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# A History of Lagos

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## Introduction

Lagos, perched on the coast of the Bight of Benin, has always stood at the intersection of geography and history, where land and water meet and civilizations converge. Today, it is impossible to speak about Nigeria, or indeed Africa, without mentioning Lagos—an economic powerhouse, a cultural engine, and a city with a restless, compelling energy. Yet, the story of Lagos is not just one of present glory; it is rooted in centuries of change, conflict, resilience, and remarkable adaptation.

This book sets out to unravel the complex tapestry that is the history of Lagos. We begin with its earliest days, when the Awori people settled by the lagoons and founded what would become known as Eko. Over the centuries, layers of influence—Benin imperial power, Portuguese exploration, the tragedy of the transatlantic slave trade, and British colonial ambition—have each left enduring marks on the city's identity. These were not simply episodes of domination or exploitation; they were moments of transformation, creative survival, and reinvention for the peoples of Lagos.

Through the chapters that follow, the evolution of Lagos unfolds as a narrative of dynamic change: from a cluster of fishing villages and pepper farms to a sought-after colonial outpost; from a central hub in the slave trade to the center of return for peoples of diverse backgrounds; from the administrative heart of Nigeria to an ever-expanding urban megacity. As we trace this journey, we encounter not only kings and colonial administrators, but also traders, immigrants, artists, and everyday Lagosians whose collective actions shaped the city's destiny.

Attention is paid, too, to the multifaceted culture that springs from Lagos's diversity. Languages, beliefs, architecture, and artistic expressions have fused and clashed in ways unique to this city. The cosmopolitan spirit, visible in the streets of Lagos Island, in the music pouring from its neighborhoods, and in the art that now commands attention across the globe, is intimately tied to its rich and often tumultuous past.

Lagos's modern challenges—its dramatic population growth, strains on infrastructure, environmental concerns, and social inequalities—are the legacies and consequences of its historical transformations. Yet, the city's enduring ability to respond to crises, innovate, and reimagine itself is arguably its most defining characteristic. Even after the federal capital relocated to Abuja, Lagos has continued to exert an unparalleled pull, both as the commercial nerve center of Nigeria and as a symbol of urban African dynamism.

In presenting "A History of Lagos," this book aims to provide a comprehensive chronicle that does justice to the city's complexity and vibrancy. Through these pages,

readers are invited not only to explore the milestones and turning points, but also to appreciate the spirit of Lagos: a city ever in motion, eternally reinventing itself, and always looking toward the future.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Its First Footsteps

Before the relentless pulse of millions, before the towering structures of commerce and the tangled web of highways, the area that would one day become Lagos was primarily a realm of water and low-lying land. Situated on the coast of the Bight of Benin, its defining features were a series of lagoons, creeks, and islands, intricately woven together. This geography, shaped by the ebb and flow of the Atlantic Ocean and the ingress of rivers, provided both a natural barrier and a unique environment for early human habitation.

The land itself was a mix of swamps, mangrove forests, and slightly higher ground on the islands and mainland fringes. Life here was dictated by the rhythm of the tides and the availability of freshwater. The lagoons offered sheltered waters, ideal for fishing and canoe transportation, while the creeks provided access into the hinterland. This was not a place easily traversed, but one that offered specific resources and a degree of natural defense to those who understood its intricacies.

Into this watery landscape stepped the earliest known inhabitants: the Awori people. They are a subgroup of the larger Yoruba ethnic group, whose ancestral heartland is considered to be Ile-Ife, further inland. Oral traditions, passed down through generations, speak of their migration southwards, a journey steeped in legend and guided by a mystical plate or object floating on a river.

The leader of this pioneering group is widely identified as Olofin Ogunfunminire. According to the narratives, he and his followers embarked on a quest from Ile-Ife, seeking a new place to settle. The journey was not swift or direct, marked by stops along the way where the guiding object briefly settled before moving on. These pauses are said to correspond to the locations of later Awori settlements inland.

