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## PRE-COLONIAL WEST AFRICAN DIPLOMACY: IT'S NATURE AND IMPACT

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### Abstract

The neglect, for a long time, of African diplomatic history particularly, by scholars of African history, and the failure to forcefully project the history and image of Africa, exposed the continent to uncharitable, disparaging and judgemental comments by Eurocentric historians who denied African history.<sup>1</sup> The fact is that in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when Europe occupied Africa, her scholars did not attempt to study and understand or to build on the historical traditions in existence there; they sought instead to challenge and to supplant them. The history of European traders, missionaries, explorers, conquerors and rulers constituted, in their own view, the sum total of African history. This view has long been deconstructed by several research works centred on African history. What has received scanty academic attention perhaps, is African diplomatic history.

This paper therefore, challenges based on available sources, the notion in certain quarters that pre-colonial West Africans were not capable of engaging in any systematic and sophisticated art of diplomacy. This challenge is sustained by examining the nature and impact of pre-colonial diplomacy in West Africa. The paper argues that not only was diplomacy practised elaborately in pre-colonial West Africa, it was conducted according to civilized standards. The paper draws examples of systematic and elaborate diplomatic practices from various West African States and discusses copiously, some of the outstanding diplomatic feats achieved by the pre-colonial West African diplomats. The paper concludes by recommending some of these feats to contemporary diplomatic functionaries.

**Key Words:** Pre-colonial, West Africa, Diplomats, Tools, Credentials.

## DIPLOMACY IN GLOBAL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: ITS DEVELOPMENT OVERTIME

This paper considers it important to undertake howbeit compendiously, a historical excursion into the art and practice of diplomacy globally. This it is hoped, will shed light into our understanding of diplomacy as practised by pre-colonial peoples of West Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> This writer has argued vehemently in the chapter two of his doctoral thesis, on the reasons why West African diplomatic history was ignored for a long time. For details see, Femi Adegbulu, "Oyo from the Sixteenth to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. A Study in the External Relations of An African State". Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos, 2005.

Diplomacy has been described as the best means devised by civilization for preventing international relations from being governed by force alone. The field in which it operates lies somewhere between power politics and civilised usage, and its methods have varied with the political convention of each age. There is no lack of evidence that sending of emissaries to open negotiations was a common practice among quite primitive peoples and that in many cases their reception and treatment were regulated, even if only in a rudimentary way, by custom or taboo (Satow,1979: 3).

In fact, Nicolson (1969:6) argues that even in pre-history there must have come moments when one group of savages wished to negotiate with another group of savages, if only for the purpose of indicating that they had had enough of the day's battle and would like a pause in which to collect their wounded and to bury their dead. The fact that these savages did not spend all their time fighting, in Nicolson's view, is diplomacy. However, juxtaposed with other view on diplomacy, the art of fighting itself, is an act of violence by which a country compels its opponent to fulfil its will (Clausewitz,1997:5)

During this Nicolsonian period, all foreigners were regarded as both dangerous and impure and had to be subjected to purification for the purpose of exorcising all harmful influence. Envoys to the Tartar Khans were said to pass through fire before they could be allowed into his presence and even the gifts which they had brought with them similarly sterilized. And as late as the fifteenth century, the Republic of Venice threatened with banishment or even death, those venetians who held intercourse with any member of a foreign legation (Nicolson). Some relics of this taboo can still be detected in Moscow and Teheran. In London and other more advanced capitals, the process of purification to which foreign ambassadors are subjected is more gradual and less overt.

Perhaps, it is worthy of note that while all these were happening in Europe and other parts of the world, diplomacy was being carried on in West Africa in a very decent and dignifying manner. Foreigners to Yorubaland were not only welcomed and treated decently, they were also given land on which to farm. And, in Dahomey, 'the king and all his subjects received strangers with the most remarkable courtesy' (Dalzel:1793).

However, what is clear is that there is not enough evidence for us to form other than a shadowy view of what truly ancient diplomacy was really like. Certainly it was intermittent and generated no permanent institutions, and how far rulers recorded transactions or negotiations and to what degree they differed in their practices, we can know only patchily. With rare exceptions, it is likely that the lack of evidence does not hide the sophisticated diplomatic structures which have been lost. This is because most of the state structures took the form of largely, loosely formed empires, with porous boundaries, slow communication and little need to deal on any continuous basis with any other entity which had to be treated as an equal. Such conditions did not give rise to the development of complicated diplomacy nor to the devices required to pursue it.

