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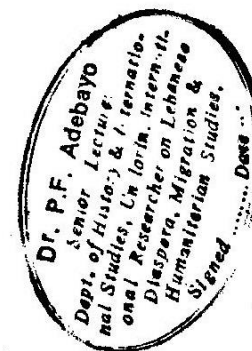
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## THE ROLES OF HUNTERS IN THE FORMATION OF STATES IN WEST AFRICA

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### Abstract

*Thousands of years ago, all humans were believed to have subsisted by hunting and fruits-gathering, with little or no agriculture. Man, had thus found it both convenient and rewarding, from primordial times, to co-habit in social groups. He has immensely multiplied his predisposition to earn a living from nature; hunting and survival (i. e. the preservation of his existence from possible extinction) being two significant factors. A better appreciation of the importance of hunting among early humans, as now believed by many scientists, reveals that early humans both scavenged and hunted. Warriorhood, militarism and belligerency also came as a gradual transmogrification from the humble background of hunting. Being vulnerable to his immediate and older neighbours, the primitive hunting man grew as a child of necessity; necessity, being the mother of invention! Many of life's great discoveries came as accidentals—fire, farming, iron metallurgy, etc., ditto also for hunting. However, these accidental discoveries were often borne out of the necessity of the ages. Necessity, the mother of invention, has moved hunting from its humble beginning of just enriching diets, providing security (via the development of social groups) and preserving humanity from possible extinction by antique dangerous monsters (via the evolution of the hunting man), to making*

*man become more sedentary by launching him into the eras of agricultural revolution and iron technology! Notable hunters such as the biblical Nimrod, described as “the first potentate on earth” and a “mighty hunter in the eyes of God who built empires such as Babylon, Erech, Accad and Calneh in Shinar; one Ojo Isekuse of Ilorin; Timi of Ede, the Olu-Ode, a notable archer—one of Sango’s two famous warriors, Kurunmi of Ijaiye; Soun Ogunlola of Ogbomoso; Sodeke of Abeokuta, etc. remain notable as reputable legendary hunter-warriors in the history of state formation and empire-building in West Africa. Such were responsible for the founding of settlements all over West Africa! Today, the contributions of the hunter to civilization and state formation can, perhaps, at best, be better encapsulated in this discourse than could just be imagined from a cursory observation*

**Key words:** Hunting, warfare, militarism, West Africa

### Introduction

It is almost unanimously agreed that all humans evolved in Africa from where they migrated and spread to other regions and continents as the climate grew warmer and became more bearable.<sup>1</sup> That Africa took the lead in World Civilization also attracted little debate until the popular *prima facie* became rivalled by that of Mesopotamia, much later in history, conceivably as an after-thought in the characteristic manner of ‘European cultural arrogance’,<sup>2</sup> aptly described as *Eurocentricism*. Regardless of whatever Eurocentric bigotry, Africa yet remains the original home of man.<sup>3</sup> From prehistoric times, states in West Africa, emerged and developed with increasingly complex administrative and social systems<sup>4</sup> especially towards the close of the New Stone Age, and perhaps more importantly at the outset of the Age of Metal, when the use of copper and bronze had been discovered. Man, obviously, had begun to become civilized. He needed to learn to co-habit peaceably with his fellow creatures, to organise a government, erect buildings as well as make advances in the arts and crafts. The antecedental role of *the*



hunter, in this regard, forms the main thrust of this exposé.

### The Geography of West Africa

The concept of *life zones*, coined by geographers, is premised upon the principle that the evolution of a society is conditioned by the geographical environment.<sup>5</sup> Thurstan Shaw's prehistoric and archaeological findings confirm that man had been living in the West African sub-region for a reasonably long time, probably prior to the differentiation of the ethnic groups, which now inhabit the region.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, archaeologists have revealed that man's ancestral precursors had, for long, occupied the West African sub-region. The West African ecological conditions were probably akin to those of East Africa in the pre-historic epoch of the australopithecines. Further archaeological findings may bring to light evidence of major stages in the evolutionary trend of man.<sup>7</sup>

