

ABSTRACT

The reforms introduced by Oba Ewuare the Great of Benin (c.1440-73) transformed the character of the kingdom of Benin. The reforms, calculated to eliminate rivalries between the Oba and the chiefs, established an effective political monopoly over the exertion of military power. They laid the foundation for the development of a military system which launched Benin on the path of its imperial expansion in the era of the warrior kings (c.1440-1600). The Oba emerged in supreme control, but power conflicts continued, leading to continuous administrative innovation and military reform during the period under study.

For the period c.1440 to 1897, 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. The study shows that, while the history of military organisation cannot be separated from the general (political and social) history of a period, the Benin military system also had a logic of its own which advanced the aims of the state and of the empire.

This study introduces the concept 'military system', discusses problems of sources, methodology and periodization in African and Benin history (chapter 1) and addresses aspects of Benin's political and military history before 1440 (chapter 2). Chapter 3 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. Chapter 4 discusses changes in the military during the 17th and 18th centuries within the context of domestic political constraints, leading to fluctuations in the military power of Benin. This was a period of active trade between Benin and the Europeans, affecting the balance of power between rival elements in Benin. Events closely associated with the development of the military in the 19th century – the most critical century in the history of Benin – are dealt with in chapter 5. Chapter 6 re-examines the Anglo-Benin military confrontation of February 1897 and offers a new perspective on the events which led to the conflict and its aftermath. The concluding chapter discusses the relevance of this study's findings for current debates in Benin historiography.