Besides, some scholars have argued that the origin of diplomacy is hard to trace. According to them, the major subject of concern in the field of diplomacy has been its practice, rather than its origins (Der Deriam, 1987:2). Some of the famous guides to the practice of diplomacy are Abraham de Wicquefort's *L'Ambassadeur et ses Sourverains* (1681), Ernest Satow's *Guide to Diplomatic Practice* (1917), Harold Nicolson's *Diplomacy*, (1939), Henry Kissinger's *Diplomacy* (1994) and Oladipo Fafowora's *Selected Essays and Speeches on Nigerian diplomacy, Politics and Economics*, (2001). Having been written by former diplomats, these works all convey a view of diplomacy as a specialized skill of negotiation, and seek to 'maximize' that skill for the benefit of novices entering the profession. Understandably, their histories of the origins of diplomacy tend to be sketchy and rather anecdotal. Moreover, since, some of these authors were serving governments at the apogee

of imperial power, they probably were not interested in looking too widely and too deeply into a past which undermined the twin pillars of skilful negotiation – order and continuity.

### **The Diplomacy of State Formation in West Africa**

It can be argued that the studies of the evolution of the states and politics entail the study of the art of persuasion or coordination of interest groups and disparate units. The very traditions of origin employ myth and legend to reconcile conflicting intergroup relationships and provide acceptable explanations of the resulting situations. Rival States on settling down to a situation of co-existence became, in oral tradition, states founded by sons of the same parents. Ritual relationships are used to explain away conquest. The rise of a state like Asante for example, is an epic requiring the welding together of separate Akan communities and states into a single political unit (Ajayi,1976: 78). The evolution of its constitution, Ajayi argues, called for high diplomatic skills such as is credited to the genius of the statesman warrior King Osei Tutu, and the magical powers of his divine counsellor, Okomfo Anokye. It called for the use of inherited ideas in the creation of new institutions of inter-state coordination such as the confederal army, the elaboration of the idea of the Golden stool and of ritual usages and traditions of common origin (Ajayi,1976.)

There are other numerous examples of state formations, but not all have yet been put together in such detail as the Asante case. However, most state systems in West Africa as in other parts of Africa, meant the bringing together of disparate groups. Perhaps, it is imperative to consider the workings of Yoruba state-system, or the composition of the more diversified Benin imperial structure to realise the diplomatic effort required to keep them together.

The remoter periods of the formation of these West African states and empires have not always been studied in depth. This can be attributed to the difficulty of recovering the essential details of diplomatic manoeuvres and procedures from the oral traditions. In the later periods of expansion, the issues of external relations of these imperial systems become clearer. The dealings between the Benin Kingdom and its eastern neighbours, with the Igala, Nupe and Yoruba, or the relations between the Oyo Empire and Dahomey; or of Dahomey with Asante, are easier to identify as issues of diplomatic relationships. And as we come closer to the present, in the nineteenth century, the detail also become more accessible and recoverable.

Moving northwards in the Sudan belt of West Africa, was an environment where relations became quite complex, and studies of contacts of a trans-continental nature become feasible. In the wake of the trans-Saharan trade in gold, salt and other commodities, the empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai maintained relations with North Africa, while Bornu and the Hausa states similarly made contact with the Maghreb. The factor of Islam brought other dimensions of contact. Rulers like Mansa Kankan Musa (1307 -1332) sent diplomatic missions to the Middle East, and his famous pilgrimage was itself a major diplomatic expedition. The introduction of Arabic writing into the Sudan, it has been argued (Martin,1962), enabled Songhai to exchange diplomatic letters with Morocco and Kanem Bornu with Tunis, Tripoli and even with the Turkish Emperor at Istanbul. This diplomatic innovation was extended south into the forest belt when some states employed Muslim scribes to establish what may be called chancery. Besides, there are reports from late nineteenth century visitors concerning the exchange of diplomatic notes in Arabic between the rulers of Ibadan and Nupe. Perhaps, it is germane here to examine in detail some of the reported diplomatic activities in West Africa.

### **CASES OF DIPLOMATIC ACTIVITIES**

There was evidence of diplomatic activity in the correspondence of some of the first Christian missionaries who visited the region. As early as the sixteenth century (Circa 1539) three Portuguese friars at Benin, had in a letter to their king, King John III, stated that 'the Oba (king)

there had the habit of ill-treating and imprisoning all ambassadors of kings who send messages to him'. The envoys of two coastal states of Adra and Labeledde are said to have been accorded this treatment.<sup>2</sup>

Another report by some Italian missionaries states how in 1691 relations between Benin and Itsekiri Kingdom of Warri became so strained that 'they (were) not exchanging ambassadors' (Ryder: 1961) a presupposition that they usually exchanged ambassadors. In the works of Dapper, Bosman, Snelgrave, Norris and Dalzel, who all wrote in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, diplomatic activities were widely reported. In the last three (Snelgrave, Norris and Dalzel), the ambassadors of Oyo, the most powerful of the Yoruba kingdoms and of Dahomey, featured prominently. In one account, Agaja of Dahomey was said to be in the habit of sending an ambassador to Whydah with a request for 'an open Traffic to his side' (Snelgrave: 1734). This same source elsewhere relates how in 1730s Agaja 'sent Ambassadors with large presents' of coral, 'together with one of his most beautiful daughters' (Snelgrave) to the Alaafin (king) of Oyo. In return, the Alaafin sent one of his daughters as a wife for Agaja. However, diplomatic marriages, such as these, were common phenomena among pre-colonial West Africans.