Eventually, the legends say, this object led Olofin and his core group to the vicinity of the Ogun River, north of the complex lagoon system that characterizes present-day Lagos. Here, at a place called Isheri, the object is said to have remained for a significant period. This signaled a more permanent halt, and it was at Isheri that the Awori under Olofin began to establish a foundational homestead.

Isheri, located some distance north of what is now Lagos Island, became the nucleus of early Awori presence in the area. From this initial base, the Awori began to explore and settle other parts of the surrounding region. Their expansion was influenced by the geography – navigating the waterways and identifying suitable patches of land for settlement and subsistence.

Over time, other Awori settlements emerged in areas surrounding the lagoons and on the mainland. Places like Iro, Ogudu, Agboyi, Ojo Ado-Ode, and Ota trace their origins to these early Awori movements and the descendants of Olofin and his followers. These communities were typically centered around the resources available in their immediate environment – fishing in the lagoons and creeks, and engaging in small-scale farming on any arable land.

Life in these early Awori settlements was closely tied to the natural world. Fishing was a primary activity, providing sustenance and likely a means of trade with other groups. The intricate network of waterways facilitated movement between settlements, allowing for communication, trade, and mutual support among the dispersed communities.

The Awori people developed a deep understanding of their environment, learning to navigate the complex waterways and utilize the resources of the coastal ecosystem. This expertise in boatmanship and fishing would remain a significant part of their identity and economy for centuries. They adapted their lifestyle to the watery terrain, building their homes in locations that offered access to the lagoon while providing some defense against potential incursions.

Their social structure was likely based on kinship ties, with leaders emerging from prominent families connected to the initial migration under Olofin. These early communities laid the groundwork for the human presence in the region, establishing the initial patterns of settlement and resource utilization that would characterize the area for a considerable time. Their oral traditions, recounting the journey from Ile-Ife and the establishment of Isheri, served to reinforce their shared identity and historical connection to the land.

While primarily focused on fishing and subsistence farming, these early Awori settlements also likely engaged in some level of local trade, exchanging goods like fish and agricultural products with neighboring groups. The lagoons and creeks, while challenging to traverse for outsiders, served as internal highways for the Awori, connecting their dispersed communities.

The landscape they inhabited, with its blend of land and water, fostered a unique culture and way of life. The challenges of the environment necessitated cooperation and resourcefulness. The abundance of fish and other marine life provided a reliable food source, while the patches of higher ground allowed for limited cultivation.

These early Awori communities were the first human imprints on the land that would eventually groan under the weight of one of Africa's largest cities. Their presence predates the external influences that would later dramatically reshape the area's history and identity. They were the original custodians of the creeks and lagoons, the

first to navigate its channels and draw sustenance from its waters.

The narrative of Olofin's migration and the stopping of the mystical plate is central to the Awori identity and their claim as the indigenous inhabitants of the region. It is a story that speaks of a deliberate search for a home, guided by destiny, leading them to the specific watery embrace of the Lagos area. This origin story is a cornerstone of understanding the historical roots of the people who first called this place home.

The settlements they established, particularly Isheri, served as important points of dispersal for further Awori expansion. As populations grew and the need for new lands arose, groups would branch out from these initial hubs, seeking out new locations along the waterways and available landmasses. This gradual expansion led to the proliferation of Awori communities across the area that now constitutes Lagos State and parts of Ogun State.

Their early economy was primarily subsistence-based, relying on the immediate environment. Fishing techniques, adapted to the lagoon system, were crucial for survival. Any farming would have been concentrated on the limited dry land, likely focusing on crops suitable for the local climate and soil conditions. This close relationship with the land and water defined their initial existence.

The political structure of these early settlements was likely localized, centered around the lineage heads descended from Olofin. These leaders would have held authority within their respective communities, resolving disputes and organizing communal activities like fishing expeditions or defense. There would have been a sense of shared identity and probably loose ties between the different Awori settlements, stemming from their common origin story and kinship.