Hopkins has revealed of West Africa, that "...though only a part of the African continent, [but] is itself almost as large as the whole of Europe, excluding Russia."<sup>8</sup> West Africa is, therefore, in itself, an ethos and an entity!<sup>9</sup> Nadel refers to the West African society as far from 'simple' or 'primitive'. "Its social and economic complexity is comparable only with the civilizations of Imperial Rome, Byzantium of Medieval Europe." The West African sub-region, although geography-wise, monolithically positioned, is situated across multiple vegetational zones consisting of coastal mangrove swamp, tropical rain forest, plateau of savannah and open woodland, Sahel semi-desert and desert lands. The West African sub-region is extensive, having streams, forests, rocks and hills, with many curious and beautiful things particularly conducive for hunting and games both during the rainy or dry season.

### The Development of Social Groups

From primordial times, man found it not only convenient but rewarding to co-habit in social groups. Two significant reasons were prominent; to hunt and for the sake of survival, to preserve his existence from possible extinction<sup>10</sup> without which, perhaps man would have gone into extinction in place of some of those dangerous ancient animals that have rather gone into oblivion.

The coming together of two or more of such social groups brought a number of possibilities, depending on the prevailing circumstances: one, dialogue and fusion between or among groups resulting into a mega society. This provided a serious impetus in the era of state formation. Two, peaceful and commercial interaction for exchange of ecologically diverse products. A third possibility was struggle! Indeed, much of human history has been a struggle for survival against natural hazards and against real or imagined human foes. In the ancient times, development has been interpreted to mean both the rise in the ability to defend the independence of the social group and indeed, to encroach on the liberty of others.

At the level of social groups, development therefore, implies a growing capacity to control and regulate both internal and external relationships.<sup>11</sup> The discovery of the fossils of a group of several *Australopithecus afarensis*, known as the *First Family*, who died together some 3.2 million years ago, appears to confirm the hypothesis that early humans lived in social groups.

With increased population, he made headway in the coordination of work from being an individualistic activity towards being an activity that assumes a social character via the participation of many.<sup>12</sup> These hunter-gatherers, also known as foragers, practiced division of labour by dividing work duties along gender idiosyncrasies. While the women gathered readily available plants as well as animal foods, and dug root tubers, the men took to the more arduous task of hunting. The early *Homos* often employed their enormous doglike canine teeth to bully, or sometimes fight with other males of

their species, usually over access to females, territory, food as well as other *needs and wants*.<sup>13</sup> The discovery of fire, from every probability must have been an invention of the hunting man, to enhance his security, aid his hunting activities, and for domestic use.

The history of warfare and militarism conceivably developed from this humble beginning as man not only fought against the other members of the animal kingdom but against fellow *homos*. This came in an acute defiance to God's divine order, from biblical perspectives. God never gave man dominion over man, but over the lesser beings.<sup>14</sup> This inaugurated the earliest demonstration of *man's inhumanity to man!*

Man has immensely multiplied his predisposition to earn a living from nature. All humanity has displayed a capacity for independently increasing their ability to live a more satisfactory life through exploiting the resources of nature.<sup>15</sup> The first humans, undoubtedly, ate some animal foods and might have done some hunting, with the invention of primitive stone or bone tools.<sup>16</sup> However, the modern human *genus* must have been peaceful plant-gatherers, opportunistic scavengers *but* aggressive hunters, fighters and warriors. Hunting and aggressive competition with carnivores powerfully influenced the evolution of social organisation and behaviour. Early humans began to hunt even the largest animals on earth, including mastodons, mammoths, bison, etc. Members of this early human species were specialized hunters of big game. Indeed, hunting might have contributed to the extinction of entire species, both of man and animals.<sup>17</sup> The need for hides and skin for the early man's clothing might have increased their aggressiveness to hunting. They needed to compete with and outsmart their neighbours—a further impetus to greater aggressiveness—for these quality products as one way of judging the level of their economic development. Walter Rodney made reference to the superior brand of red leather from Africa and the 'Moroccan leather'.<sup>18</sup> A better appreciation of the importance of hunting among early humans, as now believed

by many scientists, reveals that early humans both scavenged and hunted.<sup>19</sup>