Contemporary European observers in their reports in 1714, state how the Ashanti sent a delegation to compose differences between John Kabes, the merchant prince and virtual ruler of Komenda and the Twifo (Smith, 1976:26). In later years, the ambassadors of the ruler of Wassa succeeded in forging a league of the coastal states between cape Appolonia and the Volta in order to prevent the supply of guns to the Ashanti (Tenkorang, 1968:5). In 1777 a new Ashantehene, Osei Kwame, was said to have sent ambassadors to the King of Wawa asking him to ascertain whether the Fante were willing to accept the presents usually made on a King's death – an example of negotiation through a third party (Smith, 1969).

Examples of indigenous diplomacy abound in the nineteenth century West Africa. In the Yoruba country, the Ekiti and Ijesa kings sent embassies to other monarchs to form the anti-Ibadan coalition of 1878 known as the Ekiti-parapo (Akintoye, 1971:146). It has been argued that since the majority of the examples above concerned political issues, they not only illustrate the maintenance of foreign relations among West African States, but also the evolution and implementation of foreign policies.

Commerce and politics played a great part in foreign relations as in internal affairs. In West Africa, commercial relations did not only play a part of developing ad hoc diplomacy and expanding foreign relations into a deliberate and long-term foreign policy, but also in the tentative steps which were taken in pre-colonial West-Africa towards permanent or continuous diplomacy.

The pre-colonial West Africans were also in the practice of maintaining resident representatives abroad. As early as the sixteenth century, Askia (king) of Songhai was said to have some of his courtiers perpetually residing at Kano for the receipt of the tribute due to him from the kingdom (Ajayi and Crowder, 1971:214-15). Daaku (1970) cited in Smith (1976), states that at the end of the seventeenth century the King of Denkyira appointed an official named Ampim as his resident trade representative on the coast. On his death at Cape Coast in 1698, the English company sent consolatory gifts to the king.

The Ashanti of the eighteenth century was said to have maintained residents for the collection of tribute in Dagomba and other neighbouring states, and also sent trade representatives to Accra and Akuapim. Similarly, Dagomba and Gongga maintained representatives in Kumasi, the Ashanti capital (Levtzion; 1965). Argyle (1971) argues that the Alaafin of Oyo appointed

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<sup>2</sup> Two of the Missionaries were Franciscans and the third a member of the Order of Christ. The Letter is translated in full in A.F.C. Ryder, "The Benin Mission" *J.H.S.N.* 11/2, 1961.

ambassadors to pay extended visit to, and possibly reside in, Dahomey in the latter part of the eighteenth century in order to collect the tribute due to him under his treaties and to report any Dahomean military successes so that he might demand a share of the spoil. The Oyo government also stationed agents (Ilari) in Egbaland while it was tributary to them, a relationship which was probably broken towards the end of the eighteenth century. In likewise manners, the Oba of Benin placed agents in such peripheral parts of his territory as the Yoruba towns of Akure and Igbara-Oke,<sup>3</sup> where they were known as Balekale or Abilekale. Perhaps these had had to change their nomenclature overtime.<sup>4</sup> Ibadan which succeeded Oyo had its own residents called Ajele (Awe:1964).

### **Status, Symbols and Credentials of Diplomats**

The status of diplomats in West African states varied. In some states they were among those close to the rulers of the country, often members of the royal household. In Oyo, the Ilari who ran diplomatic errand for the Oba had servile origin, and were mainly slaves from neighbouring countries.<sup>5</sup> In some states, they were great men of the land, and sometimes, princes from the royal family were sent on missions abroad. In the sixteenth century, Congolese embassy was sent to Rome and in the seventeenth century, Ashante representative was sent to the coast.

Toward the end of the seventeenth century the kings of Denkyira and Ashanti were said to have sent some of their wives as ambassadors to each other. This mutual courtesy later caused diplomatic estrangement between them as the Asantehene, the great Osei Tutu, claimed that his Denkyiran brother had misbehaved towards on of his envoys (Bosman,1705, in Smith,1976:18). Among the Ibo, priests were appointed as ambassadors in negotiations to end the small-scale inter-communal wars (Meek,1937:224). As earlier stated, the Oyo was not the only community that used slaves as embassies to foreign lands. This was apparently so in the embassy which the Ashanti proposed to send to England in 1821. It is noteworthy that some of the diplomats were of humble but free birth, who had achieved distinction by their talents. Agyei for example, was said to be a salt-carrier on the Volta who later rose to be second linguist of the Asantehene in the early nineteenth century. Agyei, according to in Smith (1976), was the 'foreign Minister' of Ashanti.

