

**MILITARY ORGANISATION AND WARFARE OF THE TULA OF GOMBE  
STATE, NIGERIA UP TO 1900 A.D**

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**Abstract**

There is a problem of paucity of written records on pre-colonial military matters in many African societies, especially the non-centralised polities. This has hampered the development of African military history. Primary sources were useful in reconstructing the pre-colonial military history of the Tula. Secondary sources on the state of development, military organization, internal relations, Africa's contact with other parts of the world and the impact on developments and internal relations on the continent provided useful information. The paper shows that the pre-colonial military organisation, weapons, tactics and strategies of warfare of the Tula were determined by economic concerns, environmental factors, external relations framework, the behaviour of other ethnic groups, and their defence and security needs. Analysis of the introduction of firearms and their impact on pre-colonial Tula warfare and intergroup relations in the area up to colonialism is hampered by the problem of paucity of written records. Tula weapons were produced largely by indigenous technology and crafts. The findings of this study underscore the significance of primary sources in the reconstruction of the unwritten histories of some Nigerian ethnic groups and the essence and capacity of institutions in state-building in pre-colonial Nigeria.

**Keywords: Warfare, Military, Tula, Weapons**

**Introduction**

African societies had various institutions that offered the necessary foundations, mechanisms and forces for driving development and civilisation in the pre-colonial era. The methods of prosecuting wars, for instance, were critical for the development of government. Arising from this significance of war in government was the need for the creation of military institutions by African rulers. Warfare has been an important aspect of human existence all through recorded history. The war between Sumer and Elam in Mesopotamia in 2700 BCE for which Sumer emerged winner is the earliest recorded war in history. The first peace treaty ever signed to bring to an end antagonism among states occurred between Rameses

II (the Great) of the Empire of Egypt and Hattusili III of the Hittite Empire in 1258 BCE. <sup>1</sup>Warfare is the planned and orderly engagement of armed conflict between independent countries or communities with the use of military might and strategy leading to the defeat of one opponent or the suing for peace as a result of the destruction of the war<sup>2</sup>. Available evidence tends to suggest that African rulers, initially made use of their subjects, vassals, or their allies to put up armies in the field by “call up” in war situations temporarily<sup>3</sup>. In other words, at the early stages of development, there were hardly professional armies in most parts of Africa. However, over time especially by the sixteenth century, the establishment of professional armies became necessary for several reasons, for instance, the growing development of central government which required ready troops among other reasons<sup>4</sup>. However, some pre-colonial African states especially the non-centralised states depended largely on ad-hoc armies called up mainly from members of the society, including slaves, vassals and allies during war times and returned to their businesses afterwards. As it were, pre-colonial military institutions demonstrated dynamism which was informed by circumstances that affected the societies and societal requirements. Pre-colonial military organisations were predicated not just on the nature of political systems but on a whole lot of variables such as economic viability, environmental factors, external relations framework, the responses or behaviour of other states and the defence and security needs of the states.

There is a problem of paucity of written records of pre-colonial military matters not only of Nigeria but of Africa at large, especially the non-centralised polities. To many scholars, this has been a critical factor in the derailment of the development of African military history. For instance, Ali Mazrui said in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that, the African military was “still an underdeveloped field of study”<sup>5</sup>. The pre-colonial period covers many centuries but much of the developments of these periods have become lost due to lack of written records. For some parts of Nigeria, as Ukpabi rightly said, available and authenticated records do not go beyond 1000.AD whereas in some areas such records cover the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries<sup>6</sup>. As such, much of the characteristics of basic pre-colonial

structures and developments of many ethnic groups and polities in several parts of Nigeria have not been sufficiently known. A detailed analysis of the impact of some significant global developments on the pre-colonial military developments of the Tula people and polity through the long period stretching up to the period of contact with the colonialists in the early twentieth century is hampered by this significant problem mentioned above.