### Evolution of the Hunting Man

Thousands of years ago, it is believed that all humans subsisted by hunting and fruit-gathering, with little or no agriculture.<sup>20</sup> The invention of new tools, known as *Achuelean*, helped the early humans in their hunting spree. The history of militarism, whether in Africa or any other place for that matter, came as a gradual transmogrification from the humble background of hunting. Being vulnerable to his immediate and older neighbours (i.e. the wild, dangerous, often times, carnivorous beasts of that epoch, such as mammoth, dinosaurs, etc., some of which today, have gone into extinction), the primitive hunting man grew as a child of necessity. And remember, necessity, people say, is the mother of invention!

Man, from primordial times, was a fruit-gatherer. Through all his developmental stages, man continued to perfect his hunting skill. For instance, *Australopithecus Africanus* was thought to be a scavenger, a hunter and a fruit-gatherer. *Homo Habilis* was said to be a good hunter. As *Homo Erectus*, he had developed into a tool-maker and fire user and lived more in nomadic hunting bands rather than individualistic. As *Homo Sapiens*, having conquered nature by his tools which made him a better hunter who had 'dominion' over his domains, he was able to live anywhere, confident of guaranteed security as a hunter. Man's ability to adapt to his environment for survival, using science and technology is perhaps the most distinctive feature distinguishing man from the rest of the animal kingdom.

The popular *cliché* for that epoch being '*survival of the fittest*', the early man needed to compete with the more dangerous co-habitats in the wild life for shelter in caves and on trees, as well as for food such as roots and tubers. It was in a bid of endeavouring to find a solution to his struggle for survival and from probable extinction that turned the *primitive man* to the *hunting man*. Man, as a necessity, became a hunter, making stone, (and later in

the Iron Age, iron) tools, as well as building crude shelter for himself. Of course, better tools were a consequence of the interplay between human beings and nature, as part of the struggle for survival.<sup>21</sup>

The evolution of hunting, for the early man, at first, was for defensive purposes. However, having learnt and perfected those skills of defending himself, man began to use those skills to hunt for animals and enrich his diets. All these undoubtedly, provided very serious impetus for the state formation process in West Africa in particular and the world at large which many are not aware of.

### Agricultural Revolution

The effects of food production on human society, especially in the process of states formation cannot be over-emphasised. Several years ago, humans are said to have begun farming. With this, the ability to control his food supply freed him from the nomadic lifestyle of the bands of hunters and fruit gatherers. This paved the way for the emergence of towns and cities, which was the major impetus for state formation and empire building.

It might be plausible to submit that agricultural revolution, which came with surplus food production, served as a catalyst for the rise of civilizations (i.e. state formation) some seven thousand (7,000) years ago—the large and complex models of societies such as most people live in today. As this gave people some long-term food security, they began to live a more sedentary life. Increased food supplies made the early farmers some 12,000 years ago, to settle into villages and have some more children.

This settled lifestyle increased contact between and among people. Yet, the problem of insecurity arising from the principle of survival of the fittest persisted! People therefore, reacted in several ways and differently to the increasingly population density resulting from the overuse of farming and grazing lands, etc.<sup>22</sup>

Human population as at 1250 was reportedly heavily concentrated in a few areas where settled farming was practiced and cities emerged. About

75 % of all people apparently lived on 6 or 7 % of the dry-land surface of the Earth, making an average of 65 people per square mile (roughly comparable to Europe in 1650 or Texas today).<sup>23</sup>

Conjecturally, the first farmers were hunter-gatherers who tried their primitive hunting tools on activities that later culminated into farming. Again, just like hunting, agriculture, also, was a child of necessity; necessity itself being the mother of invention!

With the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, hunting gradually diminished in importance, as a means of survival.<sup>24</sup> But man has, over time, made progress from crude stone tools to the use of metals; changed over from hunting-gathering to agriculture and animal domestication.<sup>25</sup> This underscores the fact of the aphorism that 'Life is in stages and men are in sizes'. The hunting stage of man effectively prepared him ahead for the next developmental stages. The hunting stage also preserved humanity and prevented him from possible extinction.