Matheo Lopez, who led an embassy from Allada to Louis XIV of France, was described by Sieur d'Elbee, as performing functions akin to that of Secretary of State, having served several times as ambassador to Benin and Oyo. 'The office of interpreter here', according to d'Elbee, ' is very considerable, but the least mistake is as much as their lives are worth' (Smith). Similarly, the linguists at Kumasi were required to 'take fetish oaths to be true to each other and to report faithfully!

Meanwhile, it seems there was not a trace of even the most vestigial foreign office to serve as a centre for the information and execution of foreign policy, except where the external influences of Islam or Western Europe were strong. However, examples of recognized diplomatic staffs can be found in pre-colonial West Africa.

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<sup>3</sup> In the writer's extensive interviews conducted during his doctoral field work, Professor Sophie Oluwole, then of the University of Lagos, an indigene of Igbara-Oke, narrated to him how formidable the Benin influence and power was on her people in the pre-colonial period. She admitted that her people used to go to Benin in turn, to pay tribute annually, (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Personal investigation and interviews in Akure show that up till today Benin still has representatives in Akure. They are known as Odionwere, among the Edo n'Ekue, (interviews, 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Personal investigation and interviews in Oyo and other states in Yorubaland show that the Ilari and Ajele were essentially slaves from Nupe and Borgu; interviews with H.R.H. Oba Lamidi Olayiwola Adeyemi III, (60+), Alaafin's Palace, 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 1999; Chief Gabriel Olalere (76), Bada of Saki, Bada Compound, Saki, 20<sup>th</sup> December, 1999.

Perhaps the most highly organised staff was that of the Alaafin of Oyo. Ajayi (1976) calls them a group of household slaves known as Ilari, also called 'half-heads', from the custom of shaving one side of their heads into which a magical substance was inserted. These Ilaris were in hundreds who often paired themselves male and female when carrying out their multifarious duties for the Alaafin. But the point must be made that whereas, the junior had administrative and menial tasks within the palace, the senior males were used as bodyguard to the Alaafin and also as his messengers to the outside world.

The common feature among these ilaris was the titles they all bore; some of which had a significant relation to their calling; for example Obalo Lu ('the king is supreme'); Oba kose tan ('the king is not ready'); Kafilegboin ('Stand Fast'); and Madarikan ('do not oppose him').<sup>6</sup>

The reason why this important office was drawn from the slave cadre might not be unconnected with the need to make them feel important and have self esteem. Besides, Ilaris were initiated into some of the palace cults and were given the opportunity to socialize freely to the extent that they even forgot their real identity (Adegbulu, 2005:94-103). This unfettered freedom was allowed the Ilari to ensure implicit obedience and unalloyed loyalty and allegiance. When such slaves became fully acculturated it was easier for them to penetrate the rank of their home countries (Borgu, Nupe and Dahomey) with a view to gathering information regarding the strength and weaknesses of their Lord's enemies. (This was the modern day espionage). They were also allowed free movement among them. Whatever their findings, they were promptly relayed to the Alaafin.<sup>7</sup>

It can also be argued that the reason why the performance of such an important state task was entrusted to slaves and war captives was that a slave would be rabidly loyal to the state that had so elevated him. But this could boomerang. A slave or war captive who was still nursing the anger of his humiliation might either plot in collaboration with his host government against the state of his Lord; or escape and declare himself independent of his master. However, these options were rather exceptional in those days.

Ilari's appointments were confirmed only after favourable consultations with the *Ifa* oracle, followed by the necessary rituals to instill in them the courage and loyalty expected of those in the service of the Alaafin. Thus confirmed, they were then given Ilari names suggestive or indicative of the Alaafin's intentions on any given issue, a few of which have been illustrated earlier.

These names are very significant since in themselves as they carry messages. The selection of a particular Ilari for a special mission as an envoy or ambassador of the Alaafin therefore was of crucial importance since his name would automatically indicate the disposition, intention or wishes of the Alaafin on the matter considered. In a diplomatic world all too familiar with this tradition, the appearance of the Alaafin's envoy would indicate the position of the king. Thus, when by the 1860s, the rise of Ibadan 'imperialism' and its growing pre-eminence posed a great threat to Oyo's national interests, Alaafin Adeyemi resorted to diplomacy. It should be noted that during this period, Ibadan's ambitions and restlessness had suddenly become a terror to the rest of the Yoruba country. Perhaps, of great concern was the threat posed by Aare Latosa, Ibadan's generalissimo, who created the impression in the minds of many crowned heads that Ibadan's war machine was like an Indian juggernaut that would crush all of Yoruba country sooner or later.

Similar institutions of royal messengers existed in Dahomey, who employed 'half-heads' known as Wensangun. It is likely that their organization was based on that of Oyo. They also

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<sup>6</sup> Personal investigation in Alaafin's palace shows that although there are still (22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1999 – 4 February, 2000) many categories of Ilari in the palace, but it is not certain whether they still perform the duties they performed during the pre-colonial times, since some of the conditions which warranted the coinage of their names (functions) no longer exist.