### **The Land and People**

The Tula people live in present-day Gombe state in the Northeast of Nigeria. They presently inhabit the plateau which has wide surface areas and flat land and are bordered by some other ethnic groups. They are bordered to the north by the Panda, Kamo, Awak, Ture and Kaltungo to the West, the Dandiya to the south, Cham to the southeast and Waja to the east. The place was the earliest central district of the old native authority of Tangale-Waja created by the British colonialists in 1915. Some post-colonial administrative restructuring led to the establishment of four local government councils out of the defunct colonial Tangale- Waja native authority namely; Kaltungo, Billiri, Balanga and Shongom local government areas in southern Gombe. The people live in three districts namely; Wange, Yiri, and Baule in Kaltungo local government area arising from recent local government reorganisation. In other words, the Tula people are located in the three main districts of *Wange*, (*Kutule*) *Yiri*(*Yirbu*), and *Baule* representing the three main clans in Kaltungo. According to oral traditions, the Tula people migrated from Yemen in the Middle East settling first in Bornu from where they moved to the Bima mountain in the land of the Tera. Their subsequent relocation and movement from here in different directions resulted in the formation of the three different settlements in the seventeenth century. The movement of the Tula people did not occur at once but in phases starting first with the Wange followed by Yiri and Baule<sup>7</sup>.

As is common with most oral traditions, some of the specific circumstances that resulted in the migrations of the Tula people and details of some of their interactions with other groups have been lost over time. However, there are narratives of pre-colonial Tula warfare with their neighbours and foreigners especially following the successful settlement in their present location. The Wange, for instance, fought with the Ture and Waja people at different times while the Baule were variously engaged in warfare with the Waja and Awak people. The Yiri clan engaged in warfare with the Waja, on the one hand, and the Cham at different times. It is important to state that, apart from the neighbouring groups mentioned, other ethnic groups such as the Dadiya, Bangu and Tan lived side by side with the Tula on some parts of the hills for a long time before they were forced to migrate to their present abodes over time. For instance, the Cham at some time lived in a place called Losuni at the foot of the Kulani and Bwele hills in Tula<sup>8</sup>.

Military and diplomatic theoreticians agree that wars are predicated on certain socio-economic, political and geo-strategic reasons and ends. Wars are not fought for illusory ends. States engage in wars for a variety of reasons including survival, power, and wealth, among other reasons<sup>9</sup>. Disputes over possession and control of natural resources such as land and water sources, theft of food crops and domestic animal rustling account for much of the conflicts that resulted in an open military confrontation between the Tula and other groups especially with the growing population on the hills<sup>10</sup>. A wide range of strategic and economic factors influenced the migration and settlement of pre-colonial polities in Africa. Security, for instance, was one significant determining factor in the choice of places of settlement especially areas dotted with hills and thick forests and areas surrounded by water not easily accessible. Security consideration was paramount in the choice of settlements in pre-colonial societies in Nigeria<sup>11</sup>. The hills and rivers provided natural barriers against threats from external forces. The availability of water resources, fertile soils and mineral resources were also very important factors for sustaining livelihoods. For the Tula people, the choice of settlement was influenced predominantly by the hills and caves which offered barriers and protection against

external aggression, availability of fertile soils and sources of water supply. The Tula people mainly practised agriculture and produced a variety of crops including guinea-corn, maize and millet, and a variety of vegetables to sustain livelihoods in the pre-colonial era. They reared cattle, sheep, goats, and a variety of birds. The people engaged in other secondary occupations such as blacksmithing, pottery-making, and woodwork, among other auxiliary economic activities<sup>12</sup>.

### **Military Organisation and Weapons of Warfare**

Generally, the size of the army and its military capabilities were determined by the nature of weapon technology, tactics, and strategies of warfare and organisation of the military. Military organisation, tactics and strategy of warfare among the Tula went through modifications that were determined from time to time by changing inter-group relations. New tactics, skills and weapons were learned and adopted over time. The Tula had no professional army but warfare was carried out with an ad-hoc army recruited on the spur of the moment. Recruitment into the ad-hoc army was based on demonstrated or recognised bravery, skills and strength usually displayed by men, particularly during hunting exercises known among the Tula as *kifeku*. The army was also recruited among the men who distinguished themselves in a cultural display known as *Tenam*<sup>13</sup>. The *Tenam* involved men of various age brackets. It was some sort of dramatisation of warfare carried out in public glare in which Tula men carried war weapons and engaged each other in ‘friendly war’ contests accompanied with war songs by the women without necessarily causing the death of each other with the weapons in the contests. However, the men involved in the *Tenam* could get hurt. Due to the possibility of getting hurt in the ‘brotherly’ contest, the will to participate in the *Tenam* in the first instance was considered an act of bravery and strength. As it were, the ad-hoc army for warfare was garnered from the bulk of the men who displayed remarkable skills, strength and bravery in hunting (usually measured by the ability to confront strong wild animals) and the *Tenam*<sup>14</sup>.