Karl Marx, that ace German-born philosopher, economist and sociologist, writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century distinguished several stages in the development of man. The latter stages of *Communalism*, *Slavery*, *Feudalism*, *Capitalism*, *Socialism* and future *Communism*, were built on the foundation of the 'simple bands of hunters'. Following that era that man in his primitive society subsisted in groups of 'simple bands of hunter', the society became largely communal. Here, man was a contented being, sharing things mutually and with equality. Man's greed and avarice came to the fore while entering into the stage of slavery, caused by the domineering elements within the society and by some groups being physically overwhelmed by others.<sup>26</sup> From this stage to that of Capitalism, and as man became increasingly avaricious, man gradually and systematically usurped all the factors of production—Land, Labour, Capital and Entrepreneurship!

### State Formation Process

Scriptural accounts reveal the role of one Nimrod, described as “*the first potentate on earth*” and a “*mighty hunter in the eyes of God*.”<sup>27</sup> He might have been the adventurous, yet boisterous and unruly tyrant whose ambition led to the catastrophic episode of erecting the Tower of Babel. Today, in English literary tradition, the appellation ‘Nimrod’ is often used for a dexterous or intrepid hunter.<sup>28</sup> His efforts in the formation of states and building of empires such as Babylon, Erech, Accad and Calneh in Shinar, etc. remain notable in history.<sup>29</sup>

Walter Rodney has noted that whereas all societies have experienced development, it is equally true that the rate differed from continent to continent. Even within each continent, different sub-regions increased their command over nature at different rates.<sup>30</sup> State formation process and empire building were accelerated in areas that provided good, strong building materials and even more significantly, where deposits of metal, especially iron were available, discovered and mastered either by self-intuition or learnt from neighbours, to replace the stone ones.<sup>31</sup>

The first millennium after the introduction of iron, although very obscure in West African history, must have been one of intense economic activities such as hunting, and rapid population growth, which must have led to the emergence and development of state organisations. The rise of the state, perhaps, became more clearly notable with the rise of social class—a sharp distinction into social groups—the ‘aristocrats’ and ‘common subjects’!<sup>32</sup>

Conceivably, Economic and Military survival are two forms of survival that had been at stake in the history of human collectivization. The quest for economic survival has been a major aspect behind state formation. How often it is erroneously assumed that politics and economics have a special bond, that a man is a political animal just because of his economic needs! Indeed, man had been an economic agent prior to the institutionalization of distinctive organisation of politics. However, the quest of man to satisfy his greed and

avarice made him to begin to lord himself over his fellow men. Really, the pre-political man was an economic being. Of course, relations needed to cultivate land, while bands had to organize for hunting expeditions even in situations devoid of distinctive political organisations or political processes. The real impetus to man’s politicization, as some may want us to believe, might, in actual sense, lie in military inclinations, as against economic. However, this may only be a means to an end, the end being economic.

The development of the state systems seems to have provided basis for wide-ranging activities and contacts between and among peoples. Even in the economic sphere, the state must have provided security for those engaged in long distance trade. And these agents of security were the hunters. The centralised states provided their citizens with this confidence of security. Evidence from the rise of Ancient Ghana, the earliest of West Africa’s mega states, it is believed that the state grew out of its people’s need to protect their trade; as far back as before 800 AD.<sup>33</sup> Being strong in trade, they needed to be powerful also in government, in which they actually succeeded.

What took place in Ancient Ghana was the standard everywhere. Trading states arose along the course of the River Niger as well as in neighbouring regions. Hence, by 1000 AD, the West African people had already passed through various stages of *civilized development*. Between about 1000 and 1600 AD, coinciding with the transition into the Iron Age in West Africa, the West African people developed more useful systems of government, founding large states and empires. A class of politicians evolved alongside the traders, priests and craftsmen such as blacksmiths, producing weapons for the hunters (agents of security) to ensure the great security which guaranteed the great political and socio-economic developments of their history.