<sup>7</sup> Personal interviews with: Oba Lamidi Adeyemi; Chief Gabriel Olalere, 2 February, 2000.

travelled in pairs so as to ensure the accuracy and security of the messages which they memorized. These Wensangun who were very athletic diplomats, according to Smith (1973:604-5), were required to bring their oral dispatches all the way on the run, and stations were provided on the road from Whydah to Abomey where they could be relieved by relays of others.

Pre-colonial West African diplomats often carried credentials or badges of office. These credentials could be in form of a fan, a cane, a baton, a whistle or a sword. The Ashante and Dahomean ambassadors were noted for their unique credentials. They were often covered in gold silver leaf and decorated with symbolic emblems. The staff of the chief linguist of the Ashante here was called Asempatia, 'a true account is always brief' (Smith,1976:23).

It is believed that such objects, by extending the power of the ruler beyond his normal reach, were intended to ensure the safe passage of his envoys through alien territory. Some wore specially made diplomatic uniform, such as black caps which according to Bosman, ensured 'an effectual free pass everywhere' for the Tie-Ties of the Fonte. The ambassadors of Tegbesu of Dahomey to Bahia in 1750 were said to have been offered Portuguese Clothes by the authorities there, they preferred to appear in their own magnificent garb.

In the case of Ashanti, it seems, there was a public wardrobe where uniforms were distributed to diplomats prepared for mission abroad. According to Smith (1973:606), Ashanti ambassadors were provided, by their King, with splendid clothes which on their return from a mission they surrendered to 'a sort of public wardrobe'. The kind of uniforms worn varied from community to community. The Poro officials who enforced their arbitration among the Mende Chieftaincies went masked as 'devils', impersonating the guardian Spirit of their society. The Dan people in modern Liberia wore special peace-making masks...'with animal-like features and a moveable jaw' (Smith,1976).

Another important aspect of West African diplomacy was the immunity which the diplomats enjoyed in the course of their duties. In fact, immunity seems to have been part and parcel of West African diplomacy and was well recognized. This was so, particularly when the diplomats carried credentials which identified them as state officials representing their sovereigns. Ajisafe's (1924) account on diplomatic immunity in Yorubaland makes our point clear. 'Embassy between two hostile countries or governments' according to him, 'is permissible in native law and the ambassador's safety is assured; but he must not act as a spy or in a hostile way...'

Apart from hospitality to strangers, the Yoruba of pre-colonial times, had a way of accommodating those who, otherwise would have been *persona-non-grata* in the society. For instance, criminals and others who incurred the wrath of the authorities sought refuge in recognized sanctuaries, including king's palace.<sup>8</sup>

Closely associated with this perhaps, was the important role of protocol and etiquette in pre-colonial West Africa. Although there was great variety in the etiquette of the different kingdoms of West Africa, but a pattern of this etiquette can be observed. For example, non visitor was not allowed to have a direct contact with Alaafin of Oyo, except through an Ilari who in turn relayed the message to a female Ilari for onward transmission to Alaafin.<sup>9</sup> Also in Dahomey, the two highest officials, the Migam and the Meu, were intermediaries who usually spoke for the king

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<sup>8</sup> Personal interviews with Oba Lamidi Adeyemi, revealed that many who were considered as *persona-non-grata* sought safety at Oba's palace because the Oba was regarded not only as impartial but final arbiter, 02 February, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> In a conversation, Chief Gabriel Olalere, Bada of Saki, described as sacrilegious, any direct contact by visitors, with the Alaafin Ikubabayeye, Alase ekeji orisa (the second to the gods who has the power of life and death).

to the people and for the people to the king. The Meu, as Chief de protocol, was in charge of all strangers and supervised all public ceremonies. According to Dalzel (1793):

The King (of Dahomey), and all his subjects receive strangers with the most remarkable courtesy. Ambassadors, from whatever state, are not put to the necessity of learning the Dahomean etiquette. Every one salutes the sovereign, according to the fashion practised in his own country.<sup>10</sup>

Similar pattern can be observed at the small court of Quoja, where special privileges were allowed to the ambassador of the King of Folgias, to whom Quoja was tributary; and to the Dutch representative who alone was allowed to eat at the king's table.

Ambassadors, like rulers, often had to rely on or speak through interpreters. Emphasis on precedence should be seen from the stand point of the importance pre-colonial West African diplomats attached to it. A clear example of this is well narrated in Johnson's History of the Yorubas (1921:592-3) when, during negotiations in 1890 by the colonial government at Lagos to end the Yoruba wars, the Alaafin of Oyo objected to his representative being given no higher status than the representatives of Ogbomoso and Iwo. Ogbomoso and Iwo, it should be noted, were formerly within the domain of Oyo. Thus, the Alaafin refused to send his Ilari to an important meeting. Perhaps the question as to how a foreigner was supposed to know this elementary indigenous diplomacy, was answered by a spokesman who remarked that "the Governor of Lagos 'ought at any rate to know what is due to a sovereign or he would not have been selected to represent one'".

