African Military Leadership in History: A Review

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Abstract

This review of military leadership in Africa explores the "trinity of time"- the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. Drawing on evidences from diverse sources and historical developments, it underscores that Africa was a home to powerful kingdoms and empires with elaborate system of governance and military leadership. The paper challenges Eurocentric perceptions that reduced precolonial armies to "irregular and barbaric hordes", arguing instead for a recognition of the strategic prowess of leaders such as Shaka Zulu, Queen Amina of Zauzzau, Mzilikazi, Hannibal Barca , Sundiata Keita, and Samouri Ture. In the postcolonial era, African military leaders have varied in character-from nationalists to despots-and the military remains both a tool of coercion and an agent of development. Ultimately, the review concludes that a full understanding of postcolonial African militaries requires a study of their precolonial and colonial antecedents.

Keywords: African Military, Military leadership Historiography, Precolonial Africa, Queen Amina , Shaka Zulu, Sundiata Keita, Colonial Africa, Postcolonial Africa,.

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Introduction

Military leadership represents a central theme in Africa history due to the significant role the military has played as both actor and agent in the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial development of African States. From the kingdoms of ancient Egypt and Nubia to the modern era of nation-states, the military, has profoundly influenced Africa's trajectory. Yet, despite the military's historic significance, African military leadership remains understudied, overshadowed by European colonial narratives that attempt to justify colonial domination. In fact, several European scholars portrayed African precolonial armies as primitive and chaotic. Captain A T. Jones, for example blinded by racial jingoism, disparagingly described their strategies as "the irregular marching and skirmishing of the barbarous horde".[i] This review contests such depictions and aims to reconstruct an accurate understanding African military history, focusing on leadership from the precolonial through the post-colonial era. The paper is structured into six sections; introduction, conceptual clarifications, military leadership in precolonial Africa, the colonial experience and African military, postcolonial military leadership, and the conclusion.

Conceptual clarifications

The concepts of military and leadership require clarification. The term military is derives from the Latin word, *militaris*, meaning "soldier", while army originates , *armata*, meaning "armed force.[ii] While is the army is a land-based component of a military structure, the military in its broader sense includes other branches such as the navy and air force. For example, the U.S military comprises of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps and the Air force, and Coast Guard. In Nigeria, it consists of the Army, Navy and the Air Force, excluding the police force. These three makes up Federal Armed Forces. In precolonial Africa, however, military essentially refers to the armies as navy and the aerial force were not in existence were products of colonial and postcolonial development.

Leadership, on the other hand, refers to the act of guiding or commanding a group.[iii] Drawing from this, military leadership involves strategic thinking, tactical execution, adaptability, ethical conduct, and the ability to inspire and manage others. In African history, military leaders across region and various epochs

displayed these qualities, establishing and defending empires, kingdoms, city-states, and postcolonial nation-states.

Notable contemporary leaders include Thomas Sankara (Burkina Faso), Samori Ture (Guinea), Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida and Sani Abacha (Nigeria), Idi Amin (Uganda), Mengistu Haile Mariam(Ethiopia), Yoweri Musevini (Uganda), Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt), Muammar Gaddafi (Libya), Hoauri Boumediene (Algeria), Sam Nujoma (Namibia), Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Mobutu Sese Seko (Democratic Republic of Congo), and Denis Sassaou-Nguesso (Republic of Congo).[iv] These figures represent a range of leadership styles, from patriotic nationalists to authoritarian rulers. However, despotism has not been exclusive to Africa; it is a global historical phenomenon.