It is generally difficult to estimate the size of armies of pre-colonial states<sup>15</sup>. It proved difficult to determine the size of the Tula army but information tends to put the army at three or four hundred soldiers which was not static and had a tendency to decrease or increase. The size of the army depended on certain factors such as the number of men available at the time and the estimated size and perceived strength of the opposing force. While the decision to prosecute wars and general directives on war was the exclusive reserve of the rulers, specific warriors were saddled with the responsibility of outlining the war strategies, tactics, training of combatants, intelligence gathering and spying. The decision to go to war depended on the level of provocation by an enemy and how an enemy was sufficiently considered a threat to the existence, peace and stability of the people<sup>16</sup>. There exists no evidence of the use of cavalry and horses in Tula warfare. The army fought generally on foot, basically comprising heads of village units, the warriors, guides and spies, medicine men, musical instrumentalists and women who sang war praise songs behind the fighters. The war praise songs were important in two fundamental respects. First, the songs could boost the morale of the advancing army. Secondly, the songs in some cases scared the enemy even when the Tula army had a tiny population<sup>17</sup>. The absence of cavalry and horses in Tula warfare can be explained in terms of the nature of the state and its economy which made the procurement and maintenance of pack animals difficult as compared to other states in Northern Nigeria.

The women played some roles in Tula warfare which were principally outside of active participation at the war front. Some of the women sang war praise songs during wars while the majority stayed behind to look after their households during wars. Other women were selected for the preparation of meals for the army, especially in battles that took longer days. According to the narratives, there were some among the women folk who possessed the rare natural gift of premonition and could predict the outcome of the war. Some of the women were vested in the knowledge of medicine. Such women offered important advice on the planning, strategy and prosecution of warfare. Apart from these roles, Tula had few women warriors who combined their fighting skills and bravery with spiritual powers and

took an active part in combat. There is a narrative of one woman called Kwalare who was of Kulashine origin in Tula and married to the chief priest of *the Dawa* cult in Wenge. Through a combination of fighting skills, bravery and spiritual powers Kwalare, is said to have greatly contributed to the victory of some Tula wars, for instance, the attacks waded by people believed to be Fulani slave raiders<sup>18</sup>. Spiritual forces were significant in pre-colonial Tula warfare. Medicine men, and women, priests of cults and occult groups had responsibilities that included the preparation of charms, amulets and concoctions that had various functions. For instance, these could make the advancing Tula army to be invincible to the enemy and protect the army against the weapons of the enemy in warfare. These medicine men could predict the dimensions and consequences of war and this aided in the planning, strategy and prosecution of wars<sup>19</sup>.

The strategies, methods, tactics and technology of warfare among societies all over the world have increasingly changed from time to time and these changes are not unconnected to increasing knowledge systems and technology, emerging socio-economic, cultural and political threats and fears. The Tula army was an infantry that engaged the enemy force at close range using a wide range of weapons which included shields (*kusani*) produced from elephant skins, swords (*kuli*), spears (*yartu*), axes(*twani*), bows(*dikal*), and arrows(*birtu*), knives, clubs, helmets(*kusum*) slings (*twalle*) and stones (*kale*) for the slings, musical war instruments including various kinds of drums(*ganga, kalangu, time, tukubi*) flutes(*sum*), horns, charms and amulets.<sup>20</sup> These war musical instruments were also used in a war dance known as *mile* by the soldiers accompanied by the women singing praise songs after battles for the public presentation of the number of heads of slain members of the enemy. The significance of this public presentation was twofold. First, it was done to honour the brave warriors for their exploits in war and secondly, it was meant to raise the morale or spirit of young men to maintain the warrior tradition of the Tula<sup>21</sup>.

Most of the weapons of warfare among the Tula were indigenous and this military technology evolved through time as evidence suggests. The military technology was sustained by the availability of iron ore deposits especially in Baule

and the knowledge of iron processing as well as the blacksmith industry. Military technology reflected professional specialisation. The iron tools such as axes, swords, spears, knives and arrowheads were produced by the blacksmiths. The task of producing wooden handles for the weapons and clubs was that of the professional carpenters and other persons who had the skills. Other weapons such as bows, shields, helmets, armour, and slings were jointly produced by professionals and other persons who could produce them<sup>22</sup>.