Notwithstanding, there were a few instances where ambassadors were cruelly treated. Ibn Fartua reports two of such instances on which the troops of Mai Idris Aloomo of Borno killed envoys from the pagan So, during wars in the late sixteenth century. Bosman (1705) reports how the sixteenth century Oba of Benin was in the habit of imprisoning ambassadors sent to him. He also refers to the murder in the seventeenth century at 'Great Ardia' – Allada of an ambassador of the Alaafin of Oyo, an act which precipitated the invasion of Allada by an Oyo cavalry Force, and on several occasions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Ashanti complained of the ill-treatment accorded to their representatives by the Fante (Bosman). Another case of maltreatment of ambassadors, as recorded by Akintoye (1971) is reported by Smith (1976) that, in 1878, an envoy sent by the ruler of Imesi-Igbodo to assure Ibadan that his won town would not join the Ekitiparapo, was murdered by his own towns people on his return home.

### **Diplomatic Tools**

However, one major obstacle that would have hindered the flourishing of West African diplomacy was communication. To tackle this problem therefore, negotiators who were skilled in foreign tongues were employed.

This practice is not altogether peculiar to pre-colonial West Africa, as diplomacy everywhere utilized interpreters who had the tendency to become the negotiators. International relations between Europeans and Africans, in the sixteenth century, seem to have been conducted essentially in Portuguese language. Ruy de Pina, reported by Ryder (1961:30), wrote of the ambassador who in 1486 accompanied d'Aveiro from Ughoton, the port of Benin, to Lisbon, that he 'was a man of good speech' – he must have learnt some Portuguese on the Voyage – 'and natural

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<sup>10</sup> Dalzel, the History of Dahomey an Inland Kingdom of Africa, London, 1793; Snelgrave, (A New and Accurate Account of Some parts of Guinea and the Slave Trade, London, 1734) writes that courtiers whispered their messages for the king 'into the ear of an old woman, who went to the king; and having received his answer, she returned with it to them'. This was probably of the female officials known as the 'mothers' of the higher male officials and who, according to Herskovits, cited by Argyle, formed a part of the royal system of control.



wisdom. It is also possible that the activities of the Catholic missionaries and slave traders, who spread the language, facilitated intercourse between Africans themselves. Perhaps, this was the Lingua Franca in the eighteenth century (Smith; 1979),<sup>11</sup> and was used as late as 1854 when the British negotiated the Treaty of Epe with ex-Oba Kosoko of Lagos (Smith,1969:21).

There is another suggestion that in the seventeenth century, at the outset of Oyo's imperial expansion, the Oyo language (or 'Yoruba proper') was preferred for some purpose in Allada to the local Aja (Dapper in Smith: 1969). Trading contacts spread the use of English and French on the coast in both speech and writing from the eighteenth century onwards and probably earlier,<sup>12</sup> while trade between the forest and the Savannah led to the expansion of Hausa. The Fulani Jihad of the early nineteenth century and the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate might have given a great impetus to the speaking and writing of Arabic.

Before colonialism swept through the whole of West Africa, specialized vocabulary for the conduct of West African diplomacy had not developed; except in the use of significant titles for such envoys as the Ilari of Oyo and some generic terms for ambassadors.<sup>13</sup>

In other societies, like the Poro for example, signs, symbols and allusive language were used in their internal communications, which served to keep secret their political dealings (Little:1965). On occasions, according to Johnson (1921), diplomatic communications took the form of symbolic messages conveyed by objects such as the horse's tail sent to the French emissaries by the Egba in 1884 as a "sign of alliance" or by cowries and other miscellaneous objects arranged in a significant pattern, as in the congratulatory message sent by the Awujale of Ijebu-Ode to Oba Akintoye of Lagos after the latter's restoration in 1851.

Another diplomatic tool which pre-colonial West Africans used in their international intercourse was espionage. King Agaja's secret agents known as Agbajigbeto were good examples. Snelgrave writes that Agaja, 'this politick Prince', was able through his spies to discover how much the great men and people of Whydah 'were divided, and that the king was only a Cipher in the Government' formation which decided his invasion of that country in 1727 (Akinjogbin, 1967:124). The Agbajigbeto apart from gathering intelligence, were also sent abroad usually in the guise of Merchants, and were also required to create the impression that Dahomean intentions were peaceful and then, on their return home, to manufacture suitable pretexts for aggression. In certain African societies, espionage seems to play dual roles. The Ashanti for example, were said to be in the habit of keeping a watch on their won servants abroad. Bowdich said that an embassy was usually accompanied by 'A shrewd but mean boy...in the commonest capacity and meanest attire' whosent home to Kumasi accounts of the embassy's dealings (Bowdich,1819).

