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A History of Lagos

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Introduction

Lagos is a city that defies easy definition. With its complex tapestry of history, peoples, and cultures, Lagos stands at the crossroads of tradition and modernity, indigenous identity and cosmopolitan dynamism. As a vital node in the story of Nigeria and West Africa, Lagos offers a unique lens through which to examine the broader currents of African history and urban evolution.

Founded centuries ago by the Awori, a subgroup of the Yoruba, the area known as Eko was shaped by its strategic environment: a labyrinth of islands, creeks, and lagoons. These waterways were not merely geographical features, but the arteries with which the city pulsed—feeding livelihoods of fishing and farming, shaping migration and trade, and fostering contact between peoples. Over generations, Lagos evolved, adapting to influence from the powerful Benin Empire and, later, to the sweeping tides of European exploration.

The arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century marked Lagos's entry onto the world stage. The city's participation in the transatlantic slave trade—tragic as it was—entailed profound transformations in its political power and economic standing. Over time, Lagos became a crucible of contesting interests: indigenous rulers, Benin overlords, European traders, and, eventually, colonial powers clashed and negotiated, each leaving indelible marks on the city's physical and social landscape.

Colonialism brought both opportunity and disruption. As a British crown colony, and later the capital of the amalgamated Nigerian state, Lagos's urban and administrative frameworks were dramatically reshaped. The city's story in the twentieth century became one of dramatic growth, cosmopolitanism, and, with independence in 1960, an unrivalled centrality in the nation's political and economic life.

But Lagos has always been more than the sum of its challenges and triumphs. Through rapid urbanization, infrastructural strain, political upheavals, and economic booms and busts, Lagosians have forged a unique culture—vibrant, entrepreneurial, creative, and resilient. The city's streets, markets, churches, mosques, and arts districts throng with a restless energy that continues to attract millions, both from within Nigeria and beyond.

This book traces the broad sweep of Lagos's history, from its earliest beginnings to its emergence as a global megacity. By exploring the myriad influences, peoples, crises, and innovations that have shaped Lagos, this volume aims to illuminate not just the city's past, but also its spirit—a spirit captured in the enduring motto, "Èkó ò ní bàjẹ!" (Lagos will not spoil!). In telling Lagos's story, we encounter not simply the history of a

city, but the unfolding drama of Africa's greatest urban experiment.

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CHAPTER ONE: Early Settlements: The Awori and the Birth of Eko

Before the thundering arrival of ocean-going ships and the clamour of global commerce, before the city sprawl devoured the horizon, the area now known as Lagos was a collection of islands and creeks nestled within a vast lagoon system, a watery maze teeming with life. This was the landscape encountered and settled by the very first inhabitants whose legacy echoes in the city's enduring indigenous name: Eko. These pioneers were the Awori, a distinct subgroup of the expansive Yoruba people, whose migratory paths led them from the hinterlands towards the coast and its intricate network of waterways.

Oral traditions, the keepers of history in societies without early written records, tell us that the Awori migration into this lagoon area was not a single event but a process, driven perhaps by a search for new lands, security, or better opportunities. Among the most prominent figures in these early narratives is Oloye Olofin, often cited as the leader who guided the Awori group to their initial settlement site within the complex geography of the lagoon. His name, meaning something akin to 'Chief Olofin', signifies a leader of considerable importance, suggesting a degree of social organization even among these earliest settlers.

The journey of Olofin and his followers eventually brought them to a place offering both refuge and sustenance: Iddo Island. This island, situated strategically within the lagoon system, provided a relatively stable base compared to the fluctuating waterline of the mainland shores. Its location would have offered access to the rich resources of the lagoon – fish, crustaceans, and opportunities for small-scale farming on the more stable ground. For people accustomed to the demands of navigating varied landscapes, the islands and waterways presented a new challenge and a unique way of life.

Iddo Island, in the context of this early history, wasn't merely a stopping point; it became a nucleus. From this base, the Awori settlers gradually began to explore and expand their presence within the lagoon environment. Their understanding of the tides, currents, and seasonal changes would have grown with each passing year, allowing them to navigate the creeks and discover adjacent landmasses suitable for habitation and use. This gradual expansion was key to the eventual emergence of the settlement that would one day become a city.

One such expansion led them to a larger, more central landmass – what is now known as Lagos Island. This island, offering more extensive dry land than Iddo, became a

crucial site for the growing community. It provided greater scope for building dwellings, establishing communal areas, and expanding agricultural activities beyond subsistence levels. The transition from Iddo to Lagos Island, or the establishment of settlements on both, marked a significant step in solidifying the Awori presence in the heart of the lagoon complex.

The indigenous name for this burgeoning settlement, Eko, remains a powerful link to its origins. Unlike the later European names, 'Eko' speaks directly to the local experience and perception of the place. Its etymology, as preserved in oral tradition, is itself a subject of fascinating debate and multiple interpretations, reflecting perhaps the different facets of life in the early settlement or the varying perspectives of those who encountered it.

One widely circulated account links Eko to agriculture. According to this tradition, the name derives from "Oko," the Yoruba word for farm. This suggests that the early settlers utilized the available land for cultivation, establishing farms that were vital for their survival and sustenance in the lagoon environment. The fertility of the soil on the islands and the ability to grow crops would have been a major factor in the viability of their settlement.

Another related interpretation posits the name comes from "Ereko," which translates to farmstead. This variation emphasizes not just the act of farming but the established settlement built around these agricultural activities – a cluster of dwellings associated with a farm. This paints a picture of small, community-based farming villages gradually taking root on the islands, forming the early social units of Eko.