It is difficult to mention when firearms were introduced in Tula warfare and this is largely due to the lack of substantial evidence pointing to the introduction or contact with firearms and their impact on the polity. There is a problem in ascertaining the nature and degree of impact of firearms on peoples of the African

continent even though there is consensus on the certainty of the introduction of firearms in the continent through the stages of Africa's contact with the Europeans and other groups through trade and colonialism<sup>23</sup>. It has been argued, for instance,

that the slave trade prevailed in Africa's interaction at the turn of the nineteenth century which was the major means through which foreign goods including firearms came into the continent. Arising from this is the 'gun-for-slaves' stereotype of the Euro-African trade in which African demand for firearms boosted the acquisition of slaves that were sold off, a situation that disrupted Africa's polity.

The slave-gun cycle thesis follows that the entry of guns was the most significant factor for warfare which was the means for taking slaves to the Atlantic economy<sup>24</sup>. This popular theory has come under attack in some quarters. In a critique of the slave-gun cycle theory, Rory Pilosof, for instance, argues that firearms were brought into Africa before the peak of the trade in slaves, this went on for many areas after the abolition of the trade<sup>25</sup>. The nineteenth century witnessed the suppression of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the introduction of legitimate trade<sup>26</sup>. The industrialization of Europe led to an increasing demand for



raw materials from Africa for which European traders gave imported goods including firearms which constituted a large portion. Thus, firearms were significant items in the period of legitimate commerce. Historians have recorded growth in the numbers of flintlock firearms brought to Africa during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries when slave exports began to increase<sup>27</sup>. Flintlock rifles and older matchlock versions were the main weapons imported into Africa but improvements in the eighteenth century and the breech-loading revolution in the 1860s made the guns more suitable for warfare and hunting. Consequently, this led to the dumping of many obsolete military weapons by Europeans into Africa through trade<sup>28</sup>. The Tula people were renowned for bravery and military prowess and were said to have never suffered defeat in battles before the arrival of the British as evidence tends to suggest. <sup>29</sup>For example, the military forces that attacked the community in 1877 from Misau, in the present-day Bauchi state were roundly defeated. <sup>30</sup>During the abolition of the slave trade in the early nineteenth century, and its replacement with legitimate trade, Northern Nigeria had become a highly stratified and militarised society<sup>31</sup>. For instance, evidence shows the impact of new military technology, cavalry and later firearms in state formation processes in the Sokoto caliphate.<sup>32</sup> However, nothing is known about the degree of involvement of the Tula in the trans-Saharan trade and other global trades and the impact on the polity. And therein lies the challenge of situating firearms in Tula warfare and the impact on patterns of intergroup relations within the region in a proper historical context. It is possible to suggest on the strength of available evidence that the ingenuity of military organisation, indigenous military weapons, strategies and tactics of warfare of the Tula account for their successful military exploits against enemy forces including the defeat of the Misau forces in 1877.

### **Strategies, Tactics and Logistics of Warfare**

As stated earlier, disputes over possession of natural resources such as land and water sources, theft of food crops and animal rustling that could not be resolved with peaceful instruments were the principal reasons for warfare between the Tula

and their neighbours. There were some other diplomatic and military strategic planning in the war operations of the people. Intelligence gathering was very central in Tula warfare. African societies had viable intelligence that helped them to secure their places against external aggression. Spies were used in this intelligence gathering in various ways to gather information on very important matters bordering on the economic and political stability and security of the state. For instance, spies played important roles in politics and external relations decisions and structures that helped rulers to get information on the actions and plans of enemies of their society<sup>33</sup>.

Available evidence suggests the use of persons who acted as spies for the Tula kingdom in the pre-colonial period. These spies gathered relevant information about their neighbours and enemies regarding state security. The principal issues of interest were the estimated number or size of the population, warriors, and weapons of the enemy as well as possible hidden routes for escape within the enemy's territory. The volume of report of such information was important in determining the number of warriors to be used for the war, the nature of weapons, and the general preparedness for the war<sup>34</sup>. For some pre-colonial communities, as evidence indicates, these data were military and enhanced not only operations and ideas of warfare but also cooperation among communities. In some cases, this led to interaction among communities resulting in peace treaties<sup>35</sup>. Also important in Tula warfare was the chanting of war songs in the surroundings of some 'troublesome' neighbours any time conflict arose with such communities or there was some suspicion of aggression from such neighbours. Oftentimes, the songs were sufficiently threatening to prompt the neighbours to sue for conflict resolution without necessarily resorting to open military confrontation<sup>36</sup>.