To the uninitiated, the conduct of foreign relations in Africa could be arduous and tortuous. This was attested to by some European participants and observers. Complaining about the sluggishness of the officials at the Court of Allada, Sieur d' Elbee in 1670 commented that 'it is the

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<sup>11</sup> Barbot writes of the interpreter of the King of Sestos speaking 'a little Lingua Franca or broken Portuguese; See Smith, Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa, London, Methuen and Company Limited, 1976.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Antera Duke's diary in D. Forde, Efic Traders of Old Calabar, London, 1956, cited in Smith, 'To the Palavar Islands: War and Diplomacy on the Lagos Lagoon in 1852-1854', Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria, 5/1, December, 1969.

<sup>13</sup> In Yoruba, for example, the word ajele for the resident representatives of Ibadan was apparently adopted for this purpose. It was applied in the mid-nineteenth century to the British consuls at Lagos and later to British residents and District Officers. In Yoruba, 'Ambassador' or 'envoy' is asoju, a title used for chiefs who have the special duty of representing their king. State messengers were previously known as Iko. (The writer thanks Professor Dar Oguntomisin who in a conversation, threw more light on this information).

custom of the court of Ardra (Allada) to make strangers wait a long time for an answer' (Astley:1746). Some of these delays are attributed to their religious observances which according to Dupuis, restrict activities to specific days. There were, for instance, only 150 to 160 days in the Ashanti year which were considered propitious for diplomatic business. Dupuis concluded that: 'In short, the Ashantees are slow, and I believe, cautious in cabinet; they are slower, however, in warlike movement (Smith:1976).

It has been argued that since the aim of diplomacy is to carry out the policy of a government by means of negotiation, (not ruling out the possibility of war though; since this has been regarded as a continuation of policy (diplomacy) by other means), its achievements are usually expressed on either informal understandings or specific treaties. Examples of secret informal understandings can be found in several West African States. In Dahomey for example, this style seems to have reached a high level of efficiency in the nineteenth century. Dalzel reports that King Kpengla's envoys were able to bring about a war in 1786 between his enemies at 'New Ardra' (Ajase) and her former allies the Weme. Similarly, Kpengla a few months later was able to separate the Ajase from their protectors at Oyo (Oguntomisin, 65+, oral interview: Head, History Department, University of Ibadan, 2000)

Other treaties were designed to end hostilities between states. The treaty concluded between the Hausa states of Kano and Katsina, C. 1650, for instance, was to end a long series of wars; while the boundary agreement in the late sixteenth century intended to end Idreis Aloom's Kanem Wars – an agreement which has been described as the first written border agreement in the history of the central Sudan. Perhaps some of the notable peace treaties concluded in West Africa were those between Oyo and Dahomey in the eighteenth century. The peace treaties of 1730 and 1748 (the second concluded through the office of the director of the Portuguese trading fort at Whydah) aimed at a comprehensive settlement and laid down the annual tribute to be paid to Oyo by Dahomey. Other included the alliances concluded by the Fante against the Ashanti in the nineteenth century examples, the treaty of Jarapanga in C. 1830 between Ashanti and the defeated Dagomba, and the anti-Ibadan alliance of the second part of the nineteenth century. A rather curious treaty of neutrality is said to have been entered into by the king of Whydah in 1714 with representatives of the French, Portuguese, English and Dutch. The king, by this treaty, refused to be a party to the hostility between the French and other foreign traders visiting his domains.

One important feature of treaties in West Africa was their sacrosanct nature. According to Elias, (1956) 'African customary law shares with customary international law acceptance of the principle of *pacta servanda sunt* as basis for assurance of a valid world order'. To make the treaties have a binding force, oaths, which were often formidable undertakings, were sworn to. The nature of oaths taken varied from society to society. Solemnization of treaties among the TIV, for example, entailed the killing of an elephant and a slave, followed by the preparation of sacred emblems and portions and the mingling and consumption of the blood of the parties.

In some societies treaties were confirmed by the giving of hostage and dynastic marriages, as in the case of exchange of daughters between Alaafin (Ojigi) of Oyo and King (Agija) of Dahomey in 1730 (Bohannon: 1953). Sometimes the parties might resort to devices such as the planting of trees to demarcate a frontier, which concluded a war between Oyo and Benin, probably in the sixteenth century. However, cases of broken treaties abound in Africa as elsewhere, as was the case with that of 1730 between Oyo and Dahomey (Smith, 1969).

