the community, while the heads of the chiefdoms were the chief commanders of their native warriors. The Balogun title holder was under the authority of the Oba, even though the Balogun did influence the decision of the Oba. For example, during the reign of the Olusin Ajamaye Ologunogeh (1895 – 1910), Chief Koku Ologunagba⁵, the Balogun of his time turned down the royal order of the Olusin Ajamaye to wage war against Oba Akoko in 1890 on the ground that Koku’s mother was from Oba Akoko. The traditional functions of the egbe ode (hunters’ guild) include: policing duty, enforcement of the customs and norms of the communities and they were also warlords who were used to ward off enemies and defend their communities’ territorial pride and sovereignty.

It is instructive to state at this point that not until 1916 that, the Balogun title was not available in all the fifteen (15) communities of Oka, though there were some notable warriors in those communities where there were no specific Balogun title holders. The few communities with the Balogun title before 1900 were Ebinrin community (Balogun Ogunmola), Owake Community (Balogun Ajanaku Orijajogun), Okaodo Community (Balogun Akogiri),⁷ Iwonrin Community (Balogun Atero); Agba Community (Balogun Ebonni Jala) from Jagba-Akusa clan of Agba who was later succeeded by Balogun Bada Baranum of Osan Agba⁸ Iboje Community (Balogun Amogunla) the predecessor of Balogun Ologunboje. While the Balogun of Owalusin whose jurisdiction covered Owase and Idofin communities were Balogun Utufa Asagunla, (the first Balogun in Sifa Oka in 1833), he was succeeded by Balogun Koku Ologunagba, (1850 – 1900) Balogun Alome Elegbejeado (1900 – 1918).⁹ Another notable Balogun was the Balogun of Abisi – Ikanmu and his counterpart Arogbofa of Ikanmu Oka.

According to the Late Olusin Olugunagba J.J II, it was the inter-tribal wars of the 18th and 19th centuries in Yorubaland that united Oka communities together in 1833.¹⁰ Prior to the colonial era, Oka was at one time or the other faced with one security problem or the other. Some of the security challenges faced by the pre-colonial people of Okaland were the various wars of invasion led at different times by the Tapa (Nupe), Akoko Edo and Ujesha (Ijesa), inter-communal land disputes, the emergence of a notorious rascals, brigands, and kidnapping group known as ipata who actively engaged in slave raiding, fire outbreaks, the need to checkmate the various war refugees that fled to Oka to seek refuge from taking over the political power and the warding off of wild animals. In all these highlighted security challenges, the one that gave the pre-colonial people of Okaland much concern was the wars of invasion which was almost a recurring decimal. In these respect, the military prowess of the warriors’ guild (the Balogun military group) was put to test.

Generally, the roles of the pre-colonial Oka warriors under their commandant with the Oba being the commander-in-chief of the communal armies, cannot be de-emphasised in the
maintenance of general internal order, defense and stability of the kingdom during the pre-colonial era.

The Warriors Guild and the Defense of Oka in the Pre-colonial Era

During the prolonged Yoruba Interstate Wars (1793 – 1893), Oka Akoko remained unconquered and completely insulated from the fratricidal wars in the rest of the country. Oka warriors were war mercenaries to other towns and settlements in Akoko and Ekitiland. The role of its warriors played during the Ekitiparapo war otherwise known as the Kiriji war remains evergreen. It was during this war that warriors from Owalusin brought the Omomo deity masquerades to the Olusin Elure II on December 17th, 1885 during the traditional festive season of “Ilade” with pump and pageantry, when the traditional military prowess and dexterity of Owamuilere Ehimabo was displayed. Information on the military organization of Oka in the period before the Nupe invasion is scanty, but it is clear that the community did not have a standing army. Only a militia force was raised from the hunters’ guild and the age grades. Formal training was not provided but the rigor of hunting wild game prepared the men for war. The Oka hunters who formed the largest part of the warrior guild were brave hunters who helped in warding off dangerous animals from attacking their people. In fact, they were reputed for hunting down huge and ferocious animals. This hunting bravery informed the huge military successes recorded by the Oka warriors’ guild in war times especially during the Nupe invasion of the late nineteenth century. The Iroho people of Okia-Oka were reputed hunters of buffalo (efon). Hence their oriki: omo a mu ehin efon tore – offspring of those who offer gifts of buffalo hide.

The defense of Oka in the pre-colonial times from human enemies and wild animals was not without the application of some traditional means by the warriors. The role of the supernatural in the conduct of the Oka-Nupe war, although controversial, cannot be ignored. Traditions are insistent that the defense of Oka was not just a function of topography but that of the efficacy of their charms. This was with particular reference to the administration of poison, which was lethal to man or beast that stepped on it. Two types of poison - the apo and ogudu were employed the way mines are laid in modern warfare. The ogudu was a particularly potent poison, which required a considerable amount of physical and psychic preparation to make. This took no less than seven days. A portion was prepared by an old man who chanted incantations, specifically the word oro, oro, oro!! (poison, poison, poison!!) for the duration of the task. Once it was prepared, sharp objects like bamboo slivers and thorns were soaked in it and later planted in the path of the invading army. Death as a result of contact with this poison was swift and panic often thrown into the line of the advancing enemies. The Oka warriors were great schemers and ingenious war strategists who would stop at nothing to defend their communities’ territorial pride and sovereignty. Water sources were also poisoned by the Oka warriors. Specific mention is made of the Atawo pond in the farmland of the Ikanmu chiefdom, which was said to have taken a heavy toll on the Nupe who drank of its water.

