

# Why the Right to Bear Arms Worked Among the Pre Colonial 19th Century Yoruba City States

**Seun Ayoade\***

*Independent Researcher, Alumnus, College of Medicine University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria*

**\*Corresponding author:** Seun Ayoade, Independent Researcher, Alumnus, College of Medicine University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria

**Received:** 📅 November 28, 2022

**Published:** 📅 December 08, 2022

## Short Communication

“Thousands of human beings continuously associate in all the various relations of life with less injury and violence than is to be found among so many hundreds of our boasted civilized towns. During a sojourn of nearly four years I ever saw a street fight between two men—a disgraceful act discouraged by all natives; [I] heard of but one case of adultery; of but very few cases of theft And Not Exceeding Four Or Five Cases Of Murder Throughout The Native Kingdom” William H. Clarke, American Baptist missionary To The Yorubas between 1854 and 1858 [1].

Even today the question remains. Can the civilian citizenry of a country have access to firearms and yet said country not have sporadic incidents of senseless mass murders? In the mid to latter 19th century, virtually every Yoruba male from teenager up had ready access to arms and ammunition. Every home had guns and gun-powder—yet murder rates were abysmally low. Why?

- a. There were no standing armies, so every male had to fight if a city was attacked. And woe betide the man who went to a gun fight with a sword or crossbow!
- b. Wars were frequent and hunts common, and so any trigger-happy person could find release for his “gun itch” in these situations, as well as during national festivals and celebrations when guns [mostly without bullets] were fired to hearts content.
- c. Firing a gun within town walls in times of peace was strictly prohibited by universal law. Anyone contravening this law would be dealt with instantly. And in those days before the availability of silencers the noise of the gun’s report would ring clear and the powder would be seen so the guilty person would be found out.
- d. Aggrieved citizens could approach the kings/rulers for redress over any grievances no matter how low their status and get a tolerably fair hearing. So the need to take the law into

one’s own hands was rare.

e. The stigma associated with murder was great. Family members of known murderers were ostracized. The fear of bringing disgrace on one’s family prevented people from committing murder.

These are the reasons why the right to bear arms worked remarkably well among the 19th century Yoruba city states. The first thing the British did after co-opting the Yoruba into their empire in 1886 was to slowly disarm the citizenry. So, whether the right to bear arms would have worked in this modern age is another matter entirely.

## The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Yorubas and Their Guns!

“The army now in the field with the exception of an almost infinitesimal proportion are all armed with guns...The bullets are made out of bar iron, of variable diameter some being merely bolts, others ranging from the size of grape down to brick shot. Each chief has now got a few pieces fired from rests with a bore of about one and a half inches into which they put a handful of bullets and with these at close quarters they sometimes do great execution. But a very small proportion of the...army is armed with swords indeed the use of firearms appears to have thrown the hand to hand conflicts out of fashion...The swords are always straight, double-edged, about three feet long. I remember in action at Ijaye, that the swordsmen were generally armed with a pistol as a supplementary weapon. I may mention here that most of the generals and chiefs are provided with either reconnoitering glasses or telescopes with use of which they are quite familiar [2].

## Captain Arthur Trefussis Jones 2<sup>nd</sup> West Indian regiment 10<sup>th</sup> June 1861

A vast, open, grassy plain lay on the Ibadan side of the town, and just out of sight over a hillock, the Ibadan host was permanently encamped. They were awaiting the new moon to begin the attack.

The first appearance of the slender silver crescent was greeted by the roar of myriads of muskets, the fusillade continuing for several minutes. It could no longer be concealed from the people that some desperate fighting was before them. Five days were given by the enemy to feasting, then early one morning the sentinel's gun told us that the enemy was approaching. They filled the plain for many miles and were a terrible sight. In the stand up contest which followed, lines of men several abreast, streamed to the front, fired and then turned and flowed back to the rear. They thus formed an endless chain from one end of which there poured a constant stream of fire. For a while an incessant blaze issued from the front of both armies. Wherever the lines of battle were within a hundred yards of each other, the work was quite deadly, but outside of that distance the fire was not very effective. The roar of muskets was deafening, and the ground often sensibly vibrated. Neither side had any artillery, but the sound of the battle was heard in Abeokuta, two days' journey away.

The bullets were of iron or copper. The copper bullets were made by cutting off about three-fourths of an inch of a copper rod one-half inch in diameter. These produced gangrene and were much feared by the soldiers..... For several hours it was like a volcano in eruption, and when night came on and the lurid flames of the blazing muskets lit up the mass of white sulphurous smoke that hung over the plain and city, the scene was truly appalling, made even more so by the fact that the combatants were yelling with all their

might the whole time. The allies humiliated and incensed by their recent rout pressed closer and closer until in some places the bright threads of fire seemed to cross each other. At length the astonished Ibadans, no longer able to stand before a fire so galling, broke and fled in dismay, pursued for a mile or more by the exultant allies, whose fire did not slacken to the last [3]. Aganga Adoja a noble citizen was the hero of the town. One-night Aganga was inspecting his magazine with a naked lamp in hand, when suddenly a terrific explosion was heard and the hopes of [the town called] Opin with her heroic defender perished together in a moment [4].

## References

1. William H Clarke (1972) *Travels and Explorations In Yorubaland*. Ibadan University Press pp. 254-255.
2. Captain Arthur Trefussis Jones (1972) Report Addressed to the officer commanding the 2nd West Indian regiment Sierra Leone 2nd West Indian regiment 10th June 1861 "Report on the Constitution and Military Capability of the Abbeokutan (sic) Army For carrying on an offensive war" In *Yoruba Warfare in the 19th Century* by Ajayi and Smith. Cambridge university Press 136(1): 129-140.
3. Richard Henry Stone (1899) *In Africa's Forest and Jungle or Six Years Among the Yorubas*. Alabama, USA.
4. George Ruteledge and Sons (1921) *History of The Yorubas* by The Reverend Samuel Johnson Edited by Doctor Obadiah Johnson [History of The Yorubas from The Earliest Times to The Beginning of The British Protectorate published By George Ruteledge and Sons, London, CSS Nigeria 1921, 1937, 1956, 1957, 1960, 1969, 1997, 2001. pp. 309-365.



This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License

To Submit Your Article Click Here: [Submit Article](#)

DOI: [10.32474/JAAS.2022.07.000263](https://doi.org/10.32474/JAAS.2022.07.000263)



## Journal Of Anthropological And Archaeological Sciences

### Assets of Publishing with us

- Global archiving of articles
- Immediate, unrestricted online access
- Rigorous Peer Review Process
- Authors Retain Copyrights
- Unique DOI for all articles