A different, though not necessarily contradictory, tradition attributes the naming of Eko to external influence, specifically the Benin Kingdom. While Benin's major period of influence came later, some accounts suggest an earlier connection, claiming that the Benin Kingdom referred to the settlement as Eko. This perspective highlights the potential early awareness of this strategically located area by neighbouring powers, even before direct political control was established.

Yet another oral tradition intertwines the Benin influence with the very first Oba (King) of Lagos. It is said that Oba Ado, the son of the Oba of Benin and the first ruler recognized in the Lagos dynastic line, gave the settlement the name Eko. This tradition links the name directly to the establishment of a ruling authority structure, suggesting Eko became its formal designation under this new leadership. The confluence of indigenous Awori presence and external dynastic influence is a recurring theme in Lagos's early history.

Adding a touch of historical colour to these naming traditions is the account of the Oba's palace. Iga Idunganran, the traditional seat of the Oba of Lagos, is said to translate from Yoruba as "palace built on a pepper farm." This detail seems to lend

credence to the agricultural origin stories of the name Eko, suggesting that important early structures were indeed built upon land previously used for cultivation, perhaps even specifically for crops like pepper which were valuable commodities.

Regardless of the precise origin story that holds the most historical weight – and perhaps they all contain elements of truth reflecting different stages or perspectives – the name Eko firmly grounds the city in its indigenous roots. It speaks of the Awori people, their decision to settle this challenging environment, and the early activities that defined their lives on the islands before external forces reshaped their world.

The strategic location of these islands and their surrounding waterways was undeniably the primary reason for the Awori's initial decision to settle there and the key to the settlement's later development. The complex network of lagoons, creeks, and the proximity to the Atlantic Ocean offered a unique blend of opportunities and challenges. These natural features dictated patterns of movement, access to resources, and defense.

For the early Awori, the lagoon was a larder. Fishing was undoubtedly a central pillar of their economy and daily life. The sheltered waters of the lagoon and creeks would have provided a reliable source of various fish species, shellfish, and other aquatic life. Understanding the migratory patterns of fish, mastering fishing techniques appropriate for the lagoon environment (like using nets, traps, or lines from canoes), and preserving the catch would have been essential skills passed down through generations.

Beyond fishing, the more stable land areas on the islands allowed for farming. While not as extensive as in the open hinterlands, this farming would have supplemented their diet and provided staple crops. Yams, cassava, vegetables, and perhaps, as the name Iga Idunganran suggests, spices like pepper, would have been cultivated. This dual economy of fishing and farming provided a degree of self-sufficiency for the early communities.

The waterways were also their highways. Canoes, crafted from local timber, were the primary mode of transport, allowing movement between islands, access to fishing grounds, and potential interaction with other communities along the lagoon or river systems leading inland. This natural infrastructure, while demanding skill to navigate, facilitated communication and trade within the early settlement and its immediate vicinity.

The natural defenses provided by the islands and the surrounding water would have also been a significant advantage. Accessing the settlements required traversing the waterways, making them less vulnerable to attacks from land-based rivals compared to communities situated on the open plains. This relative security would have allowed the early Awori communities to develop and grow with a measure of protection.

As the Awori population in the lagoon area grew, perhaps through natural increase and the arrival of other related groups, settlements would have multiplied and spread across the more habitable islands and mainland fringes bordering the lagoon. While Olofin is associated with the initial settlement on Iddo, the process of establishing Eko as a significant location likely involved the consolidation of several smaller Awori communities over time on Lagos Island.

Oral traditions speak of Olofin having many children who founded various settlements in the surrounding areas, further illustrating the spread and establishment of Awori presence throughout the lagoon district. These narratives serve not only as historical accounts but also as charters of identity and connection for the different Awori communities that populate the region to this day. They underscore the deep historical ties of the Awori people to the land and water that constitute Lagos.

The arrival of other groups further enriched the early history of the area. Oral traditions mention the Ijebu, another major Yoruba subgroup, also arriving in the vicinity around the 15th century. Their presence would have added another layer to the demographic and cultural mix of the emerging settlement. Whether these interactions were always peaceful is difficult to say with certainty from the limited early records, but they speak to the increasing attraction and importance of the lagoon area as a place of habitation and potential interaction.

The Ijebu were renowned traders, and their arrival suggests the growing potential of Eko not just as a fishing and farming community but as a node for commerce. The strategic location on the coast and the access to both inland areas via the lagoon system and, eventually, the open sea, hinted at the future trajectory of Eko as a trading hub. However, this transformation was gradual and would be significantly shaped by forces yet to fully arrive.

In these nascent stages, Eko would have been a modest collection of villages and hamlets, with a focus on subsistence and local exchange. The social structure would have revolved around chieftaincy, with figures like Olofin holding sway, overseeing communal life, settling disputes, and perhaps organizing communal activities like fishing expeditions or farming. Religion would have been centred on traditional Yoruba beliefs, with reverence for deities associated with the sea, land, and ancestral spirits.

Life in early Eko would have been intimately connected to the rhythms of the natural world. The tides, the seasons for fishing and farming, the challenges of the wet season, and the opportunities of the dry season would have dictated the pace of life. The architecture would have been functional, utilizing local materials like mud, thatch, and timber, adapted to the humid, coastal environment and the need to sometimes contend with flooding.

The period of early Awori settlement and the birth of Eko laid the foundational layer of Lagos's identity. It established the indigenous claim to the land and gave the settlement its enduring local name. While subsequent centuries would see Eko profoundly reshaped by external powers and global events, the presence of the Awori and the memory of their pioneering efforts on these islands remain central to the city's historical narrative. This was the crucible where the first elements of Lagos's complex identity were forged from water, land, and the resilience of its earliest people.

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