It has been established that the choice of settlement for the Tula people was influenced essentially by the hills and caves which offered barrier and protection against external aggression, availability of fertile soils and sources of water supply. The natural cover offered an important part of their strategy of warfare. In times of war, the caves served as hide-outs for the people because they were sufficiently

spacious to accommodate several hundreds of people for a long time since there were also sources of water supply in the caves<sup>37</sup>. Attacks at enemy camps were carried out mainly during the early hours of the morning after intelligence gathering had been concluded. The killing of women and children was prohibited in Tula warfare and this had to do with considerations of their weakness and presumed innocence<sup>38</sup>. Evidence is scanty regarding the threat to cut off or the practical denial of the right to the use of natural resources (such as ponds or water supplies) from neighbours to weaken them in battles or to force them into submission. However, evidence points to the fact that in some critical cases, the Tula warriors poisoned the water sources of their enemies during battles to weaken them. For instance, in the battle between the Tula and Misau in 1877, Tula warriors blocked and poisoned the source of the water supply of the invading Misau forces<sup>39</sup>.

The movement of the forces and the physical engagement in battles were conducted generally on foot, as there were no faster and better means of transportation for the people. The use of Human portage was employed in the movement of weapons musical instruments of warfare and food items to the battlefield. Considering the simple and light nature of these weapons and instruments, there was hardly much difficulty in conveying or carrying them along to the battleground. Moreover, the procurement and breeding of pack animals especially horses and camels for warfare were expensive for a pre-colonial state such as Tula<sup>40</sup>. Evidence is scanty regarding the nature and type of training of the army among the Tula. Evidence shows that military training was conducted basically through the *Tenam and Kifeku* (hunting) described previously to inculcate the spirit of adventure, self-reliance, courage, and mental alertness into the young men for maximum utilisation in war times. Men received training in proficiency in handling weapons skills of engaging opponents and the making of simpler weapons such as bows and slings<sup>41</sup>.

Treaties were conducted by both centralised and non-centralised states in Africa times to end hostilities and to ensure peaceful coexistence between states though in some cases treaties could be broken<sup>42</sup>. Evidence is scanty regarding the

existence and practice of treaties ending hostilities between the Tula and other ethnic groups in the area and the impact of these treaties on the patterns of intergroup relations and diplomacy within the area before the introduction of the British colonial administration. However, there is evidence to show that in 1908, the neighbouring ethnic groups reported to the British Colonial Resident Officer in Bauchi that the Tula people were causing trouble in the region through constant military attacks and this brought a delegation of British officials to broker peace in the area. Rather than the expected peaceful resolution, an ugly development occurred as the guns brought by the officers who came for the reconciliation went missing in the course of the failed peace meeting. This led to a full military attack on the Tula by the British colonial forces who defeated the Tula and this was the people's first defeat in any war, according to sources<sup>43</sup>.

### **Summary of Findings and Conclusion**

What is demonstrated in the above analysis is that the pre-colonial military organisation, weapons, tactics and strategies of warfare of the Tula were determined by economic concerns, environmental factors, external relations framework, the reactions or behaviour of other ethnic groups towards the people, and their defence and security needs. An analysis of the introduction of firearms and their impact on pre-colonial Tula warfare and patterns of intergroup relations in the area up to the period of contact with the British colonialists in the early twentieth century is hampered by the problem of paucity of written records. But as evidence suggests, Tula warfare weaponry was produced and sustained largely by indigenous technology and crafts. The iron tools such as axes, swords, spears, knives and arrowheads were produced by the blacksmiths. Wooden instruments and wooden handles for the weapons were produced by specialists in the craft and other persons who had the skills. Other weapons such as bows, shields, helmets, armour, and slings were jointly produced by professionals and other persons who could produce them. The Tula used foot soldiers for their wars, selected by the quality of their strength, bravery and skills and in proficiency in handling weapons, skills of

**THE CALABAR HISTORICAL JOURNAL**

Vol. 10, No. 2, December 2021 p91-106 ISSN: 2315-8816

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engaging opponents and the act of war. The use of medicine men and women was employed for spiritual needs, strength and victory in pre-colonial Tula warfare.

**ENDNOTES**

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## THE CALABAR HISTORICAL JOURNAL

Vol. 10, No. 2, December 2021 p91-106 ISSN: 2315-8816

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