Some of the earliest West African States, Kingdoms and Empires included the Kanem-Bornu, Hausa-Fulani of Northern Nigeria, Fante and Ashante Kingdoms of Ghana, the Fon Kingdom of Dahomey, Oyo and



Benin in Yorubaland and Edoland respectively, etc. Many towns and settlements that grew into prominence also either became founded or at least, consolidated at the instance of reputable hunters. E. g. Ilorin is believed to have been founded sometimes in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century A.D. by one Ojo Isekuse, a legendary hunter said to have hailed from Oyo-Ile<sup>33b</sup>, in the Old Yoruba country. Ede was also founded by one of Sango's two famous warriors—Timi, the Olu-Ode, a notable archer; Ijaiye Kingdom by Kurunmi—a ferocious and tyrannical hunter-warrior said to have been more dreaded at Ijaiye than even the gods of the land, <sup>1k</sup> Ogbomoso by Soun Ogunlola, Abeokuta under Sodeke, to mention only a few, all of them being reputable legendary hunter-warriors, around the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Many hunter-titles have remained prominent till date as political, religious and military titles in Yorubaland such as *Asipa* (Chief of Staff of the Hunters), *Eejala/Onijala* (Hunter Lord), *Olu-Ode/Baalode* (Chief/Head of the hunters), etc.<sup>34</sup> Even in the so-called mini states, such hunters (either pure or hunter-warriors) were responsible for the founding of most of the settlements. Even in the era, in Yorubaland, when princes went about founding their kingdoms, they succeeded at that only at the instance of and in strong conjunction with these hunter-warriors. Examples of these abound all over Yorubaland, for example—Iwo in Isin L.G.A., Oro-Ago in Ifelodun L.G.A. of Kwara State, etc. They were also instrumental to the development of some quarters in Yorubaland. For instance, in Igbesa now in Ogun State of Nigeria, Awofisayo observed that 'some years later, some hunters joined Akeredun—one of the children of Isheri-Olofin) at Igbesa and were allocated the four major quarters in Igbesa. The hunters and their quarters include Odu-Agbe at Igbe quarters, Odu Osi at Osi quarters, Ogono at Oke-Ijana and Idomo by Akeredun himself. Also, in Kabba town of Kogi State, hunters from Ohakiti settled in Odolu quarters of the town. It is interesting to note that this phenomenon is prevalent in Yoruba land and other West African States.

As towns and cities were founded, gradually cities grew into states, and then successively, into kingdoms and empires. The city-governments were needed as well as the men trained to be put in charge of maintenance of law and order, looking after the safety of citizens. This culminated in the process of city-founding and empire-building in West Africa.

### Professionalization of the Military

It is quite plausible to state that just as the ancient *clubs* undoubtedly served as the precursor for modern day batons, the secondary armament of the Nigerian police, the hunter stands as the ancestor of today's professional soldier. It is particularly noteworthy here that, unknown to many today, most of the recruits for the British constabulary forces—the forerunner of the contemporary Nigerian Army—at the beginning of colonial rule, were Kiriji war veterans, many of whom were hunters by their background.<sup>35</sup>

*Warriorhood* or *militarism* might have become distinguished from the hunter's activities and professionalised in some societies. The Prophet Mohammed of the Islamic Faith is reputed to have observed that 'War is trickery'. This element of trickery as part of the tactics of war is clearly evident in hunters.<sup>36</sup> Professionalization of the military varied from one place to the other across the West African sub-region. While militarism might have attained a level of professionalism among the Fon Kingdom of Dahomey where they even had a professional Standing Army of Women—the Amazons—it might not have been the same elsewhere, especially among the Yoruba. Olutoye and Olapade, for instance, revealed that Yoruba soldiers were not paid salaries.<sup>37</sup> The Kiriji War even revealed that the Yoruba soldiers received little or no material gain from warfare. Yet, these are parts of the attributes of military professionalism. Nwabueze is more emphatic about it, insisting that:

*There was nothing in the pre-colonial polity  
remotely like the alien-type state's strong,*



*formidable organisation of force, its enormous power...all backed by an overwhelming force at once intimidating, irresistible and awesome in the form of a standing or full-time army or police with all their weapons of violence...*<sup>38</sup>