The Precolonial Era

During the precolonial era Africa was home to powerful and organized kingdoms and empires, each with its own military structures and strategies. Examples include Shaka Zulu (South Africa), and Mzilikazi (South Africa and Zimbabwe) in Southern Africa, Hannibal Barca and Queen Dido in North Africa, Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim Al-Ghazi of Ethiopia /Somalia and Emperor Tewodros II (Theodore II) in Eastern Africa, Queen Nzinga of Angola in Central Africa, and Queen Amina of Zaria and Sundiata Keita in West Africa.[v] In addition, while the origin of Ghana has been placed around 300 AD, but before 622 AD, twenty –two kings had ruled the empire and two kings after 622 AD. By 800, it has become a powerful trading state, called Wagadu by its rulers, but the name *ghana* became more famous and applied because, *ghana,* or "war Chief", commanded respect through military prowess.[vi]

The weapons of war included swords and staff, missiles and projectiles and, firearms, with evidence of guns in West Africa dating back several centuries before European colonization. War logistics were adapted to ecological conditions- using horses in the savannah and canoes in riverine areas.[vii] It remain to be added that war in precolonial Africa had multiple causes , including territorial expansion and natural instinct to subjugate another, access to and control of trade routes, broken alliances ,and religious or ritual motivation. This shows that the causes of wars precolonial Africa were essentially mundane. As Joseph Smaldone, noted:

> An active, efficient, and mobile army was the principal instrument of territorial expansion, security for strategic trade routes, and political control of far-flung but loosely knit empires. Continuous campaigning was necessary for conquest and reconquest, imperial defence, and internal control. Annual expedition were dispatched to stabilize frontier regions, suppress revolts, and awe ambitious viceroys and vassals.[viii]

The above were the traditional roles of the military which defined the causes of wars across African region in the precolonial era.

Queen Amina also known as Amina bint Nunu, (c.1533-1610), for instance , ruled for over three decades and expanded her kingdom through series of military campaigns even as far as Kwararafa and Nupe lands. In short, the military organization of Hausa states were eminently based on the principle of conscription, and the armies were made up of men from different parts of the kingdom due to ethnic mingling and comingling. Queen Amina leadership and tactical genius celebrated in oral and written traditions.[ix]

From the foregoing, it is evident that military power was central to the formation and consolidation of African States. Leading African scholars often agreed that many African States were born out warfare and the military initiative.[x] In short, the military symbolize authority and was integral to statecraft, and its legacy continues to shape modern African nations. In other word, as a symbol of authority and power, the military throughout the ages has remained sacrosanct to its traditional role because States in history rises with the military and if it fails, it falls on the military.[xi]

The Colonial Epoch

The colonial era marked a significant turning point in African military history. Motivated by the need to sustain industrial growth, the European powers colonized vast of territories in the world, especially in Asia, Americas and Africa. For instance, by 1890s, European industries were still producing what it started producing at the takeoff of industrial revolution ,and at the time of the scramble, (1884-1885), the industries were in depressed and distressed condition.[xii] With the

conquest and colonization, the business of imposing foreign military structures and suppressing indigenous systems began in earnest. African soldiers were recruited into colonial armies, often used to quell local resistance. European military superiority, particularly their advanced firearms, allowed them to subdue African forces despite the latter's resilience and ingenuity. Nevertheless, notable exceptions existed. In the 19th century for instance, Dahomey, had transformed into a real military kingdom. A European explorer described it as "a small black Sparta"[xiii], whose female warriors–the Amazons–earned a formidable reputation. The colonial conquest dismantled traditional African military institutions, replacing them with European command structures. These legacies persist till today, as contemporary African militaries- comprising of the army, navy and the air force- are fundamental properties of colonial and imperial impositions. However, from the post- independence, many African military leaders have displayed remarkable patriotism and played pivotal roles in nation-building project.[xiv]

The Post-Colonial Era

The postcolonial period, spanning the last seventy years, began with a wave of independence movements across Africa. Newly sovereign states inherited military institutions shaped by colonial rule. African military leaders became central to shaping national defense policies and responding to internal and external threats. However, the postcolonial era has been marred by deluge of military coups, civil wars, and foreign interventions. Many African states remained economically and politically dependent on former colonial powers. This dependency, coupled with weak political institutions, created fertile ground for military interventions in politics.

While some leaders acted patriotically, others ruled as hardened autocrats. Nonetheless, the military continues to play crucial role in African politics and security. In recent years, African militaries have had to confront emerging threats such as banditry, terrorism, piracy, and organized crime. Added to these, is the lure of bribery and corruption from unscrupulous democratic political heads and leaders, who for fear of being toppled by the military, for the reason of insecurity and nonperformance and to perpetuate themselves in power. This is a threat to ethics and professionalism, and a threat to the allegiance to the State or the nation.

