STUDIES OF THE SOUTHERN NIGERIAN PRE COLONIAL KINGDOMS

1. Yorubaland (Ile-Ife and Oyo Empires)

History

- Ile-Ife: is regarded as the beginning of Yoruba civilization, Ile-Ife is considered the birthplace of humanity by Yoruba mythology. It was founded around the 11th century. Oduduwa, who came from Mecca a key figure in Yoruba tradition, is believed to be the progenitor of the Yoruba people and the first ruler of Ile-Ife.
- Oyo Empire: The Oyo Empire emerged as a dominant Yoruba state in the 15th century. It grew from a small town to a powerful empire, reaching its peak in the 18th century. Its rise was attributed to strong military organization, especially its cavalry.

Political System

- Ile-Ife: Is governed by the **Ooni of Ife,** the political system in Ile-Ife was more centralized and spiritual, with the Ooni serving both as a political and religious leader.He was a highly reverence figure.
- Oyo Empire: The Oyo Empire had a sophisticated political system led by the **Alaafin of Oyo**. It was supported by a council

called the Oyo Mesi,law makers who acted as advisors and checked the Alaafin's powers. Below the Alaafin were various provincial chiefs (Baales) who governed smaller territories.

Economic System

- Trade was a key aspect, with the Yoruba engaging in regional and trans-Saharan trade of goods like kola nuts, palm oil, textiles, and slaves.
- They also practice agriculture,planting yam, maize, millet and crafts such as blacksmithing,weaving, textiles and pottery were significant economic activities.

Art and Culture

- They are renowned for bronze and terracotta sculptures, especially from Ile-Ife, which depict detailed human figures.
- Had Rich oral traditions, including myths, legends, and proverbs, play a vital role.
- The Yoruba were known for elaborate festivals like the Eyo Festival, Osun Oshogbo Festival and the worship of deities (Orishas) such as Sango (god of thunder) and Ifa divination.

2. Bini Kingdom (Benin)

- The Bini Kingdom, centered in present-day Edo State, was established around the 10th century. It gained prominence under the rule of the Oba of Benin starting from the 13th century.

- It reached its zenith during the 15th and 16th centuries under powerful Obas like Ewuare the Great and Esigie, who expanded the kingdom and promoted the arts.

Political System

- They have a centralized monarchy headed by the Oba of Benin, who wielded both political and spiritual authority.
- The kingdom was organized into wards and guilds with chiefs (Uzama N'Ihinron) serving as advisors and administrators.

Economic System

- Thrived on agriculture, especially yam farming, and regional trade in ivory, textiles, and later, slaves with Portuguese merchants.
- The guild system played a significant role in crafts and economic productivity.It was a family system of skill acquisition and apprenticeship

Art and Culture

- Famous for its bronze and ivory art, particularly the Benin Bronzes, which depict historical events, court scenes, and religious motifs.
- Elaborate palace architecture and traditional festivals like the Igue Festival, which honors the Oba and ancestral spirits.
- Strong belief in ancestral worship and the role of deities like

Olokun (god of the sea).

3. Igbo People

History

- The Igbo are one of the oldest ethnic groups in Nigeria, with evidence of their existence dating back thousands of years.
- They lived in decentralized communities, but some areas, like Nri Kingdom (9th century), served as a religious and cultural hub.They lived an Egalitarian lifestyle.

Political System

- The Igbo operated a stateless society with a republican system. Decisions were made collectively by elders, titled men, and councils such as the Umunna (lineage group).The council of elders and red cap chiefs play a prominent role in decision making in the land. The age grades are also very important personalities in Igbo society.
- Some regions, like Nri, had priest-kings known as Eze Nri, who wielded spiritual influence.He was seen as more of the representative of the gods than a civil leader

Economic System

- They farm yam, cassava, coco yam, palm oil and vegetables. These were the backbone of the Igbo economy.

- They were involved in local and long-distance trade of goods like palm products, crafts, and slaves.

Art and Culture

- Notable for Uli body art, wood carving, and iron smelting.
- They have Celebrations like the New Yam Festival (Iri Ji) and masquerade festivals reflecting their agricultural and spiritual life.
- They also have Belief in ancestral spirits and gods like Chukwu (Supreme Being).

4. Ijaw People

History

- The Ijaw are one of the oldest ethnic groups in the Niger Delta region, tracing their ancestry to the earliest Niger Delta inhabitants.
- They lived in small, autonomous communities around water bodies in the south south region of Nigeria.Their lives are centered on fishing and trade.

Political System

- Governed by councils of elders and community leaders. Chiefs (Amanyanabo) were chosen for their wisdom and leadership skills.

- Their Clan structures ensured localized administration.

Economic System

- Fishing, salt-making, and trade in fish, salt, sea food and slaves were major economic activities.
- Played a crucial role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade as intermediaries.

Art and Culture

- Known for wooden masks and canoe carvings.
- Their spiritual beliefs revolved around water spirits like Egbesu and the worship of ancestors.
- They have Festivals which were often tied to fishing seasons and water deities.

5. Urhobo People

History

- The Urhobo are an ethnic group from the Niger Delta region, believed to have migrated to their current location centuries ago.
- They organized themselves into small communities or kingdoms.

Political System

- Leadership was vested in clan heads and councils of elders.
- Titles were given to individuals who contributed to the community's prosperity.

Economic System

- They practice agriculture planting yam,plantain and cassava .They also cultivate rubber plants where they get latex . fishing was primary economic activity for almost all families
- They also engaged in trade with neighboring groups.

Art and Culture

- Notable for their wooden carvings and traditional shrines dedicated to Erivwin (ancestral spirits).
- Festivals such as the Ohworu Festival celebrate their agricultural heritage.
- They also have Rich oral traditions and belief in a Supreme Being called Oghene.

Conclusion

These pre-colonial Southern Nigerian kingdoms were distinct yet interconnected through trade, culture, and spiritual beliefs. Their governance systems, artistic heritage, and economic structures laid the foundations for modern Nigerian society.