The army-type among the Yoruba and most (if not all) West African states was perhaps, at best, the militia-type, often characterised by being cheap to raise, quick to mobilise in the event of a war, with no serious central command or control. Their weapons were easily obtained and locally derived. They hardly embarked upon long continuous campaigns just as the period of engagement in hostility is often brief.<sup>39</sup> In the event of a war, the hunter-warriors ('*?d?-Ajagun*' among the Yoruba) were the very first to be mobilised, thus, forming the advanced party of the army. This is because, as Olutoye and Olapade put it,

*On account of their thorough knowledge of the terrain and natural endowments as hunters, they could move as close to the enemy territory as discretion permitted, climb into the top of tall trees and generally carry out reconnaissances and bring back useful information about the enemy which will assist a military commander plan his operation effectively.*<sup>40</sup>

Providing credence to this hunter-warrior militia-type account is the fact that common among the war-chants are the hunter-songs (*Ìjálá ?d?* in Yoruba).<sup>41</sup> Besides, the similar skills, tactics, charms and implements of hunting were employed in warfare in West Africa. Many of these had

been learnt, discovered, tried, tested and perfected in the hunting grove! Little wonder that these hunter-warriors formed the first recruits across West Africa, where there was no Standing Army, as well as the larger chunk of the army where Standing Armies existed. Aboyemi has also noted that though there were no standing armies, but each of the warrior-leaders in Igbomina were hunters who had many war-boys under them to be trained on how to handle guns and rifles.<sup>42</sup>

With time, among the Yoruba, the semi-professional army known as the *Èsò* (i.e. guards) or *Ológun* (i.e. warriors) evolved which might have been aside the hunter-warriors. It was at this level that the Yoruba believe that 'one of two things befits an *Èsò*: either to be victorious or to die fighting!' <sup>43</sup> There was the constant reminder by drummers, fluters and other Para-militias that the glory of a warrior (*Èsò*) is to win a battle; no more, no less! It is only as a second best option that it befits an *Èsò* to die in active warfare. Terms, in modern military parlance, such as '*retreat*' or '*tactical withdrawal*' were completely tabooed!

However, other categories of people who participated in wars, based on the power of medicine they possessed, included hunters, traditional herbalists and volunteers as Para-militias such as drummers, fluters/bugle-players/trumpeters, watchmen (*Alóre*), emissaries (*Ikò*), etc.<sup>44</sup>

It is quite plausible, at this juncture, to adjudge the professionalism of militarism in West Africa as the legacy of foreign influence! This came with the introduction of professional weapons and tactics of fighting real wars and not just mere raids and skirmishes often loosely used as 'wars' even among scholars!

## Conclusion

In the remote past, geographical effect on history was greater than now that man has conquered the earth by subduing natural obstacles such as mountains, waters, groves, etc. Whereas open plain-dwellers tended to

be warlike to defend themselves from attack, animal or man, others living in remote inaccessible areas often had little need to be aggressive.<sup>45</sup> This explains why people within the same region developed with different levels of aggressiveness to life. One can adapt the Late Sir Ahmadu Bello's words as quoted by Maitama Sule that West Africa:

...as it is today is a product of three  
factors: Geography, History and the  
Character of its people!<sup>46</sup>

Many of the great discoveries of life were stumbled upon by accidents—fire, farming, iron metallurgy, etc., ditto also for hunting. However, beyond the veils of these *accidentals*, they were often discovered to have been borne out of the necessity of the ages. Necessity, the mother of invention, has moved hunting from its humble beginning of just enriching diets, providing security and preserving humanity from possible extinction by antique dangerous monsters, to making man become more sedentary by launching him into the eras of agricultural revolution and iron technology! Today, the contributions of the hunter to civilization and state formation can, perhaps, at best, be better encapsulated in this discourse than could just be imagined from a cursory observation!

It is good to note that until lions learn to write their own histories, tales of hunting will not cease to eulogise the hunter! Our mega society today, owes, at least one thing to the hunter—the preservation of mankind for the era of state formation!