### **Diplomatic Exchange in Arabic**

The exchange of diplomatic correspondence became a very marked feature in the operations of the nineteenth century revolutionary jihad states of the Western Sudan – the Sokoto Caliphate, the Segu-Tukutor empire, Masina, and others. The leaders of these states corresponded

with each other, for example, Shaikh Ahmad Lobbo of Masina is said to have written letters to Uthman dan Fodio of Sokoto. However, the most popularly known diplomatic exchange, as argued by Ajayi and Crowder (1985:33) seems to be that between the Sokoto caliphate and Borno which involved major ideological confrontations. Uthman dan Fodio and his son Sultan Bello argued that the Fulani were justified in attacking Borno even if it claimed also to be a Muslim state since its rulers had attempted to aid Hausa elements against the Fulani jihad, and also because acts of pagan syncretism were practised in Borno (Last and Al-hajj, 1965: 231-240).

El-Kanemi of Borno pleaded innocence on the charge of aiding unbelievers against the jihadists, but stated that the pagan practices alleged against Borno were to be found in many Muslim States and did not amount to polytheism. He therefore, charged the Sokoto Caliphate with waging war against a fellow Muslim state, contrary to the rules of Jihad. It appeared that these diplomatic controversies were a factor in the proliferation of tracts by the leaders of the Sokoto Caliphate explaining and justifying the aims and conduct of their jihad.

### **Afro-European Relations**

Europeans arrived on the Guinea coast some three hundred years after the Muslims had made their first converts in the Savannah. And from the end of the fifteenth century onwards, that part of West Africa which was within reach of the coast was in almost continuous contact with Western Europe. Perhaps, the statement reproduced by de Barros, of the answer returned by the representative of a coastal ruler to a Portuguese captain's request for land on which to build in 1482, shows the attitudes as well as the level of diplomatic discourse they maintained. The request was rejected on the grounds that:

Friends who occasionally remained better friends than if they were neighbours...He did not speak thus to disobey the commands of the king of Portugal, but for the benefit of peace and the trade he desired to have with those who might come to that port; and also with peace between them, his people would be more ready to hear of God, whom he wished to know; therefore, since time would reveal these inconveniences, he asked the captain to avoid them by allowing the traffic to continue as it had before...(Ajayi, 1976:42).

Trade with the Europeans produced many such diplomatic encounters requiring great skill on the part of the coastal rulers and peoples to keep the avaricious visitors from over the seas at a safe but profitable distance. This was especially the case when the slave trade gave way to the palm oil trade; and the coastal states had to deal with consuls who came with gun-boats to negotiate treaties to abolish the slave trade, even to abolish local customs, and, in time, to establish a foreign faith. However, the period of direct threat of conquest and of resistance to conquest posed the gravest problems of diplomacy for the West Africa states and produced a wide variety of diplomatic response.

### **The Diplomacy of Resistance**

Perhaps, more than any other aspect of diplomatic history, that of resistance seems to be the most accessible to historians. For instance, various resistance put up by traditional nationalists such as Kings Jaja of Opobo, Nana of Itsekiri and Kosoko of Lagos, was well known and has been well documented by historians. Much of it is contained in the records of the European powers, even if coloured in the process of recording. However, in some cases it is still possible to record oral accounts from direct descendants of the resistance leaders or from persons who saw some of the actions. There are already quite a number of good accounts of these struggles against the imperialists, from all parts of West Africa. But there can be few examples to surpass the strange dilemmas faced by Al-hajj Umar and his son Ahmadu, rulers of the Segu Tukolor empire (Boahen, 1973:3-4).

From 1857-1860 the Tukulor saw themselves competing for territory with the French, and fought them. After 1860, both parties agreed to expand east and west of the Senegal in uneasy accommodation of their competing interests. Since both were imperial powers in their own ways, each had to contend with challenges of local groups. Thus, in the period 1885-87, the attempt of Mohamad Lamine to carve out a new empire for himself appeared to threaten both powers. The leaders of the Tukulor empire were forced by the new situations to accept a pact with the French to defeat Lamine. But this process quickly led to a strengthening of the French who, in further alliance with local enemies of the Tukulor brought that empire to its end in 1893. Similar story of resistance against imperialism ran through most African communities.

### Conclusion

Having established that pre-colonial West Africans practised diplomacy contemporaneously with other parts of the world; and having affirmed that their kind of diplomacy was not only civilized but also more human and decent than what was practised in some parts of the world during the same period; it is germane here to draw some lessons from the above.

Perhaps, an important virtue which pre-colonial West Africans exhibited in their external relations, with their neighbours was what Mazrui calls 'Africa's short memory of hate. States that had differences, according to Mazrui, did not allow them to become interminable. Once the causes of crisis were out of the way, good relations emerged and developed once again. Time and time again, pre-colonial West Africans displayed a remarkable capacity to 'Let by gones be by gones'. This reflected in Oyo alliance with Borgu, its rival, to fight their common enemy – the Jihadists. It is noteworthy also, that in spite of the havoc Nupe purportedly wrecked on Oyo during the sack of the later by the former, this did not lead to a perpetual severance of diplomatic relations between them.

The kind of understanding that was instrumental in facilitating such relationships in spite of occasional conflicts should be exploited and sustained by modern conflict managers and diplomats.

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