Communication and travel between these early communities were primarily waterborne. Canoes carved from local timber would have been the main mode of transport, allowing them to navigate the intricate network of creeks and lagoons. This reliance on water transport shaped their interaction with the environment and with each other.

The environment itself presented challenges, from seasonal flooding to the presence of mangrove swamps, which limited easy movement and land use in many areas. However, the protective nature of the waterways also offered a degree of security, making the settlements less vulnerable to attack from groups in the hinterland who were not accustomed to water travel.

These early Awori inhabitants lived in relative isolation from the major political centers of the Yoruba hinterland for a period. Their focus was on adapting to and thriving in their unique coastal environment. Their history in this initial phase is one of pioneering settlement, resourcefulness, and the slow but steady establishment of communities in

a challenging yet bountiful landscape.

The names of many locations in and around modern Lagos can be traced back to these early Awori settlements and the individuals associated with them, a linguistic legacy of their foundational presence. These names serve as markers of the historical layers that make up the city's identity, pointing back to a time before its global prominence.

The Awori developed their own dialect of the Yoruba language, influenced by their specific environment and interactions. This linguistic variation is another testament to their distinct history and identity as the original inhabitants of the Lagos area. Their customs and traditions were also shaped by their coastal lifestyle and their close relationship with the water.

Their initial settlements were not large urban centers but rather clusters of dwellings, reflecting a more communal and subsistence-oriented way of life. The focus was on practical living, drawing directly from the resources provided by the lagoons, creeks, and surrounding land. This was a stark contrast to the dense urban environment that Lagos would eventually become.

The narrative of Olofin's journey also highlights the connection of the Awori to Ile-Ife, emphasizing their place within the broader Yoruba cultural and historical framework. While they ventured into a new territory, they carried with them the traditions and lineage of their ancestral home.

The act of following the mystical plate is a powerful symbolic representation of their guided migration and their destiny to settle in this specific watery region. It imbues their arrival with a sense of purpose and divine direction, solidifying their claim to the land.

These early Awori settlers were the vanguards of human presence in the area, clearing the land where possible, establishing fishing grounds, and setting up the first rudimentary forms of community organization. Their efforts laid the essential groundwork for everything that would follow in the long and complex history of Lagos.

Without their initial adaptation to the unique geography and their establishment of the first settlements, the subsequent chapters of Lagos's history – involving trade, conflict, and massive growth – could not have unfolded in the way they did. Their story is the indispensable opening act in the making of this great city.

The lagoons and creeks were not merely geographical features; they were the arteries of these early communities, facilitating not only movement and trade but also shaping their worldview and folklore. The water was both a source of life and a defining element of their existence.

The scattered nature of the early Awori settlements, dictated by the availability of inhabitable land within the watery expanse, meant that a strong sense of local identity developed within each community, even while acknowledging a shared Awori heritage.

This early period, before the arrival of external powers and the dramatic transformations that would follow, was a time of quiet establishment and adaptation. It was a time when the relationship between the people and the land was perhaps at its most direct and fundamental.

The legacy of these first footsteps can still be felt in the cultural practices, language, and indeed, the very names of places within modern Lagos. The Awori remain a significant part of the city's diverse population, their history deeply intertwined with the land they first inhabited.

Their traditional occupations, particularly fishing, continue to be practiced in some areas, providing a tangible link to the distant past. The knowledge of the waterways and the local environment, accumulated over centuries, remains a valuable inheritance.

The story of the Awori migration and their initial settlements is not just a historical account; it is a narrative of resilience, adaptation, and the deep connection between a people and their chosen land. It is the essential prologue to the bustling metropolis that Lagos is today.

Understanding this early history is crucial to appreciating the layers of identity and influence that have shaped Lagos. It provides the foundational context for comprehending the subsequent events that transformed a collection of Awori settlements into a global city. The land, with its intricate water systems, and the Awori, with their pioneering spirit, together began the story of Lagos.

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