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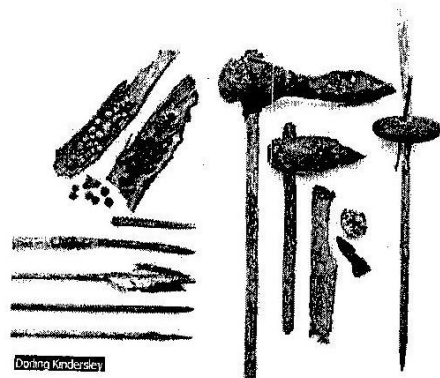
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## APPENDIX I

### Early Hunting and Gathering Tools



Dorling Kindersley

An assortment of prehistoric tools provides evidence of the hunting and gathering methods of early peoples. Slabs of bark were often used to gather nuts and berries and functioned as crude dishes or bowls (top left). Reproductions of fishing

tackle and arrows believed to have been used around 8000 BC are displayed on the lower left. Recovered tools for digging and cutting (right) are shown with recreated wooden handles. The heads of the adzes are made from flint, as is the fire-starter shown below them.

Dorling Kindersley

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## APPENDIX II

### Neandertal Family

#### Neandertal Family

A mural depicts a Neandertal family group at the Le Moustier rock shelter in southwestern France. The mural was painted around 1920 by American illustrator

Charles R. Knight for the American Museum of Natural History.

Courtesy Dept. of Library Services American Museum of Natural History

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to butcher animals. Small arrowheads of a variety of shapes and sizes made precise weapons for hunting.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Aboyeji, A. Justus & Adebayo Peter Ph.D	The Roles of Hunters In The Formation of States In West Africa.	1
Asifat, Tajudeen Olelekan & Ogundipe, Israel Adebayo	Ethnic Rivalry In Nigeria: A Discourse of Its Genesis and Consequences.	21
Omotola, Adeyoju Ilesanmi & Adebajo, Adeola Aderayo	The South Sudan Conflict and The Role of External Actors.	37
Maiyaki, Mejida. M.	The Bassa Traditional Administrative System In Nigeria: A Neglected Aspect of National Security.	60
Omotayo, Olatunbosun Tope & Adegbola, Gbeminiyi Mujaheed	Political Degradation of Older Persons: An Analysis of 2003 General Election In South West Nigeria.	75
Nyityo, Saawua Gabriel Ph.D	A Culture Historical Approach To The Study of Agricultural Practices Among The Tiv of Central Nigeria.	91
Ayodeji, Gafar Idowu Ph.D	Overcoming The Challenge of Corruption In Governance: A Case Study Of Nigeria Since 1960.	111
Ajetunmbi, Rasheed O. Ph.D Awofisayo Albert Oladipupo Ph.D	Origins, Migrations And Settlement Patterns of The Yoruba Awori of Nigeria 1600 - 1700 AD.	136
Adekoya, S.K. Bada, J.B. & Adenle J.O. Ph.D	Awujale Palace Architecture: A Monumental Symbol of Age-Grade Contributions In Yorubaland.	166
Osiyale Babatunde O.	Imagbon War of 1892 And The Transport Industry In Ijebuland.	189
Williams Oreofe	Historical Perspectives on The Representation of Esu Elegbara In Euro-Christianity and Yoruba Cosmology.	209
Erinosho, Timothy O. Ph.D Ajetunmbi, Rasheed O. Ph.D & Osunkoya, Olusesan A.	Laying Solid Foundation of History And Diplomatic Studies In Nigerian Universities Through Effective Handling of Government At The Secondary School Level.	227
Fatai Owolabi Jamiu Ph.D	A Survey of The Evolution and Development of Science of Arabic Lexicography	247
Afolabi, Abiodun, Ph.D	Political Economy of Yorubaland Prior To Colonialism.	263
Osunkoya Olusesan Adewunmi & 'Niyi Ogunkoya	Poverty Alleviation In Nigeria Under The General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida Military Administration: A Historical Perspective.	276
Idowu, Kojusotito Olatunji Ph.D	The Contribution of American Negroes to the Development of General Art Between the 18h and 20 <sup>th</sup> Centuries.	290



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