In pre-colonial Okaland, the tackling of security challenges was not left only in the hands of the warriors’ guild, retired warriors, their wives and non-combatant young men were given
one responsibility or the other depending on the exigencies of the time. The point to be made here is that, the pre-colonial people of Oka were responsive to the security needs of the time no wonder they overwhelmingly gave their patriotic and brave warriors the needed moral boost and direct support in addressing their collective security challenges in the pre-colonial era.

The warriors in attempt to ensure total security of their communities used everything at their disposal which hugely put them at advantage over their enemies. The caves were adequately used in the protection of the aged and the young members of the communities during wars and the rocks were also put into good use by the warriors as weapon of death. The valley was also effectively put into use in warding off invaders. While other members of the communities including their traditional heads are deep in sleep, the warriors patriotically and bravely police the area as vigilante to protect their people against rascals and kidnappers who often lurk in the cover of the dark.  

Lookout men \((\text{alore})\) who were positioned by the warriors to monitor enemy movements promptly blew the horn to alert the people of danger. Through this, the warriors were able to ensure the daily safety of the people. The existence of the communal quip which served to alert members of the community of any form of threat was very effective in the overall success of the warriors’ guild efforts at addressing Oka pre-colonial security challenges. The communal quip called \(\text{teete or atete}\), is used to make a communal clarion call for rescue or to alert the community of eminent danger, especially when a native is privileged to have seen a foreigner whose mission is not clear or a native whose action or pre-supposed action run contrary to the corporate existence of the kingdom. By this measure, the people were equally largely involved in addressing their security problems in the pre-colonial times. Indeed, security was seen as everybody business.

Fire outbreak was also promptly attended to by the warriors with the use of traditional items and method. It was a common thing in pre-colonial Okaland to erect shrine at community centre. This shrine was known as \(\text{eka}\) which represented the community traditional fire extinguisher unit that housed the native eggs \((\text{eyin adiye ibile})\) used to extinguish any fire outbreak no matter its magnitude. These traditional eggs were known for their traditional potency and efficaciousness. They were equally used by the warriors to set belligerent communities or suspected enemy building ablaze. In fact, these eggs were put in good use during the Yoruba internecine war and the Ife/Modakeke war. Some measures were put in place to avoid the abuse of the sacred shrine by members of the community. Each shrine had a chief priest who was also a member of the warriors’ guild. This was to ensure that the protection of the traditional eggs and the shrine itself was placed in competent hands. As a strict measure, married women were forbidden from opening their heads while passing through the shrine vicinity and banana or plantain must be covered when taken through the shrine vicinity. The last two measures served to avoid the contamination of the powers of the shrine and fire extinguishing traditional eggs kept in it for preservation. While the people unconditionally show their commitment to obey the rules guiding the shrine, they also helped to make the traditional eggs available for preservation.
The warriors were also patriotically committed to the security of the communities’ farmlands and market places. In this regard, the warriors often divide themselves into groups with specific instructions received from their commanders on how to ensure the proper discharge of their assigned duties as the trusted eyes of all the members of the different chiefdoms in pre-colonial Okaland. As a result of the menace of the rascals and kidnappers (ipata), some warriors took it upon themselves to escort the women folks to the markets to buy and sell and some warriors equally serve as guards to the men and women who go to the farm to work the land and bring some produce home for consumption and possible exchange for other items as the case maybe. While some members of the communities are out to the market and some to the farm, those who are left behind are also protected by the warriors who have been assigned with the duty to do so. With this well thought out security arrangement put in place by the warriors’ guild, the pre-colonial people of Okaland were able to collectively organize and develop their communities since they had nothing to fear.

Before concluding this article, it is important to consider some of the factors that contributed to the success of the warriors’ guild in their effort at addressing the pre-colonial security challenges in Okaland.

Factors that Informed the Success of the Warriors’ Guild

Several factors were responsible for the successes recorded in the various offensive and defensive measures put in place by the pre-colonial Oka native warriors in attempt to fix the kingdom’s security challenges.

The existence of large and accommodative caves in Okaland such as the Oroke Ebinrin cave, which housed about 200 people at a time, the Oroke Owase cave which lies between Okese-Owase and Agba community in Oka, about 0.6km long in size, the Ujo Ukure cave of Ikanmu, the gulf of Asin Olugbagada in-between Iwaro and Oke-Oka settlement, the Uwotufa otherwise known as Asagunla cave at Okeowa-Owalusin which Pa. Adungbe Gabriel corroborated during an interview session. Inside this cave, the aged men, women and children were kept during wars until their men return from the battle. Since these caves served as safety house, the warriors were availed the concentration needed to repel invaders as they were assured of the safety of the rest members of the society.