As professional corps, the militaries are expected to overcome these and secure peace for Africa.

Given Africa's ethnic and religious diversity, the role of the military in promoting national unity and identity cannot be overemphasized. As Sifawa, Odeh and Marafa argue, as a forger of national unity and identity, the military remained a critical asset and a component of the nation's patriotic culture, embodying political values and state's sovereignty.[xv] The post-independence militaries, in short, defines at all times the wellbeing and life span of African state especially, of its democratic institutions. These underscore that the military, is not just a fighting force or instrument of coercion, but also a force for nation building and development.[xvi] It thus appear, the above account for why political leadership in postcolonial African States has not been able to do without the military. B. A.Ogot, aptly notes:

> We are not likely to understand the nature and role of the military in post-independence Africa unless we also study the nature and role of the military in precolonial as well as colonial Africa.[xvii]

The above raises quite a number of fundamental issues that concerns the subject matter of history as a study of change, and about the connectivity between the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial eras in the study of African military history. In all, it validate the fact that history is the study of continuum of event that society has witnessed. Although contexts may change, the fundamental causes of war-such as the pursuit of power –remain constant. Michael Howard cited in Odeh, observed:

> Just as Thucydides had written that the causes of the Peloponnesian war were 'the growth of the Athenian power and fear this caused in Sparta", some of the principal causes of World War I were the growth of the Germany's power and the fear this aroused in Britain.[xviii]

The above observation agrees with Aristotle's that in every change there are things that change and there are things that does not change.[xix] This is in view of the fact that reality is made up of two elements: *nature* (essence) and a*dventure* (or change). While the human nature which distinguishes man from other animals does not

change, individual person does changes. This underscores why the human nature that made leaders and nations to declare war or invaded another, as Russia did to Ukraine, has not really changed. The application and implication of this is that the role of African military leaders and of the military since the precolonial period has not fundamentally changed. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of the military engagement in the postcolonial Africa requires a great deal of reversion to history.

This review through time has revealed the role of the military in state formation and empire building engineering, the impact of European colonization, the significance of local knowledge (terrain and cultural factor), the experiences and exploits of women (such as Queen Amina of Zaria, Queen Nzinga of Angola, Queen Dido of north Africa, the Amazons of Dahomey etc.,) in statecraft, and the experience of the marginalized groups in African military enterprise. It further revealed that the tactics employed in the warfare encounter with the European, as indicated by several studies shows that though some of the strategies were unsuccessful, they were not of those of "barbarous hordes" (as claimed by Captain Jones), but of generals , often with long years of experience, some so sophisticated that they taxed European forces, despite their possession of superior weapons, to the utmost; others so hide-bound by traditional military thinking that , like the French at the beginning of the World War, they were unable to appreciate that old methods were not suitable for dealing with armies equipped with revolutionary new arms-the Maxim and Gatling guns.[xx]

Conclusion

By a way of conclusion, the review has shown the following : one, that study of African military history should be promoted, and legendry leaders such as Shaka Zulu, Queen Amina should be commemorated through organized conferences, symposiums, seminars, lectures, and academic research; two, that African military capabilities should be strengthened through deliberate investment in modernization and regional cooperation to combat common security threats; and three, that empowerment of women in military leadership should be prioritized. The legacies of Queen Nzinga of Angola and Queen Amina of Zaria (Nigeria) should inspire contemporary efforts to promote gender equality in military institutions. By consciously working to close these gaps, the study of

African military leadership will be enriched, ensuring its relevance and resilience in the 21st century and beyond.

The paper has examined the historical trajectory of military leadership in Africa cutting across the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. It challenged colonial-era stereotypes that always talk down on indigenous development and highlighted the sophisticated strategies and leadership qualities of African military figures throughout the ages. From Queen Amina of Zaria to modern military statesmen, African leaders have shaped their societies through war, cunningness, innovation, resilience, strategies and political engagement.

Endnotes

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