The topographical nature of Oka settlements and the availability of traditionally made protective charms and techniques of guerilla’s war system as well as the spiritual supports of their native gods/goddesses such as the Ebita of Ibaka, Esinmirin stream of Owalusin and the Omomo deities masquerades, the Agbaa and Ugboli gods of Okaodo, the Adogunmodo of Korowa etc., besides that of the military personnel also contributed greatly to the military expeditions and achievements of Okaland.

The existence of the communal quip called teete or atete which served as an alerting security sound symbol also helped the warriors’ guild in the proper discharge of the communal duties as informal security group in pre-colonial Okaland. Since the teete was only used to alert members of the community of any form of security threat (s), both the attention of members of
the community and the warriors alike were drawn as security through this means become the business of everybody. With this collective response, the warriors were readily assured of the support of their people, thus further enhancing their commitment to the defense of the people and the community.

The warriors’ guild was considered as the community police and as such, much respect was accorded them. While the warriors were committed to duty laced with integrity, financial, moral and spiritual supports were provided by the traditional rulers and the people. This served as morale booster for the members of the warriors’ guild to further pledge their loyalty and readiness to defend the community regardless of the risks involved.

The availability of local weapons and strong charms also contributed to the success of the warriors’ guild. This buttresses the fact that pre-colonial Oka warriors were also strong herbalists and spiritually powerful men. By this, the warriors also used their powers to protect themselves against any form of attacks.

**Conclusion**

The structure of *Sifa* communities in the pre-colonial Oka kingdom was like that of the military barracks (citizen-militia) where every native was a soldier, and the military importance of the uneven, rocky surface and canopy-like topography made Oka settlement unconquerable. It remains an undoubted fact that Oka Akoko was a major power in the Ekiti/Akoko and Ijesa war prosecution even though it did not suffer any direct invasion and destruction, yet it was the refugees’ camp for the other Akoko towns and migrants of the time.

Notwithstanding the warriors and their commandants contributions which called for the emergence of the *Balogun* title holders in Oka kingdom, yet *Balogun* title holders/chieftains were not given Colonial Government recognition just like that of the ‘*Opon*’ title holder. Though the *Balogun* title remains a factor to be reckoned with in the administration and the maintenance of the communal and territorial security of the confederated Okarufe town, the fact is that after 1900, when war seems to be over in Okaland, except the inter-communal disputes over the available lands and that of seniority, the role of the *Balogun* started fading away, even though many warrior families still retained ‘war’ appellation to their name up till date.

By and large, the warriors’ guild in pre-colonial Okaland more than anything else should be applauded for the huge and patriotic roles they played in addressing the pre-colonial security challenges in Okaland. As revealed in the paper, the warriors’ guild huge success was not without the assured supports of the people and their leaders. This underscores the fact that security problems can be better tackled collectively rather than leaving it all in the hands of the law enforcement agents and other security personnel. The stability and peaceful existence of any society is anchored on the readiness of the entire members of such community to pull resources together as a collective to fight a common menace. For any reasonable development to be achieved there is the urgent need to first arrest all forms of security shortcomings as a crisis ridden society repels growth and development in all ramifications.
Anchored on the above, the Nigeria government should as a matter of fact be ready to sincerely invest in measures that will help curtail the menace of insecurity which has seriously imperiled the country’s development and growth for decades. The military, police force and all other agencies responsible for the security of the country should be given the needed exposure to new strategies and all necessary logistics and support should readily be made available to them for better output. Patriotism can only be assured when the leadership is right with its schemes especially those that affect the larger masses. Poverty, endemic corruption and bad welfare schemes will only help to compound the country’s problem of insecurity. Only an honest leadership with the zeal to put in place an all-inclusive government and masses oriented programmes will avail.

Notes

1. The grandfather of the Okiolaja Ogun family of Ikese-Owalusin, Iwaro-Oka.
2. The chief priest of Ugboli goddess.
3. I.e. the war that ended the 100 years Yoruba interstate wars.
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-Igejogbo Ladele, 62 years, a traditional orator, interviewed at W.O. 40 Osan Agba, Oka on January 31, 2011.

-Ajanaku A. The Balogun of Owake-Oka, 56 years, interviewed at No. 68 College Road, opposite Magistrate Court Iwaro-Oka Akoko on January 18, 2011
Later nicknamed Uwo Ajini. Ajini was a young mad man who took over this cave last as his house before his death.

-Interviewed at his house, No. 14 Balogun Street Owalusin on December 30th 2010. He was one of the heroes still living that have entered the cave for hunting.

-Ojonla Amoko ‘aged’ 48 years, a professional and traditional creative artist interviewed at Westend House, Iwaro-Oka on January, 10, 2011.

-The ‘Opon’ is the oldest male person in a community or town. He is ranked second to the Oba (king/head chief)